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UNTIL ALL THE PIECES FIT:
A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE
INFORMAL LEARNING OF SELECTED FOSTER PARENTS
IN NORTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA

A Dissertation in
Adult Education
by
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ABSTRACT

Nearly 500,000 children are in foster care in the United States. Adult education address the complexity, in depth and breadth, in parenting children, including foster children. Adult education programs for parents have existed in the US for well over a century. Parent education programs specifically for foster parents are fewer in number and infrequently assessed for efficacy. All fifty (50) states have a formal certification process for certifying foster parents. In every state, part of this process is to undergo a more formalized education (training) process, including a specific number of annual training hours. Pennsylvania, for example, has an annual requirement that foster parents undergo six (6) hours of approved formal training. There are linear, detailed, measurable requirements for a person to become a foster parent, but becoming a foster parent and being a foster parent are not synonymous experiences. How does an adult learn to be a foster parent? The place of more formalized training in the process is well documented. The same cannot be said of informal learning integral to the lived experience of foster parenting.

What, then, is this experience of informal learning for foster parents? What does it “look like” in the daily lived experience of foster parents? To complete this qualitative research study, I utilized a phenomenological research method in an attempt to uncover and describe the created meanings and meaning structures of the lived experience of foster parenting.

Through semi-structured interviews with selected foster parents in northeastern Pennsylvania and through observations and journaling, I analyzed the data in accordance with the phenomenological procedures of data analysis, reflection, and writing. The findings of this study reveal a depth and breadth of complexity to the informal learning of foster parents. Ongoing studies of foster parent learning are indispensable to this crucial aspect of adult education in the United States.
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated:

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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

“All you need is love”—Paul McCartney and John Lennon
“Love is never enough.”—Dr. Aaron T. Beck

Chapter One details background information about this study, including the purpose and scope. The chapter begins with a detailed narrative of my emerging and ongoing interest in the informal learning of foster parents, those who open their homes and their hearts to provide short-term and often long-term care to children whose families of origin are unable to care for them. The chapter then moves to a discussion of the problem, followed by the research rationale. Following this, the chapter continues with a discussion of the research questions which drive the study, and concludes with a brief outline of the dissertation.

Coming to the Question

My Initiation into the Foster Care System

On a dreary Good Friday nearly twenty-five years ago, I got the news that I was being laid off from my teaching job in the public school system. I was engaged, unemployed, and terrified. An employment advertisement in the local paper heralded an opportunity to work as a caseworker in the foster care system, placing medically-fragile and HIV-positive children from Philadelphia into foster homes in Bradford, Tioga, Sullivan, Clinton, and Lycoming Counties. Having almost no knowledge of the foster care system and having literally nothing to lose, I interviewed for the position, got hired, and dove eagerly into my new responsibilities. My horizon expanded from day one.

During my first year as a caseworker, I supervised nearly two dozen foster care placements in more than a dozen foster homes. The majority of the children would remain in foster care for an extended period of time, while others were in the system for just a few months before returning to
their biological parents, and some would be adopted. I oversaw to completion the very first adoption for our agency and took great delight in helping a family and a foster child come together in a “forever home.”

During my nearly three years as a caseworker, I became so enthralled with the idea of foster parenting and the opportunity to make such a positive impact on the lives of children, that my wife and I applied to be foster parents in early 1993 with the foster care agency I was working with at the time. We went through the training and certification process. We learned CPR and “black hair care.” (All of the children this agency placed into care were from Philadelphia and nearly all of the children were African American or biracial.) We got our FBI and Child Abuse clearances. We completed the home study process. We endured six hours of agency-sponsored training. We were certified foster parents. I thought I had learned what I needed to know to be an effective foster parent.

I didn’t.

And, I didn’t know what I didn’t know.

We knew so much, and yet we knew so little. Within two years of becoming a caseworker and within a few months of getting married, our lives would change forever. Our horizons expanded exponentially. For then, my wife and I became foster parents for a beautiful, ten-month-old African American infant. Cody was born prematurely and required nebulizer treatments to assist with breathing and an apnea monitor while sleeping, which would alert us via a piercing alarm if he stopped breathing during the night. What joy he brought for the few weeks he was with us before he returned to the full-time care of his maternal grandmother. What intense sadness and grief. Had we participated in the agency training on the reunification process between child and family of origin? Yes. During the certification process, were we educated about the impermanency of foster care and the potential emotional toll of “losing” a child? Absolutely. Did the agency-sponsored, state-
mandated training prepare us for the moment we handed that child to his grandmother…forever? No way. How could it? There was so very much more to the lived experience, the day-to-day reality of foster parenting. My horizon had just expanded in an unwelcome but essential way.

Yet we were undeterred. We would foster again. Because, like Everest, it was there. We were determined to foster parent again. And again.

It wasn’t long after that our agency got a call about three older boys (7, 8, and 10) from Philadelphia who needed a temporary foster home. The agency had never cared for any children other than infants and toddlers, so this would be a first for the agency and a first for us. The supervisor decided that my wife and I would care for eight-year-old Josiah and the other two boys would go to a foster home within half an hour of our home. Not only would I be the foster parent for one of these boys, but as an agency caseworker, I, like the prophet Isaiah, offered, “Send me,” and I was assigned to drive the boys from Philadelphia to their new homes. My horizon expanded from moment one of meeting these three boys, and it continues to expand to this day.

**Meeting the Foster Children**

“Are you our new dad?” the two boys asked nervously as they huddled together by one of the marble pillars in the pristine lobby of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS). The June afternoon warmth had made the 180-mile sojourn to the City of Brotherly Love one of both eager anticipation and unspoken anxiety. Smiling in response to the earnestness of their question, I was immediately captivated by Brenton and Emery, the first two children that I that day placed into foster care after DHS removed them from the home of their mother and father for repeated instances of abuse and neglect. I drove the boys to our home in Montour County, approximately four hours from center city Philadelphia. Josiah had been placed at a different emergency shelter than his brothers. Brenton and Emery showed no reticence about leaving the familiarity of the DHS building
to go with me, a person they had literally known for several minutes, to pick up their brother Josiah. Yet, that is what they did.

In my naiveté, I had expected Josiah to be as personable and sociable as his brothers. When I got to the shelter, a smallish boy, one who certainly did not appear to be seven years of age, stomped past me with fists clenched and eyes staring straight ahead and with both anger and urgency in his voice, demanded, “Where’s my brothers?” Josiah remained much more agitated than his brothers, but seeing them did seem to bring some measure of reassurance to him. So, with the three brothers in tow, the four of us began travelled to Muncy in Montour County. The plan from Best Nest was that I would bring the three boys to our home for the night, and Brenton and Emery would be placed in a foster home together in Northumberland County, approximately twenty minutes away from our home. Josiah would remain with my wife and me as our newest son. The boys would be in short-term care and would be returned to the custody of the biological mother, who was continuing treatment for drug and alcohol issues at a halfway house in Harrisburg. In fact, the boys might even be able to return to their mother within six months. The foster care agency would see that the boys had regular visits together, and that all three would visit and spend time with their biological mother in Harrisburg. It seemed as though a thoughtful, workable plan had been developed, one that would ensure the safety of the boys and the reunification of the family.

It would take only a few hours to realize that a plan that looks workable on paper, one both agency-approved and state-approved, can have little consequence or value in the lifeworlds of those for whom such planning was initially put into place. Upon arriving home that evening with the three boys, I introduced them to my wife Donna. We were excited at the prospect of being foster parents, loved the idea of opening up our home and our hearts to a child who could not be at his home for whatever reason and for whatever period of time, and we were certain that if we just loved that child
enough, if we simply did what the agency taught us to do, we could help him get through any bumps and hurdles in his young life. As a Christian, I took to heart the words of Jesus about loving children. As a child of the sixties, I knew Lennon and McCartney had it right: “All you need is love.”

Well, John, Paul, George, and Ringo never had foster children. And I had no idea of what we were in for, or that this would be an experience that would change all our lives. We had received all six, state-mandated training hours from our foster care agency, had a completed home inspection on file, had drinkable water and a flushable toilet, were fully certified by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to be foster parents, and were nearly clueless about the reality of the day-to-day experience of being foster parents. The chasm between becoming foster parents and being foster parents was before us. It was sink or swim; shit or get off the pot; fish or cut bait. It was now. Our horizons grew once more. As Dr. Maya Angelou said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

Learning to Learn

While the purpose is not to diminish or disparage the value of the agency-mandated, state-approved training we received, and would receive repeatedly in our tenure as foster parents, the most relevant education would begin informally on the very first morning as foster parents. Brenton and Emery were about to leave our home with their caseworker who would be transporting them to their new foster home in the next county. As they prepared to leave, Josiah, not wanting to once again and so quickly be separated from his brothers, plopped down on our living room couch, began to growl, and then started to bite himself on his left forearm. The caseworker saw this and reassuringly said, “How about if I take the two boys with me so you can get him settled down?” As a fully qualified, agency-trained, state-certified foster parent, I did the only thing I could think of— I panicked.
Then, I thought I had better do something, so I picked him up, held him in a passive restraint position to keep his arms away from his mouth, and tried very hard to keep my arms away from his mouth. Josiah must have sensed this because his first comment was, “Don’t worry. I’m not gonna bite you!” My introduction to informal foster parent learning had begun. What was it that Josiah wanted to achieve with his biting? Was it my focused attention? Was it anger about a lack of control over being separated from his brothers yet again? Was it an expression of self-loathing, feeling he “must have done something” to merit separation from his birth parents and biological brothers? Was it an intense anger that he had to express somehow and lacked the words or capacity to do in any other way? As an adult foster parent, I began to learn from Josiah in a way that I had not learned from the agency, indeed in a way that I doubt I could have learned through any formalized training process. It was a new horizon opening, a paradigm shifting.

What I learned in that moment – and as I reflect back on that moment -- that there was more, much more, to the incident than biting, and that there was much, so very much more, to foster parent learning than I had ever imagined or that any mandated, agency-based training had ever prepared me for. In the months and years that followed, my wife and I would come to rely more and more on other foster parents for managing the day-to-day concerns and living the day- after-day reality of foster parenting. I learned more about foster parenting from our foster children than we ever learned from foster care caseworkers. I looked forward to such conversations with anyone who had any experience with foster children, and at times intentionally sought them out. In what ways could such informal learning be more a part of the foster parent training and certification process? It appears as if a valuable resource, and an invaluable experience, is overlooked. Many horizons need to expand.
**Statement of the Problem**

On any given day in the United States, approximately 500,000 children are in foster care (Lovitt, Emerson, & Sorenson, 2005), and in 2012 (the last year for which statistics are currently available), approximately 200,000 new children were placed into foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). That is enough children to fill nearly five venues the size of Penn State’s Beaver Stadium. In Pennsylvania alone, in seven of the last eight calendar years, more children entered the foster care system than exited it (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). There are more children residing in the foster care system today than there are residents in the capital cities of Vermont, South Dakota, Maine, Kentucky, Montana, Alaska, Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and Pennsylvania … combined. In fact, in the United States, there are 16 states with a smaller resident population than the population of the foster care system (StateMaster, 2013). Every one of the 50 states has children in the foster care system.

Approximately half of the children in foster care, and this has been consistent for the past13 years, reside in non-family foster homes. That means that adults not biologically connected to the children are caring for these children. The average foster care stay continues to exceed two years (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Foster children need foster parents. Because so many children are affected (nearly half a million) for such a significant part of their lives (more than two years), foster parent education merits ongoing examination.

To further confound matters, the plans don’t always work out according to foster care agency or family reunification plans. Although the plan from day one had been for Brenton, Emory, and Josiah to return home, that would not happen. The biological father murdered his own mother and hid her body in the freezer of her home, and he had done so in a drug-induced rage. The biological mother, while in halfway house in Harrisburg, during one of the hottest days of that summer, consumed an
excessive amount of alcohol, passed out, and died of alcohol poisoning alone in her room. The three boys would thus remain in foster care until they “aged out” of the system when each turned eighteen. Thus, for Brenton, Emory, and Josiah, what started out as a temporary, situation-specific need (foster care placement) became an ongoing alternately situation-specific issue (the inability of the biological parents to care for them), turned into extended foster care placements in a variety of settings. A number of foster parents cared for these three boys for more than half of their growing-up years through the foster care system of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

For the duration of the foster care placement, foster children need foster parents. Foster parents need relevant, rigorous, practical educational opportunities that prepare them for the daily rigors of the foster care experience.

There is a linear, formalized, structured process for becoming a foster parent. All fifty (50) states have a formal certification program for those seeking to become foster parents. In part, this more formalized education includes a specific number of annual training hours in order to acquire and maintain annual certification. Pennsylvania, for example, requires foster parents be at least 21 years of age, be in good physical health, have potable water and a flush toilet, have a place for the foster child’s belongings and the ability to care for the foster child(-ren) placed in the home. Pennsylvania also has an annual requirement that foster parents undergo six (6) hours of approved formal training. These are the linear, detailed, measurable requirements to become a foster parent.

However, becoming a foster parent and being a foster parent are not synonymous. How, in fact, does a person learn to be a foster parent? This does not happen in six hours of annual training. By federal regulation, foster parents are required to have adequate (emphasis added) training prior to being certified as foster parents, and additional (emphasis added) training as needed subsequent to placement (Grimm, 2003). Is there a place for informal learning here? While the place of formalized
training is well documented, the same cannot be said of informal learning in the lived experience of foster parenting.

Children enter the foster care system for a number of reasons. Fanshel and Shinn (1978) note that a majority of children who enter foster care come from backgrounds and living situations in which neglect, abuse, parental drug abuse, and family instability are prevalent, which may lead to issues of trust and attachment in the foster family setting. Foster parents may, thus, encounter a very wide range of behaviors and behavioral issues that biological parents might not. Many children in foster care have physical and/or psychological problems as a result of experiences including pre-natal exposure to alcohol or drugs, neglect, abuse, and multiple foster care placements. The Child Welfare League of America (2004) states, “Approximately 60 percent of all children in out-of-home care have moderate to severe mental health problems,” and as such adolescents residing with foster parents or in group homes “have about four times the rate of serious psychiatric disorders than those living with their own families” (p. 2).

There are significant educational challenges foster parents face as well. According to the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education (2014), students in foster care score significantly lower than their peers on standardized testing, are much less likely to graduate from high school, and rarely attend any type of post-secondary education. When a foster care placement changes, the foster child(-ren) affected may end up changing schools or school districts. This change can lead to under-identification of special needs since it often takes weeks or even months for the special education testing and placement process to move to completion. This change in placement can also
lead to over-identification of special needs since movement from school to school may leave gaps in basic skill acquisition not connected with any learning disability.

Buboltz and Whiren (1984) note that parents of these children may encounter particular challenges and require additional resources to function in a corresponding manner as a foster family of a child without such special needs. When these “additional resources” mean that foster parents of children with special needs have the opportunity to interact informally with other foster parents, there is the potential for significant benefit to parents and children. I have met well over one hundred foster parents over the past two decades. Every foster parent I know has cared for foster children with special needs, and the selection of the plural noun *children* is intentional. The foster parents I know and the foster parents I have met in conducting this research have cared for children with specific behaviors and behavioral issues that have challenged them to address with creativity and compassion. These behavior challenges offer another significant opportunity for edifying and enriching the informal learning that occurs among and between foster parents. A mantra of the autism community is, “If you know one child with autism, you know one child with autism.” Children with autism have such unique lives and lived experiences that blanket generalizations are simply not deep enough. The very same mantra could readily apply to foster care. Foster children come from varied and, at times, horrific backgrounds; therefore, the utilization of resources for foster parent learning should be as expansive as possible. This includes informal learning, as foster parents seem to already be well aware. Brown, Moraes, and Mayhew (2005) acknowledge that “foster parents emphasize the value of training, communication with professionals, counseling services, respite, peer support, and community resources” (p. 418). Research-based evidence of the importance for foster parent education is extensive, ever-present and everywhere-present, multi-leveled and multi-layered.
Foster children need qualified foster parents, those who have both formal certification as well as informal learning to draw upon in the parenting process, the day-to-day lived experience(s) of foster parenting. What factors affect the learning needs of foster parents?

These need to be known and understood in order to effectively deal with the very real and immediate needs of children placed in foster care.

As a foster parent, I have cared for a child who told me he scooped cockroaches out of the jar of peanut butter and ate that with his fingers because that was all there was to eat in the house, a child who was locked in the basement for three straight days because he sold his Nintendo to buy food, a child who has a shunt because he was physically abused extensively as a very young child, a child who said matter-of-factly one day while we were playing cars, “My daddy plays with my dick,” and many children who used drugs and alcohol to cope with the realities they survived in the care of their biological parents. No formal training program could have prepared me for what I would experience as a foster parent. I had to rely on what I learned informally, through the experiences with our foster children and through interactions with other foster parents, to really learn what I need in specific situations encountered. Brown, Moraes, and Mayhew (2005) acknowledge, that “few studies have focused on the experience of foster parents of children with a range of disabilities” and even less is known about the informal learning of foster parents (p. 418). While Pennsylvania’s mandated certification process is valuable, the learning needs of foster parents go beyond six hours of annual training. Well beyond. Without informal learning through our foster children and other foster parents, I would never have remained a foster parent for nearly two decades. As my research study indicates, other foster parents have had similar experiences.
Research Rationale

Since “lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research,” my research is based on the principles of phenomenology (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). Dilthey (1985) asserted that lived experience is to the soul what breath is to the body. Lived experience, thus, “is the breathing of meaning” (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). Therefore, a lived experience has a “certain essence,” the quality of which can only be grasped through conscientious retrospect (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). Lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance “as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them” (van Manen, 1990, p.36). Since phenomenology is “the study of essences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii), this method of research allowed the foster parent participants to tell their stories in their own words, to verbalize how they have constructed meaning through informal learning experiences. A linguistic connection between lived experience, reflection and interpretation, and discourse (the interviews) was established. What was, then, their perception of the meaning of their experiences? According to van Manen, A good description that “constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance in a hitherto unseen way” (van Manen, 1990, p. 39). This allowed me, as the researcher, to get at the foster parents’ perception of the meaning of their lived experience, and thus make the “unseen” more readily seen.

I did not grow up in foster care. Thus, what I know about foster care I know from what I have read, from working as a foster care caseworker, from my lived experience as a foster parent, from the meaning I have constructed from the informal learning that I have gained through the foster care process and from reflecting on the two decades of caring for other people’s children. An authentic understanding of how foster parents learn to be foster parents can only be provided by those who have lived that experience. I can research statistics on the substitute care system of the United States.
I can read books and journal articles about foster care. I can read case studies and case files of foster children. I can interview the Director of Children and Youth for Lycoming County, a person I have known for a quarter of a century. I have an understanding and interpretation of my experience as a foster care caseworker, as a foster parent, and as an adoptive parent of children who were part of the foster care system.

But I sought something deeper for this dissertation: “The starting point of phenomenological research is largely a matter of discovering what it is that deeply interests the researcher and of identifying this interest as a true phenomenon, i.e., as some experience which human beings “live through” (van Manen, 1990, p. 40). To orient oneself to a phenomenon implies a particular “interest, station or vantage point in life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 40). My orientation or vantage point for the issue of foster care is as a teacher and as a foster parent for two decades. My interest was to better understand the role of informal learning for foster parents, and to understand how foster parents understand their own informal learning experiences.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my research was to gain insight into the human phenomenon of foster parent learning. Van Manen (1990) writes “the method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator [a parent or teacher] in the first place” (p. 2). As a special education teacher, a foster parent, an adoptive parent, a college instructor, and a doctoral candidate, I have a profound interest in people and how they act meaningfully and purposefully in this world by creating meaning out of the experiences they daily live in this world. As van Manen (1990) states, “the preferred method for human science involves description, interpretation, and self-reflective or critical analysis” and by so doing, human science targets “explication of the meaning of human phenomena and understanding the lived structures of meanings [such as in phenomenological studies
of the lifeworld’’ (p. 4). The results of my research have begun to “fill the gap” of what was not previously known about the informal learning of foster parents.

**Research Paradigm**

As one of the more prominent figures of the 20th century to bring ever-increasing interest in and attention to the concept of the ‘paradigm shift,’ Thomas Kuhn notes two essential qualities of a paradigm: The paradigm must, first and foremost, be “sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group away from competing modes of scientific activity” and secondly must also be “sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve” (Kuhn, 1962, p. 10). The foster care system in the United States was developed and implemented to address the fact that not all children could be cared for by their biological parents, but still needed individuals to fill the parental roles. That fact that nearly half a million children are in foster care today indicates a depth and breadth to the response to the need for foster parents. My research sought to detail the accepted methods and practices in educating foster parents, from the perspective of those who have lived this experience, with the goal of understanding the role of informal adult learning for foster parents. While no single research endeavor will uncover the myriad complexities of foster parenting learning, my hermeneutic phenomenological study provided detailed accounts of how participants made meaning of the daily lived experience as foster parents. Perhaps this research on foster parent informal learning, and similar subsequent studies, will bring about a paradigm shift by expanding the horizons of those with the position and power to effect fundamental changes to foster care education and training in this nation. Perhaps informal learning will become as valued as the more traditional means of training foster parents. This could mark a significant paradigm shift in foster parent education and foster parent learning. According to Kafle (2006), a paradigm “can be perceived as a loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts, or
propositions that orient thinking and research,“ consisting of four component parts: metaphysics, methodology, quality, and ethics (p. 193). I address metaphysics here, and the concepts of methodology, quality, and ethics in Chapter Four.

Constituted by ontology (the science of the study of being), epistemology (the concept of how what is known, is known), and axiology (the place of values, ethics, and opinions as related to knowledge generation), lives the metaphysics of research (or more precisely, a research study). In hermeneutic phenomenology, reality is understood as an individual construct, situation specific and context dependent. The literal situatedness of the foster parent participants influenced the methodology selected for this study. This knowledge is subjective and underlying my hermeneutic phenomenological study was the belief that knowledge creation is, indeed, possible and it becomes possible through subjective experiences and insights and reflection, a “practical form of knowledge generation” (Kafle, 2006, p. 194).

van Manen (1990) states that there is in existence no fixed set of methods to conduct this type of research endeavor. Merriam (1997) suggests purposeful sampling with information rich cases, which is what I dif in establishing the criteria for foster parent participation. Those with five or more years of foster parenting experience had very information- rich stories to tell, ones they were eager to tell, as Chapter Five indicates.

The goal of my research was to more fully understand a human phenomenon and participants’ experiences of this phenomenon (the adult informal learning of foster parents).

This goal “fits with the philosophy, strategies, and intentions” of the chosen paradigm (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 613). As a research methodology, hermeneutic phenomenology “is best suited for answering questions about human issues and concerns… the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions” (Benner, 1994, p. 80). These “what” and “how” questions provided a rich source of information for
understanding the lived experience of foster parenting. Therefore, some very basic historical contextualization now follows.

Ihde (1971) acknowledges that hermeneutics is “not a well-defined field,” but is generally taken to mean “interpretation” with the “idea of a text as that which is interpreted” (p. 6). He has translated the work of Paul Ricoeur, a French scholar and author, who describes hermeneutic phenomenology as “reflective philosophy” in the Preface to Ihde’s book (p. xv). In short, “the self of self-understanding is a gift of understanding itself and of the invitation from the meaning inscribed in the text” (p. xv). For Ricoeur (1976), it is impossible that man (sic) may know himself directly,” but rather it is through a “series of detours that he learns about the fullness and complexity of his own being” which involves a “reflective procedure” (p. 7).

Gabriel Marcel, Ricoeur’s professor through his graduate program, greatly influenced Ricoeur’s thinking regarding the mystery associated with being:

The doctrinal element in Marcel’s thought, however, is not what Ricoeur cites as most important. Rather, it was the “Socratic” method of teaching discovered in the seminars held in Marcel’s apartment. The guiding rule was that all students were to speak first from experience – prior to citing texts or making commentaries (Ihde, 1971, p. 8).

Reflecting on lived experience becomes the basis for interpreting that experience and making meaning of it. Philosophy is “a reflection upon existence and upon all those means by which that existence is to be understood” (Ihde, 1971, p. 9). This type of inquiry queries, “What is this experience like?” in its endeavor to unpack meanings as lived in everyday existence and experience (Polinghorne, 1983). Phenomenology aims to attain “a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology, as it concerns lived human experience, is creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). For Ricoeur (1976), “Man is language” (p. 23). For Gadamer (1960),
Language is the “universal medium” in which understanding occurs; “understanding occurs in interpreting” (p. 389). Through language we express how we understand ourselves. It brings experience into the open, the arena of reflection. As foster parents learn informally, they engage in discourse and as they explain their experiences as foster parents, they interpret those experiences, and in this dialogue meaning is created. Understanding is gained, perhaps deepened, as foster parents come to know that which had not been known, and that influences – perhaps even profoundly so – their being in this world.

I specifically chose to complete a hermeneutic phenomenological study because this allowed “the exploration of participants’ experiences with further abstraction and interpretation” by the individual doing the research based on the researcher’s theoretical and personal knowledge (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2008, p. 616). Subjectivity is valued. It is an impossibility for any researcher to be totally objective because each individual person is situated in a reality constructed by subjective experiences. Therefore, I make no claim to objectivity regarding foster parenting. It has been my lived experience for two decades. Six of my children have come into my life through the foster care system and either have been or are in the process of being adopted. My lived experience as a foster parent, and how I have interpreted that day-to-day reality, forever influences how I situate myself in this world and in relation to this research study.

Since communication and language are intertwined, hermeneutics provides a way to understand such human experiences captured through language and in context with the goal of developing a rich, dense description of the phenomenon under investigation and within a particular context (van Manen, 1990).
Van Manen (1990) states “To know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way,” and this type of hermeneutic phenomenological study revealed what it means for these foster parent participants to be in the world as foster parents, as they live, learn, understand, and interpret that experience (p. 5). Interpretation, through internal and external dialogue, then, became critical to this process of understanding (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger noted that every encounter absolutely involves interpretation, and thus my hermeneutic phenomenological study bore fruit in a way other research efforts and methods would not. A quantitative method of inquiry, for example, simply would not yield the “thick and rich” results that this qualitative study has yielded.

To summarize, as van Manen states, “Then research is a caring act: we want to know that which is most essential to being” (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). I sought to shed light on the lived experience of foster parents. Since meaning arises from interpretive interaction, by choosing this methodology, I believe light has been shed. A methodology is “not a correct method to follow, but a creative approach to understanding,” so I now turn to the research questions that identified the phenomenon I wanted to understand (Laverty, 2003, p. 28).

**Research Questions**

Three overarching questions focused this study:

1. What is the lived experience of selected foster parents as they create meaning from the day-to-day events, interactions, and experiences of caring for foster child(ren)?

2. What is the nature of informal learning in this lived foster parent experience? What does it “look like”? How is it initiated and executed?

3. What meaning does the foster parent make in reflecting on the lived experience of being a foster parent and the informal learning that occurs in the foster parent experience? What is the impact of informal learning on the lived experience of foster parents?
Conclusion

This chapter has presented background information on the learning needs of foster parents in the United States who care for the approximately 500,000 children currently in foster care. Foster children need qualified foster parents. By “qualified,” I mean those who have formal certification as well as informal knowledge to draw upon in successfully negotiating the foster parenting experience. While each state has a specific certification process and a formalized training process for foster parents, the role of informal learning for foster parents seems to have been ignored. This chapter has also briefly presented information on my experience with informal learning as a foster parent. In proposing a hermeneutic phenomenological study of eight foster parents and their perceptions of their informal learning, I sought to better understand the phenomenon of learning to be and being foster parents. I believe the results of this research provide insights that would inform other foster parents in their own learning process of lived experience of foster parenting.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is presented in six chapters. This chapter has outlined the research problem, rationale, and questions driving this phenomenological study. Chapter Two reviews research related to foster care, foster parenting, the special needs of foster children, and the need for foster parent education. Chapter Three outlines the development and foundational concepts of phenomenology as a qualitative research method. In addition, although researchers engaged in phenomenological study are admonished to minimize presuppositions, this chapter also presents a discussion of Situated Learning Theory (SLT) and Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT), which are used as a theoretical framework for understanding foster parent experiences with informal learning. Chapter Four provides a detailed discussion of the methods I used for
collecting and analyzing data. Chapter Five provides an introduction of the participants of the study and presents the results of my study. Chapter Six brings the dissertation to a close with an analysis, a revisiting of the research questions and the researcher learning, and possible implications of the results of this research.
Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I review literature relevant to the research purpose of this dissertation. I begin with research on foster care, followed by the foster parent certification process. I then review literature on the particular learning needs of foster parents related to the special needs of foster children, efforts to address those needs, foster parent assessment of their needs, and gaps in the current research.

A Brief History of Foster Care

In the United States, foster care has been in existence since the middle of the 19th century. Charles Loring Brace, who founded The Children’s Aid Society, sought a way to address the immediate and pervasive needs of the approximately 30,000 homeless or neglected children struggling to survive on the streets and in the slums of New York City (The Children’s Aid Society, (nd)). Brace, a minister by trade, believed that by removing these children from dangerous city streets and placing them with farming families, these children would have a better, safer life.

The pivotal moment in these early stages of foster care was the Orphan Train Movement, founded under the auspices of Brace, which transported children in need of safer and more permanent places to live from the streets of New York City to work on farms in the Midwest and West. Lasting from 1853 to early 1929, the Orphan Train movement transported an estimated 250,000 “orphaned, abandoned, and homeless children” throughout the United States and Canada (National Orphan Train Complex, (nd)). Families were able to pre-select children by completing an “order form” in which a family could specify the age, gender, hair color, and eye color of a child they thought would be most useful in completing the work at hand on the homestead. At times, trainloads of these children were
hoarded and huddled together on stages, town halls, even train platforms, to be evaluated and selected by prospective parents (Chin, 2007). This process led to further separation and segmentation of these children as they were frequently separated from their siblings and often placed geographically far from biological brothers and sisters. The initial primary emphasis appeared to be placing these children in a safer environment as opposed to preserving any type of familial connection. These initial foster parents could choose their foster children based on physical attributes they found most useful or appealing. It was a beginning, and any birth process is less than tidy.

Prior to the efforts of the Children’s Aid Society, however, people who could not raise their children depended on the kindness of family members, the charity of the church or orphanages, and sometimes in spite of these alternatives the children were simply abandoned. It was not until 1933 that federal support for foster care was established under Title IV of the Social Security Act (Simms, Dubowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000). Children were placed into foster homes, but often languished there because there was no mandated permanency or reunification plan. The primary goal seems to have been solely the physical safety of the placed children, not for permanency or reunification. This continued for nearly half a century.

In 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Reform Act (PL 96-272) “directed social service agencies to prevent out-of-home placements when possible, to make reasonable efforts to reunify them with their biological families when feasible, or to find adoptive placement when necessary” (p. 910). This marked the first legislative endeavor to address both the immediate needs of foster children (removal from a dangerous or abusive setting) and the long- term needs (permanency). These reforms are what largely form the current foster care system in the United States.

While the immediate impact of this legislation resulted nationally in a decrease in the number of children languishing in foster care, the societal issues of substance abuse, single- parent families,
homelessness, child poverty, child abuse, and the explosion of HIV-infection – these societal issues resulted in “an even greater expansion of the foster care population” (Curtis, 1999). Thus, while foster children were not spending as much time in foster care, more children were in need of foster care services, and thus foster parents.

The most significant recent piece of legislation impacting children in foster care is The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA, PL 105-89) of 1997. ASFA establishes “the health and safety of children in the child welfare system as clear priorities” by mandating that states begin the procedure to terminate parental rights “if a child has been in care for 15 of the prior 22 months” (Simms, Dubowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000, p. 910). For all children in the foster care system, “states must obtain a court order at least every 12 months and demonstrate that reasonable efforts have been made toward establishing a permanent plan for reunification, or toward legal guardianship or adoption” (The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, PL 105-89, 1997). Each legislative act reflects a growing emphasis on the foster child’s best interests.

The Federal Definition of Foster Care

The federal government, specifically the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) oversees the organization and operation of the foster care system in our nation. In its Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Title 45, Volume 4, Part 1355, Section 57, the federal government defines foster care as

24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes. The reporting system includes all children who have been in foster care at least 24 hours. The foster care settings include relative foster homes, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, childcare institutions, and pre-adoptive homes (HHS, 2003).

As part of its record keeping responsibilities for the children placed in the foster care system, HHS maintains and publishes statistics on the efficacy of substitute care in our nation. These statistics indicate that the foster care system in the United States oversees the daily lives of approximately half
a million children, and that nearly 40% of the children in this system on any given day in the United States entered into the system for the first time within the previous twelve-month period. The foster care system “faces serious challenges in the twenty-first century,” argue Sandra Stukes Chipungu and Tricia B. Bent-Goodley in “Meeting the challenges of contemporary foster care” (2004, p. 84). The substantive societal problems of “family poverty, homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, unequal education, family and community violence, and racism” that seem ever- and everywhere-present “have a deleterious effect on families and directly impact child well-being and the child welfare system” (p. 77). The need for foster parents continues to grow throughout the U.S., and there is no evidence to suggest that the need for foster care, and thus foster parents, will decline anytime soon. There remains a “chronic” shortage of foster families (Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002, p. 151). Not only is foster parent education a valid topic of research, it is integral to the efficacy and sustainability of foster care in the United States.

With these legal parameters in place, it falls upon the individual states to interpret the law and to recruit and certify foster parents.

**The Certification Process for Foster Parents in Pennsylvania**

According to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1999) in *Chapter 3700. Foster Family Care Agency* there are three requirements for Pennsylvania’s foster parents:

- to be at least 21 years of age;
- to pass a medical physical by a licensed physician; and
- to pass background and child abuse screenings (effective January 1, 1986).
As far as place of residence is concerned, the Commonwealth requires that the drinking water be “potable” and that the caregivers be “physically able to care for the child” (3700.62); that the residence have “at least one flush toilet, one wash basin and one bath or shower with hot and cold running water”; an “operable” heating system; an operable telephone; and sleeping accommodations that include a “clean, comfortable mattress and clean linens, blankets, and pillow” (3700.66). Other specific foster care requirements detailed in The Code include: discipline, punishment, and control (3700.63); assessment of foster parent ability to “provide care, nurturing and supervision” to children and to “accept a foster child’s relationship with his own parents” (3700.64); and finally foster parents “shall participate annually in a minimum of 6 hours of agency approved training” (3700.65). Most of these requirements focus on the physical environment of the foster home (flush toilet, operable heating system, mattress and clean linens). Even those requirements that deal with an assessment that is not quantifiable (the ability to provide care, nurturing and supervision to children) are evaluated as part of the application and certification process that foster parents undergo before even a single foster child enters that home environment. The only stated regulation that applies to foster parents while they are actually engaged in the daily lived experience of foster parenting is the annual training requirement of six (6) agency-approved hours.

The Training Requirements for Foster Parents

Throughout the United States, foster parents become foster parents through the completion of requisite foster care agency and state-mandated training that serves as the sole means for foster parent certification with the intent that foster parents will understand and use skills such as CPR and First Aid, nutrition, and behavior modification that will help them in the day-to-day experience of providing care to children placed in their homes.

The majority of states do require a minimum number of training hours each year, but the
range of these mandatory training hours varies significantly. While the federal government defines the nature and scope of foster care, individual states determine these three aspects of this training: the amount of training (required annual hours), the source of the training (state-approved providers), and the content of the training.

While it may seem that Pennsylvania has a modest requirement of only six (6) hours of mandated training annually for foster parents (44 hours fewer than a teenager needs to get a driver’s license), many states require even fewer mandatory training hours. Hawaii, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Wisconsin mandate no official annual training hours for foster parents (Gerstenzang, 2009). New York does not have a specified number of training hours required (New York Office of Children and Family Services, 2013). Tennessee requires three hours each on discipline, sexual abuse, cultural competency, and work with birth parents; two hours of education; and one elective hour (Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, 2013). While Connecticut requires only nine training hours annually, during the first 18 months of service, foster parents are required to complete 45 hours of training. Kansas and Wyoming each require 16 hours of yearly training while Colorado, Ohio, and Texas top the list, mandating 20 hours each (Gerstenzang, 2009). Vermont ties the number of completed training hours to the level of reimbursement foster parents receive; foster parents who attend 40 hours of training over a two-year period move from one level of reimbursement to the next level (Vermont Department for Children and Families, 2013). Much like many a union contract in the educational world, more accumulated training results in a higher level of income. The fact that there is so much variation in the amount of required foster parent training raises significant issues about the role of such training in the day-to-day lived experience of foster parents, or the perceived value of such training by various states and provider agencies.
Another factor in the mandated training of foster parents is the content of that training. Each state determines what counts as “acceptable” training in order for foster parents to maintain their certification as foster parents. Individual states determine the acceptable content. Parent education programs do differ significantly in design, development, and delivery. According to Wolfe and Haddy (2001), some are didactic in nature while others focus on social supports; some are based on conflicting philosophies (behaviorism, as opposed to client-centered); some employ divergent methodologies (positive reinforcement, as opposed to natural consequences). Significantly, parent education programs are most successful when program elements are considered in light of the goals parents have for parent education instruction (Debord, Heath, McDermott, & Wolfe, 1999) in changing general behaviors aimed at improving parent-child relationships. Does foster parent training mirror that of other such parent education programs?

Foster parent educational training does show similar differences in design, development, and delivery. Colorado, for example, mandates in the first year there must be 27 hours of core/certification training. Of that, 12 hours is called Core Foster Parent training. The additional 15 hours must be completed within 3-4 months of a child's placement. The training must focus on the areas of competency needed to meet the child's needs. In addition, prospective foster parents must have CPR/First Aid prior to a child's placement (in addition to the 27 hours). In addition, foster parents must complete 20 hours of ongoing training. This means that by the time of annual recertification, foster parents will have received about 55 training hours (27 core/ certification+8 CPR/1st Aid + 20 hours ongoing). Thereafter they must complete 20 hours of annual training. Thus, even those states that do require a substantial number of training hours for foster parents, place a very heavy emphasis on structured, formalized agency training, such as CPR certification and Core Foster Parent training modules (Colorado Department of Human Services: Office of Children, Youth &
Family Services, 2013). Nationwide, there is reliance on this type of adult learning opportunities for training and maintaining foster parents.

Finally, each state also establishes approved training providers for that state’s foster parents. In Ohio, the state approves training curricula offered through the state’s regional training centers, and the state approves all training content for private agencies (Ohio Office of Families and Children, 2013). In Vermont, training opportunities may include formalized agency training, workshops, relevant conference participation, reading books, viewing videos, or other similar activities (Vermont Department for Children and Families: Family Services Division, 2013). For foster parents in Delaware, participation in in-service training classes offered by Department of Family Services (DFS) or private foster care agencies is the preferred method (Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, 2013). However, Foster Home Coordinators may approve equivalent training or experience if such training or experience develops the competencies for DFS classes listed on the Foster Care Model. For classes where competencies have not been outlined by DFS, the DFS Foster Care Training Administrator must approve substitute training or experience. In some instances, Foster Home Coordinators may approve alternative learning methods in consultation with the DFS Foster Care Training Administrator. Foster parents must get pre-approved for any substitution for DFS or private

foster care agency training. There is a defined and definitive intricate chain of command in place for determining the relevance of such foster parent learning opportunities.

Alaska offers all foster parent training via “Web-based, on site, self-study packet, video or audio” training, while some trainings are available in one of the Native languages (Gerstenzang, 2009). The state currently contracts its training for resource families (the state’s designated term for “foster parents”), and all training is open to any interested community members (Alaska Department
of Health and Social Services: Office of Children’s Services, 2013). In Alaska, it is possible to become a certified foster parent and care for foster children, without ever even sitting in a training setting – let alone talking with – any agency caseworkers or any other foster parents.

The literature indicates the extent of the control each state has over the foster parent training process that is used as the primary – if not exclusive – means of training and certifying foster parents. The literature also indicates a great disparity between states in the amount, content, and context of foster parent educational endeavors.

The Connection Between Parent Education and Foster Parent Education

Parent education is a recognized subset of adult education. That parents play a crucial role in the education of their children is a key tenet of adult education (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). Indeed, the myriad benefits connected with parent education have been demonstrated for decades and across a variety of disciplines (McConachie & Diggle, 2007). Not only has such research, both quantitative and qualitative, reiterated the significant place that parent education holds within adult education, but it has both expanded in scope and specialized in focus for particular aspects of parenting. More recent research has explored the effectiveness of parent education programs for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Schultz, 2011), for incarcerated parents (Wilson, Gonzalez, Romero, Henry, & Cerbana, 2010), and for early intervention (Owen & Mulvihill, 1994) to name a few. As such, parent education “draws its strength from its comprehensive nature, ability to serve multiple functions, and adaptable form” (Schultz, Schmidt, & Stichter, 2011, p. 96).

Fan and Chen (2001) posit that while parent education is frequently, if simplistically, viewed as uni-dimensional, the reality is more appropriately conceptualized as a construct that is multifaceted
in nature because of such a wide variety of parental behaviors and practices. Shiffman (2011) notes that participating in adult education programs “offers a set of conditions and experiences that provides parents with access to resources, content knowledge, and other supports” that parents might not otherwise have available (p. 161).

Thus, parent education, according to Schultz (2011), broadly encompasses programs and trainings developed and implemented to provide parents with information and to teach them skills. Brookman-Frazee, Shahmer, Baker-Ericzen, and Tsai (2006) state that a very common area for parent education is aimed at parents of children demonstrating disruptive behaviors. Parent education has also focused on teaching specific parenting skills, such as time out and reward strategies (Barlow, Parsons, & Stewart-Brown, 2005). Parent education programming “often focuses on changing general behavior” in an effort to alter the interactions between parents and their children” (Schultz, 2011, p. 97). These “highly structured, prescriptive, concrete tasks for parents produce more stable gains than less structured programs” (Becher, 1984, p. 7).

But what about when something more than a change of “general behavior” is needed? While research shows common threads connecting the learning needs of all parents, there are specific learning needs that foster parents have. Thus, while “parents” and “foster parents” may have a surfeit of commonality in needed parent education, the two terms – and thus the needs of the two groups – are not synonymous.

**The Specific Educational Needs of Foster Parents**

While the learning needs of all parents are myriad, there is a depth and a breadth to the educational needs of foster parents because of the plethora of issues regarding the foster children in their care. Foster parents today are being asked to take on more demanding foster children and to assume greater responsibility for arranging services for these children in addition to needing to know
counseling and behavioral techniques to care for these more challenging foster children (MacGregor, Roger, Cummings, & Lescheid, 2006). Fanshel and Shinn (1978) note that a majority of children who enter foster care come from backgrounds and living situations in which neglect, abuse, parental drug abuse, and family instability are prevalent, which may lead to issues of trust and attachment in the foster family setting. Prior research in the field of social work indicates that foster children tend to have experienced an insecure attachment history with their families of origin (Crittenden 1983, 1985; Egelane & Sroufe, 1981; Spieker & Booth, 1988). Ponciano (2010) notes this insecurity often stems from “past shared experiences that may include abuse, neglect, rejection, and/or abandonment” (p. 98). Foster parents report that these bonding and trust issues are at the heart of their concerns as foster parents. Inadequate training on these and other substantive issues is one of the primary reasons that foster parents quit being foster parents (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Therefore, foster parent education geared toward attachment theory and attachment behaviors seems of significant importance, and is but one way that “foster parent education” differs from the broader “parent education.”

Another significant area of need for foster parent education involves behavioral issues. While many foster care placements fail for any number of reasons, one of the leading reasons foster parents have sustained placements is because they are “able to manage a wide variety of child behaviors” (Dando & Minty, 1987). Newton, Litrowik, and Landsverk (2000) report foster children with higher rates of externalizing problems become more likely to experience placement disruptions, which decrease the chances of successful foster care placement. Placement disruption could reinforce issues of trust in caregivers and perpetuate an increase in maladaptive patterns of behavior. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being Research Group (2003) reports that nearly half of children in foster care show evidence of some form of externalizing behavior problems. All children
act out. Foster children, at times, may be more pointed and pronounced in these acting out episodes. A significant factor in why foster parents quit is that they have not received adequate behavioral training, especially for foster parents dealing with teenagers and children with special needs (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Therefore, foster parent education in behavioral theory, applied behavior analysis, and behavior modification techniques seems of paramount importance.

A significant portion of the foster care population in the United States has specialized health and educational needs as well. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002) reports that children in foster care are as much as 10 times more likely to have mental health problems than children not impacted by the system. Lips (2007) also confirms the likelihood of foster children to need and engage in the services of mental health programs. Studies of foster children have revealed higher rates of medical and mental health problems, as compared to normative and community samples (Simms & Halfon, 1994). The learning needs of foster parents of children with special needs are even more intricate and involved because these children’s needs are so intricate and involved. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) report that a significant proportion of students in foster care score 15-20% below their peers on statewide achievement tests in reading and mathematics. Parrish, Graczewski, Stewart-Teitelbaum, and Van Dyke (2002) have found that foster children placed in group homes had twice the absenteeism rate, referrals for disciplinary action, and failure to be promoted to the next grade level as their peers who were not in foster care. Thus, the special needs of children placed in foster care represent another potential area of need for foster parent education to address.

Many children in foster care have physical and/or psychological problems as a result of experiences including pre-natal exposure to alcohol or drugs, neglect, abuse, and multiple foster care placements. The Child Welfare League of America (2004), states “Approximately 60 percent of all children in out-of-home care have moderate to severe mental health problems. Adolescents living
with foster parents or in group homes have about four times the rate of serious psychiatric disorders than those living with their own families.” A 2000 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report found that foster children are more likely than other groups of Medicaid children to use mental health services. In California and Pennsylvania, 16 percent and 21 percent of children in foster care respectively use psychiatric services, as compared with 2 percent and 5 percent of other Medicaid-eligible children. Children in foster care are educationally vulnerable, while children in foster care with special needs are even more so. Nationally, approximately 10% of the general student population in the public system receive special education services, but “almost a third to half of the foster population receives special education services” (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006, p. 162). The literature indicates that a significant number of children in foster care will be navigating the special education system in the nation’s public schools, which represents another area of need for foster parent learning.

Lips (2007) confirms the likelihood of foster children to need and engage in the services of mental health programs. These specific elements of the foster care experience were explicitly “taught” in the formalized process of becoming certified to be foster parents. Studies have indicated that between 28% and 52% of children in foster care receive special education services, generally either as the result of a diagnosed learning disability or an emotional disturbance (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2001). To address the often deep-seated needs of the children in their care, Lips (2007) notes foster parents receive training that the children in their care might have behavioral needs, therapeutic appointments, and relationship issues at home and at school. However, in this phenomenological study, comments made by foster parents implied a “struggle of the heart” in relation to the “various situations that arose during the day-to-day provision of care,” (such as the growing bond between the foster parent and the foster child). For example, as one foster parent described her first experience of
providing care, “‘When I got (child’s name) then I knew he could be taken away from me and, um, I thought to myself at the time that this would be ok…you attach after a couple of days and, um, then it would have been terrible for me had he ever been taken’” (Lips, 2007, p. 78). While agency-sponsored foster parent training clearly states that foster care is “temporary” and not a permanent solution, foster parents still grow increasingly attached to their foster children. This represents yet another substantive area of need for foster parent learning.

Additionally, foster children with special needs frequently have more than one area of specialized need. Buboltz and Whiren (1984) note that parents of such children may encounter particular challenges and require additional resources to function in a corresponding manner as a foster family of a child without such special needs. Brown, Moraes, and Mayhew (2005) acknowledge that “few studies have focused on the experience of foster parents of children with a range of disabilities” and that “foster parents emphasize the value of training, communication with professionals, counseling services, respite, peer support, and community resources” (p. 418). Caring for children with a range of disabilities is another educational need for foster parents of children with special needs. Evidence of the necessity for foster parent education is ubiquitous, ongoing and ever-present, multi-leveled and multi-layered.

**Current Efforts to Address the Need for Foster Parent Education**

The adult education literature characterizes non-formal adult learning as a type of learning that occurs outside of formal learning systems, but which does have specific learners with identified and identifiable learning goals (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Non-formal learning is structured with specific learning outcomes in mind but generally
includes no formalized assessment (degree or certification) and tends to occur outside of the more
traditional educational institutions and settings (Livingstone, 1999). In non-formal learning, there is
less of a hierarchical instructor-learner dynamic, but rather the “teachers” and “learners” act in a more
collaborative relationship, sharing information, ideas, expertise, and knowledge, with instructors
offering content expertise but little to no formal teacher training (Taylor, 2006). In non-formal
learning settings, those providing instruction tend to orient themselves toward the specific needs of
the learners, with an emphasis on informality and interactivity (Taylor & Caldarelli, 2004). This
seems to be the approach to state-mandated, agency-sponsored foster parent training throughout the
United States.

One entirely online approach to foster parent education is the Foster Parent College, which
provides interactive, multimedia training courses for adoptive, kinship, and foster parents (Northwest
Media, Inc., 2014). For a modest fee of ten to twenty dollars, foster care agencies and foster parents
can receive training in Behavior Management (Anger Pie, Children with Autism, Stealing, Wetting
and Soiling, Sleep Problems), and Parenting Strategies (Cultural Issues in Parenting, Foster Care to
cost $30 per participant, yield six hours of training per workshop and include multimedia
presentations, printable handouts, required discussion board exercises, and a printable Certificate of
Completion. Twenty-six foster care agencies in Pennsylvania accept FPC training hours toward their
parents’ annual training requirements, including four agencies in Lycoming County, three in
Columbia County, and three in Centre County (Northwest Media, Inc., 2014). This program is
approved by programs such as Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA) and the
National Adoption Center, as well as endorsed by the Foster Family-based Treatment Association
(FFTA) and the National Foster Parent Association. Of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties, the only two
county children and youth agencies to accept these trainings hours as meeting the state-mandated hours for annual training are Sullivan County and York County.

In Lycoming County, where I reside, “Resource parents” (the county’s term for those providing foster care services to children and youth), must have twelve hours of pre-service training and then participate in six hours of Agency-approved training annually each year of service (Lycoming County Joinder Board, 2014). A telephone conversation with a Children and Youth Supervisor revealed that the agency works with three other agencies in the county to provide foster parent training. The pre-service twelve hours of training are generally done one-on-one with foster parents being trained by an agency caseworker. “Sometimes, experienced foster parents are involved in these pre-training sessions” to work with new foster parents (M. Westerbrook, personal communication, February 21, 2014). For the six hours of annual training, the agency encourages a combination of in-person and online training, but “we don’t have a lot of resources” so we “try to make it easy” for foster parents to amass the requisite annual training hours (M. Westerbrook, personal communication, February 21, 2014). If the pre-service training takes place one-on-one with a caseworker, and if a portion (or all) of the six annual hours of training are provided through online means, there seems to be limited opportunities for foster parents to learn informally from other foster parents.

In Centre County, where Penn States resides, pre-service training sessions are offered three times a year (fall, winter, spring). Classes meet one evening a week for 2.5 hours per session, and are six weeks in duration. These classes are required of all prospective foster parents in Centre County (J. Jordan, personal communication, February 21, 2014). To meet the required six hours of annual training, Centre County “makes many training resources available to foster parents, including booklets, books, DVDs, and videos, as well as “numerous websites” and “community agencies”
(“Centre County Pennsylvania,” 2014). In Centre County, once the initial fifteen hours of face-to-face training has been completed by prospective foster parents, all or most of the annual six hours of training can be met either by reading or by online means, with little to no contact with other foster parents.

**Foster Parents’ Perspectives on Their Learning Needs**

Foster parents do recognize their need for training that extends beyond the needs and scope of traditional parent education. Hudson and Levasseur (2002) conducted a study in which 66 foster parents responded to a 12-page questionnaire in which the primary question was, “What do foster parents identify as the type of support they require to successfully maintain their foster home?” Foster parents expressed a desire for “inclusion in the same professional development opportunities as the paid staff of the agency” (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002, p. 868). For 71% of respondents, training in the agency’s policies and procedures was the highest priority item. That such a mundane topic would be valued so highly seems to indicate that improvements could be made in the educational opportunities offered to foster parents. More experienced foster parents in the study “sought to improve their skills in managing difficult behaviors in general,” as well as “advice and direction and perhaps mediation” from other experienced foster parents, while less experienced foster parents sought training in more specific subject areas such as “sexual abuse and fetal alcohol syndrome” and preferred, in times of crisis, to “step aside and let the worker resolve it” (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002, p. 869). Not only do foster parents desire education and training, but the form(s) that takes differs with the relative experience of foster parents. There is perceived value in informal learning of foster parents congregating with other foster parents.

MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings and Leschied (2006) conducted a qualitative study that examined motivation, support, and foster parent retention in a child welfare agency in nine Canadian
counties that involved nine foster parent focus groups and a total of 54 participants. The most frequent motivations for becoming and serving as foster parents were intrinsic (wanting to make a difference in the lives of children). The most significant strategies for increasing foster parent retention included “improving supports for fostering, providing accurate information about the foster child, and introducing foster parents to the role gradually” (MacGregor et al, 2006, p. 351). While eight out of the nine focus groups typically thought they received excellent training from their respective foster care agencies, these foster parents also had numerous ideas for training improvement and enhancement. These foster parents also explicitly stated their awareness that no amount of training would have prepared them adequately for the day-to-day realities of the lived experience of foster parenting; however, they were just as explicit in stating what they thought would help them to be more effective foster parents. “One theme that came through strongly was the need for foster parents to support one another.” In this way, foster parents would “share their common experiences and help new foster parents who were struggling” (MacGregor et al, 2006, p. 358). Other suggestions included some type of support group or coffee club that would regularly meet, as well as a type of “buddy system” in which foster parents would have the opportunity to talk with other foster parents.

When these foster parents were queried regarding methods that might increase retention of foster parents, they echoed what they perceived to be deficits in the current training and support system. The responses of the foster parents who participated in this study indicate a definite understanding of the potential value of both non-formal and informal learning that foster parents could provide for one another. Research indicates that foster parents value the role of foster parent education. It seems apparent, “given the severity of foster children’s trauma histories and resulting difficulties,” that individuals who are becoming foster parents “should receive solid training in the range of domains that will be necessary to successfully ‘parent’ these children during the time they
reside in foster care” (Dorsey, Farmer, Barth, Greene, Reid, & Landsverk, 2008, p. 1408). Federal legislation via the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (H.R. 3443) states that “before a child in foster care is placed with prospective foster parents, the prospective foster parents will be prepared adequately with the appropriate knowledge and skills to provide for the needs of the child, and that such preparation will be continued, as necessary, after the placement of the child” (Grimm, 2003, p. 3) The form and format of this essential foster parent education – the how of being “prepared adequately” and with the “appropriate knowledge and skills” – and how such needs could be addressed through informal learning, and this seems to merit research investigation.

**The Gaps in the Literature**

Dorsey et al (2008) acknowledge that while nearly every state in the nation requires training for foster parents, “very little is known about the effectiveness of this required training” and there remains “little empirical support for the most widely-used curricula of foster parent training” (p. 1403). Not only is there great disparity in the content and amount of foster parent training required, there is scant evidence as to the efficacy of the training that is required. Rork and McNeil (2011) conducted a comprehensive view of 17 studies on the effectiveness of foster parent training experiences and found that “little research is available to determine the effectiveness of these training programs” and that what little research is available is “fraught with methodological limitations, calling into question the reliability, validity, or generalizability of study results” (p. 167). As little as is empirically known about the efficacy of the formalized training programs for foster parents that are already in place, even less is known about the efficacy of informal learning of foster parents, and its place in the day-to-day, lived experience of foster parents.
The Bridge to Nowhere Becomes a Bridge to Someone

When a child enters foster care, that child’s life is set on a course of predictable instability, created at times unintentionally by the child welfare system, that has the very real potential both to compromise developmental stages of childhood and to prevent these children from attaining an optimal level of health (Bruskas, 2008; Morris, 2007). In addition, a variety of factors (behavioral, social-emotional, agency and biological family issues) may result in a foster child having several different placements while in foster care (Rubin, O’Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007). A foster child might end up “living with everyone but belonging to no one” (Bruskas, 2010, p. 232). Broady, Stoyles, McMullan, Caputi & Crittenden (2010) interviewed five individual foster parents in an effort to get a deeper understanding of the experience of providing care for someone else’s child. One area these researchers studied involved the motivation to continue being foster parents. Those who expressed a reduced motivation to continue as foster parents discussed specific incidences of the reality of being a foster parent not matching the expectation of the experience. Some foster parents witnessed “very little progression” in terms of the development of the child and others “did have fear for our personal safety” (Broady et al, 2010, p. 565). But all participants recounted specific stories, anecdotes, and experiences of the informal learning that went into being foster parents. Even the agencies that certified the participants to be foster parents, and thus provided the requisite formal training prior to certification, did not escape the critique and criticism of these foster parents. Agencies expected a “certain level of commitment from foster parents,” but the “lack of stability” and the fact that the foster parents “had predicted more consistency from foster care agencies and caseworkers” led some foster parents to end a particular placement and contemplate whether or not to continue either as foster parents or as foster parents with that particular agency (Broady et al, 2010, p. 565). My research with foster parents who have remained foster parents for five or more years
explored the place of informal adult learning in the foster parenting experience. The knowledge of these foster parents’ experiences helped to bridge the educational gap that exists in the foster care system of the United States.
Chapter 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PERSPECTIVES

This chapter explores the theories offering explanatory or interpretive frameworks, through referencing the corresponding literature, for the phenomenon of foster parent learning. A brief history of phenomenology is offered including significant concepts of phenomenology. I then discuss Situated Learning Theory (SLT) and Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT) as frameworks for understanding the informal learning of foster parents, along with a discussion of informal learning.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework can be described as a systematic ordering of ideas about a particular phenomenon being studied or as a systematic account of how a set of variables are related (Camp, 2001). Creswell (1998) adds that the development of a theoretical framework involves the examination and evaluation of discipline-based literature on a particular idea or phenomena and then identifying an overarching theory that explains a key hypothesis or informs an area of research interest. To establish a theoretical framework for my research, I now explore relevant theories and their underlying concepts that guided my research regarding informal learning and foster parenting. This serves as a precursor to the development of a particular point of view to focus my study and identify underlying assumptions from which my research interests and questions arise.

A foundational assumption underlying the foster care system in the United States is that foster parents have a genuine, even an abiding, concern for the children placed in their care. Ongoing research endeavors indicate this: “Researchers and educators are increasingly implementing qualitative research methods to investigate issues of concern and interest” (Charalambous, Papadopoulos, and Beadsmore, 2007, p. 638). This qualitative research study explored and then
moved beyond a concern for foster care in this nation to a deeper understanding of how foster parents learn to be foster parents. Phenomenology as a methodology allows researchers to intentionally, thoughtfully, and reflectively do exactly this type of study leading to deeper understanding (Madjar & Walton, 1999). The “methodological and philosophical views of hermeneutics” (Charalambrous, Papadopoulos, and Beadsmore, 2007, p. 639) provide a “new direction for study not only in philosophy but also across many disciplines” (Finch, 2004, p. 253).

This chapter, detailing the theoretical framework underlying the research study, begins with a discussion of the historical development of phenomenology, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology as the selected approach for this qualitative inquiry, including the influences of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer. An examination of the concepts of phenomenology, such as lived experience, essence, interpretation, and bracketing, follows. The chapter concludes with a discussion of both Situated Learning Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory.

**A Brief History of Phenomenology**

While phenomenology is regarded as a qualitative research method associated with both Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, phenomenology is more than just method. Phenomenology, as a means of doing qualitative research, is historically associated with philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur (Lauver, 2010). To establish a context for this research study, a brief examination of the development of phenomenology follows.

**Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology**

While the term *phenomenology* has been in existence for 250 years (Moustakas, 1994), German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859 -1938) is frequently referred to as the father of phenomenology (Koch, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1983). While his initial life’s work focused on
mathematics, his academic pursuits changed over time toward phenomenology. Seeking to “get to the roots, the essence of consciousness” through systematic and disciplined study (Moustakas, 1994, p. 20), Husserl turned to phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). Phenomenology, according to van Manen (1996), at its core is the study of lived experience or the life world. The emphasis is not on the “world” or “reality” as separate from the person, but rather an emphasis “on the world as lived by a person” (Laverty, 2003, p. 22). As a research method, this mode of inquiry endeavors to discover an answer to the question, “What is this experience like?” as such experiences are lived out in the everyday human existence (Polkinghorne, 1983). This ‘life world,’ then “is understood as what we experience pre-reflectively, without resorting to categorization or conceptualization” (Laverty, 2003, p. 22) and could include that which is often taken for granted and deemed common sense (Husserl, 1970).

Husserl saw phenomenology, or perhaps more precisely the phenomenological method, as a way of discovering or disclosing “a realm of being which presented itself with absolute certainty, arising from experience” (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). For Husserl, “true meaning” could be reached through “penetrating deeper and deeper into reality” (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). Consciousness is a “co-constituted dialogue between a person and the world” (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). As a human being encounters a particular phenomenon, that individual intentionally takes action. Such action is not a Pavlovian response of automatic salivation on cue without thought or reflection. For Husserl, phenomenology is action and actionable, intentional not mechanical. He viewed intentionality as “a process where the mind is directed toward objects of study” (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). A conscientious consciousness could direct an individual’s focus toward and eventually to the essence of a particular phenomenon. For Husserl, the potential of phenomenology was the possibility of getting at the “essence” of the phenomenon in question. As such, an individual could “develop a description of
particular realities” (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). This awareness marks the beginning point of an individual’s grasping and knowledge of reality.

To accomplish this grasping and laying hold of, Husserl proposed that an individual had to “bracket out the outer world as well as individual biases” so that the person could “successfully achieve contact with essences” (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). The researcher suspends judgments, bracketing biases and beliefs, as a precursor to opening one’s self to essences. What is “known” is set aside so that the researcher can truly know the essence, the ultimate reality or meaning of, the phenomenon, without any prejudice or bias blocking this understanding of the essence. This represents, “the phenomenological reduction to phenomena” (Husserl, 1927, p. 4). For Husserl, this “search for the ultimate, constitutive foundations of experience of the world as the world of human consciousness” (Edle, 1964, p. 55), places us in the “presence of experience as experience,” free of any and all biases, expectations, or prejudices (p. 58).

**Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Where Husserl emphasized *transcendental* phenomenology, it was Heidigger who explored *hermeneutic* phenomenology. Heidigger, following ideas expounded by Wilhelm Dilthey, “introduced the hermeneutic method into modern philosophy through his elaboration of the necessity of interpretation in the study of human being and the circular structure such an interpretation must have” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 2). Interpretation becomes something not to be shunned or bracketed, but to be embraced. Hermeneutic phenomenology can be understood as “a research methodology aimed at producing rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the lifeworld of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively” (Smith, 1997, p. 80). By exploring the particular phenomenon, a deeper, a more profound, understanding of that experience is sought. This occurs through “increasingly deeper and layered reflection by the use of rich
descriptive language” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 619). Heidegger concerns himself with “the possibilities of Being,” in that existence “knows itself only in relation with others and other objects” (Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2002, p. 115). Husserl’s knowing becomes Heidegger’s understanding. Since phenomenology describes “how one orients to lived experience” and hermeneutics describes “how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 4), this hermeneutic phenomenological study of foster parents tried to understand the role and the significance of informal learning in the foster parent experience, and to understand how foster parents understand the impact of informal learning on their lived experience as foster parents.

Benner (1994, p. 71) examines Heidegger’s philosophy and establishes these assumptions of hermeneutic phenomenology:

1. Human beings are social, dialogical beings.
2. Understanding is always before us in the shared background practices; it is in the human community of societies and cultures, in the language, in our skills and activities, and in our intersubjective and common meanings.
3. We are always already in a hermeneutic circle of understanding.
4. Interpretation presupposes a shared understanding and therefore has a three-fold forestucture of understanding.
5. Interpretation involves the interpreter and the interpreted in a dialogical relationship.

The concept of a “three-fold forestucture” has potential implications for the study of foster parent learning. Heidegger asserts that this structure serves as an understanding upon which all interpretation is grounded, and it consists of:

- a *fore-having*: we come to a situation with a practical familiarity, that is, with background practices from our world that make an interpretation possible.
- a *fore-sight*: because of our background we have a point of view from which we make an interpretation.
- a *fore-conception*: because of our background we have some expectations of what we might anticipate in an interpretation (Benner, 1994, p. 72).
These ideas link understanding with interpretation. As such, “The concept of meaning embraces the formal existential framework of what necessarily belongs to that which an understanding interpretation articulates,” and this leads to understanding meaning as “the ‘upon-which’ of a projection in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something” (Heidegger, 1962, p.193). This is “taken for granted” in our daily lives (Heidegger, 1927/1962 as cited in Benner, 1994). In doing hermeneutic phenomenological research, to have credibility the researcher clearly lays out any “preconceptions, biases, past experiences, and perhaps even hypotheses that make the project significant” for the researcher because that “may affect how the interpretation takes shape” (Benner, 1994, p. 72). It is also incumbent upon the researcher to make this explicit for the participants in the study because “this may be part of the narrative that the investigator elicits in the study in order to make sense of the participants’ situations” (Benner, 1994, p.72). This making sense, in fact, part of the reason for conducting a hermeneutical research study. Phenomenology connects to interpretation (hermeneutics).

Heidegger believes that these interpretations do not come independently, without bias or presupposition. Indeed, quite the opposite. As an integral element of hermeneutic phenomenology, such interpretations “must be based” upon the “understandings we already have” (Cohen & Omery, 1994, p. 146). To set aside these understandings and experiences is not possible. As such, hermeneutic phenomenology seems an effective approach to study foster parent learning.

Heidegger also delineates four core features of phenomenology that impact the approach taken for this research study: human beings are situated in their worlds, constituted by their worlds, engaged in everyday activity; and motivated by their concerns in daily living (Benner, 1994; Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1962). Each of these features helped inform this hermeneutic phenomenological study of the lived experience of foster parents and the place that informal learning holds in that day-to-day reality.
Gadamer and New Horizons in Phenomenology

Gadamer (1976) stressed the concept of historical awareness, and all that accompanies this concept. Accordingly, Gadamer (1998) affirms that we are all part of history, that we are historically situated, and it is impossible to somehow step outside of our context to look at experiences objectively. For Gadamer (1998), consciousness is “determined by the fusion of the individual’s horizon within the prejudices of history” (p. 115). The idea of bias or prejudice is not viewed negatively, but is seen more as a preunderstanding. While it is possible to lose one’s wallet, glasses, keys, and train of thought, a person cannot “lose” his preunderstandings because they are part of our historical context and situatedness in this world. Presunderstandings are not a negative. Gadamer (1998) asserts that preunderstandings make understanding possible. He affirms that such preunderstanding or prejudice is a condition of understanding (Gadamer, 2013). Realizing the inherent reality, the ubiquity, of preunderstandings and identifying one’s preunderstandings, has a positive connotation. The hermeneutic researcher must acknowledge, not set aside, these preunderstandings. Through reflection, these preunderstandings “are visited time and time again” during the research and writing process (Gadamer, 2013, p. 116).

Awareness is key; bracketing, impossible. Herein lies a fundamental difference between Husserl and Heidegger that Gadamer discusses. Gadamer (2013) continues, “Reflecting upon these will enable [the researcher] to move beyond their preunderstandings to understand the phenomenon and so transcend their horizon” (p. 117). Gadamer’s key contribution to phenomenology may be offering a stronger link between phenomenology and hermeneutics, making explicit the connection between a particular human experience and an expression of the situated meaning of that experience through language or discourse.
The connection between language and understanding was further strengthened by Merleau-Ponty, who said, “When I speak I discover what it is that I wished to say” (1973, p. 142, as cited by van Manen, 1996, p. 32). Thus, language is integral to the process of understanding. van Manen affirmed this connection, explicitly linking language with phenomenology: Human science research is a form of writing. At this point, the various schools of phenomenology, and perspectives of understanding phenomenology become many more than two divergent paths, and further exploration of this divergence is beyond the scope of this research study. The connection, however, between language, interpretation, and phenomenology initially forged by Heidegger remains integral to the pursuit and practice of hermeneutic phenomenology. As a discipline, phenomenology “aims to focus on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them” (Langdrige, 2007, p. 4). Human experience is “a topic in its own right” and hermeneutic phenomenology’s concern, thus, is “meaning and the way in which meaning arises in experience” (Kafle, 2006, p. 182). As foster parents recount their experiences, light was shed on the way(s) in which these foster parents constructed meanings from what they lived each day.

**The Theoretical Concepts of Phenomenology**

This section outlines key concepts of phenomenology as applicable to qualitative research.

**Horizontalization**

Horizontalization is “opening up possibilities for seeing things differently and changing one’s perspective” (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, p. 16). While Husserl explicated the essential understanding of essences, Moustakas, among others, rejected the notion of an ultimate understanding of the underlying essence of an event or experience. Understanding is influenced by background, experience, historical place and time, as well as understanding and interpretation. But lived
experiences open up new horizons and thus new understandings. Horizons grow and expand. And horizons will expand more. Horizons do. They are limitless. They are endless. In this life, we do not reach the endpoint of meaning. We do not wrench from reality the ultimate essence.

Moustakas (1994) clarifies:

Horizons are unlimited. We can never exhaust completely our experience of things no matter how many times we reconsider them or view them. A new horizon arises each time one recedes. It is a never-ending process and, though we may reach a stopping point and discontinue our perception of something, the possibility of discovery is unlimited (p. 95).

Interpretation(s) of experience(s) change(s) with time, reflection, discourse, and new experience(s).

**Lived Experience and Lifeworld**

Many researchers utilizing a phenomenological approach have used the lifeworld since Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970).

Phenomenologists tend to use the terms *lifeworld* and *lived experience* synonymously or interchangeably. van Manen (1990) delineates a four-pronged lifeworld: “lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality)” (p. 101). Lived space, not simply the physical environment or location one has in the world, is perhaps best understood as “felt space.” The idea of felt space impacts the way we feel in understanding our place in the world and “helps us uncover more fundamental meaning dimensions of life” (van Manen, 2003, p. 103). One of the realities of the foster parenting experience is that other people will regularly be inside the home of the foster parents in order to evaluate their homes for cleanliness and utility, and to ensure the home meets the state-mandated standards. While no one would likely argue the value of a fire extinguisher in the kitchen, for example, for foster parents it is a requirement. To have a caseworker monitoring the home may cause feelings of discomfort or strangeness for foster parents. Lived space is more than just the literal house.
Lived body is most readily understood as we are, always and ever, bodily in this world. We do not experience life apart from our physical selves. When foster parents care for foster children, out of absolute necessity they do so by being physically, bodily, present. Foster parents physically carry, hold, and nurture infants. Foster parents physically transport foster children to visits with the family of origin (i.e. they drive the car). Foster parents are physically present in family planning meetings, IEP meetings, transition meetings, foster parent trainings. Foster parenting cannot be separated from van Manen’s corporeality.

Lived time is not on-the-clock time. It is subjective, and therefore the passage of such time may be agonizingly slow (waiting to be seen in an emergency room) or alarmingly fast (the first vacation trip a foster family takes). Lived time, for van Manen, represents a way of being in the world (1990). It may be an oversimplification to tie experience to the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future (Assuming one stays united with the same spouse, is there really a “past marriage” and a “present marriage” and a “future marriage” as separate, time-bound realities?) However, it does seem clear that past experiences and experiences in our past influence the way we experience the present, and the past and present, then influence the future. Conversely, our future hopes and goals and dreams and aspirations reinterpret our past experiences and even guide our understanding or interpretation of the present moment.

Finally, lived other (relationality) is “the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them” (van Manen, 1990, p. 104). From the view of the lived other, we accept the pre-iveness of the other and our intersubjectivity, which includes interchangeability of standpoints. and congruence of relevance systems. (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). From this dimension of relationality, we encounter the other person and grasp the interpersonal significance of our lived experiences.
This tetralogy of lifeworld essentials serves as a means of researching lived experience. In a reflective journal, I took notes on what I observed in the homes of the participants (i.e. pictures on the walls, shoes by the door, toys strewn about the living room), and asked the participants about these items, carefully noting affect in the responses. I interpreted what I saw, as I saw it, as I made my notes, and as I wrote in my journal. The lived body would include the rigors of the foster parent process: Was extensive travel involved in natural family visitation? How frequently were visits made to school? How much time was spent working on homework together? This is perhaps the dimension for which information is most readily available because there is an immediacy to the foster parenting experience that requires the physical presence of foster parents and foster children. The temporal dimension was discussed in terms of length of service as foster parents, length of individual foster care placements, and interpretation of such (“We have been raising children forever.” “I thought the birth mom was never going to get her act together.” “We finally got [the child] enrolled in learning support.”). Finally, the lived human relation seems to be the cornerstone of foster parenting. Were the foster children home during the interviews? Were they in the same room while the interviews were being conducted? What was said that might indicate something about the relationship between foster parent and foster children? What went unsaid? van Manen’s ideas helped to shed needed light on the foster parent experience during the interview and writing processes.

The Problem of “Essence”

Humans are situated in a particular time and place in history. Humans are trying to understand the world in which they live, by living in that world and while living in that world. And since we are always living in our situated context, constructing meanings from our interpretations of our experiences, an absolute “essence” of meaning or understanding is impossible. There can be no “absolute external standard by which we, or others, can judge the truth of our interpretations”
(Chesla, 1995, p. 68). The unlimited nature of horizons means we do not reach ultimate essence. We do, however, understand more. Each horizon “as it comes into our conscious experience is the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). The best we can hope for is, that as our horizons expand, what may have initially been cloudy or confused, becomes more clear. It is not only the Apostle Paul who “sees through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12), for a perfect vision of ultimate truth remains an unattainable entity. New horizons emerge as previous horizons recede. To conclude, Moustakas (1994) states:

> It is a never-ending process… the possibility for discovery is unlimited, the horizontal makes of conscious experience a continuing mystery…we consider each of the horizons and the textural qualities that enable us to understand and experience…when we horizationalise, each phenomena has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence (p. 95).

Understanding of an essence, for a researcher, is always “a work in progress,” partial, and most assuredly particular to the experiences from which the interpretations have been formed.

**Bracketing**

A significant challenge of phenomenology is to describe the phenomenon – in this case the lived experience of the foster parent participants – without being “obstructed by pre- conceptions and theoretical notions” (van Manen, 1990, p. 184). Husserl sought to bracket, or set aside, interpretive influences that would prevent the understanding of the phenomenon in and of itself. For Heidegger, bracketing is more of an awareness of the impact of bias, prejudice, historicity, and situatedness have on understanding and interpretation. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher does not try to set aside such contextual realities, but is reflectively aware throughout the research and writing process of these influences on interpretation. The researcher brings his or her self (and all that implies) to the research process, but is consciously, conscientiously, and continually aware (through reflection and discourse) of these influences.
**Interpretation**

To engage in hermeneutic research is to interpret. While Husserl and those who advocate a transcendental approach or perspective regarding phenomenological research strive for liberation from interpretation, Heidegger and those who adopt a hermeneutic approach or perspective to phenomenological research recognize that interpretation—and recognition thereof—is integral to the research, interpretation, and reflection process. I chose hermeneutic phenomenology for my research because I remain intensely interested in foster parent learning, how foster parents interpret their experiences as foster parents, and how these experiences and interpretation shape the lifeworlds of foster parents. Just as all writing is, to some degree, persuasive in nature, so too is all description of a phenomenon, to some degree, an interpretation of that phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

Gadamer’s contribution here is to expound upon the concept of historical awareness (1990), and all that encompasses. An individual’s experience of and interpretation of an event (phenomenon) is influenced by how that individual is situated in this world. Rather than fruitlessly deny bias or prejudice, one’s positioning in the world, for Gadamer, provides the preunderstanding(s) that make understanding possible. Rather than attempt to bracket, the hermeneutic phenomenologist acknowledges these preunderstandings, visiting them “time and time again” to discern their influence on interpretation (Gadamer, 1998, p. 116). A hermeneutic circle of reading, reflective writing, and interpretation is essential in hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003).

Moustakas (1994) further clarifies the idea of interpretation by noting that there are endless possibilities to discover in reflecting upon and dialoging about phenomena. Since human beings live within a particular time and place, this situatedness means that interpretation occurs within the confines of historical placement with the inherent conditions and limitations of historicity. What a
person “knows” today, that person could very well “know differently” tomorrow because new experiences or understandings or reflections may open new horizons. To do hermeneutic research is to interpret. For Smith (1997), in the identification of the experience of the phenomenon, in this case as foster parents offer detailed accounts of their experiences, a deeper understanding of that experience is sought. Experiences can best be understood – and be understood best – through stories told of that experience (Langdridge, 2007). In this research study, the selected foster parents revealed the impact of adult informal learning as they told their stories of the lived experience of foster parenting.

**Being in the World and Being in the Hermeneutic Circle**

Heidegger’s focus is an ontological one, and the meaning of Being is central to his thought (Cohen and Omery, 1994). Being, or presence in the world, seeks the nature or meaning of a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). It is Heidegger who utilizes the actual phrase “Being-in-the-world” to describe the way human beings exist, act, or evince involvement in the world (Dowling, 2007). Understanding, by nature, is a reciprocal activity, and Heidegger has proposed the concept of a “hermeneutic circle” as illustrative of such reciprocity (Koch, 1996). Racher and Robinson (2003) perceive the hermeneutic circle as a “revisioning” of phenomenological reduction (p. 473). Understanding is derived “from personal involvement by the researcher in a reciprocal process of interpretation” (Dowling, 2004, p. 36). Thus interpretation is integral and inquiry becomes dialogue. The researcher’s position within the hermeneutic circle is affirmed, since the fusion of horizons is circular in process (Koch, 1996). In order to understand “the meaning of something held by another,” the researcher must not “attach blindly to [their] own fore-meaning” (Dowling, 2004, p. 37). The researcher must remain open to the meaning held by the research participants while also being keenly aware of the researchers’s biases. This openness allows for the text to convey its uniqueness against
the fore-meanings of the researcher (Gadamer, 1989). Therefore, “the hermeneutic process becomes a dialogical method whereby the horizon of the interpreter and the thing being studied are combined” (Dowling, 2004, p. 37).

According to Sharkey (2001) hermeneutic phenomenology challenges the researcher to reflect, and to do so deeply, on what it is that the texts [the transcripts] have to say. The researcher is called to ruminate on the texts, to get caught up in them, to get lost in deep conversation with them (Kafle, 2006). The goal of this type of research is not to clone the interview transcripts [the text] for the readers of the research but to invite the readers to enter the world that the text would reveal – the lived experience of foster parents – and to understand, not merely better, but differently than before (Gadamer, 1998).

Figure 1: The Hermeneutic Circle
Informal learning

Informal learning is the most common form of adult learning and is “the spontaneous, unstructured learning that goes on daily in the home and neighborhood… in the workplace and marketplace, library and museum, and through the various mass media” (Coombs, 1985, p 92). To differentiate non-formal learning from informal learning regarding foster parent education, I explored the concept that there is an important distinction to be made between how people become foster parents (the non-formal process by which certification is attained) and how people, in the day-to-day reality of living the experience learn to be foster parents (provide for the depth and breadth of needs of individual foster children on a day-to-day basis). van Manen (1990), in recounting the story of Diogenes in Researching Lived Experience, acknowledges, “a human being is not just something you automatically are, it is also something that you must try to be” (p. 5). The same idea applies to foster parents. Becoming a foster parent is a static event: a formalized and standardized process is in place which prospective parents must follow to be designated as “certified.” It is analogous to the more structured education process in the United States in which one completes requisite tasks and is granted a piece of paper in recognition of definitive tasks completed. State-mandated foster parent training, likewise, is largely static: training sessions offered, training sessions attended, training hours recorded.

Learning to be foster parents is a fluid process, continuous and nonlinear as foster parents learn, largely informally, what it “looks like” to be a foster parent for each unique foster child in that foster parent’s care. It is the informal learning, that which occurs in the process of “doing” and “being” the foster parent, which is insufficiently understood in the available research on foster parent learning. The relationships (foster parent-foster child, foster parent-foster parent, foster parent-caseworker) themselves create knowledge, and that knowledge helps to define, refine, shape and
reshape the relationship. The integral role of informal learning in foster parent education merits further and ongoing qualitative research.

Informal learning, occurring daily throughout the life span, has been described as impromptu and unorganized in response to situations that emerge in daily life (Coombs, 1985). Informal learning is problematic to research because it may be largely invisible (Eraut, 2010). There are no written tests to take or transcripts to process. Informal learning often occurs without conscious attempts to learn specific information (Reber, 1993). Consequently, informal learning is often either taken for granted or disregarded as insignificant. Such learning takes place, sometimes without the learner even being aware of what has been learned. According to Eraut (2010), informal learning can provide a “simple contrast to formal learning or training” which allows “greater flexibility or freedom for learners” and that “recognizes the social significance of learning from other people” as a means for utilization of greater individual agency (p. 247). Informal learning is part of all parenting, including foster parenting, and offers a potentially invaluable resource for foster parents as they live the day-to-day reality of caring for foster children.

Frank Coffield, editor of The Necessity of Informal Learning and author of its introduction, writes, “If all learning were to be represented by an iceberg, then the section above the surface of the water would be sufficient to cover formal learning, but the submerged two-thirds would be needed to convey the much greater importance of informal learning (Coffield, 2000, p. 1). Coffield illustrates the depth and breadth of the possibilities informal learning offers. Livingstone (2001) notes that the conditions of informal learning are determined by the individuals who choose to engage in it. Foster parents live within the more formalized structures and strictures of the foster care system in which they operate; however, since foster parents deal with individual children and individual realities and experiences of those children, there exists a wealth of opportunities for informal adult learning and
thus myriad possibilities for research on the lived experience of foster parents.

Informal learning occurs “whenever people have the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning” (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 28). In an earlier discussion of informal learning, and perhaps to preclude dismissing informal learning since anything could be learning, Marsick and Volpe (1999) concluded that informal learning includes the following characteristics:

- integrated with daily routines;
- triggered by an internal or external jolt;
- not always highly conscious;
- haphazard and influenced by chance;
- an inductive process of reflection and action; and
- linked to the learning of others (p. 38).

Schugurensky (2000) notes that informal learning can be “additive” (adding knowledge or improving skills) but it can also be transformative (changing our existing prior knowledge and approaches) in a given setting or within a set of circumstances.

**Situated Learning Theory (SLT)**

As Fenwick notes, “Much adult learning is commonly understood to be located in everyday workplace tasks and interactions, home and family activity, community involvement, and other sites of nonformal education” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 243). Human lives are “situated within meaningful activities, relationships, commitments, and involvements” and that such situatedness opens up “possibilities and constraints for living” (Chesla, 1995, p. 66). Our experiences contribute to the composition of who we are. For Heidegger (1962), humans live in a particular place and time, and live within a complexity of understandings both about the world and about being and acting in the world because of being historically situated in a particular time and a particular place.
Being situated involves an understanding of who we are, an understanding that “is not cognitive but is lived” (Chesla, 1995, p. 66). Situations, “co-produce knowledge through activity” and as such “learning and cognition…are fundamentally situated” (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989, p. 32). As initially noted in Chapter One, the process of becoming a foster parent is linear. Being a foster parent, however, is anything but static or linear. It is lived. It is learned. It is learned by living. Chesla (1995) states, that being situated means “we already understand who we are” and that these understandings “are transmitted in the everyday habits and practices of those around us” (p. 66). The designation of foster parent situates the individual, as does the daily lived experience of being a foster parent to the foster child(-ren).

You are reading the words of this dissertation because of your situatedness: you are members of Penn State’s graduate faculty. You are also reading these words because you have entered into a situation – as sitting members of a doctoral committee - that is thick and rich with the “possibilities and constraints for living” noted earlier in this section. (One of the possibilities is, perhaps, that you gain insight into foster parent learning, while one of the constraints is, perhaps, having to read these many pages). The experience is analogous to the situatedness of foster parents. These are people who choose to enter the contextual situation of a particular agency (Centre County Children and Youth, for example) and in a particular relationship (certified foster parents for that agency). You understand the words of this dissertation because words themselves are situated. The context determines meaning, and you rely on that context to determine the meaning of these words in this context. The point is not to discover the “essence” or ultimate meanings of words herein, but to understand them in the context they are in. Situated learning was integral to this research study to that provide “detailed understanding of particular ways that families in a situation work out their meanings and practices” (Chesla, 1995, p. 70). Knowledge is inseparable from the situational context that produced the knowledge (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).
Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT)

Substantive advances have been made in understanding cognition, in neuroscience and in behaviorism, for example, and this has both shaped and enhanced understanding of learning. Just as social cognition grew as a response to behaviorism, constructivist learning theory aids in comprehending how people make meaning of their lived experiences. Von Glasersfeld (2005) affirms CLT’s focuses not just on what people learn, but on the ways in which new information is organized, integrated, and associated with prior knowledge to form meaning. A key feature of CLT, one that my research explored in vigorous detail and rigorous depth, is that learning (knowledge) is actively constructed by individuals as they reflect on experiences and as they engage in discourse with others (Cobb, 2005; Hein, 1991). These two perspectives are not in opposition, nor are they mutually exclusive. Cobb (2005) asserts they are complementary. As such, both merit consideration, and my researched has explored both individual learning and the social aspect of learning from others.

Hein (1991) has established a set of guiding principles of CLT that complement situated learning theory and informal learning theory:

- Learning is an active process wherein learners use sensory input to construct meaning;
- Learners learn to learn, as they learn (the construction of meaning requires the development of systems of meaning);
- The process of the construction of meaning is a crucial element of learning;
- Learning is influenced by language;
- Learning is a social activity;
- Learning is contextual, and the consideration of context is crucial;
- New knowledge builds on existing knowledge so some prior knowledge is necessary;
- Learning takes time, and this may include extended and extensive reflection as well as repeated and diverse exposure; and
- Motivation to learn is vita (p. 3).

These constructed meanings based on reflection of lived experience can be conceptualized as
subjective beliefs, transcendent symbols, cultural understandings, intuitive consciousness, even stimulated responses (Cunningham, 1992). Von Glasersfeld (2005) adds that creating meaning is the process of linking prior knowledge with new knowledge attained both through individual experience and social engagement. According to Cobb (2011) a sociocultural constructivist perspective would emphasize the importance of social interaction(s) and cultural practice(s) in meaning making. Fosnot (1996) and Schunk (2008) state that knowledge is constructed by those learners who are actively involved in the learning process, as learners assimilate and utilize what is learned in their novel problematic situations.

While the terms constructivism and social constructivism are often used interchangeably, some clarification is necessary. Constructivism is perhaps more precisely discussed in terms of cognitive constructivism, which holds that individuals mentally construct the world of experience through cognitive processes (Andrews, 2012), and social constructivism favors the concept of learning as a social construct mediated by language via social discourse (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism, therefore, has an epistemological not an ontological perspective (Andrews, 2012). Language and communication are keys in social constructivism. As McMahon (1997) notes, “In our complex use of language, humans are unique and it has become the primary enabling tool of learning” (p. 3). So does context. Decontextualized knowledge may not provide the skills to apply our understandings to authentic tasks since “we are not working with the concept in the complex environment within the complex interrelationships in that environment that determine how and when the concept is used” (Duffy & Johnson, 1992). A student who can figure out the correct tip on a $40 tab for dinner on a mathematics exam (cognitive constructivism) is not necessarily able to figure out the correct tip on a similar dinner tab at Red Lobster based on total cost and quality of service (social constructivism). Since my research involved actual foster parents caring for actual
foster children in the complexities of the real world, social constructivism is a key concept.

Based on my own experience of foster parenting and research with foster parents, one aspect of constructivism which seems especially relevant is that meanings are formed and developed in context (Schunk, 2008). The construction of meaning for foster parents is both context-dependent and context-child-dependent. A foster child might have significant behavioral problems because of a history of child abuse or a history of neglect or because of family poverty or because of parental mental health problems (Orme & Buehler, 2004). Foster placement itself may be a contributing factor: adjustment to a new family, placement disruptions, placement in a new school district, the number of children in the foster family (Fanshel, Finch, & Gundy, 1990). Homelessness, parental substance abuse, amount and degree of psychosocial stressors (Orme & Buehler, 2004) are also potential factors. The constructivist paradigm sees the context in which learning takes place as central to the activity of learning itself (McMahon, 1997). These factors, and others, and any combination therein, are part of the context of the foster parent-foster child relationship. It becomes vital, then, not necessarily to have a cognitive checklist of foster parent “do’s and don’ts,” but for foster parents to construct knowledge based on the individual foster child in the day-to-day social context of the foster parent lived experience. To disregard such contextual factors, to disregard any of the concepts that provide the framework for my research, would do a disservice to foster parents and to the children for whom they care.

When foster parents decide to stop being foster parents, foster care placements are disrupted. There already exists a shortage of foster homes and a large and increasing number of children need family foster homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). A shortage of foster parents “limits case-planning options and jeopardizes the quality of services provided to foster children,” as well as placement disruptions, placement in unnecessarily restrictive and otherwise
inappropriate environments, overcrowding, and mismatched children and foster families” (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001, p. 85). Foster parents are often asked to care for children with serious physical, emotional, and behavioral problems, but often are poorly trained, given inadequate or inaccurate information about the children placed in their care, and are left on their own to negotiate a fragmented and confusing service delivery system (NCSL, 2002). This same report affirmed that foster parents are more inclined to continue being foster parents with “support from the child welfare agency, as well as support from a network of other foster parents” (NCSL, 2002, p. 3). Rindfleish, Bean, and Denby (1998) surveyed 720 closed homes and 804 randomly selected current homes to test a model predicting continuance or discontinuance of foster parents. Along with agency dissatisfaction, another key factor in predicting those who would quit as foster parents was inadequate support from other foster parents. This research study of the lived experience of foster parents could make a significant contribution to foster care in the United States.

Situated learning theory, constructivist learning theory, and informal learning theory are compatible in a number of ways, and are complementary in understanding the lived experience of foster parents. The following conceptual framework guided the development of my research study as I sought to integrate and elucidate common aspects of these three concepts.
The goal of phenomenology is a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Since this occurs through “increasingly deeper and layered reflection by the use of rich descriptive language” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007), it was possible to gain a more informed understanding of the foster parenting experience in the United States by interviewing foster parents. Since phenomenology describes “how one orients to lived experience” and hermeneutics describes “how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 4), a hermeneutic phenomenological study of foster parents was an appropriate
approach to understanding the role and the significance of informal learning in the foster parent experience, and to understand how foster parents understand the impact of informal learning on their lived experience as foster parents. Language is integral to the process of understanding, as is understanding to the importance of horizontalization, the “opening up possibilities for seeing things differently and changing one’s perspective” (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, p. 16).

Informal learning occurs “whenever people have the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning” (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 28). This includes the situatedness of the lived experience of foster parenting.

Human beings are historically and culturally situated, bound by time and space. This profoundly impacts the lifeworld or the lived experience. van Manen (2003) describes four features of the lifeworld: “lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality)” (p. 101). Rather than attempting to bracket this, hermeneutic phenomenologists embrace this situatedness.

Constructivist learning theory (CLT) informs how people make meaning of their lived experiences in their situated context in the world. Von Glasersfeld (2005) affirms CLT’s focuses not just on what people learn, but on the ways in which new information is organized, integrated and associated with prior knowledge to form meaning. Experience is active. Learning is active. Reflection is active. Construction of meaning is active. These are time-bound and situation- specific. Foster parents shed the most light on the lived foster parent experience.
Chapter 4. RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

In this chapter, I discuss the suitability of hermeneutic phenomenology as an appropriate method for exploring the lived experiences of selected foster parents who have been foster parents for at least five years. I also detail the design of my research study. I will then also discuss specific issues related to the participant selection, site selection, data collection and analysis, as well as issues regarding ethical concerns and the quality of the study.

**Phenomenology and the Foster Parent Experience**

The goal of my research was to better understand a human phenomenon: the lived experience of foster parents. Van Manen (1990) admonishes “the method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator (a parent or teacher) in the first place” (p. 2). Spiegelberg (1959) wrote, “All phenomenology takes its start from the phenomena. A phenomenon is essentially what appears to someone; that is the subject” (p. 75). Patton (2002) notes that the selection of a research method follows from the research question(s) the researcher seeks to address. As a special education teacher, a foster parent, an adoptive parent, a college instructor, and a doctoral candidate, I have a profound interest in people and how they act purposely and purposefully in this world by creating meaning out of the experiences they daily live in this world. My research has focused on how selected foster parents learn to be foster parents, the informal learning that is integral to the lived foster parent experience. In other words, how do foster parents learn and live the day-to-day experience of foster parenting? As a research method, hermeneutic phenomenology “is best suited for answering questions about human issues and concerns… the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions” (Benner, 1994, p. 80). As Crotty (1996) asserts, phenomenology “works hard at gathering people’s subjective
meanings, the sense they make of things” (p. 3). It is phenomenology that “provides a description of how one orients or understands, focuses on the lived experience of phenomena” and hermeneutics, then, “provides a description of how one interprets the lived experience” (Lauver, 2010, p. 291). Quantitative inquiry would no doubt yield some important information and insights into the foster parenting experience; however, a qualitative inquiry such as hermeneutic phenomenology would yield a “thickness” and “richness” in data collection, and thus potentially more significant findings. Willis (2004) states “different people participating in an event in their lives may give it radically different meanings” (p. 3). The experience of foster parenting may very well be radically different even though all of the participants in the study come under the general heading of “foster parents.” In fact, one of the significant challenges of my research is that the results were so divergent as to make thematizing difficult if not virtually impossible. And yet, regardless of any disparity, such depth is best attained through hermeneutic phenomenology. It is hermeneutic phenomenology “as a systematic approach to uncover, describe, and interpret everyday lived experience [that] invites one to better understand a particular experience” (Lauver, 2010, p. 291).

While individual states do quantify the number of training hours foster parents must have each year, qualitative studies about the utility and efficacy of the legally-mandated, state- sponsored and agency-supervised training required for foster parents are few in number. Dorsey, Farmer, Barth, Greene, Reid, & Landsverk (2008) acknowledge that while nearly every state in the nation requires training for foster parents, “very little is known about the effectiveness of this required training” and there remains “little empirical support for the most widely-used curricula of foster parent training” (p. 1403). Although Hembree-Kigin and McNeil (1995) noted that foster parents are strongly motivated to learn new parenting, “the outcome research for foster parents and foster children is scant” (p. 16).
This research suggests that the lived experience of foster parenting, in spite of the lack of empirical evidence of the effectiveness of state-mandated, agency-sponsored training, is multi-faceted. The formalized training in the certification process does play a role. Foster parents do benefit from agency-sponsored training on CPR, First Aid, and behavioral intervention. But the focus of this research was on the informal learning of foster parents - learning situated in the daily lived experience of foster parents and learning that is both situation-specific and child- situation-specific. It is phenomenology that “brings to view the subjective states and interpretations of people who have engaged in common experience” like foster parenting (Willis, 2004, p. 4). And herein lies the gap in the research that I have tried to address in this hermeneutic phenomenological study.

Phenomenology, as a research method, allows the researcher to ask questions – in this case through a process of semi-structured interviews with the participants – that sought out meaning about the lived experience of these foster parents. Of significance to this study and as discussed in detail in Chapter Five, is the wide range of these lived experiences of foster parent learning, learning that did not and could not take place through the simplistic agency-sponsored trainings mandated by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The method of phenomenological research allows open-ended questioning, as well as further questioning based on participant responses as a means of getting at the learning that takes place in the lived experiences of foster parents, as well as the far-reaching implications of this learning. It is hermeneutic phenomenology “as a systematic approach to uncover, describe, and interpret everyday lived experience [that] invites one to better understand a particular experience” (Lauver, 2010, p. 291). Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, “is an interpretation of human beings as essentially self-interpreting, thereby showing that interpretation is the proper method for studying human beings” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 34).
Acknowledgement of Biases

While Husserlian phenomenology emphasizes “bracketing of perceptions and holding them in abeyance,” Heideggerian phenomenology is grounded in experiencing and understanding, and thus “presuppositions and biases are acknowledged” (Lauver, 2010, p. 290–91). Prior to initiating my foster parent interviews, and the corresponding collecting of data, I reflected upon and acknowledged my own biases by journaling. My identified biases are as follows:

- foster parents become foster parents for a variety of reasons, with the desire to make a difference in the life of children being a key factor;

- foster parents gain marginal benefit from agency-sponsored training, but the most significant learning takes place “on-the-job” as foster parents live the day-by-day experience of foster parenting;

- foster parents struggle to find and live their place in the lives of foster children (their rights to have access to information, to sign medical consents, to participate in IEP and other school meetings, to be part of sports and extra-curricular events);

- foster parents are resilient and resourceful in their lived experience of foster parenting;

- foster parents live in fear (of the system that could take their foster child at any time, of a court system that favors the rights of the biological parents over the best interests of the child[ren] in their care, of the biological parents’ “claim” on the child[ren], and at times of the foster child himself or herself.

My fundamental assumptions about how foster parents learn to be foster parents, what the day-to-day reality of foster parenting “looks like” are based on my own two decades of being a foster parent and the 100+ hours of agency-sponsored foster parent training I have received, my three years as a foster care caseworker, my sixteen years as a learning support teacher in the public school system in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and my seventeen years as an adoptive parent. Like those parents in the studies cited in the previous section, I gained important information in the state-mandated trainings from Lycoming County Children and Youth and from Best Nest Foster Care
Agency through trainings on CPR, behavior management, integrating foster children into family life, and visitations with the biological family. I also endured less-than-helpful trainings on black culture and black hair care (three training sessions!). I am well aware of the inherent danger of relying too much on my own experience as a foster parent. Stephen Brookfield (1990), in “Storming the Citadel: Reading Theory Critically” emphasizes the importance of asking epistemological questions (i.e. how does the researcher/writer know that something is true? Are the ideas presented predetermined by the intellectual paradigm of the researcher/writer?). In my research study, it is important to be clear about how the research has been conducted, how evidence to support generalizations has been gathered and interpreted, and what intellectual traditions influence the researcher/writer. Brookfield (1990) also advocates the asking of experiential questions: “Experiential questions help us view written depictions… through the lenses of our own experiences” (p. 189). While the “honoring and dignifying” of the experiences of the researcher/writer seems a necessity, there are “implicit dangers” as well (p. 190). This type of “autobiographical experience” requires “critical checks” that literature can provide (p. 190). My experience is limited by my own experience, by my theoretical perspectives, by my cultural background. There are discrepancies between my experience of foster parent learning and the research on foster parent learning. To dismiss my own two decades of experience as a foster parent seems foolish and inappropriate, if not impossible. In my research journal and in my reflections, I note when I am responding to the interview responses based on my own experiences, perceptions, and biases. To ascribe complete validity to my own experience and dismiss conflicting ideas from theorists and researchers is an invalid approach to research. I must be cognizant of at least two potential contradictions: 1) that one between my experience of foster parent learning and the research on foster parent learning; and 2) the learning experiences of the foster
parents I interviewed for my research and my own learning experiences as a foster parent. My dissertation, thus, acknowledges this as well.

An additional assumption about foster parenting originates from my experiences as a foster parent and a foster care caseworker: My informal learning experiences were as integral to my lived experience foster parenting as were state-mandated, agency-sponsored trainings. I learned from my experience as I lived that experience each day, reflecting on various events and seeking out opportunities to learn from other foster parents. While I suspected that I am not alone in valuing experiences and informal learning as significant aspects of the lived experience of foster parenting, I did not know it. I believe my research has provided important, relevant, rigorous results about the relevance and the utility of informal learning in the lived experience of foster parents. Through this research study, and as additional research into the informal learning of foster parents is undertaken, there is the opportunity for substantive impact on both the understanding of how foster parents learn to be foster parents as well as how (i.e. the methods) such learning opportunities may be provided for future foster parents.

Acknowledging my biases was not a one-time event; it was ongoing throughout the research and the writing of this dissertation. At those junctures in the process when personal feelings became a source of frustration or anger or irritation, it was the journaling process that allowed me to consciously confront my own personal biases. Rossman and Rallis (2003), in discussing the analysis of the data of a phenomenological study, use a very relevant term here: deliberately naïve. A significant challenge of any research study is to let the data speak for itself. The researcher is tasked with elucidating the meaning and the structure and the essence of the lived experience of the phenomenon being studied. Again, while a complete bracketing of bias is impossible, the research journal proved to be invaluable in the process of the writing of this dissertation. Journaling allowed
me to reflect on the interviews themselves, but also allowed me a place to write and reflect as a foster parent and not only as a researcher. I needed to return again and again to the transcripts themselves throughout the writing process, moving back and forth between my notes and observations recorded during the interviews, my research journal, and the transcripts themselves. This deliberate endeavor to be naïve allowed me, as the researcher, to more effectively focus on the lived experiences of foster parent learning as the foster parent participants reflected on them throughout the interview process.

The term “analytic bracketing” (Braun & Clark, 2006) describes this tension, this back-and-forth strategy of approaching the data. Being cognizant of this “principle of bracketing” (p. 78), as opposed to bracketing itself, was crucial in the development and the writing of Chapter Five. This concept meant a conscious and a conscientious awareness of and ability to discern when my own subjective thoughts, feelings, and foster parenting experiences led to a premature conclusion or an oversimplified outcome which could produce an unreflective (researcher reflected?) interpretation of the experience and thus prevent an understanding of the participants’ understanding(s) of the lived experience itself. This approach helped to “enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience” (Laverty, 2003, p. 29).

**The Research Questions**

The goal of my research study was to find answers to these questions:

1. What is the lived experience of selected foster parents as they create meaning from the day-to-day events, interactions, and experiences of caring for foster child(-ren)?

2. What is the nature of informal learning in this lived foster parent experience? What does it “look like”? How is it initiated and executed?

3. What meaning does the foster parent make in reflecting on the lived experience of being a foster parent and the informal learning that occurs in the foster parent experience? What is the impact of informal learning on the lived experience of foster parents?
The Population

To collect “thick and rich” data for my study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six-ten foster parents in their homes, with each interview lasting approximately an hour in duration. I requested the opportunity to return to a particular foster home for a second visit should time constraints or the need for additional information arise. Research employing a phenomenological approach is limited to a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under study. Both Dukes (1984) and Riemen (1986) have suggested utilizing no more than ten participants in a phenomenological study (as cited in Creswell, 1998). The target population for my study was six to twelve foster parents who self-identified as having been foster parents for five or more years. By requesting up to twelve participants, I was allotting for the potential that not all the foster parents would be willing or able to complete the entire interview process. I visited five different foster homes in northeastern Pennsylvania, interviewing eight foster parents in the process. The disparity in number of foster homes and number of foster parents is that on three occasions, the married foster parents chose to be interviewed together. The other interviews, at the choice of the foster parent, took place with only one foster parent at home.

I specifically requested to interview the foster parent(s) in their home since context clues (swing in the yard, toys in the living room, shoes piled by the door) provided insights into the daily lives of the residents of the home. I intentionally did not put any other qualifications on the population, such as mandating that both foster parents participate if there were two foster parents in the home or requiring that no children being present, because I wanted to observe and interview the foster families as they chose to be observed and interviewed. By being in the homes of the foster parents, I was afforded the opportunity to confront “the data of our world squarely and honestly” (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 79). Meanings are constructed by human beings in individual and unique ways,
and such constructions are dependent upon their context and personal frames of reference as foster parents engage with the world that they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). In this type of research, as participants shared their stories and interpreted the meaning(s) of their lived experiences, findings emerged through the interactive process between the researcher and the individual participants (Creswell, 1998). These interviews yielded “thick and rich” data for examination (Crotty, 1996). This was a reasonable number of participants, given the researcher’s constraints on time and money, as well as professional obligations, and produced both some common themes of meaning making as well as unique constructs, bound by the realities of unique foster parents caring for unique foster children (and both, then, underscored the importance of informal learning to foster parenting).

My screening questions were as follows:

- Have you been a foster parent for the last five or more years and have you had foster child(-ren) in your home during the last five years?
- Are you willing to participate in a research study about your learning experiences as foster parents?

I made inquiries at my place of employment, posted flyers, and utilized social media (Facebook) to recruit foster parents. To secure foster parent participants, I placed posters advertising my study on the campus of Pennsylvania College of Technology. The Dean of Sciences, Humanities & Visual Communications (the department I work for) granted his approval for such postings. I also made use of social media (Facebook) to find willing participants. Word of mouth also proved to be an effective means of finding foster parents who meet the criteria. In fact, in late2012 while sharing my research interest with a colleague, a former student approached me and mentioned that his parents have been foster parents for nearly fifteen years and that he could “give me their number” because they “love to share stories” of foster parenting. The aide for one of my former students who is deaf inquired about my dissertation topic, and then informed me that she and her husband had more than a
dozen combined years of foster parent experience. A former student of mine (1999 – 2000 school year) whom I met again recently through a chance encounter noted that his parents have been foster parents in Lycoming County for more than two decades. I had no difficulty in finding sufficient, qualified participants for my study, and I had more foster parents who offered to participate throughout the development and writing of this dissertation.

I specifically sought to interview a limited number of (six - twelve) foster parents who had five or more years of experience as foster parents. For hermeneutic phenomenological research, the intent is to select participants “who have lived experience that is the focus of the study” and” who are willing to talk about their experience” in order to “enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience” (Laverty, 2003, p. 29). Those who had lived the daily reality of foster parenting for half a decade or longer had a depth and breadth of foster parenting experience to draw upon and to see both the impact of informal learning on their parenting as well as if and how this informal learning has impacted subsequent foster care placements. Since Pennsylvania requires a minimum of six mandated training hours per foster parent per year, each participant had engaged in at least thirty (30) hours of state-mandated, agency-sponsored training opportunities, and had met a variety of foster parents, those with perhaps greater experience and those perhaps with less experience. My lengthy experience as a foster parent helped me build relationships of trust with participants, an essential component in phenomenology (Marcel, 1950; Polkinghorne, 1983; Van Manen, 1990). Carolan and Bell (2003) state that “social relations become constituted (and reconstituted) in particular moments” and that such moments take place in a “dialogue of trust” (p. 225). Noting that trust is “essential” to healthcare because of its ability to facilitate “positive patient experience,” Brown (2009) emphasizes the “relative importance of interpersonal communication compared to perceptions of the system” (p. 391). Since I approached my research as someone who
has been a foster parent for more than five years, as opposed to a caseworker (or someone else from “the system”), trust was more easily established because of the common ground shared by the research participants and by the researcher. Four participants contacted me directly because they had seen my recruitment materials and wanted to participate in the study. Four participants were referred to me as possible participants based on my recruitment materials. Two additional individuals, whom I did not use because of the number of participants already engaged in the study, were also referred to me by current participants. It was not difficult at all to garner a sufficient number of foster parents who met the criteria for participation and who were willing, then, to be interviewed for this research study.

The participants consisted of eight foster parents who self-identified as having been foster parents for more than five years. All participants had both biological and/or adopted children and foster children. Six of the participants had adopted children who were originally placed in the home as foster children. All participants were married, white, and lived in single-family homes in northeastern Pennsylvania. In all but one of the foster homes, the foster mother was the primary caregiver and the foster father was the primary wage-earner. Four of the participants were stay-at-home moms. In the foster family where the foster father was the primary caretaker, both spouses worked outside the home. All participants had cared for at least one child with special needs. All participants held First-Aid and CPR certification. All had completed the state- mandated six annual training hours each year of providing foster care.

The Initial Contact and Visit

Each foster parent participant was initially contacted by telephone call. The telephone script is in Appendix A. During the initial visit with each participant, in the participant’s home, I discussed the details of the research study, the fact that I have been a foster parent for nearly two decades, and the
potential value of this study. I paused frequently to give the participants a chance to ask questions. I reviewed the informed consent document. I informed each participant that I would be making an audio recording of each interview, that the recording device would be locked in a fireproof box in my home, and that all recordings and typed notes would be stored on my password-protected computer.

I assured each participant that their identity would remain confidential and that they could change their minds about participating in the study at any time. Each participant signed two of the informed consent forms, as did I. One copy was given to the participant. One copy was locked in a fireproof box in my home. Once all participant questions had been answered, and the informed consent forms signed, I concluded the initial contact with each participant.

In a previously approved study, I did some initial research with foster parents and former foster children to test my idea for my dissertation in a pilot study. Of the five initial participants, two met the requirements for participation in this study and were willing to do so. The pilot study yielded a wealth of information, both confirming the viability of my idea for the research for this dissertation and helping me to focus and refine the questions for this current research. The pilot study proved to be an invaluable experience, providing me the opportunity to navigate the IRB process, to validate the interview protocol, and to evaluate if, indeed, participants would be willing to “tell their stories” of their lived experience with the foster care system. In other studies of the lived experience of foster care, foster parents were “relieved and grateful to be able to tell their stories and be heard” (Lauver, 2010, p. 292). This proved to be true in this research study.

Data Collection: In-depth Interviewing

For phenomenological research, “A researcher who uses in-depth interviewing commonly seeks ‘deep’ information into knowledge – usually deeper information and knowledge than is sought in surveys, informal interviewing, or focus groups” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 104); the goal,
then, is “to collect data” (p. 104). Polkinghorne (1989) notes that the phenomenological researcher seeks a deeper and a clearer understanding of what it is like for an individual to have an experience, and then for someone else (in this case the researcher) to have an increased appreciation of sensitivity towards those who engaged in that experience. Since it is imperative that “the method matches the research question being asked,” these detailed, in-depth interviews, of a semi-structured and open-ended nature, garnered data that could not be obtained through quantitative means (Wimpenney & Gass, 2001, p. 1485).

The foster parent interviews took place over a three-month period of time as participants were identified who met the criteria for participation. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants of the study. I anticipated one or two interviews with each participant, and that each interview would last approximately one hour in duration. The semi-structured interview questions are included in Appendix C.

By asking such focused and descriptive questions, I sought detailed descriptions of the experience under investigation (Kvale, 1996). According to van Manen (1990), the intent of phenomenological reflection is “to try to grasp the essential meaning of something” (p. 77). We constantly reflect and interpret. I intentionally asked open-ended questions in my semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to discuss their experiences and reflect on those experiences. Each described the experience of foster parenting, the day-to-day learning and lived experience, in great depth and detail.

As a research method, hermeneutic phenomenology “is best suited for answering questions about human issues and concerns… the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions” (Benner, 1994, p. 80). By asking “What has your experience been like for you?” opened the door to discussion and reflection (Polkinghorne, 1989). These “what” and “how” questions provided a rich source of information for
understanding the foster parent lived experience, as discussed in Chapter Five.

While I anticipated the interview lasting approximately an hour, all but one lasted longer. When the hour mark approached, I suggested continuing the interview at another time to be respectful of the one-hour period of time I originally requested, but the foster parents consistently continued to talk. The foster parent participants selected the time of day and the date of the interview. Three intentionally chose an evening time so that both spouses could be present. The rest specifically chose a time during the day so that no one else would be around during the interview.

Foster parents helped in setting up interview times and invited me into their homes. While I offered a neutral location for the interviews to take place, every single participant opted to do the interviews in their home. Data were collected in participants’ homes. While moving through the interview questions, I did ask other questions related to the information and stories being shared by the foster parents. To conclude each interview, I offered each foster parent the opportunity to say anything else they would like to say, regardless of whether I had specifically asked about it (Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience as foster parents? Is there anything else you would like to add?) When I received a negative response to such queries, indicating that we had reached the saturation point, the interview process concluded with that foster parent. I thanked each of the participants for their time and their participation. Each participant was encouraged to contact me by telephone or by email with any questions or concerns, or to make additional comments or contributions to the study.

I listened to each interview in seclusion, either in my office at work with the office door locked and the outer office door locked, or with headphones in my home office to ensure privacy.
Data Collection: Field Notes and Research Journal

As part of the research process, I developed a “Data Collection Instrument for Interviews” Word document. Three aspects for observation were chosen for the interviews: home environment observations, significant relationship observation, and artifacts observations. I used a separate form for each of the interviews. To guard the confidentiality of the participants, the only identifying information on the actual form was the date of the interview and the time of day (a.m. or p.m. only) that the interview took place. During the interviews, I took written notes about what I observed. I also wrote questions that I wanted to ask that were not part of the semi-structured interview protocol, but were questions based off of something that foster parent said during the interview. I made detailed notes about the exterior of the home (toys, pool, swings, bikes) and the interior of the home (where the interview took place, what “evidence” there was of children in the home, those present in the home during the interview, pictures or drawings posted on the walls or refrigerators).

Once the interview had concluded and I returned home, I also made additional notes in a research journal, which I also kept in the locked fireproof box with the other research materials noted earlier. My notes were my reflections of the just-completed experience. I make no claim to objectivity about foster parenting and I made no effort to “bracket” my thoughts and ideas and experiences in my reflection. This was an introspective act, reflective in nature that allowed full and free expression of both thoughts and feelings. The difficulty was not putting pen to paper, but in deciding on just how and in what way(s) such personal experiences and reflections would be included in my write-up (Creswell, 1998). I was profoundly affected by what I heard during these interviews, and affected in ways I did not anticipate. After two specific interviews, I found it very difficult to sleep the night of those interviews, and at least three times during the transcribing process, I woke up, startled and stunned, after a “bad dream” which graphically portrayed events recounted during a
particular interview. I “heard” the voice of the foster parent, and I “saw” the events depicted during the interview. Keeping a reflective journal became an integral part of the research experience. As Merriam (2002) notes, for qualitative research the process of data analysis begins with the process of data collection. I soon discovered that writing is integral to analysis. While I do not believe that total “bracketing” of one’s experience – the setting aside of all prejudices and preconceived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) - is realistically possible, my reflective journal was an essential first step in the process of analysis because it afforded me the opportunity to attain a greater awareness of my own thoughts, ideas, experiences, and preconceptions. I did not do this with the idea of “setting” these “aside,” but rather so that my awareness of my preconceptions could allow a greater focus on the experiences of those interviewed for this study.

**Conceptual Framework for Analysis**

Hermeneutic phenomenology can be understood as “a research methodology aimed at producing rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the lifeworld of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively” (Smith, 1997, p. 80). The goal is a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. To analyze the data, van Manen (1990, 1998) calls for reflection “on essential themes which characterize the phenomenon” (p. 30). He continues, “Phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience. So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). Fenwick (2000) in reviewing five contemporary perspectives on concepts relating to experiential learning, that offer interpretive frameworks for the phenomenon of foster parent learning: Reflection (A Constructivist Perspective) and Participation (A Situative Perspective). Reflection, for Fenwick (2000), “casts the individual as a central actor in a drama of personal meaning-making” (p. 248). The learner, “reflects on lived experience to form
mental structures” which constitute knowledge which can be “represented, expressed, and transferred to new situations” (p. 248). As I sought to understand the lived experience of foster parents, this reflection and application proved central to data analysis. Acknowledging the contribution of Brown, Collins, and Dusguid (1989), Lave and Wagner (1991), and Rogoff (1990), Fenwick utilizes the term “situated cognition” to assert that “learning is rooted in the situation in which a person participates” (p. 253). Participation implies action, and foster parents actively engaged in the learning process. From this perspective, learning is “engaging in changing processes of human activity in a particular community” (p. 253). “Knowing” and “doing” become inextricably intertwined (Lave, 1988). Individuals learn as they “participate by interacting” with others within the “moment’s activity” of a particular situation (Fenwick, 2000, p. 253). These two concepts are not mutually exclusive, or even at odds with one another. The foster parent is a central figure in the foster care experience. Reflection on the lived experience of being a foster parent produces insight into the experience (i.e. the essence of that experience for the foster parent) and that reflection, through dialogue, is active engagement that may produce a change in the foster parent experience. This corresponds to my own experience where I have seen the value of reflection, of dialogue, of active participation in being a foster parent and becoming more adept at being a foster parent.

Data analysis is an activity that “involves reflecting on essential themes which characterize the phenomenon” (van Manen, 1998, p. 30). What follows is a description of the process I used to organize and analyze findings from the perspective of phenomenological concepts.

**Horizontalization**

Moustakas (1994) acknowledges that horizontalization serves as the initial step of the researcher’s analysis of the interviews from the research participants. Gadamer (1998) characterizes the concept of the horizon as “the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy” as well as
“the way one’s vision is gradually expanded” (p. 301). The finite-ness entails “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 301). The analogy is to a teenager who obtains a learner’s permit by correctly answering the twenty questions on the computer-generated permit test. This vantage point is the horizon of one who understands everything about driving that can be known from reading about driving in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania driver’s manual. It is finite because the individual has yet to get behind the wheel. The horizon is “expanded” the first time the individual actually navigates a car. The “gradually expanded” idea may be reinforced by the first driving experience typically being in a parking lot, as opposed to a major roadway. Gadamer (1998) then asserts that someone who has attained a particular horizon “knows the relative significance of everything within the horizon” (p. 313). Thus, I assembled a full transcript of each interview, read the transcript of each interview in its entirety to get a sense of the whole and then broke each interview down, line-by-line, in order to identify the significant statements and key words and word phrases (Moustakas, 1994).

To conduct horizontalization for the foster parent interviews, I listened to the interviews once again and then read the transcripts. I marked individual meaning units (sometimes a single comment or key word or phrase, and sometimes a vignette told by the foster parent) using the New Comment feature in Microsoft Word to insert relevant comments. I developed tracking codes for the meaning units, using the Copy and Paste feature in Microsoft Word to open new blank documents for these meaning units. Common themes in the interviews began to emerge about the pre-service training that foster parents received and about the creative ways foster parents devised to gain needed information and services for their specific foster child(-ren).
Thematizing

I studied the transcripts for recurrent themes and then organized the data in separate Word documents around emerging themes. Van Manen (1990) succinctly states, “Theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand. Theme describes “an aspect of the structure of lived experience” (p. 87). Through thematizing, those engaged in phenomenological inquiry “cluster the invariant constituents of the experience” and those clustered and identified constituents serve as “the core themes of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Themes emerged from the descriptions of the experiences of the foster parents.

Here is an example of thematizing: the perceived and stated inadequacy of agency-sponsored training for the specific situation/ specific foster child(-ren) in this foster family.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kay</th>
<th>“We learned about ethnic foods and black hair care, but not about how to take care of teenagers with behavior problems.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>“Nothing. I learned absolutely nothing from these trainings. They were a waste of time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>“We listened to one guy who told us foster children don’t have to get angry. They choose to get angry. We tried to tell him they had reason to be angry but he kept saying ‘it’s their choice.’ We got up and left.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trina</td>
<td>“When I have a question about a new regulation, I call the Director of Children and Youth directly and he explains it to me. I don’t depend on the caseworkers to explain things.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clustering these commonalities in transcript segments thus categorizes “a problem, an issue, an event, or a happening that is defined as being significant to respondents” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 124). As I reflected on these interviews, it seemed significant that the foster parents evidenced no reluctance or hesitation in answering any of the semi-structured interview questions or any of the questions I posed based on statements foster parents made during the interviews. Each participant had chosen “an issue, an event, or a happening” of significance to the foster parent as the
respondent. Given the depth and detail of the responses, given the disparity and variety in experience and response, it is crucial to underscore that the emerging themes were not “islands’ unto themselves. They did link together. For example, the theme of frustration at the agency-sponsored training content connected to the resourcefulness of the foster parents who sought out needed information for their particular problem, question or issue. Foster parents did call on foster care agency administrators, and other foster parents, and engaged in their own online research when their training proved inadequate for their needs, or the needs of the foster child(-ren). But there was so much more to these interviews, indeed to the lived experiences and the reflection on those lived experiences of the participants, than could be adequately captured in writing about themes alone.

**Textural Description**

At this point, then, with the meaning units organized into themes, I further developed what Moustakas (1994) terms coherent textural descriptions. No single statement, no word or phrase, captures the significance of the phenomenon, which can only be captured by “a fuller description of the structure of a lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 152). While themes did emerge from an analysis of the data, I began to question whether presenting the results of the research (Chapter Five) according to theme, would really reveal the richness of the data of the individual interviews. Moustakas divides textural description into these approaches: individual textural descriptions, composite textural descriptions, individual structural descriptions, composite structural descriptions, and synthesis of composite textural and composite structural descriptions. The data drives the selection of the method for presenting the data.

Because the data seemed to warrant this, I chose individual structural descriptions for the the next chapter of this dissertation. To write the Introduction of the Participants portion of Chapter Five, I reviewed the observation data for each participant. For the Findings in Chapter 5, I returned to the
interview data. Although I describe the individual participants’ experiences of foster parenting in Chapter 5, I have utilized themes from my thematizing documents as a guide for the composition of these individual descriptions. Chapter 6, then, presents a summary of the findings, an analysis, and a discussion of the implications.

Ethical Considerations

Subjectivity is valued in hermeneutic phenomenology. Total objectivity is impossible for any researcher of any topic. All human beings find themselves situated in a reality constructed by subjective experiences. The subjective interpretation of these experiences continues to shape how the participant foster parents understand their experiences as foster parents. What I was continually cognizant of as I engaged in, transcribed, and sought to elucidate the subjective lived experiences of the foster parents I interviewed, is how I understand what I heard in the interviews and read in the transcripts. An ethical consideration in hermeneutic phenomenology is to be very clear and upfront in stating, “This is how I have interpreted ______.” This called for a great deal of self-reflection. Bracketing of my experience as a foster parent is not consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology.

Another ethical concern is for the confidentiality of those being interviewed. When I proposed my pilot study, I indicated that I would use a Random Name Generator website (http://www.kleimo.com/random/name.cfm) and that I would use an obscurity factor of 70 as a means of safeguarding the actual identities of participants. I used the same website and the same obscurity factor in my research with foster parents. A third significant ethical issue is one of trustworthiness, discussed in detail in the following section.

Trustworthiness

All research needs to address the issue of trustworthiness. The ultimate question, perhaps, is whether the research has been conducted in such a manner as to inspire confidence in the study’s
findings. This “trustworthiness,” as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1990) is integral to a qualitative study’s quality and is comprised of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To achieve the “phenomenological nod” (van Manen, 1997, p. 27), one must query whether the conclusions of the research study demonstrate an ability to inspire confidence because the supporting arguments have “been persuasive” (p. 57). If the researcher writes in such a way that the reader perceives, through and within the textural description, a plausible experience, then the phenomenological description resonates with said reader.

To establish credibility, in my initial contact with each participant, I disclosed that I have been foster parenting for approximately twenty years. This established common ground with the participants as we were able to talk about foster parenting “from the trenches.” During the interview process, I shared vignettes of my experiences as they related to responses from the foster parents. For example, when the interview topic was the training involved in becoming a foster parent, I was able to engage in the discussion not only as a researcher but as someone who has undergone the same process. The participants seemed comfortable opening up to someone who was also a foster parent. Credibility is dependent on the researcher’s “training, experience, track record, status, and presentation of self” (Patton, 2002, p. 552). The fact that all but one of the interviews lasted for more than an hour also speaks to the credibility that was established by the researcher.

Creswell (2007) discusses eight strategies for addressing the quality of a qualitative inquiry: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review and debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, thick and rich descriptions, and external audits. To guarantee even a minimal level of quality, the researcher needs to employ at least two of these strategies. My process of data analysis, as discussed earlier in this chapter, involved both repeated listening to the taped interviews and repeatedly reading the transcripts to prolong my
engagement. The actual interview transcripts, my own field observations, and journal entries allowed
examination and reflection upon the phenomenon from multiple directions, which is constitutive of
triangulation, a “validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and
different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.
126). This systematic process enabled me, as the researcher, to sort through hundreds of pages of
transcripts (the data) to find common themes, which were, in turn, corroborated through observations
and the research journal, as well as my own literature review on the adult learning of foster parents.
Chapter 5 offers thick and rich descriptions based on my observations and on the interview
transcripts. Once the interviews were completed and the transcripts assembled, I revisited the
participants’ homes in the study, sharing the transcript of their interview with them and asking these
foster parent participants to verify the transcripts for accuracy (member checking). In each case, the
foster parent participants verified the accuracy of the transcripts, often pausing in their reading to
either provide an update on a particular child or situation (health, visitation) or to ask about my
progress with “the project” (the dissertation). Lincoln and Guba (1985) regard this verification as “the
most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). For external audits, I asked two
colleagues at Pennsylvania College of Technology to read the Findings portion of Chapter Five. One
individual is a program specialist in Human Services with more than two decades of experience
preparing students for careers as social services caseworkers, child protective services workers, drug
and alcohol counselors, and positions in youth programs. This professional works closely with
Lycoming County Children and Youth, the agency that oversees the certification of foster parents and
the placement of foster children into foster homes in Lycoming County. The other is a retired teacher
and adjunct instructor at Penn College who has also served as a foster parent in Lycoming County.
Two additional individuals, both of whom have been foster parents for more than a decade but who
did not participate in my research study, were asked to also read Chapter Five. These four individuals were able to provide substantive feedback, questioning me where my writing did not seem “deep” enough to capture the significance of the foster parent narrative and challenging me to be more thorough in acknowledging my own assumptions and biases, and encouraging me to “get out of [your] own way” in constructing Chapter Five. They also, without nudging or prompting, shared with me their own lived experiences, their own encounters, their own reflections of their experiences with foster parents and foster parenting, much of it mirroring the content of Chapter Five and thus affirming this chapter as being authentic, descriptive, and detailed. Their personal and professional experiences of foster care, foster parent learning, and the foster care system helped me address issues of dependability and confirmability. In the previous chapter, I noted Holstein and Gubrium’s (2005) term analytic bracketing and the importance of distinguishing between my subjectivity as the researcher precluding an analysis of the data of the lived foster parent experiences as the foster parents understand and interpret their experiences. Through extended and extensive efforts to address such concerns as thoroughly detailed here, I was thus able to address issues of both dependability and confirmability.

Transferability of the research findings to other settings is an important indicator of the overall quality in qualitative research (Hammersley, 1992). Researchers are tasked with the responsibility to describe the context in sufficient depth and detail so that the reader can form a judgment for himself or herself about the applicability of the findings of this research to his or her own context(s). This dissertation situates the research within hermeneutic phenomenology, offers detailed research about situational learning, informal learning, and constructivist learning theory, provides a detailed account of foster parent recruitment, screening, informed consent, and semi-structured interview questions, and then offers a “thick and rich” discussion of the foster parent interviews. There is nothing within this
study that is tied to a particular geographic location or institution. The semi-structured interview questions could readily be used and adapted to, for example, a study of the adult learning of foster parents in an urban setting in the United States or even foster parents in another country. Therefore, transferability has been established. Ultimately, the reader and other potential researchers will decide on transferability for their own research endeavors.

**Limitations of the Study**

This research sought a depth and breadth of understanding of the lived experience of foster parenting, *as the foster parent(s) understood it*, and as I interpreted it. The “essence” in this context is the essential meaning the foster parent derives from such lived experiences. Ultimately, the project of phenomenological reflection and explication is “to effect a more direct contact with the experience as lived” (van Manen, 1990, p. 78). Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, “is an interpretation of human beings as essentially self-interpreting, thereby showing that interpretation is the proper method for studying human beings” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 34). As foster parents responded to these questions through reflection of their own lived experience of being foster parents, the meaning or the situated experience of this phenomenon came to greater light, in its many and varied dimensions and layers and levels. Perhaps the most apparent limitation of my study is that interviews with different foster parents yielded so many different results. Some saw great utility in the mandated adult foster parent learning opportunities. Others did not. Some have a wide circle of acquaintances, friends, and family they draw upon for support, while others take a “lone ranger” approach to foster parenting, solving and resolving their own issues as such issues arise. Some had edifying situation-specific experiences and others less-than-satisfying ones. Some had “lost” foster children, either due to a return to the family of origin, death, or through their own desire to terminate the foster care experience with a
particular child; others have ongoing, even permanent relationships with their foster children that extend beyond formal foster care.

An additional limitation of the study is that in selecting foster parents with five or more years of experience as foster parents, I have excluded the informal learning experiences of relatively new and inexperienced foster parents, which might include some of the initial insights and experiences of those new to the foster parenting experience.

A final limitation of the research is the relatively small number of foster parents that I interviewed. The participants were from a more rural area. Perhaps the experience of foster parents in a more urban area, such as Philadelphia, is different from the more rural areas of Lycoming and Clinton and Centre and Sullivan and Bradford Counties. Whether such differences exist might provide an opportunity for further study.

Van Manen (1990) deems this type of research a “caring act,” one that if “our love is strong enough, we not only will learn much about life, we will also come face to face with its mystery” (p. 5, 6). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a science, but a human science that studies human beings and human being (Dreyfus, 1991).

As a research method, hermeneutic phenomenology allows the research to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of the phenomenon under investigation (van Manen, 2003), in this case, the lived experiences of selected foster parents. Of the variety of qualitative research methods, I specifically chose hermeneutic phenomenology because it most clearly and closely connected to my research interest in the informal learning, the lived experiences of foster parents. Phenomenology is systematic and reflective, an approach “to uncover, describe, and interpret everyday lived experience [that] invites one to better understand a particular experience” (Lauver, 2010, p. 291). I intentionally selected participants for this research study “who have lived experience
that is the focus of the study” so that in-depth interviews would “enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience” (Laverty, 1990, p. 78). By going into the homes of the participants, I entered the lived space where the phenomenon under study was lived and lived out daily. I witnessed how they experienced the foster parent experience, which offered me the opportunity to encounter “the data of our world squarely and honestly” (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 79). Through listening to and transcribing the interviews, through reflection and explication, I was able to “effect a more direct contact with the experience as lived” by these foster parents (van Manen, 1990, p. 78). Member checking and external audits established consensual validation of the results of the research study. Phenomenology queries, “What is this experience like?” and that this hermeneutic phenomenological research study addresses in the following chapter. In Chapter Five I introduce the participants in the study, and report the findings of this study.
Chapter 5. THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE FINDINGS

Initial findings of the study came from my first interactions with the participants. For this reason, this chapter introduces the eight foster parents and then details the findings of the study in relation to the research questions. Individually, each participant has more than five years of experience in foster parenting, and collectively, they have over one-hundred years of service as foster parents. The participants have three common elements to their experience with the substitute care system of the United States: an undergirding desire to make a difference in the lives of children, a tenacity to do whatever is necessary for the children in their care, and an expressed frustration with the training and support of their foster care agencies. Each participant realized their paths diverged into unique sojourns that each acknowledged changed their lives. Each participant, although none used the specific term, employed informal learning as a means of confronting, conquering, circumventing, and surviving the lived experience, the day-to-day reality, of being foster parents. Their stories and their experiences illumined a spotlight on the absence of established research about foster parent learning. Pseudonyms have been used in place of the real names of the foster parent participants. Pseudonyms have also been used for the names of the children (foster, biological, and adopted) mentioned during the interview process. This was done to ensure confidentiality and the privacy of all family members.

The following profile reports are presented in an entirely random order.

**The Foster Parent Participants**

The eight participants in this research study self-identified as having been foster parents for at least five years. All were from Pennsylvania and all resided within a two-hour radius of State College,
Pennsylvania, home of the Pennsylvania State University. All participants were married or in a committed relationship. Two of the interviews took place with both foster parents participating together in the interview process. The other four interviews were with one foster parent (the other foster parent was at paid employment outside the home). Each interview took place in the home of the foster parents.

Kay

“I grew in my life from this experience”

Residing in one of the more affluent school districts in Lycoming County, Kay and her husband have been foster parents for more than fifteen years. I park in the driveway of this quiet, suburban neighborhood on a somewhat dreary late winter day. At the end of the driveway, behind a wooden fence that is showing its years in chipped paint and missing pieces, I notice the above-ground pool and a wooden swing set. There is a hand-written, semi-taped note above the doorbell admonishing me that the doorbell does not work. I knock at the door and am greeted by Kay, the foster mother. We enter the living room and it is obvious that a small child or children reside here. There is a plastic doll stroller and crib near the television, two small pairs of colorful shoes, a couple of Barbie dolls, several empty candy wrappers in the candy dish. Kay turns off the television set. I am immediately struck by the number of pictures, of various sorts and sizes, of children, of various sorts and sizes, which adorn every living room wall. More than two dozen frames show smiling children, some infants and some toddlers and some teens. Several demonstrate the obvious posing and posturing of annual school pictures. Some of the pictures are of white children, some are biracial, and others are African American. The vast majority are males. There appears to be no ordering by size of frame, age of the pictured, or season of the year (some depict playing at the beach, and others show playing in the snow). There is randomness and there is togetherness.
Kay notices me noticing the pictures. She begins to tell me about the people in the pictures.

“This is _______ when he was in middle school. And that is _______ in his senior portrait. _______ was wearing her pirate hat.” Not all the children are the biological offspring because of the various skin colors. Never once, however, does Kay qualify the picture—or rather the person in the picture—toby saying, “This is our foster son _______ when he was in middle school. And this is our adopted son _______ in his senior portrait. Our foster daughter _______ was wearing her special hat.” My view of the external appearance of the children and the differences they revealed was not the focus of Kay who voiced no categorization of the children based on how they came into their lives.

By her own acknowledgement, Kay is the primary caregiver for the children in her home. In fact, I do not meet her husband during any visit to the home. She has been able to stay home with the children (biological, foster, and adopted), and he has almost always worked more than one job in the nearly quarter-century that they have been married. By her estimates, she and her husband have cared for nearly two dozen children, some for a very brief time measured in weeks, and some remain part of their family to this day.

A small plaque with the words “Enjoy the journey” sat easily on the frame above the front door. Kay proceeds to tell me about her journey of learning and living as a foster parent.

**Trina and Dave**

“Our family is a circle of strength and love.”

Driving into the cul-de-sac as I look for the correct address, I am struck by the tidiness and orderliness of the area. It is pristine, like one might see in a real estate advertisement for the ideal family neighborhood. As I pull in the driveway, the initial impression is only reinforced. There are no toys or bicycles in the front yard. An above-ground swimming pool is out back with a small cedar deck and fence surrounding it. The swing to the left is appropriate in size for small children, but there
are no worn paths where sneaker-clad feet have brushed the ground. One other vehicle is parked in the concrete driveway in front of one of the two-bay garage. The foster mother greets me with a smile and welcomes me into the home. I am immediately confronted by the strong smell of cigarette smoke, something I have become unaccustomed to in the world of foster homes. (When the two children most recently placed in our home last year by Lycoming County Children and Youth returned to reside with a family member, one of the requirements before the children were returned was that the caregiver agree to only smoke outside the residence because of the breathing issues of the one child. My immediate thought, then, was that the child(-ren) in this home must not be medically fragile because smoking in the home would be strictly prohibited by the foster care agency.)

I enter the living room and pass by a plaque above the front door that reads “Our family is a circle of strength and love.” The living room has a collection of toddler toys along the wall. The toys are arranged in no particular order, and I am escorted into the adjoining kitchen where we sit around the kitchen table.

The couple specifically asked that I come to the home to meet them when their children would be at school so that we could talk without interruption. Initially, I had hoped to visit homes when children were present so that I could observe family interaction, but I readily agreed to honor the request. I find out, during the initial telephone contact, that the person who gave me their contact information (an acquaintance of mine from work and a friend of the foster mother) had forgotten to inform this couple that I would be telephoning them about possibly participating in this study. When Trina invites me to “have a seat” in their home, my initial concern is to confirm their willingness to participate in the study. They express no reluctance. In fact, they begin talking about their experiences as foster parents before I even have the chance to go over the informed consent forms
with them. So, I politely steer the conversation back to the consent forms and to the details, informing them that I would be audio recording the interviews upon a return visit to the home.

As they read over and sign the informed consent forms, I gaze around the kitchen. There is a montage of frames on the kitchen wall each encasing pictures of children. Trina notices me noticing them and with a smile on her face and tells me the “story” of the nearly one-dozen pictures. Some are of the 35 foster children she and her husband have cared for over the years. Most are pictures of the couple’s biological children holding and interacting with one or more foster children. Trina and Dave talk easily, sometimes simultaneously, about “the kids.”

When I contacted the foster mother about scheduling the actual interview, she chose the early morning when she and her husband would be available to talk and when the other children would be “out of the house,” presumably at school. This, however, was not the case because the couple’s youngest child, a toddler just over one-year of age, was also present. The toddler, the only child at home at the time, was supposed to be at a visit with the biological parents, but the parents cancelled the visit. We spent nearly 90 minutes talking about their nearly two decades of experience as foster parents.

Sandy

“I didn’t know enough to do half the things I’ve done.”

Nestled in sparsely-populated Bradford County, Sandy and her family reside far from anything that could be deemed a town. There is one country road that leads to the house, and I turn off that road only to drive one-quarter mile or so down a dirt road until I get to the actual house. There is a pick-up truck in the yard, a four-wheeler close by; various toys and balls and bicycles decorate the front lawn. The paint is peeling in places too numerous to count. There is a noticeable creak as I ascend the front steps. I barely raise my hand to knock on the front screen door when it is opened by a smiling little girl of about eight or so, who waves to me and then waves me in. There is
much to observe as I enter. There are multiple pairs of shoes near the door and near to each other.
Jackets are hung on the coat rack, for the most part. The television is on. Two of the school-aged
children (both elementary school age) are home during my early afternoon visit. This is parent-
teacher conference week, so there are staggered schedules for the six children in the home.

Sandy and her husband have no biological children. The six children currently residing in the
home (ages 6 – 17) all came into this family through the foster care system. Four of the six have been
adopted through Bradford County Children and Youth. They are in the process of adopting the other
two children through a private foster care agency that also works with families to adopt the foster
children in their care, when the option to return to the biological family is no longer viable. State
regulations prohibit the placement of more than six children in a foster home without getting a special
waiver from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Once their oldest child turns eighteen, Sandy and
her husband plan to welcome a new “sixth child” from the foster care system.

Since Sandy’s husband is a truck driver who spends the majority of the work week on the
road, he is not present during the initial meeting to discuss the nature of the study, nor is he present
during the interview process. While I talk to Sandy about my research and review the informed
consent form with her, we are interrupted on half a dozen occasions by the young children who come
into the kitchen to see their mother and this unfamiliar individual with the papers and pen. The kids
give no evidence at all of being phased that a stranger is in their midst. They may be accustomed to
strangers (caseworkers, DHS workers, therapists, agency workers). One of the children has drawn me
a picture of her favorite doll and the family dog. I smile and thank her for the random act of kindness.
This child then crawls up on my lap and whispers that she is going to see her “mother” this week, and
smiles with excitement. Sandy is securing a drink for another child and does not hear this “secret”
sharing. Does she mean the biological mother? While Pennsylvania is not an open-adoption state,
adoptive parents sometimes decide to maintain contact with the biological parents even after the adoption has been completed.

There is laughter in this house. And bustle. And activity. The refrigerator is barely visible because it hosts so many treasures created by young hands: artwork (a Christmas tree), a hand imprint, a poem, pages ripped from coloring books and an assortment of appointment cards for the doctor and the dentist and the eye doctor. A box of Fruit Loops sits on the counter. The morning’s dishes – unwashed – crowd the sink. The chairs at the kitchen table are mismatched but plentiful. At least two cats deign to enter the room and then proceed to ignore all of us. Nothing is still; everything and everyone is animated.

**Lori and Dan**

“*I was afraid where they would go to next.*”

Lori and Dan had the most number of foster children out of any of the participants in this study, 75 in all as they self-reported. Theirs is a truly blended family: “hers, mine, and ours” as Dan described it. Each had been married once before, and Dan was actually a foster parent when he married Lori. Each had children entering into their marriage and they have a child together.

I arrived for our evening appointment at the appointed time. The stone driveway led from the main road – the only road in the area – to the single-family home. A swimming pool sat across the driveway right next to a weather-worn swing set. There were two bikes near the steps leading up to the entrance. It appeared that one of the vehicles in the front yard area might not have been operational. The harsh winter had taken its toll on the wooden steps and deck. I hear the voices of young children as I approach the entrance. It sounds like the children are playing together and it seems like they are getting along. Lori welcomes me into the home. The door opens into the kitchen which is not especially well lit.
The evening meal has been served (roast chicken is the lingering aroma that permeates the room) and the dishes have been washed, dried, and put away. The wet dish towel hangs over the edge of the sink. The kitchen table is very large. It engulfs the room, and could easily sit a dozen or more people. It looks somewhat worn, perhaps slightly weary, well aware of the dozens of feet that have sat under it and the many elbows that have rested upon it.

Dan is nowhere to be found. However, a critter is. In scanning the kitchen for anything that might be interesting or noteworthy, I notice the aquarium. No fish. No water. Some kind of lizard-like creature who, interestingly enough, appeared to be staring at me. I am intrigued and stare back. Lori sees me eyeing up the family pet and informs me it is a chameleon, and he belongs to the children. Interesting that a foster family, a blended family, one that has cared for so many children and over so many years, has a chameleon in the kitchen. Chameleons change colors, sometimes as social signals, sometimes in response to the physical environment, and sometimes as camouflage. The symbolic parallels to foster parenting are plentiful. The interview with them brings this to light.

Dan appears. He has been “taking a nap” after a long day at work. Lori introduces us. He and I shake hands. The three of us sit at the kitchen table. This home the only interview setting in which I enter only one room. For the entire time of the initial visit and of the actual interview, we remain in the kitchen. Dan is very quiet at first.

We sit down. We chat. I inform them of the nature and purpose of my study. Dan becomes more engaged at the mention of foster parenting. They ask me questions about my studies at Penn State while I review the signed consent, securing both of their signatures, and answering their questions. The initial hour passes, and we set up the date and time for the return visit.

The three of us gather in the kitchen. The interview commences. At approximately the one-hour juncture, to honor the request in the informed consent form and in recognition of the relative
lateness of the hour (8:00 p.m.). They decline my invitation to return for an additional visit, and continue telling their story.

All the while, the children play together in various rooms of the house. The conversation is vivid, detailed, graphic, and informative. And the chameleon looks on.

**Will and Sunny**

"*God bless us, one and all.*"

Initially, I was invited to meet and speak with Will and Sunny during the noontime portion of the day so that I could speak with the two of them at the same time. They lived just a few miles outside of town, about a ten-minute drive from my own home, but they were decidedly “out in the country.” In fact, there were no other homes within site as I pulled into the driveway and parked near the entrance. Both Will and Sunny were sitting at the table when I arrived. They motioned me in. They had not met me before and had no idea who I was, yet motioned me in.

We chatted informally for a bit. It appeared that they had just finished lunch together, since a paper plate was set off to Tim’s left. He had some kind of papers out in front of him. Mindful of the time and timeframe – Sunny had specifically set a time when her husband “would be here for lunch” – I intentionally moved the discussion forward, sharing with them the purpose of my study, why I had chosen this topic, and what their help would potentially mean for my research. We reviewed the signed consent form, line by line. I stopped after each paragraph to ask if there were any questions or anything they wanted to discuss. They just kept on reading the form, asking nothing but intently perusing the entire document. Without question or comment, each signed two copies. I then signed, giving each of them a copy and keeping one as well. The conversation about “the kids” resumed. We talked for another fifteen minutes or so, and then made plans for the semi-structured interview.
Sunny invited me to their home specifically in the evening so that I could talk to her and to her husband and meet the other family members. Five members of the family were present that evening when I arrived. Will and Sunny were seated at the kitchen table. Tim came to the door, unlocked it, and invited me in. A baby obviously lives in this home. There is a package of opened diapers on a chair in the corner. A can of formula rests on the kitchen counter. “Fischer-Price” are two common words in this household. And, of course, there is a baby crying.

We sat at the kitchen table. Preparation has gone into this evening. There is a plate of sliced fruit and a plate of cheese. A half-gallon of iced tea and a half-gallon of lemonade serve as the culinary accoutrements. I accept the proffered iced tea, and inquire about whether either of them has any questions about the initial visit or any concerns they wanted to share. There were none, and so we began. At various points during the interview, family members drift in and out of the kitchen. I meet the eldest (former) foster child, a nineteen-year-old young woman who initially came into this home through foster care and was eventually adopted by Will and Sunny. The baby, who appears to be perhaps six months old, I discover, belongs to the nineteen-year-old. They all live in this home. It is unclear to me who is actually “raising” the infant (i.e. who has legal custody) but I do not ask, not for a lack of curiosity but out of respect for the family. They have invited me into their home to participate in a research study with certain parameters that have been approved through Penn State. I do not want to appear to be a leering presence, especially when my curiosity does not “fit” the nature or purpose of my study.

Nor do I ask about the adult female sitting in the living room, specifically positioned so that she can see into the kitchen and look directly at me the entire time I am conducting the interview. Deena refers to her as “aunt” and that is all that is said.
In the living room, the dozen or so toys on the floor have not been picked up and put away. They have been “shoved” to the far side of the room, where they cannot be seen from my initial vantage point in the kitchen, but also where they do not interfere with family members’ movements through the room. Will and Sunny hold, rock, comfort, and talk to this baby. The conversation is vivid and detailed, at times graphic, and the foster parents do not hesitate to answer the questions posed to them.

As I compose this chapter, deciphering my field notes and observations, the decision to interview the foster parents in their home seems to be a prudent one. As Yogi Berra once said, “You can see a lot just by watching.” By entering into the homes of the foster parent participants, I also, for that sliver of time, entered into their lives. They answered my questions. They asked their own. They told their stories. Their experiences of adult foster parent learning through the day-to-day lived experience of foster parenting are detailed and varied.

For a hermeneutic phenomenological study, quality is a significant concern. Van Manen (1997) identifies orientation, strength, richness, and depth as the four major quality concerns. Orientation is the involvement of the researcher in the world of the participants and their stories. Strength is revealed in the capacity of the written text to convey, convincingly, the core intention of the reflective understanding of the research participants through their stories. Richness is the vivid accounting of the text that delineates the understanding of what these stories mean to the participants. Depth is, then, the ability of the research text to “penetrate down and express the best intentions of the participants” (Kafle, 2006, p. 196). As Chapter Five continues, I offer the findings of the study as these participants tell their stories of adult learning in the daily lived experience of foster parenting with an eye toward orientation, strength, richness, and depth.
Findings from the Interviews

I herein provide detailed descriptions of participants’ lived experiences as foster parents in northeastern Pennsylvania. Lincoln and Guba (1990) initially introduced the concept of the individual human being as a research instrument, emphasizing the uniqueness of the role of the researcher in scientific inquiry. This uniqueness “lies in the notion that only people construct and bring meaning into the world” which, in turn, makes people “the most appropriate instrument for inquiries aiming to arrive at understanding” (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013, p. 1). For this research study, I have also used myself as an “instrument of research” (Patton, 2002, p. 86), and I have done so by incorporating reflections, analyses, and organizing the descriptions.

In reporting the results garnered from each participant interview, I have also included an analysis of the included transcript segments. An underlying principle of employing hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method is the acknowledgement that analysis begins at the point of initial data collection and continues on multiple levels throughout the research process. Results cannot be separated from analysis. For this reason, results and analysis are presented as part of an integrated process rather than as discreet chapters.

Kay

I arrived at the home of Kay and her husband, and was offered a seat at the dining room table. The only child at home was the prescrawler who was watching Nickelodeon Jr. in the living room and playing an electronic device, a Kindle perhaps. We chatted informally for several moments, and I asked if she had any questions about the study since our last visit when the informed consent was signed. No questions were asked. The foster father, who worked a full-time and a part-time job, was not at home.
Since Kay and her husband have been foster parents for nearly two decades, I began by asking her the motivation for becoming a foster parent.

K: I became a foster parent because it was… I thought it was very important for the children to have some kind of permanency in their life and that, and some kind of stable home. It also made it alright for me to stay home with my own children. I don’t have to go out to work. I did the foster care and I really enjoyed it after we tried it.

BW: Tell me about the experience of becoming a foster parent and the agency you chose.

K: I remember there were two quite lengthy questionnaires and visits from the caseworker. There were, um, at least an hour or more long. They asked about our background growing up, how my children were growing up. Let me see what else. They wanted to make sure they had a clean living space. They had their own beds. They had a dresser to keep their clothes in, and they were going to be in a safe environment at all times.

BW: What types of training did you have from the foster care agency as part of the certification process?

K: I had CPR, and emergency health care. Like how to bandage arms or legs, and what to do. I can’t remember what it was called. But we had to learn that. I also had to learn the care of a black child because I had never grown up around any black children and knew very little about that and about their way of life, how they fixed their hair.

Basically in the main trainings, living family life in your home with someone else’s child in your home that wasn’t used to your way of living. They trained us but, yet, most of it, the training, we got from everyday life. Some of the things they told us were helpful. Some of the things were not.

BW: Help me understand that.

K: Most of the trainings were geared toward younger children, like for hair care and skin care.

BW: Skin care?

K: Basically, they needed a lot of lotion with cocoa butter. And after a bath to use lotion on his entire body. Things that he couldn’t do for himself. But we got older kids from the agency, and they could do these things for themselves.

Anderson, Reder, and Simon (1996) note in their research on informal learning that training by abstraction is of little use. In this particular instance, the foster mother is learning information about proper skin care for African-American infants. This information would be used in situation-
specific and child-specific instances. Since she and her husband “got older kids,” however, this particular agency-sponsored training seemed to have little practical utility. Foster parent training efforts should be “related to helping participants understand children’s development while preparing them for anticipated difficulties that may occur during their foster care situation” (Baum, Crase, & Crase, 2001, p. 204). These trainings of which Kay spoke focused almost exclusively on the physical care of an infant or very young child. This would be relevant to foster parents caring for very young children. What Kay did not find, however, was relevance in this type of learning opportunity for children who were old enough to care for their own hair and skin needs. Again, there is a disconnect between what the foster parent is learning and the type of learning that would be of use to this specific foster parent in this specific situation (caring for older foster children). While such training would help to meet the six hours of Pennsylvania-mandated annual hours, the utility of the content was non-existent.

BW: So was that helpful?

K: Well, they didn’t train us on how to transition foster children into our home. What kinds of behaviors to expect from them. The kids did not have routines in their homes. Even something like sitting down to a meal. (The foster kids) were surprised at first that we all sat down at dinner together and that there was enough food. I remember at first they would put large amounts of food on their plates out of fear that there wouldn’t be enough of amount of food for them. They would get food and hide it or hoard it. If we had cookies or cupcakes or candy on the counter in the kitchen, they would take it and hide it in their dresser drawers. We would find paper under their beds after they had eaten whatever. They were trying to hide that they had eaten the food.

BW: What did you do about this?

K: We sat the kids down and told them that there would always be enough food around, and they didn’t have to take it and hide it. They would take it down to their rooms and hide it… sodas, juices, candy bars, sometimes sandwiches. They were used to just throwing everything on the floor and not keeping a neat room. We got ants in the house because it was summer.

BW: So, what did you do?

K: Well, my husband researched online to see if other foster parents were having the same
problem. In our training from (the foster care agency) we were told that foster children could not be denied meals, and that food could not be withheld as a punishment.

BW: A punishment?
K: Yeah, I remember getting to send to bed without supper when I was a kid if I got in trouble. (The foster care agency supervisor) told foster parents that even snacks could not be taken away from foster children. So, my husband showed me a blog about foster parents locking up food so that the kids couldn’t get to it without the foster parents knowing. I guess this was one way to do it (address the hording issue). But I was not going to lock up food in my home. Even though we told them not to do it, they still kept doing it. They wanted to make sure they got their share.

BW: So what did you do?
K: Basically, over time, they just stopped doing this (hoarding food). They had to learn to trust us, to find trust in us, that we were not going to keep food from them. It was a good three to four, maybe even six months before they stopped doing this. I kept showing them that I knew what they were doing, and they did eventually stop. They knew they were going to have food available to them. They knew they could ask us for snacks and they could have them.

BW: What did you do about the ants?
K: We made them do the work for the room. They cleaned up each day, and we made them spray for ants. It didn’t make sense to get mad at them. But we didn’t at first know or understand why they did that.

BW: How did you come to an understanding?
K: Well, we just sat down and talked to them. At first, that the food would be there. And then, we asked why they were taking food. Then (foster son) told us about not having enough food at (the biological father’s house) and that they just never knew if there was going to be food at home or not. We told them there would always be enough food. Always.

McMahon (1997) discusses the ways in which learners make meaning: the ways in which learners make meaning from experiences through an internal process of interpretation. Kay is vocal about and seems very well aware of the learning deficits that need to be addressed The foster mother notes a decrease in the problematic behavior of the foster children hiding food in their rooms. She interprets the reason for this, not as because of any type of house rules or in an effort to please the foster parents, but as an internal change on the part of the foster children There is something deeper
here than simply establishing and following a set of household rules. But it is not only the foster children who are learning. As Fenwick (2000) notes, “situated cognition maintains that learning is rooted in the situation in which a person participates” (p. 253). The foster parents engage in self-directed learning by intentionally addressing the food issue with the foster children. This idea is not an “intellectual concept” at work here (the foster parents already knew that “foster children could not be denied meals,” that food “could not be withheld as a punishment”). The learning took place with the understanding that a change in behavior was the desired goal (not hoarding food). The “learning” and the “doing” are not separate entities within the context of this situation. Through discourse, the foster parents engaged in “changing processes of human activity” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 253) as evidenced by the change in the behavior.

Studies do show that foster children, particularly those who have a history of abuse or neglect, are at an increased risk of malnourishment, but also at an increased risk for eating disorders because they frequently come from households that struggle with food insecurity. These experiences have “long-lasting consequences on the health of school-aged children (Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, 2011). If the established research indicates this, why doesn’t agency-sponsored foster parent training address this?

Pennsylvania does address the issue of food in its policies and procedures. Foster parents “are responsible for providing all of the child’s daily living needs, including food, shelter, clothing, transportation and other normal expenses” (Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, 2013). All foster children are eligible for free or reduced lunch in the public school system. All parents, and that would certainly include foster parents, are encouraged to have “healthy snacks” available at all times (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009). So, not only does research indicate that food issues are of significance to foster children, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania also addresses this through
the Department of Human Services. Research has provided insights into the issue of food as it relates to foster children; laws in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania address this. But the more formalized, agency-sponsored foster parent training does not. Thus, the foster parents engaged in informal learning to meet their situation-specific needs regarding the food issue in their home.

Kay conveyed her knowledge of the regulations And, the agency-sponsored training did impart this knowledge to the foster mother who internalized it (she did not have to “look up” this information during our interview) and who lived it (food was not denied, nor were snacks, as evidenced by the wrappers “hidden” under the beds of the foster children). The snacks, in turn, were being consumed (the foster mother notes the “empty” wrappers under the beds). The agency training on food (not denying it to foster children) covered only the legal mandate that foster parents have appropriate food available. Even those gatherings at the park to which the foster mother refers focused on the content (ethnic) of the food, not the context of the meaning of food for the foster children.

The foster mother, as she discussed the food issue with the foster children (the expanding of a horizon?), learned that the foster parents and the foster children did not understand “food” the same way. For the foster children, the scarcity of food in their lives prior to entering foster care seemed to make this an issue of personal significance. For the foster mother, food had been a non-issue. Because of the situatedness of the people in this home, food became an issue, one of potential conflict and possible understanding. In the context of this foster family at this time, the food issue got addressed and a change in behavior occurred. The act of talking together appears to not only produce knowledge, but produce a visible and viable change in behavior. Situations, “co-produce knowledge through activity” and as such “learning and cognition…are fundamentally situated” (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989, p. 32). This interview portion illustrates situatedness. The learning took place in
the situation in which the learning was applied. Language was the medium through which the learning occurred, part of the hermeneutic circle as the meaning of this text (the transcript) was found within the context of the interaction between the members of this household, the relationship between the foster parents and the foster children, and the conversation between the researcher and the foster mother. The foster parents took two concrete actions: one that addressed their concern about the ants and one that addressed the concerns, expressed verbally and behaviorally by the foster children, about the former scarcity of food. While the change in behavior did not happen immediately, taking as long as half a year to cease the hoarding behavior, change did occur. Since learning is mediated through language (Vygotsky, 1978), this conversation was crucial because it yielded an understanding of something that had not been known or understood before. Through this experience of informal learning, the foster parents were able to “transcend their horizon” (Gadamar, 1998, p. 117).

When I initially went to this home to talk with the foster mother about my study and to get the consent forms signed, as we were discussing the interview process and our mutual experiences of foster parenting, she began telling me about Robbie, the second foster child this family had received into their home. Robbie had extreme learning and behavior issues. But the foster parents were not told any of this prior to placement.

Another partial transcript from my interview with Kay illustrated some of the behavioral challenges foster parents of children with special needs face on a daily basis, as well as some of the creative ways that these foster parents devised to address the challenges.

**BW:** So, you have really been frustrated at times with Robbie?

**K:** To say the least. Embarrassed at times, frustrated lots of times.

**BW:** Embarrassed?

**K:** Well, when Robbie was placed with us, they didn’t even know what grade to put him in, so because of his age, they had him in third grade. It’s a small town and this was, maybe, umm… ten years ago or so. No real special ed or anything. I didn’t know if that was right
or not, but it’s what we had and we tried. Robbie got so frustrated with the work because he didn’t read very good and he came from Philly and you know what school is like there. And when Robbie got upset or frustrated, he just got to acting out. He would crawl under his desk and refuse to get up. He would yell at the teacher or the other kids.

BW: Did you talk to the caseworker or the teacher?

K: Of course. One day, Robbie got so bad, he was in the principal’s office yelling and swearing and I was told to come get him because they couldn’t “educate him today.” So I went to the school, and he was still going at it. The principal and I ended up carrying him out of the building, and at one point, the principal – a good Christian man and the nicest soul you’d ever wanna meet - put his hand over Robbie’s mouth, shook his head, and said, “I just can’t have a child talk like that in my school.” I was embarrassed, partly because this was the same man who was principal when my other kids went to elementary school and when I went to that school.

BW: So what did you wind up doing?

K: I just could not get Robbie to stop swearing when he got upset or frustrated. I don’t use that kind of language. My husband doesn’t talk like that…well, too often. I do not allow my other children to use that kind of language, but I couldn’t get Robbie to stop! I tried all the stuff I was “supposed” to do. We tried punishment. We sent him to his room. We took TV away. We tried ignoring it. I think that might’ve raised my blood pressure more than a few points. We tried rewarding him. “If there’s no problem at school this week, we’ll go the arcade at the mall this weekend.” And nothing helped. So, I asked another foster parent, one who had had teenagers in her home, if she had any ideas. We talked and she suggested, “Well, tell him that if he feels he has to use those words to do it with you in private, not in public at a football game or at school. That way he still gets to use the words but it’s better for all of you.”

Well, that didn’t really solve the problem. Him still getting’ to “use the words” WAS the problem and I didn’t get how this would be “better.” I didn’t want him swearing, but you know, “Necessity is the mother of strange bedfellows” (At this point I am stifling laughter because of the mixed metaphor and the unintended meaning of her words.)

So, I just figured it couldn’t hurt to try. So, I talked to my husband and I talked about this idea with Robbie, it really cut down – I mean way down – on his swearing at school (laughing a bit to herself) and in Wal-Mart and the grocery store and the pharmacy and at my mother’s. Maybe he needed to just know he could still use those words. I did tell the caseworker, eventually, and (the caseworker) thought the swear words were an “expression of power” (foster mother makes quotation marks in the air). I guess as long as he could swear at the right time and place, if that makes sense, he didn’t need to do it so much at other times or places. I don’t know.
BW: It sounds like you learned from other foster parents.

K: One of the things we did learn from talking to foster parents was to take the child out of the situation. At home, we could take them to another room and get them calmed down. The other foster parents were really helpful. And they were really calm. I learned to not get so excited about minor things, and they showed me that things can work out without getting all hyper and upset about things. It made me a better parent for my own children too. I didn’t. I was more rigid and wanted things certain ways with my own things, and I saw with foster children you couldn’t be that way. You had to be more flexible about life and about management.

Robbie had an IEP because of his behavioral issues, so he could only be suspended for a maximum of ten days per school year (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). The school did not technically suspend him that day. The school simply could not “educate him” that day. Also the school called the foster mother, recognizing her as the first line of intervention, as opposed to the foster care agency or the foster care caseworker. The school also did not offer any type of intervention for this specific behavioral issue other than to remove the child from the school environment. The comment from the caseworker (the swearing as an “expression” of power) and the actions of the school left the foster parents essentially on their own to figure out something to do. The school could exercise its power by claiming a powerless inability to education Robbie that day but this would not be a long-term solution. And even if the caseworker is correct about swearing as an exercise of power, this still did not address the problematic behavior in a way that would allow this child with special needs to function appropriately in social settings (school, church, public places).

The need is situation-specific and child-specific. For her “other children” the foster mother simply did not tolerate inappropriate language in the house. The choice of the word “other” to refer to the other children in the home also reveals something about Kay’s perception. She does not say “the other foster children” or “the other biological children” so it appears that she does not distinguish or categorize which is which. The foster mother intentionally seeks out ideas from another foster parent to address the immediate need (the swearing).
The foster mother experienced an internal conflict. Through seeking out potential learning from another foster parent, Kay learned how this foster parent deals with inappropriate language in her home. This conflicted with the foster mother’s values and belief system (“Him getting to ‘use the words’ was the problem”). In discussing constructivism Cheetham and Chivers (2001) state that not only is the construction of knowledge “very much an individual process” but that learners “find their own way of making sense in the world” (p. 254). Discourse was the means by which Kay began to resolve this internal conflict. Self-directed learning is, as Schugurensky (2000) suggests, both “intentional and conscious” (p. 3). Herein, Kay was intentional, perhaps even methodical, in addressing her expressed learning need regarding Robbie’s swearing. She was very much conscious both of her internal conflict as well as the results of her behavior change in allowing Robbie to “use the words.” Did this resolve the internal conflict? Kay indicated her uncertainty about the decided upon course of action. Eraunt (2010) notes “each of us is embedded in a continuous flow of experience throughout our lives,” but that “discrete experiences are distinguished from this flow and become meaningful when that are accorded attention and reflected upon” (p. 251). A “discrete experience” such as recounted here by Kay of both Robbie’s swearing and her internal conflict, received ongoing attention. This could conceivably “be given on a number of occasions” (there is no indication in the interview that Robbie’s swearing ceased altogether) and thus the attention given to the learning in this vignette “may be given on a number of occasions, each conferring a different meaning on the experience according to the meaning-context of the moment” (Eraunt, 2010, p. 251). The issue of the swearing remained unresolved, as did the apparent internal conflict within Kay, so this may indeed provide additional opportunities for informal adult learning.

While approximately 10% of the general population has identified special needs, studies indicate that 50% or more of children in foster care have such needs (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea,
2001), and many of those are children with health-related issues. As part of the interview process, I asked Kay about this aspect of caring for children with special needs.

K: Well, the first baby we ever took care of had a nebulizer for breathing treatments. We also had a young man with many special needs, both physical and emotional. So we spent a lot of time at the hospital and with counselors. He was very trying on our nerves at times but we made it through.

BW: Did you get any training from the agency about caring for a child with special needs?

K: Not a lot. No. Because they were not used to having older children. They were used to having babies, and HIV babies. They really hadn’t had any children of this age. The brothers were 6, 7, and 8 when they came. We just tried to do the best we could. A lot of prayers. We got counseling for him.

BW: Did you set that up or did the agency set it up?

K: I did most of the time. I set up those appointments because, like I said, the agency was not used to dealing with these types of children. This particular child was supposed to be a temporary placement. They were supposed to go back to live with the mother who was in a halfway house for alcohol, but she died so the children stayed until they were grown. We were they only parents they knew.

In this particular vignette, two things seem to be apparent about the foster mother: she was the one who provides the greatest degree of care for the foster children in her care, and she took the initiative to get what was needed for a particular child in the particular situation. As noted earlier, human beings are situated in their worlds, constituted by their worlds, engaged in everyday activity; and motivated by their concerns in daily living (Benner, 1994; Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1962). Kay has situated herself in this world as a foster parent. This shapes who she is and how she functions in and relates to the world (as it is constituted) in which she lives as a foster parent. She talked freely about the daily reality of caring for foster children. She was motivated by her concerns in daily living. In these brief portions of my interview with Kay, recounting and reflecting upon her lived experience provided important insights into the learning and living of foster parents. Informal learning has impacted this family and the ways in which they daily live the reality of foster parenting.
Sandy

On a sunny later winter day, I arrived at Sandy’s home early in the afternoon to begin the interview process. At my first visit to the home, I talked with her about my research. I reviewed all sections of the Informed Consent Form with her and asked if she had any questions. So, to begin the conversation this day, I asked if she had any questions for me before we started the interview. She said that she did not, and that she had talked with another foster parent (a personal friend of hers) who also volunteered to be interviewed if I needed another participant. I thanked her, reminded her that her responses would be kept confidential, and then the interview began.

Sandy was not a foster parent with a county agency, but with a private agency, so I asked her about this choice and about the process of becoming a foster parent for this agency.

S: We already had adopted our five children, but I heard about this agency and that they worked primarily with children who were HIV+ and who were medically-fragile.

BW: Medically fragile?

S: Children whose health needs were pretty involved. When I called the agency and talked to the supervisor, he told me that the idea was for these children to have foster homes so that they wouldn’t have to spend so much time in a hospital, or in some cases their whole lives in a hospital. Some of these kids were very sick and might never get out of CHOP (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia). Since I’m an LPN, I was doing private duty nursing work at the time, but sometimes that meant I would work twelve hour shifts in a person’s home, or be working all night. (My husband) was driving truck and wasn’t always home nights. We needed the two incomes. I needed to be home more. This sounded perfect. I got the home study done. My training hours were already taken care of because of my nursing. We did clearances and were all set.

BW: Your training hours “were already taken care of”?

S: I have First Aid. I had CPR. I would get the training I needed for whatever the medical need was for the child I’d be getting.

BW: So, you did not need the six hours of state-mandated training?

S: Well, my husband and I went to the agency orientation, and got the typical information about placement and agency policies and that the caseworker would be visiting every week or so, and so on. But the real training would be at the hospital.
The choice of adjective “real” to describe the training Sandy received at the hospital indicated her perception of that training’s value. While she did not, in word or visage, disparage the agency-mandated training (the “typical information”), she did not regard this training to be as significant as what a particular hospital provided her about caring for a particular child.

Lave and Wender (1991) notes the central place of the learner in situated learning. Agency training on orientation and agency policies, makes the agency the center of the instructional process. (A training on “agency policies” is, after all, about the agency.) The foster parent is, at best, a minor player in the placement process. The placing agency contracts with the provider agency. It is agency workers who complete all paperwork, who transport the child to the foster home, who supervise the actual foster care placement, and who appear and testify in court as needed. Perhaps the fact that Sandy did not have an active role in the agency-sponsored training led to the assertion that “the real training would be at the hospital.”

Shor (1987) also notes the central place of the learner in the situated learning process, which consists of content, context, community, and participation. To gain further clarification, I asked Sally to describe a “real training” at a hospital.

S: Danny was, I guess, about 14 months old. He was at CHOP. He had a lot of health issues and was not going to live probably to be school age. He ate nothing by mouth, but received nutrition through a “J” tube. (This stands for “Jejunostomy tube,” which is inserted through the abdominal wall into the small intestine. This tube is used for children who are unable to take in sufficient food or liquid by traditional oral means.) When (the caseworker from the foster care agency) contacted me about Danny, I called CHOP to talk to the ped <pediatric> nurses. We arranged for me to go there for two days of training. I basically lived there, which got me time to get to know Danny and his nurses. They showed me how to care for the tube, how to clean the abdominal area, how to feed him through the tube, how to change the tube.

BW: You basically lived there?

S I stayed at the hospital for those two days, slept on the chair in the room, so I could learn what I needed to do for Danny. They could show me what they needed to. They showed
me. Then I worked with (my emphasis) the nurses. Then I did the procedure myself with them monitoring me. Then the caseworker picked me up and took us home. Well, eventually (laughing to herself) we got home, after the caseworker got us lost in Philadelphia so we were trying to leave at rush hour. Didn’t matter, though. I had Danny, so it was all good.

Lave and Wagner (1991) argue for the integral place of the particular community, tools, and activity of the situation as the means for the understanding which emerges that helps the person to participate in that situation. Sandy travelled to the hospital with the specific goal of learning how to properly care for Danny’s specific medical needs. During this time at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, she became part of the community of caregivers for Danny. In this case the “tools” were quite literally the medical devices. The “activity” was Danny’s care and feeding. Prior to Danny being permitted to leave the hospital with Sally, she had to demonstrate the context-specific (feeding Danny) and the situation-specific (changing the tube and cleansing the tube area). Individuals learn “as they participate with the community” (Fenwick, 2007, p. 253). “Knowing” and “doing” were not separate entities. Indeed, the learning took place, the knowledge emerged, through the intertwining of the community, the tools, and the activity.

According to Pile and Thrift (1995), understanding flows through conduct and is adaptable and future oriented. “Learning” and “doing” are intertwined, with present learning affecting both current and future action(s). There was progression in Sandy’s demonstration of the learning. She was first shown what to do. She then worked cooperatively with other members of the community to care for Danny’s feeding needs. She then completed the process herself under the supervision of the attending nurses. The idea of adaptability came into play here because the expectation was that Sandy would be able to perform this process, not just in the hospital setting, but also in the foster home setting.

Unstated, by underlying this two-day learning/training event, was the future-oriented nature of this demonstrated learning. At what point did Sandy leave CHOP with Danny? After she demonstrated that
she was able to do what she had been taught by the nurses to do, so that she could continue to do this for Danny when the two arrived “home.” Sandy learned in the experience. Fenwick (2000) notes “each different context evokes different knowings through very different demands of participation” (p. 254). The intensity of Danny’s needs necessitated a deeper level of “participation” than, for example, learning CPR by practicing on a mannequin. The situation demanded the type of learning in which Sandy engaged, and engaged successfully as evidenced by being allowed to take Danny “home.” Sandy learned in the “immediate situation” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 253) to care for the physical needs of Danny. Within the social context of the hospital environment and through interaction with the nursing staff, Sandy also had the opportunity for “the extraction of potentially relevant knowledge from the context(s) of its acquisition and previous use (Eraut, 2010, p. 256).

Situated learning places the learner in the center of an instructional process consisting of content-the facts and processes of the task; context--the situations, values, beliefs, and environmental cues by which the learner gains and masters content; community--the group with which the learner will create and negotiate meaning from the situation; and participation--the process by which learners working together and with experts in a social organization solve problems related to everyday life circumstances (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Lave 1988; Shor 1987).

BW: You earlier used several adjectives to describe your foster parenting experience (“rewarding,” “exhausting,” “frustrating,” and “interesting”) What frustrates you about foster parenting?

S: (laughing) Hmm, what doesn’t frustrate me? (After a pause). The five children that we adopted from foster care are my kids. I do the things that need doing for them but it just isn’t what happens with foster care. <The agency> is there, and they help with some of the work sometimes. (Pause) They just make it a challenge to get what the kids needs at times, and I don’t understand it. They’re kids…

BW: Tell me about one of these challenges.

S: The Early Intervention worker wanted James <the three-year-old foster son> to be evaluated by an occupational therapist at Geisinger because he wouldn’t hold his pencil the way she thought he was supposed to. I think it was the fork or spoon too. I didn’t see
the problem. I was teaching James to write his letters and his numbers. And he didn’t have any trouble eating. So, what’s the problem? (She pauses, looks at me, and I just nod.) But, whatever is, just is, so I went along with it. (The early intervention) worker left the permission form to get signed so the appointment could be made to get the evaluation done. I gave the form to the caseworker to get ‘mom’ (meaning the biological mother) to sign it. Nothing happened. (The early intervention worker) asked about the form when she came back, I guess the next week, and she wasn’t too happy that I didn’t have it and I asked my (agency) caseworker again. (At this point she sighs and just shakes her head.)

BW: (After a pause) What did you do then?
S: (She smiles, first to herself and then makes eye contact with me) I told (another agency foster parent) and she said, “Why didn’t you call Geisinger yourself?” (Pause.)

BW: And?
S: I called Geisinger, made the appointment, and then ‘reminded’ my <agency> caseworker about the appointment and that I needed the signed form to take with me.

BW: Did the caseworker ask you why you had made the appointment?
S: (Grinning and staring at me.) You’re funny. I didn’t tell the caseworker I made the appointment. She didn’t ask. I just let her (the caseworker) think she had made it and I was just reminding her about the paperwork. I just did what got James what they thought he needed. You know? It needed done.

BW: It “needed done”?
S: (slightly agitated, almost as if she wants to justify her actions) I did for James what I would have done for one of my own kids. While he was in my home, he was my child and that’s the way I talked about him and that’s the way we all treated him. He got what he needed. No harm done. I took care of James.

BW: While we are talking about this incident, and you reflect on it now, what’s going through your mind?
S: I got James what he needed. I didn’t lie. I didn’t tell<the caseworker> everything. I don’t think she would have cared that I made the appointment, but as long as James got the appointment, what else mattered?

Human beings are “situated within meaningful activities, relationships, commitments, and involvements” (Chesla, 1995, p. 66). How did this situated learning take place here? The “meaningful activity” was caring for the needs of the child. The relationships involved the foster mother, who was taking care of James; the agency caseworker, who supervised the placement; the early intervention
worker, who was concerned with the developmental delays of James; and the biological mother, who had the legal authority to sign, or not sign, the permission form. In this situation, each participant had a particular commitment based on that person’s role in the situation. By taking James into her home, the foster mother committed to taking care of his day-to-day needs. The caseworker for James committed to monitoring and supervising the placement by handling agency-related matters (i.e. the vast amount of paperwork). The early intervention worker was committed to evaluating James for developmental milestones and suggesting intervention when those milestones were not met. The biological mother, the only individual of these four with the legal standing to sign any medical or treatment forms, demonstrated a commitment (one could argue the nature of that commitment) by, indeed, signing the form. It was this situatedness that led these four individuals to all being involved in the seemingly simple task of securing an evaluation for James.

It was when there was a breakdown in this process that the intentionality of informal learning came into play. Sandy followed the established “chain of command” within the foster care agency, as she was instructed to do in the agency-sponsored, state-mandated training she had received from the co-founder of the agency as part of the foster care certification process. When this did not result in the desired result, this foster mother took proactive steps to get James the appointment he needed. She did not badger the agency caseworker with phone calls or voice mail messages. Instead, she intentionally sought out a learning opportunity from another agency foster parent. With intentionality and clearly self-directed (Marsick & Watkins, 2001), she pursued this informal learning with a specific goal in mind to benefit James. The knowledge gained from the interaction with the other foster parent was intentional and goal-oriented, though not formalized, but instead from that foster parent’s own lived experience of being a foster parent who wanted the appropriate services for her foster child. What could have been a potentially frustrating roadblock without the necessary occupational services (“Nothing happened.”) became an opportunity for this foster parent to intentionally and situationally engage in informal learning by seeking out another foster parent (Eraut, 2010) and by taking action on what was learned (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). Heidegger emphasizes the significance of engaged practical activity as a fundamental way that human beings
live in this world (Chesla, 1995). Informal learning has played a significant role in the lived experience of this foster parent.

**Lori and Dan**

According to the calendar it was early spring. The thermometer told a different story as I drove to the home of Lori and Dan on a very cold March evening to begin the interview process. Lori welcomed me back to their home. During the initial visit, we talked for perhaps half an hour. I met four of the five children residing in the home. We talked about the purpose of my study and I reviewed each section of the signed consent form. Lori and Dan each signed two copies of the form. They kept one and I kept the other. We made plans for conducting the actual interview.

This night, we sat around a large kitchen table, one that could easily seat ten people for a family meal together. Wood was burning to heat the home and there was very much a comfortable feel as we began talking together, the three of us at the table, the children playing in one of the bedrooms behind a closed door. Neither Dan nor Lori had any questions to ask from the initial visit or about the research study. I assured them that their confidentiality would be protected and that they could ask questions as well during the interview. So we began.

I asked why they decided to become foster parents. The answers I received were far different from any of the other interviews incorporated in this research study.

**D:** I was a foster parent before we were married. In fact, I had foster children when we met And got married. What started me out? When I went to college, I went to Allentown and south Philly and I seen the ways kids were raised and I thought I could help them. And I just always liked kids. When I became a foster parent I was only 23.

**BW:** So that was very young, then…

**D:** Yeah. I have just always loved kids. I thought if I was a little younger it would be easier. Because they looked at me more as a friend and not a father figure. So I had it a little bit easier. They respected me more. I was a foster parent for four years in York County and
six years here, but all with the same agency. (This meant that this family worked with a private agency and not a county-based agency).

BW: Tell me about your experience becoming foster parents.

D: It was harder for me than a lot of people because I had a background. I had been arrested a couple of times for when I was younger, an incident when I was 19 or 20, so I had to go through a lot of interviews and counseling and training and stuff like that. When I first got the background checks, they didn’t have any concerns. I talked to other foster parents. When I was growing up, I had a friend who was a foster child, and I went back and talked to his parents and they got me rolling into it. It was a lot of interviews. You know how I was not. How I felt about what I did. What I learned from it. Stuff like that. A psychological evaluation. I mean they were real thorough. I’ll give ‘em that. They were taking a chance on me. It took me a year to get certified. I was going to do it no matter what.

All of the other participants in the study were married when they became foster parents and all had had children of their own prior to becoming foster parents. No other participant self-disclosed legal issues, so this combination of factors made Dan’s entry into foster parenting unique among the participants.

People decide to become foster parents for a variety of reasons. MacGregor et al. (2006) states, “foster parents can be motivated by a combination of both internal and external processes” (p. 353). In this initial portion of the interview, Dan’s motivations seemed to be more intrinsic (“I have always loved kids.”). Barth (2001) notes that fostering out of a love for children is a strong intrinsic motivator for some individuals. He intentionally chose to become a single foster parent and a foster parent at the age of twenty-three.

Having some degree of familiarity with the foster care system while growing up can also be a contributing factor in a person’s decision to become a foster parent when that individual becomes an adult because that individual experienced a degree of closeness in identifying with other foster children (Baum, Crase, and Crase, 2001). Dan also demonstrated perseverance in becoming certified to be a foster parent (“It took me a year to get certified.”) Intrinsic motivation has been defined as
“tasks that are performed … due to the forces that are inherent in the person, such as values,”

(MacGregor et al., 2006, p. 352). Dan performed the requisite “tasks” of the foster care agency. The “forces” that were “inherent” appear to be love and determination.

I wanted to explore the idea of “being friends” to a greater depth because that seemed so anathema to the foster care role. After all, the official designation is “foster parent,” not “foster friend.” So I asked Dan to talk about his experiences (“Because they looked at me more as a friend and not a father figure.”).

Dan: I would sit them down and talk. When they would bring a kid for the first visit to meet, I would just sit the kid down and be straight and say, “I’m not your dad. I’m not your parent. I want you to look at me as a friend. I want you to look at me as a role model. I want to help you through life. Period.

BW: What was the response?

Dan: I would say there are rules in the house. If you don’t like these rules, we can talk about them. If we need to, we can tweak them. The biggest thing was always curfews. I had them check in every hour. I mean, they could never stay overnight at a friend’s house (Pennsylvania regulations state that foster children are only allowed to spend the night in a home that has been approved by the foster care agency, with adults who have been approved by the foster care agency). We would work around that. I would let their friends come here. Even my own family. They couldn’t stay at my brother’s [house] and that would cause problems. But we found ways to work around that. If they wanted to go do something, I went and did it with them. Just stuff like that, and that helped them adjust to the rules and to being foster children.

BW: How did you learn all this? How did you know to do that?

Dan: It’s just life experiences. It’s how I would want to be treated. I did not have a good life. My dad (and he starts to whisper here) was really abusive. And I raise the foster kids the way I wanted to be raised. That’s the way I look at it. That’s why I said that when they go to look at foster parents and they have someone who has never had a problem in their life and someone who has had problems in life, I would pick the ones who had problems over the others because they know where the kids are coming from. It’s overwhelming.

In this segment of the transcript, Dan added another dimension to the factors that influenced his decision to become a foster parent. Anderson (2001) noted the significance of family dynamics as
a factor in deciding to foster parent. Dan juxtaposed his own hushed acknowledgement of abuse with the affirmation that life for his foster children would be different from his own upbringing. The use of the past tense (“wanted” to be raised) is significant because it indicated the gap between Dan’s desired experience and his lived experience of while growing up. Buehler, Cox, and Cuddeback (2003) acknowledge that altruistic motivators for becoming a foster parent do include wanting to help children and wanting to provide a stable environment for children. Wolfe and Haddy (2001) assert “[foster] parents need to distinguish between the demands of the present situation and old feelings, anxieties, fears, and limitations that come out of their own childhood experiences” (p. 79).

While Dan credited “just life experiences” as how he learned foster parenting skills, the fact that his very next sentence was the conditional “It’s how I would want [emphasis added] to be treated” indicated an awareness of the limitations of his own family of origin, as well as an understanding of his power to do something different for his foster children. He did not say “I would raise,” but rather the present tense “I raise the foster kids the way I wanted to be raised.” The verb tense indicated present action(s) differing from those he experienced in his own childhood. As Chesla (1995) states, “Concerns show up most forcefully in the actions taken by an individual or family in a particular situation” (p. 75).

According to Fenwick (2000), knowledge is “part of the very process of participation in the immediate situation” (p. 253). As far as curfews, staying overnight at friends’ houses, wanting to “go and do something,” these scenarios are part of the daily lived experience of foster parents who care for older children in their homes. It is Heidegger who affirms “the basic way that humans live in the world is in engaged practical activity” (as quoted in Chesla, 1995, p. 71). Lori and Dan acted in ways that honored the constrictions and restrictions of the foster care system through an active participation in the immediate situation in their home. Twice, Dan acknowledged finding ways to “work around
that” while also helping the foster children “adjust to the rules” and to “being foster children.”

Knowledge is “interminably inventive” and “entwined with doing” (Lave, 1998), and part of what Lori and Dan did as foster parents of teenagers, whether this immediate situation involved curfews, friends, or other activities.

As open as Dan was in telling me about his reasons for becoming a foster parent and his challenges in becoming certified, and as anxious as both Lori and Dan were to relate their experiences caring for the foster children in their home, I also wanted to know about the type(s) of state-mandated, agency-sponsored training provided as part of the certification process.

**BW:** What types of training did you have?

**D:** Whatever the state required is what we got. They the foster care agency basically gave us sheets of paper to read and pamphlets about agency policies. A caseworker would come to the house, say “Read this” and then we would sign off that we read it. Most of it was read training. Here, every so often we would do, like, parent meetings. And everyone would go there and you would discuss problems you were having. There would be food there. Usually this would be twice a year. This was just for the foster parents. And then they would have picnics and stuff like that at Knoebel’s (an amusement park located in Montour County) for families.

**L:** A lot of it was how to deal with different situations, situational stuff, like discipline. How to deal with them. A lot of the training was future. How to get them started on goals and reaching goals and stuff like that. A lot of stuff with goals. How to get kids started on that.

**BW:** How did these trainings prepare you?

**L:** Honestly, it didn’t. I mean even if you’re here training me, telling me what to do, every situation is different. Every child is different. And you gotta treat each kid differently. Just because it worked with “Billy” one way doesn’t mean Bobby’s gonna take it the same way. And I had to look at every individual kid I had as a different person. Discipline wise. What I tried to teach them.

According to Lee and Holland (1991), “Training for foster parents has been identified as a crucial factor in the success of foster care” (p. 163). For an agency that took one year to certify Dan as a foster parent, to provide “read training” was an inadequate means to address the complexity of his lived experience of foster parenting. Foster parents that are well prepared are better able to
provide greater stability in placements, improved parenting skills, reduced incidents of problem behavior in foster children and better relationships between the foster parents and the foster care agency (Runyan & Fullerton, 1981). Providing only two opportunities for foster parents to converse with one another also seemed to be insufficient amount of time to spend informally with others who might be experiencing similar situations in their own homes and families. Baum, Crase, and Crase (2001) in a study of 183 foster parents, participants “discussed the importance of talking with others in the group, especially those with experience in the foster care system (p. 207).

Lori does not hesitate in her response about the effectiveness of the agency-sponsored trainings. She evens appeared to indicate how difficult it would be to provide meaningful training opportunities. If, situations are situation-specific, then more than “right” and “wrong” was at stake here. The pamphlets that provided information on the foster care agency policies and procedures, agency-established, agency-defined, agency-published information, the defined steps to follow, were not definitive. They could not be. Knowledge is not judged “by what is true or false or what is erroneous, but by what is relevant in this particular situation” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 254). Informal learning, as Coombs (1985) affirms, arises in response to situations that emerge in daily life. Livingstone (1999) notes that the conditions of informal learning are determined by the individuals who choose to engage in it. With relevancy being situation-specific, I queried

Lori and Dan about any specific training for a specific child.

BW: What about for the specific children you were getting? How often did the agency really prepare you for the child you were getting?

D: None. I think a lot of it is they just give you the general of what they know. A lot of the stuff that I found out I would find out because of the relationships that I formed with the kids. The kids would confide in me a lot. And we would have an open discussion with them. It could be school or drugs or their parents. I would try to comprehend why they were in foster care and try to get them to comprehend. It’s not my fault. We’re all trying to do the best we can for you. Caseworkers had laws. Children and Youth have laws. They got these procedures that have to follow. But when it comes down to it, you are in foster
care for one of two reasons: either yourself, because you are out there getting into trouble all the time or because of your parents. Foster parents did not put you in foster care. Caseworkers did not put you in foster care. Until you accept the reason you are in foster care, you’ll never change it. And that’s the way I would present. And then we would start talking about stuff.

Marsick and Volpe (1999) assert that informal learning incorporates these characteristics of being integrated with the regular routine, being triggered by some internal or external jolt, not always being highly conscious but often haphazard, and being an inductive process that is often linked to the learning of others.

The lived experience of foster parenting is a daily experience. Being taken from the home of one’s biological family and placed into the home of strangers (the foster home) would qualify as an “external jolt.” Dan seemed to be intentionally endeavoring to provide an “internal jolt” to the foster child newly placed in his home. In this instance, Dan seemed “highly conscious,” purposeful in his intent, perhaps through “reflection” as he took action. This changed the relationship between foster parent and foster children as Dan indicated in the progression of the conversation.

BW: Tell me about your experiences of building relationships with your foster children.

L: We have had 75 kids and we have pictures of all of them. How many stories would you like? <She pauses, smiles at me, waits. I smile back, and I wait.> Two of the girls we had were sisters. Kyla was 16 and Shawna was 12. Their mom was in jail for murdering their dad. They were Mennonites. They were real sheltered. They had a hard time fitting in. I think I had them for about 8 months. But about 4 or 5 months into it, the older one and I got really close, I got her to get her first haircut. I got her to start wearing makeup. Changing her clothes and dressing more like the other girls. I got her to open up more and be more willing to talk to others.

And one night, she just started crying. I said, “Kyla, what’s wrong.”

She said, “I gotta tell you something. Mom didn’t kill my dad.” Their dad was abusive sexually to the girls and physically to the mom.

I said, “What?”

She said, “I did. I’m the one that shot him. Mom just said she did.”
And I was thinking, “Oh, my God. I wish you’d never told me this because what do you do?” <long pause> “What do you do?”

“Kyla, you’re gonna have to tell somebody, not just me.”

She said, “I know.” Cuz the mom got something like 15 years. The mom took the blame and nobody knew but her mom and her and her sister, and now me.

And I was like, “What do I do?” And I fought with it. And I didn’t tell nobody for, like, a week. I ended up. She had an aunt that lived in Florida. I told her. <The girls had her phone number and they would call once in a while. They were originally from Florida.> The aunt said, “So what are you gonna do about it?”

I don’t know. I don’t know whether to tell. I mean, she’s such a good girl. She’s so sweet. I hate to see her go to jail. I ended up calling the caseworker and told her what she told me. I had to because the law… <long pause>… And right away, they ended up taking them. It was a week afterwards they took them both to shelter. They wanted to investigate it. They were both from the State College area and they put them back in that area. And then, I know for a fact, that the younger one ended up going to Florida to live with the aunt. I don’t know what happened to the older one. I knew they went to court but that was it. I never found out.

BW: Is that why you didn’t want to tell the agency?

L: Yes. (Then looking at her husband) We knew what would happen. Foster care agencies really need to support your foster parents. More one-on-one time for the worker to come out and talk to foster parents. At work, we have a phone chain if we need to get in touch with each other or pass information along. Why couldn’t we have a phone chain of foster parents? Just someone to talk to about some of this.

Research indicates that a crucial external support for foster parents is adequate training. Foster parents today are assuming greater responsibility for arranging services for their children, as well as needing to know counselling and behavioral techniques to care for challenging foster children (Orme and Buehler, 2001). Rhodes, Orme, and Buehler (2001) found that foster parents’ satisfaction and intent to continue fostering were correlated to their perceptions about the effectiveness of training, which can help them feel more prepared and supported in dealing with difficult children.

Lori and Dan were upfront about their belief that the agency-sponsored trainings did not prepare them for the realities of foster parenting. In this particular situation, by virtue of being in
the situation of foster parenting these girls, Lori became the first person to be trusted with the information about the violence. Lori had, intentionally, established a good relationship with Kyla, so much so that Kyla entrusted her with information that could potentially disrupt her life again. At that moment, Lori was confronted with both an internal and external jolt (Marsick and Volpe, 1999). The external jolt was the revelation from Kyla. The internal jolt was having to decide what to do with this information. Pennsylvania’s Child Protective Services Law (CPSL) identifies foster parents as mandated reporters in Pennsylvania (The Pennsylvania Code, 1999). Foster parents are made aware of this as part of the certification process. From a strictly legal standpoint, the question “What do I do?” is moot. The law is clear. Yet, something more, something deeper, was happening here. There was an internal conflict over the mandatory reporting of the information shared by Kyla and the inherent fear of what this revelation would mean. By not making the mandated report, Lori risked losing certification as a foster parent and possible criminal prosecution (The Pennsylvania Code, 1999). By making the mandated report, Lori risked having the girls removed from her care. Informal learning can be viewed as “an iterative process of action and reflection” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p.7). These concepts of action and reflection were present throughout this anecdote as Lori recounts this incident.

Lori did not initially confide in the caseworker but rather a biological relative of the foster children (the aunt), someone whom she had never met face-to-face. The response of the aunt (“So what are you gonna do about it?”) proved to be of no help in resolving the internal conflict. Her concern was two-fold: a stated concern (“She’s such a sweet girl. I hate to see her go to jail.”) and an unstated concern (“We knew what would happen.”). Reflection involves “looking back on what we have done, measuring it against what we wanted to achieve, and assessing the consequences ((Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p.7). As part of the informal learning process (these events unfolded over
several days) reflection played a significant role, even to the point of Lori expressing what she
“knew” would happen because of the conscious actions taken. This fear is often part of the daily lived
experience of foster parents. The shift in pronoun from the singular first person (“I hate to see …”) to
the plural first person pronoun (“We knew what…”) reflects the shared nature of this fear.
Ultimately, Lori and Dan decided to do what they were legally mandated to do (“I had to because of
the law…”).

The result was exactly what Lori and Dan feared. Lori and Dan lived Heidegger’s “three- fold
forestructure” in this single incident. They had a familiarity with the background practices, in this
case that foster parents are mandated reporters, which is “fore-having”; they made an interpretation
based on their point of view, in this case not saying anything and then calling the aunt and then
finally informing the caseworker, which is “fore-sight”; and they had an expectation of what might be
an anticipated outcome, in this case that the foster children would be removed from their home, which
is “fore-conception” (Benner, 1994). Indeed, as Gadamer (2004) would assert, their preunderstanding
made understanding (the implications of informing the foster care agency and of not informing the
foster care agency) possible.

Not only did Lori and Dan have Kyla taken from them and from their home, but her sister,
who had nothing to do with the shooting, was also removed as well. The removal of the two girls is
as stark a contrast between foster parenting and traditional (biological) parenting as there can be
because such a situation, biological parents would neither encounter nor have to endure. The foster
parents were powerless to do anything about it. Once a foster child leaves a foster home, the foster
family has no legal recourse and is not entitled to any information about their (former) foster
children.
Lori moved directly from the fallout of informing the caseworker that Kyla did the shooting, to what she believes foster parents need (“Foster care agencies really need to support your foster parents. More one-on-one time for the worker to come out and talk to foster parents.”). If, as Ricoeur asserts, “Man [sic] is language” (1981, p. 23) and if, as Gadamer asserts, “Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs” (1960, p. 389), there is potentially much to be gained, much adult learning that could occur, in this type of conversation. But in this case, that did not occur. Lori engaged the caseworker in conversation by sharing the information Kyla had told her, but that seemed to be the end of the conversation. The next contact with the caseworker was the removal of both girls. There was no phone call in advance. No warning. No including the foster parents in the planning. Lori and Dan wanted conversation with the caseworker. She even offered a modest proposal for increasing opportunities for interaction Coombs (1985) defined informal learning as impromptu and unorganized in response to situations that emerge in daily life. Something as simple as Lori’s proposed phone chain could have provided such an opportunity for learning that would, indeed, be in response to daily life situations.

Testa, Miller, Downs, and Panek (1992) conducted a study that showed women who received support following abuse disclosure experienced fewer psychiatric symptoms than those who did not receive support following disclosure. Lori and Dan didn’t know if Kyla ever got that support. Grigsby (1994) sugested that social support could act as a mediator. Perhaps that’s why Lori confided in the aunt before informing the caseworker. The placement was torn asunder by an acknowledgement of a truth about the shooting and the requirements of the situation to inform the caseworker. Each different context “evokes different knowings through very different demands of participation” (Fenwick, 2007, p. 254). The “what to do next” (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993) of foster parenting is a conundrum that impacted both sisters and both foster parents.
I asked Dan and Lori if they had any other ideas for foster parents cooperatively working with one another in the daily rigors and routines of caring for foster children.

D: I always volunteered. To be a mentor. They (the foster care agency) never took me up on it. Never. You know why? Because I don’t have a degree. They worry about liability. To set up a hotline, they didn’t want that. They were afraid I was gonna step on their toes. But someone with a degree…was better than me. Didn’t you know that? We never had a caseworker who was a foster parent. We only had one who was a parent. She was divorced and got her kid every other weekend. How often does a mom do that?

Schugurensky (2000) notes that informal learning can be additive as well as transformative. It is certainly reasonable to posit that an experienced foster parent would and could add to the knowledge of a novice foster parent. It is equally reasonable to suggest that foster parents of varying levels of experience could enhance the understanding of practices and approaches to situations encountered by foster parents with their foster children. After all, situations “co-produce knowledge through activity” (Chesla, 1995, p. 66). Lori and Dan chose not to quit being foster parents after the girls were removed from their care, but continue on.

I inquired about the children with special needs who have resided with them.

BW: You have cared for a number of children with special needs. Tell me about your experiences working with the public school system and with IEPs for these children.

L: Sit in [at IEP meetings]. Voice opinions. But most of the time I was overruled. If they wanted to send them to Bethesda (an alternative placement for children with behavioral issues), I was like, “No. Teach them here. Learn to deal with these kids. If you can’t, you shouldn’t be teaching. That was my philosophy. If I’m dealing with them at home – I’m no expert. I didn’t go to school for teaching. You are! It was just easier for them to push them on. Bethesda is a joke. [At this point, the response became a rant about this particular alternative placement agency, so I tried to refocus on the special needs of the foster children this family has cared for.]

D: Most of the time the biggest problems I had were with the schools, not following the IEPs. They would find ways around them. Um, I have a [foster] son with an IEP who is graduating this year. We had a hand-drafted IEP for him.

My foster son has an impulse control disorder, so I wrote in that he would have a TSS worker with him at all times at school because if him and his friends were walking along
and one of them said ‘Pull that fire hydrant’ Brian would pull it. Punch that kid in the face. He would act in the blink of an eye.

Well, Warrior Run said, “We don’t do that. We don’t do TSS workers.” I was like, “What do you mean you don’t do it?” And I allowed them to talk me out of it. They said, “We have so and so and so and so and so and so.” We have these one-on-one classroom aides. But that was in the classroom. When he went outside the classroom he got into trouble. And they started suspending him and suspending him and suspending him. I had one teacher threaten to kill him. The teacher got a warning. <My foster son> got ten days out of school. Until I finally told them I would sue them for not following the IEP, they finally did something. Then they tried to tell me I couldn’t change the IEP if I felt necessary and I said, “Bullshit” I can’t. That is one thing I learned from being a foster parent and from her working with students with special needs. It’s hard to get an initial IEP and that’s bull crap. It’s hard to get them to want to do the testing. It’s hard to get them to do the initial IEP. Schools don’t want nobody with IEPs. And when they do get them, they don’t get enough funding for them.

It’s a nightmare with the schools.

Out of all of the interviews I conducted for my research, this vignette was the strongest reaction about foster children with IEPs. Every foster parent I interviewed has cared for or has cared for children with special needs. By federal and state law, foster parents are entitled to participate in the decision-making process for a child with special needs, including participating in the IEP meeting and signing the IEP (Education Law Center, 2006). The specific timelines for requesting and securing special education services are also established by law: a school district has sixty calendar days from the date a child’s parent signs a Permission to Evaluation Consent Form to evaluate the child and issue an Evaluation Report; if the child is deemed eligible for special education services, the team must meet to develop the child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) within thirty calendar days; the parent must have the Evaluation Report at least ten days before the IEP meeting (parents can waive this right); the school district must implement the provisions of the IEP no later than ten school days after the completion of the IEP; and the IEP must be in effect at the beginning of each school year (The Pennsylvania Code, Chapter 14, 2001). This requirement is clearly spelled out in the laws governing special education services in Pennsylvania.
The public school entity has the legal obligation to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to every student enrolled in that district. Students with special needs must be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). These requirements are clearly spelled out in the Chapter 14 regulations of the Pennsylvania Code. The school district in question, from the foster father’s perspective, disregards these legal mandates. A Therapeutic Support Staff (TSS) provides one-on-one attention to severely emotionally disturbed children or adolescents in accordance with a behavioral treatment plan, with the goal of reducing inappropriate behavior, increasing socially responsible behavior, and providing emotional support to the child (Kossor, 2010). If such support would help a student with special needs to be educated in the regular educational setting (the legally-mandated least restrictive environment), then the school district has no legal grounds to deny this service to the student in question. The school district’s response to this particular foster child potentially violated this student’s rights to be educated in the least restrictive environment.

Learning is in evidence as the foster parent navigated this conflict with the school. The response was two-fold: an active role in the IEP process by including service(s) the foster parent believed necessary and a threat of legal repercussions for failing to comply with the IEP Fenwick (2000) notes that “the process of knowing… is essentially realized through action” (p. 254). Each response was initiated by the foster parent, not the caseworker or the foster care agency. This foster parent had the legal right to seek to incorporate what he believed his foster son needed, and while there is a process for dispute resolution detailed in Chapter 14 of the Pennsylvania Code (2001), a lawsuit is a viable way of resolving such a conflict if the parties involved cannot agree on a course of action.

Dan understood his legal rights as well as the legal responsibilities of the public school. As indicated by his response to being told the IEP could not be changed. Dan understood this because
the law allows the parent, foster parent, guardian to request the IEP team to consider changes to the IEP when the parent feels such a change is warranted (The Pennsylvania Code, Chapter 14, 2001).

His response to this learning is two-fold: foster parent training and foster parent lived experience. If, as Fenwick (2000) notes, “learning is rooted in the situation in which a person participates (p. 253), then the situation (caring for a foster son with special needs) has brought about the participation. Informal learning can be both additive (‘the addition of knowledge’) and transformative (‘radically change our existing prior knowledge and approaches’) (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 6). Dan actively participated in developing and revising the IEP for the foster son based on the learning he gained from the foster parent training process (‘the addition of knowledge’), and Trina was an instructional aide working with students with special needs in the public school system, including participation in IEP meetings (‘the addition of knowledge’). Since knowing and learning are defined as engaging in changing processes of human activity in a particular community” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 253), the “approach” of the foster parents for this particular foster son in this particular situation did “radically change.” The foster son got the TSS worker and was preparing to graduate from high school. For Dan and Lori, this learning “is not cognitive but is lived” (Chesla, 1995, p. 66), part of the lived experience of caring for a foster child with special needs.

One of the reasons for interviewing foster parents with five or more years of experience foster parenting was to ascertain what they might have to teach, what novice foster parents could learn from them. Here is part of Dan’s response.

D: I wouldn’t recommend people with little ones to become foster parents because they are coming in with unknowns. At least half my kids were sexually abused and we almost never knew that at the time.

You get them in and say, a month later, you find out they were. What do you do? Do you turn your back on them? Keep an eye on them and watch them? I can’t honestly tell you none of my kids were every sexually abused by one of them.
It was a little red-head kid. He was caught molesting other kids. The caseworker told me, “We need somewhere short-term for him. Til we find somewhere else to send him.”

Well, it’s probably about two weeks before Thanksgiving, and they tell me, I can’t take him nowhere because he is too much of a liability. I take him nowhere. I couldn’t take him to my parents for Thanksgiving or Christmas. I couldn’t take him anywhere around little kids. But it wasn’t just other kids. I caught him masturbating my dogs. I caught him having anal sex with my dogs. I walked into the bedroom and never seen anything like that. Turned around and walked back out. Obviously, I told the caseworker what I seen.

The caseworker goes, “What did you say?”

I didn’t know what the hell to say. What did you want me to say? “Stop screwing my dog?” I didn’t know what to say. What did you want me to say? I turned around, walked out of the room for a while, and I recomposed myself and went back in and he realized I had caught him, and he was sitting on the bed. He was 11 or 12. Stuff like that. I mean, they got him counseling, but… (he shakes his head and just stares down at the kitchen table). They [the foster care agency] need to let us know what they know.

Foster children are prone to act out sexually. Approximately 1 in every 4 girls and 1 in every 6 boys are sexually abused before age 18; nearly 70% of all reported sexual assaults occur to children ages 17 and under; an estimated 39 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse exist in America to this day (Hopper, 1998). Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013) advocates, “One of the most useful actions that foster and adoptive parents can take is equipping themselves with information.”

Certainly before a foster child who has been sexually abused is placed with a foster family, the parents should be fully informed about this child. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2014) acknowledges that child welfare agencies “usually share all known information about your child’s history with you” and “many children to not disclose past abuse until they feel safe.” It is for this very reason that foster parents are “the first to learn that sexual abuse has occurred” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014).
In this particular incident, Dan and Lori were not told about the abuse issues until this foster child was already living in the household and that they could not take this foster child to any situation where other children were present. Dan found out about the sexual activity with the dog because he walked in on it. It could be argued that this was an “external jolt” or that walking into the bedroom at just that moment was “haphazard and influenced by chance” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999). Of significance here was the caught-offguard-ness of the foster father (“I didn’t know what to say.” “I turned around, walked out of the room for a while, and recomposed myself”) but also of the caseworker (“What did you say?”). According to Marsick and Volpe (1999), an underlying assumption of “traditional training” is that an organization or agency “can analyze a task, process, or function to discover an optimal means of performing it, document that optimal method, and then prescribe the required skills or expertise that a learner must master” (p. 2). These foster parents signed off on forms as part of their training and certification process. As Schugurensky (2000) states, sometimes informal learning contradicts learning that has been acquired in other non-formal settings. For Lori and Dan, such contradictions seemed pervasive. To work through the potential constraints of such contradictions, they utilized both the transfer of knowledge (from Lori’s workplace setting and from their understanding of IEP regulations) and a transformative aspect of learning to “fit” the new situation regarding the foster child with very specific special needs.

For Chesla (1995), “The way that humans are engaged in their world is set up and bounded by what matters to them” (p. 74). Through the years, what has mattered to Lori and Dan has not always been in synch with their perceptions, their lived experience, of what has mattered to the foster care agency. Would it be possible that when both the agency and the foster parent(s) become truly actively “engaged” in the adult learning process that is fundamental to foster parenting, “what matters to
them” individually will become “what matters to them” collectively and collaboratively, as they 
“work out their meanings and practices” (Chesla, 1995, p. 70)? Knowing, at that integral juncture, 
would become inextricably connected with doing (Lave, 1988).

**Will and Sunny**

Situated in a country setting but only about ten minutes from town, Will and Sunny invited me 
to their home after the dinner hour so that we could talk while the family was unwinding for the day. 
Will greeted me at the door and welcomes me again into their home. Sunny had put drinks and some 
-snacks on the kitchen table and invited me to sit down. There were six people in the house, three 
adults and three children. The television was on in the living room, but the volume was not at a level 
that distracted us. I heard the excited laughter of a young child in the living room, and soon learned 
he was the son of their foster/ adopted daughter. Will and Sunny’s foster/ adopted daughter was about 
the same age as their biological daughter. Both females were in college, each at one of Williamsport’s 
two colleges. Will was the proprietor of his own business, so the kitchen doubled as an office. Yet 
there was plenty of room for us to sit down together for the interview. I began by asking if either 
participant had any questions from our initial meeting. I had provided all the necessary information 
and secured the signed informed consent forms. No questions were asked. Drinks (iced tea and 
lemonade) were poured. I explained that the interview would be audio taped so that I could transcribe 
the interview for my research. I assured both Will and Sunny that their confidentiality would be 
protected. The atmosphere was relaxed yet lively because of the presence of the toddler. They 
welcomed me into their home, specifically at a time when they were all home. Throughout the 
interview, various members of the family wandered into and out of the kitchen, sometimes just for a 
drink and sometimes to linger and listen in.
To open the discussion, I queried about motivation for becoming a foster parent and length of
time fostering.

S: I became a foster parent before I even met him. In 1988 they started letting single people
be foster parents. I had a son who was nine so I wanted someone his age, and that’s when I
got the first foster child. 26 years ago. It was just something that – I don’t know – I just
wanted to do.

W: She started doing it and I married into it. (They both laugh.). It was either I had to to do it
or she would lose the children she had at the time.

There are multiple reasons and many factors that influence the decision to become foster
parents. Anderson (2001) notes that family dynamics often influence the decision to foster, as
For this foster mother, learning that a prior legal restriction had been removed allowed her to pursue
becoming a foster parent. With an external barrier no longer in place and an intrinsic desire to do
foster parenting, Sunny completed the linear certification process and becomes a foster parent to
eight-year-old Doyle.

BW: How did your experience of Doyle compare to what you were told foster parenting would
be in the application and training process?

S: Well, I was told about that there was abuse and neglect and that was the reason for placing
Doyle in foster care. We were also told that it would be a short-term placement and that he
would be going to live with his mom <who was incarcerated at the time> within a few
months. Part of the foster parent contract with the agency was about no physical discipline
and that we were encouraged to use praise and rewards.

BW: Did the formal training that you received prior to placement help?

S: Help with being a foster parent? No, not at all. Foster parenting isn’t different from regular
parenting as far as that is concerned – you learn on the job.

BW: On the job?

S: Yeah, definitely.
BW:  What do you mean by that?

S:    Well, here is sorta the idea. Cleaning Doyle’s room not long after he came to live here and I found a shoebox under his bed with food in it. Just pretzels and some of those, you know, fruit snacks and stuff like that. It was things he got from the kitchen. Now, normally, the kids know they are not allowed have food in their rooms on account of mice. But I wondered why Doyle would take food to his room and not eat it. So, I called up <friends> who had been foster parents a couple years longer than us and asked.

BW:  If you had questions, why didn’t you call the caseworker and ask?

S    (laughing). The caseworker didn’t have kids. What was she gonna be able to tell me about kids? So, I called up (a friend) who said that Doyle hiding food in his room had nothing to do with tryin’ to get away with something or break the rules or nothing like that. It was probably just a way of making sure that he had some food available to him if he got hungry since he probably went hungry a lot.

BW:  So what did you do then? Did this make sense to you?

S:    Yeah, my wife and I talked to Doyle, but we were real careful to make sure we let him know that we weren’t mad at him. (laughing) I was about whispering so he wouldn’t think I was somehow yelling at him. He told us a little about his life and not having food We kinda reached a compromise – he wanted food in his room and we didn’t want mice in the house, so we got one of those plastic containers with a lid. Josiah wrote his name on it in big letters with a Sharppee, and he kept it in the top drawer of his dresser, not on the floor under his bed. (laughing again) I don’t know if he ever ate the stuff or not, but he seemed okay just knowing it was there.

This was the second “food issue” that emerged during the interview process. Nothing that the foster parents “learned” regarding the stored food in Doyle’s room came about through agency-sponsored, adult learning, but what was learned arguably changed (“added to”) the relationship between Doyle and the foster parents (Doyle learned “his” food would remain in “his” container) and added a dimension to how the foster parents understood themselves as foster parents (“I called up a <friend>…”). As Eraut (2010) notes, integrating newly acquired knowledge with “other knowledge and skills” allows the individual to take action “in the new situation” (p. 256). Watkins & Marsick
(1992) affirm that informal learning is often characterized by a focus on action, by non-routine conditions, and is enhanced by proactivity and creativity. If these are four criteria for informal learning, then the actions of Sunny met all four. The focus on action to both acknowledge Sunny’s concerns about food and the concerns about a mice invasion resolved the food-in-the-bedroom issue. This was a non-routine condition because the foster parent had not dealt with this in her own upbringing or in the raising of her own nine-year-old son. The non-routine conditions meant that taking the food into the bedroom to store was not a daily or regular ritual, or at least not one of which the foster parent was aware. It seemed to be enough for Doyle to know that the food was there if he wanted it. The proactivity and creativity were in evidence by a solution that empowered Josiah to manage this supply of food and the foster parents respected the contents of the container by not inspecting the contents of the container. They were proactive because a solution was implemented before the mice arrived and before Doyle experienced any behavioral outbursts. They were creative for the same reasons. For Fenwick (2000) this constitutes learning “in” the experience (p. 254). The fact that the foster mother acknowledged in the interview that she did not know if Doyle “ever ate the stuff or not” seemed to indicate the food in the bedroom became a non-issue for the foster parent and for the foster son, at least in part because of the situated informal learning experience initiated by this foster mother with this particular foster child. Informal adult learning shaped the lived experience of this twenty-six year veteran of foster parenting, with this, her very first, foster child. Marsick and Watkins (1990) state that informal learning “is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner (p. 92). This illustration fits this definition because the learning did not take place in a formalized setting and there was intentionality (“control of learning”) on the part of a novice foster mother who sought out information to resolve this problematic situation.
Once Will and Sonny got married and Will officially moved into the home where Sunny resided (given that occasionally Sunny used the pronoun “we” instead of “I” the exact living arrangements prior to the date of the actual marriage are uncertain. This would be problematic for the foster care agency, but is beyond the scope of my research interest), he had to have the standard background checks and “take classes” as he put it to meet the requisite six hours of annual training.

Since the focus of my research is adult learning, I asked Will and Sunny to tell me about their agency-based adult learning experiences.

W: You had those training meetings you had to go to. Two or three updates a year at Sharwell (the office building for Lycoming County Children and Youth). You do them, and, well, sometimes she could take them but I would be at work and have to play catch-up at the end of the year. Instead of one or two a month, they gave you choices that would fit into your schedule. “Okay. Cram course” at the end. Sometimes I had to take off work to get the trainings in.

S: But these trainings were not… they would just get whoever they could to speak. Remember the one guy? “Anger is your choice.” Parents got up and walked out. His whole thing was these children have a choice whether they want to be angry or not. And the more he talked, the angrier the people in the room got. They would say, “But these kids have a right to be angry.” And he would say, “But it’s a choice. They don’t have to be angry” and oh, my Lord. People were yelling and got up and left. It was entertaining but it didn’t help.

W: That one meeting I wanted to leave, but she wouldn’t let me. They had that guy how to identify when your children are drug users. How to identify them. He had these ten points. This and this and this. Yeah. Both of his kids were just arrested a month ago for drug charges. You mean to tell me he can’t even detect his own kids? I don’t think he should be authorized to be up there. His kids were arrested and convicted. It was in the paper. Maybe they should’ve got a different speaker. I was gonna ask, “How did you miss your own kids?” I probably should of.

S: We went to another training about The Wizard of Oz. It was all about how to always turn to little people because they always know what’s going on, and how the brick road turned yellow. That was really interesting because I had always hated the Wizard of Oz and I never realized that everyone in that movie stood for something. It’s got a real deep philosophy behind it.
BW: What did that have to do with foster care?
S: I have no clue (laughs). No clue at all. That’s what I wondered at the time too.

In hearing foster parents discuss their agency-sponsored, state-mandated training as part of the certification process and part of the annual requirement to maintain their status as foster parents, this was this was an eclectic assortment of adult education endeavors. The research is abundantly clear on this: adequate training is essential (MacGregor et al, 2006; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002). When foster parents end up in a heated verbal exchange with the presenter of the training, that is not an adequate educational experience. Will and Sunny were clear about their assessment of these trainings as being of little inherent or practical value. Indeed, while Sunny thought The Wizard of Oz session was interesting, she could not articulate even a connection to foster care (“I have no clue. No clue at all”), let alone any viable application of the information. The fact that Sunny “wondered at the time” about the content indicates that, even during the training, she was trying to make connections to the lived experience of foster parenting. They needed something more meaningful.

Will and Sunny were very clear about this as they discuss their experiences fostering.

W: We got married in 1988 and have been foster parents since then. The longest we have had is Amy, and she’s still here (there is laughter from the living room. Amy is the mother of a very young child and both currently reside with this family). First we took her sister. There was a group of about ten of them. Her brother had shot somebody in Philadelphia. They all saw the shooting. Philadelphia DHS sent the mother and nine of the children up <to Lycoming County> to protect them from retaliation. So when they come up, they were wild. We took one of the older ones. It was supposed to be for a few days and somebody else was going to take Amy. Well they (Lycoming County Children and Youth) called after a few days and said, “This little girl (Amy) just sits in a corner. She never makes a sound.” Biggest lie ever!

Amy was over the age of eighteen although her exact age was not revealed during the course of the interview. What was revealed was that she had completed two years of college in Williamsport, and this was accomplished prior to the birth of her child who was not yet one-year-old. Prior to 2008,
when children turned age eighteen, they “aged out” of the foster care system and were considered adults, with all the independence, demands, and responsibilities that accompany that designation.

With the passage of the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* (PL 110-351), foster children can remain in care until age 21 if they choose to do so in order to pursue post-secondary education or independent living options.

This appears to be what Amy opted to do.

The foster mother continued to tell the story of how Amy ended up in this foster family.

S:  (laughing and looking at Will) We took her [meaning Amy] and we were afraid of her sister because she was going to turn into Chucky and kill us in the night. And we believed her. And one night in the car they just got so wild, throwing things. And the caseworkers just would not help. They would never respond when I called. I always had to fax them things. I wanted to let them know how things were so I started faxing <the caseworker>. I wanted to have a paper trail. In case something happened. I would write exactly what happened. ‘how was your weekend? Mine was the weekend from hell’ and I would write exactly what happened. They wouldn’t come out. They were like… It was supposed to be a day-by-day thing.

I was in the van one day. They took the seatbelt buckles and were hitting each other and me and the other kids. I took them to Williamsport Hospital and dropped them off. I did not know what else to do. I dropped them off, gave them the caseworker’s phone number and left. Then they <Lycoming County Children and Youth> called to ask if I would just take the little one <meaning Amy> back. She was 6½ and weighed 32 lbs. She was malnourished. I took them both to the hospital. They had no place to put them because they were so horribly bad. But we did take Amy back. We didn’t know if we could keep her. The school here didn’t want her. They said she was so retarded and emotionally disturbed that she won’t be trainable. Untrainable. They said she couldn’t be in the school. She was in therapeutic kindergarten in Philadelphia and got kicked out.

She animated and detailed in the reflection. Three issues emerged in this vignette. The first and most disconcerting because it set the other issues in motion, was the lack of support from the foster care agency. According to Titterington (1990), while foster parents provide the practical care of the child in their home, foster care caseworkers provide support and a perspective enhanced by case
experience. All the case experience in the world is irrelevant if intervention goes unoffered. Kirton (2001) found that money was not a factor when deciding to become a foster parent, but foster parents said they were naïve with respect to the difficulty of the job. Will and Sunny had completed all agency-mandated trainings. But they were not prepared for what they encountered in a placement that initially began as temporary.

Research indicates that lack of agency support services to help foster parents with issues concerning the foster child (-ren) affects the retention of foster parents (Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002). Not only was this agency unresponsive to the pleas for assistance, the foster parent recollected that they were lied to by the foster care agency. The faxes, a discernable paper trail of this family’s extensive efforts to contact the agency caseworker, got no response from the caseworker. Sunny has kept the faxes to this very day. Because of the lack of support, assistance, intervention, and communication from the foster care agency, and with nowhere else to turn the foster mother wound up forcing the issue by taking the children to the local hospital, the second substantive issue that emerged here. The reality of the lived experience of foster parenting did not match her expectation of what this experience would “look like.” Marsick and Watkins (2001) note that people “learn from their experience when they face a new challenge or problem” (p. 31). The foster mother confronted both. For Argyris and Schon (1978) this learning, then, would result in a change of “tactics” because the foster mother was faced with “a mismatch between intentions and outcomes” (p. 27). What happened here was a reflection on the tactics (“I always had to fax them things.” “They wouldn’t come out.” “They would never respond when I called.”). As Marsick and Watkins (1999) affirm, Informal learning varies because of the situations in which people find themselves. It is the interpretation of the context that is in evidence here (Cseh, Watkins, & Marsick, 1999). The lens through which the foster
mother viewed her lived experience as a foster parent framed the learning, which resulted in new actions and activities of creating a detailed paper trail.

The third issue was the educational one. The school expressed concern regarding Amy’s behaviors, but the school district did not have the right to deny a child a free and appropriate public education. How did the foster parents handle the school issue? Will informed me that the school relented, with one provision in place (“They agreed if she had a wrap-around, they would keep her.”).

This did not address, however, the behavioral issues the foster parents encountered at home from this child. I asked Will and Sunny about this adult education need.

S: You can’t imagine when I say “Bad.” She knocked over the display in (the local grocery store.) I couldn’t take her anywhere. She would scream and scream and scream. At home, she would slam the door and slam the door and slam the door, and swear and call me a “black whore.” And it was abusive, extremely abusive.

BW: So what did you do?

W: She (Sunny) would do the shopping and run the errands. I stayed here with Amy. S: (laughing). One day, Amy was screaming when I left and she was screaming when I got home. I said, “How long has she been doing this?” He said, very calmly, “The whole time.” She had never stopped. Here I later came to find out from one of her sisters that the mom had given her drugs so she could work the streets. And here she was having drug withdrawal at 6½! That was a very stressful time and the only actual reason that we kept April was because (our biological daughter) had a real desire to take care of April. She was four months older than April, but April was like an infant. We carried her, put her in the grocery cart. (Biological daughter) would bath her. If we put her in the high chair (bio daughter) would feed her. She was just like a baby. And without her older sister, she started to come around. We got medicine to help her be calm and (biological daughter) really loved her and wanted to help take care of her.

Children who are placed in foster care because of extreme issues of abuse and neglect are often placed in homes where they are the only foster child because the need for intervention is so extensive. Satisfaction tends to be higher: Foster parents tend to remain foster parents for a more prolonged period of time when foster parents feel competent to handle their foster children, have no regrets about time investments, face less agency red tape when requesting services, and are provided
needed information about foster children from social workers and agencies (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002). Three of these four factors were at work here. The longer that this family cared for Amy, their confidence and their competence seemed to grow (they find a way to get the grocery shopping done and the errands run without Amy disrupting the entire process). Will and Sunny expressed no regret about the time investment in fostering Amy (who was lived with them since 1999). The foster care agency appeared to have been of little help since phone calls were not returned and visits were not made to the home. The providing of the “needed information” did not come from the agency nor the agency caseworker, but it did arrive through an informal conversation with an older sister of Amy’s. That, plus the care and nurturing of Amy by the biological daughter of this couple, both educated the foster parents and saved this placement. Orme and Buehler (2004) state that foster parents today take on a greater responsibility for arranging services for the children placed in their care and for knowing behavioral techniques to effectively meet the needs of challenging foster children. Will and Sunny actively learned to learn as they learned (Hein, 1991), which is a central tenet of CLT.

They also learned from the elementary school guidance counselor. I asked Will and Sunny about this.

S: Actually, that one guidance counselor, she was fantastic, nice to April. Most people weren’t even nice to her because if you saw her, you just wanted to hit her. So then I took her off medicine because we learned if she just had structure… if she knew what was coming next…we could kinda control her behavior. Like, we couldn’t just say, “Come on, let’s go to the mall.” We had to start Friday night – “Tomorrow, we’re going to the mall.” You know, she had to know everything that was coming, and all of a sudden she just started being really good. Then we went to see this doctor, Dr. Bruce, this guy they got us into, the head psychiatrist at the time at Williamsport Hospital and he did this thick study on her to see how damaged she was.

BW: How did you get this appointment? Did you make it?

S: Because she was going up for adoption and they wanted this for kids going up for adoption. And he said, he thought she was bright, that she had great ability to learn, but he
didn’t know how damaged she was. That she was missing something in the front of the brain that when you are doing something bad says “Stop. You can make a better choice.” She doesn’t have that filter. It’s just gone. And Amy’s sitting there listening to that. And on the way home, I said to Amy, “I don’t think that’s true, Amy, because I have seen you control yourself.

So, the next day when I went to pick her up at latchkey, the teacher said, “Amy came and said to me, ‘I was gonna hit so-and-so but I said to myself “April, you can make a better decision.” And they gave her red gummy fish and she never hit anybody after that. It was like a big change and she started telling herself, “I can make better decisions.”

BW: You think she made a change because…
S: … because she heard the doctor say it. I don’t know why. The doctor said she didn’t have this but on the way home I said I thought she did. That’s true. But he was so negative talking about her. That’s horrible. But I could see some good in her. I could see glimpses. That she had good in her. They also said she had that wasn’t curable. Defiance behavior. But she’s got that pretty much under control.

A number of factors emerged that made this placement work, factors that the foster parents actively and intentionally brought into play on behalf of this foster child. Will and Sunny learned from the guidance counselor and they employ that knowledge in situation-specific and child-specific ways. They integrated what they learned into their regular routine. As a behavior modification technique, this is called priming and it is often used for intervention with children who are on the autism spectrum (Koegel, Koegel, Frea, & Green-Hopkins, 2003). This learning was the link to learning that they could take Amy off the medication. Informal learning can be, as Schugurensky (2000) notes both additive (when knowledge is added or skills improved) and also transformative (changing existing prior knowledge and approaches). What Will and Sunny discovered through informal learning opportunities with other adults proves to be both: it added to what they already knew from their experience with Amy and it changed their approach to her problematic behaviors. None of this knowledge came about through state-mandated, agency-sponsored adult learning opportunities. For Fenwick (2000), people learn “as they participate by interacting with the
community (in this case, the values and procedures of the professionals and the parents, the tools at
hand (the language utilized for priming, what Amy heard at school, both from the doctor and from the
foster mother), and the moment’s activity (the mall and not hitting other children at school)” (p. 253).
Understanding here was created within the conduct of Amy and those with whom she interacted and
this knowledge was adaptable in that it altered both the perceptions and the behaviors of those
involved.

Will and Sunny also learned “in” the experience of fostering Amy: The longer that Amy lived
in this home and with this family, the greater the learning became. There was an emphasis on
“improving one’s ability to participate meaningfully” at home and at school (Fenwick, 2000, p. 254).
They learned as they lived, in the situation and in the moment.

S: Oh, she was more difficult, but at least she was progressing then. She would go in stages.
Like with not hitting someone. And then there would be a problem. And she would bring
these little note cards home. It was a sad face if she was sad. If she good, it was a happy
face. And she liked that. She wanted to sing the happy face song.

W: She couldn’t write at all when we got her. In fact, she didn’t really speak English. She
spoke an ebonics so it was hard to understand her. And one day she comes home with this
sticker right in the middle of her forehead because she had written the letter A on paper.
And you would have thought it was Christmas. From then on, you give her a sticker or say
“da-de-da” and she would perform like you wanted her to. It was all positive. And that
went against a lot… we always punished people when they were bad but expected the
good. Whereas, when we started rewarding her for being good…

BW: How did you know to reward her for being good?
S: Well, that sticker! That’s it. She taught us. She was proud of the stickers.

W: Really proud. It was like getting her ready in the morning for school. If she thought she
couldn’t, she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t get ready. I taught her to tie her shoes. Watch this?
She was getting the eggs ready. “I will race you.” She was very competitive, so I said, “I
will race you.” Or say “Da-de-da.” And she would fly.

BW: Is that some kind of expression?
W: Yeah, it was on some kind of show. “Da-de-da”. Some kind of show or something. And
that was a winner.
S: That’s what started her getting dressed. She would get up in the morning and she had to be the first “da-de-da.” She would hide his shoes so he couldn’t be the first one. She would get up at midnight and put her clothes on and get back in bed so she could be the first “da-de-da”. No prize. No gift. No money. Just the first “da-de-da.” And if she wasn’t the first...It was not a good day.

Operant conditioning and the efficacy of reinforcing behavior has been around since B.F. Skinner’s work in the early twentieth century. The more that the foster parents “discovered” what impacted Amy’s behavior, the more they experienced positive changes in that behavior. “Da-de-da” appeared to be the epiphanic “aha!” experience for Will and Sunny. They learned through their lived experience with Amy, that this worked. What was meaningful in this context was determined by those within the context, “negotiated between the individual’s desires and intentions (including the desire to belong)” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 254). I have no idea what “da-de-da” means, and am ignorant regarding its origins or development. And my lack of knowledge is irrelevant. What was meaningful to Will and Sunny and Amy was the meaning they ascribed to this “phrase” within the strictures and structures of the daily lived experience of this foster family. Through interaction, through language, through the (foster care) situation, these learners lived what had been “worked out in joint action” and they do so “through shared but not necessarily articulated understandings” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 254). This learning served to “increase the effectiveness and durability of foster-care placements” (Franks, Mata, Wofford, Briggs, LeBlanc, Carr & Lazarte, 2013, p. 378). As Heim (1991) notes, learning does indeed take time.

**Trina and Dave**

The early morning frost had given way to full sunshine. Trina specifically asked me to come to their home at an early morning hour so that all of the children would be at school and the three of us (Trina, Dave, and I) could talk without interruption. Easy to find on this second trip to this cul-de-sac, I pulled into the driveway and approached the front door. Immediately, I heard the playful
squeals of the toddler who was the youngest and newest resident of the home. Perhaps I had arrived early. Perhaps plans had changed. Trina greeted me with a big smile on her face, just as she had on my visit to the home to meet the parents and discuss the study. Dave was playing with the little girl in the living room. He got up to greet me. The child gave me a curious look, just barely long enough to notice a stranger person in the house, but not enough to distract her from the light-up toy with which she was playing. Dave got up. Trina led us into the kitchen where we sat around the table. For several minutes we engaged in small talk while Trina made coffee. I reminded them of the purpose of the study and that I would be audio recording the interview. When I asked if either had any questions, they looked at each other, smiled, and then Trina responded, “None at all. Let’s get started. We have a lot to talk about!” I sensed an eagerness to tell their stories, so I capitalized on the moment.

I began with a query regarding their entry into foster care.

D: Well I grew up in foster care and wanted to pay it forward. There are a lot of kids out there who need help. I did, and someone was there to help me.

BW: You “did”?

D: I went into foster care when I was 12 and was there til I [was] 18. My foster family got me on track and that’s what we’ve (turning to his wife and nodding at her) tried to do. I was with Lycoming County Children and Youth and that’s what we done for about 17 years. [He looks over at Trina almost as if to affirm the correct number of years.

T: 17 years. I always wanted a lot of kids. And I came from a very small family so after my second child they told me I shouldn’t have any more, health wise, and maybe adopt. Then we decided to get into foster care. We have adopted five out of the system. Two biological children and five adopted.

BW: So the children you adopted…

T: (sensing the question before I complete it and smiling broadly at the telling) all came from foster care. We didn’t get in it for adoption. We were taking emergency cases.

Macgregor et al (2006) notes that “some foster parents have experienced being in the foster system themselves (p. 353). The only participant in the study who had, himself, been in foster care was also the only one to state “pay it forward” as a motivating factor in deciding to become a foster
parent. There was a convergence of reasons present here that were motivating factors for Trina and Dave to become foster parents: Dave’s experience in the foster care system, Trina’s desire for a large family and the medical reality of this couple being able to have only two biological children. In a 2001 article entitled “Influences on the Decision to Become or Not Become a Foster Parent,” Baum, Crase, and Crase report the results of a year-long study of reasons that individuals decide to become and remain foster parents. Rarely is there only one reason leading to the decision to foster, but rather a combination of factors contribute to this decision. Trina and Dave confirm this.

We began to talk about the number of foster children this family has had and their experiences with these children.

T: When we first got into it, I don’t know if there even was any agencies like Kidspeace. It was all county-based. Now the first time we had a very bad experience (after the first five years). We had gotten four kids. I had gotten two little boys. Their mom was the type that whatever guy she happened to be around. Well, when I got them, it was terrible.

They would bleed whenever I took their diaper off. The boyfriend wanted them in their cribs 24/7. But then he got put in jail for something and she ended up with a good guy who loved the kids, cleaned up her act, she deserved the kids back. But she was a follower. So she got rid of this guy, picked another jerk up and went right downhill again.

Then we got a girl and a boy, without knowing that their parents had been extremely abusive. Like he had seen his parents do so much to him, hurting someone was natural to him. Like, dad threw mom down the steps and mom knifed dad. He was 8. They had pulled him to a specialized home.

And the little girl we had for five months. The parents took off for Florida. Never visited. Just stayed there. And they got kicked out of Florida by the relatives so they came back here. The first court case, the judge said, “They made an attempt” and he gave them back. In the meantime, she (the foster daughter) is hanging on my leg screaming “Mommy, you’d never give <biological son> away. Why are you giving me away?” And I was done. I almost got arrested for contempt of court. Anyway, we quit that day. I said, “I can’t do this.” <pause. The foster mother looks away from me and looks “off” in the distance almost like she sees in her mind the events of that day, nearly 20 years ago>.
BW: (softly and quietly) What are you looking at?

T: (She looks back at me; her voice is very soft.) Her. (Another pause.) She had 100% trust in us and they just took her away. Two weeks later, she was found in the back of an abandoned car. She was in and out of foster care her whole life.

BW: What did it mean to you that (the foster child) was returned to the biological parents?

T: It was just re-breaking everything over and over. It was a sudden decision. I couldn’t protect her. There was nothing I could do. My (biological son) had gone through kindergarten and first grade together with her. It was like they were brother and sister. And then this little girl, I mean, it wasn’t like they showed up for visits and did all this stuff. They didn’t do anything they were supposed to.

Edelstein, S. B., Burge, D., & Waterman, J. (2002) studied the “significant changes in the roles and expectations for foster parents,” focusing specifically on the issues of loss and grief within foster care (p. 102). One of the primary reasons that foster parents quit being foster parents is the pain of the loss of a child. And in this context, “loss” does not mean the physical death of a foster child, but the “loss” of that child to the foster family. For Trina and Dave, the loss was so intense that they walked away and quit fostering for about five years. And they quit that day. Her nonverbal communication spoke volumes about the pain of that loss, as she paused and looks away before speaking again.

This passage conveys the vivid detail with which the foster mother recalled what happened, especially considering that these events unfolded more than two decades ago. When the foster mother looked “off” in the distance while talking about these events, she was not literally looking at a picture of this child which was hanging on the wall of the room in which we sat. Yet, when I asked what she was looking at, the response (“her”) indicates that the foster mother was, even then, both reflecting on the events of the day this child was returned by the court to the care of the biological parents and on the ongoing effect of that singular event on all the people involved.
Trust that had been built with this child was gone. It disrupted the family structure and routine. The foster child turns to the foster mother for some measure of comfort, as this child was being physically taken from the foster mother. Langdridge (2007) notes that phenomenology, as a discipline, “aims to focus on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live in [sic] and what it means to them” (p. 47). As Trina recounted this event to me, I heard the pain in her voice in the recalling and retelling. Her words reveal her interpretation of the meaning of the events of that day: “I couldn’t protect her. There was nothing I could do.” Trina was correct on several counts about there being “nothing” that could be done. The Pennsylvania Code (3700.73) states that foster parents may appeal the relocation of a child from the foster family “except under one of the following conditions”:

1. The child has been with the foster family less than 6 months.
2. The removal is initiated by the court.
3. The removal is to return the child to his [sic] parents.
4. The removal is to place the child for adoption.

This particular child had resided with this foster family for five months (1); the court ordered the change in this child’s placement (2); the change in placement was for the child to return to the biological parents (3). There was legally nothing that the foster mother or foster father could have done to appeal, reverse, or circumvent the court decision that day. However, the issue went deeper that the legal ramifications or the letter of the law. After all, the law does not address perceptions, either of the foster child as the foster mother remembers it (“Why are you giving me away?”) or of the foster mother (“I couldn’t protect her.”)

Trina and Dave had received training from Lycoming County Children and Youth about reunification, about foster parent rights, about court hearings and court visits. But that did not seem to
make a difference on this particular day. In fact, Trina and Dave stayed away from fostering for more than five years. But they did decide to return. Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid (1992) conducted a study in which 31 foster families were provided with enhanced training and support services. “For the Enhanced Training and Support condition compared to the control group, the foster parent dropout rate… was cut by almost two-thirds over the two-year study period” (p. 398). On this court date, Trina and Dave severed the official relationship with Lycoming County Children and Youth, and, thus, had no more access to any potential support from the agency at this difficult time. Bass, Shields, & Behrman (2004) suggest “Child welfare agencies can provide foster families with quality training that candidly discusses the challenges of foster parenting and the resources available to them” (p. 16). One potential resource available to foster families who “lose” a foster child is other foster parents who have experienced a similar loss. Better training “would increase the likelihood that families would … continue to foster parent” (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004, p. 17).

When they decide to stop fostering, some foster parents stop forever. Others change their minds and decide to foster again. Trina and Dave fell into the latter category.

D: Other foster parents. We know a lot of other foster parents. But yeah it definitely has stronger rules and regulations and guidelines. The judges are much more active. Like they can order the parents to go to classes. Yeah, they explained under what circumstances children get placed and you know what if something happens. What if they are homeless? Sometimes they might be going right back. They explain more now.

Dave and Trina returned to foster care because of what they learned from other foster parents. It was not agency recruitment and even the ongoing need for foster parents in Lycoming County, but what was learned informally about what other foster parents experienced in their tenure(s) as foster parents. This segment is a relevant example of horizontalization in that the informal conversations with other foster parents provided an opportunity for “opening up possibilities for seeing things differently and changing one’s perspective” (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, p. 16).
These foster parents experienced changes to the foster care system once they decided to foster once again.

D: We are a lot more active and we keep informed of what’s going on. I mean, right now two of our lead guys are in Harrisburg to get the months in care down to 22 months. A parent has 22 months to turn their life around to make the changes they need to make. Whereas before, there really wasn’t a limit. They could just keep going. But, and its not foster care, it’s the judges. There are “extenuating circumstances.” Well just about anything could fall into that category. So its not like they can really explain these are the extenuating circumstances. A lot of the times I call the Director of Children and Youth or the Assistant Director of Children and Youth to get answers.

BW: Why don’t you just call the caseworkers with your questions?

T: Well, the caseworkers are trying to explain to us what they are hearing from the Director or the Assistant Director so we are getting the information secondhand. If I don’t understand something, I just call one of them up. They know my by the sound of my voice now (they both laugh) and I get an answer in a way I can understand it.

BW: Well, how did you know or learn to call the Director and Assistant Director?

T: That’s what my friend <another foster parent with this same agency> told me she does when she doesn’t understand what’s going on.

Language is, as Gadamer (1998) notes, the universal medium through which understanding occurs. The learning is relational because it is linked to the learning of others (Marsick & Watkins, 1999). The learning results in action being taken of contacting the director and assistant director. The learning and the expression of that learning were both situation-specific and context-specific.

Since my research interest is primarily concerned with foster parent learning. I inquired about the training opportunities that Dave and Trina have had in their tenures as foster parents.

T: We had CPR. We are required to take six hours of extended classes every year now.

D: The training was always at the Sharwell. Now all that has changed. We can sign up for classes anywhere. We go to a lot of Dr. Dowell. He is a child psychologist. We go to a lot of his. You can even do a whole bunch on computer, ones you hadn’t never done before, so you’re not repeating anything. And ones that more or less fit in your case, Like if you have teenagers they do a lot on drug and alcohol stuff. Whereas if you just had her <pointing to the infant child>, that wouldn’t be appropriate.
BW: So the trainings that you have done, have they been with other foster parents?

T: Oh yes. They could be like a lot come from other different counties. It depends on what they’re about. We’ve had 30 at times. At other times 10 or 12.

D: Dr. Dowell does a lot of, like, your autistic children and behavior and like some things that worked for ours. Somebody else might say “I never tried that. Maybe it will work for mine.” The sessions are very interactive. That’s why we like him, like when there was question and answer times. You get more feedback from other people that have kids. A lot of these people aren’t foster parents. They are just parents that have their children and they just gotta figure out what is going on and why. Most of them have been adopted. I mean, a lot of them are from Russia. They’re not in foster care. But the connection would be the special needs.

Of all of the foster parent participants in my research, Trina and Dave were the only ones who voiced the opportunity to engage in learning experiences based on need and not role. This seemed like a relatively modest innovation, yet it does not appear to be a practice widely utilized. Dave and Trina sought out this opportunity to learn with other adults. The sessions were not adult learning opportunities sponsored by the foster care agency, but were intentionally sought out by these foster parents to meet situation-specific learning needs.

Hein’s (1991) guiding principles of CLT involved here in that the learning was active, in that Trina and Dave learned to learn as they learned, and they constructed meaning in the process. The interactive nature of the sessions afforded opportunities to engage in discourse with other parents with similar learning needs in a social setting. The knowledge gained built on the existing knowledge. Their motivation to learn spurred the effort to secure learning opportunities.

That these fosters parents continue to avail themselves of these adult learning opportunities indicated that they assigned value to what was learned, and that the interaction with other parents (not just other foster parents) whose children have similar behaviors was beneficial to their lived experience as foster parents.
I inquired about the idea of “emergency placements” that the foster mother mentioned early on in the interview because I thought that might provide some additional information not only about this foster parent learning, but about the context and the situatedness of that learning. These were the only interviewed foster parents to mention emergency placements, so I asked them to reflect upon their understanding of and experience with such placements.

D: An emergency placement is, like, when the state police go into a house and they make a drug busy and there’s no kinship, you know, no family willing or able to take the children. They (the children) come here. And sometimes they come just for a couple days til they find a family member or best friend or whoever and sometimes there isn’t people. So… (he looks at the infant playing with Cheerios in the high chair at the table where we are sitting, but he doesn’t say anything else).

BW: So, was she an emergency placement?

T: Emergency room. Sometimes hospitals. She was abused. We got her (the fourteen-month-old) with a serious head injury and a real bad infection and a broker leg. Abuse. (She looks deep into my eyes, perhaps looking for shock or surprise or some other reaction. Employing my best poker face, I implore her to tell the story.)

BW: Tell me about your experience with (this foster child).

T: The family gets two hours a day. Monday thru Thursday. Two hours a day (to visit with this child) but they don’t show up. The plan is for a caseworker to pick her up. They (the biological parents) live in Jersey Shore. They were picking her up, transporting her, because they’re supervised visits. They’re not allowed to visit without someone being there. Now, they moved back this way <toward the Williamsport area>. They are supposed to be at the Sharwell (the office building for Lycoming County Children & Youth) for the last two weeks, but they are a ‘no-show.’ Now – and this is something that’s changed since we’ve been back in it (fostering) - the parents are mandated to call because they’d (the caseworker and the child) get there and nobody’d be there (at the Jersey Shore residence of the biological parents).

BW: Would the visit be with the abusing parent?

T: Well, because they couldn’t prove which one (pause) nobody went to jail. The police know it’s one of them (the biological parents) but which one? So, they both get to visit but it’s supervised.
BW: You mentioned they are “no-shows”.

D: She’s here this morning because they (the biological parents) didn’t confirm the visit. We were all set to go. Children and Youth called to say there would be no visit. They aren’t gettin’ their act together. Their rights are gonna be terminated if they don’t. They get 22 months.

BW: And if parental rights do get terminated?

T: (looking at Dave) Then we’ll adopt her. We already talked about it.

This was the most vivid description of abuse that I had heard during these foster parent interviews. There was a lot more going on here than just a recounting of how this child wound up with this family. Trina and Dave were involved in the day-to-day plans for this child. “The most important supports and deficits in support from their agencies were emotional support, trust and good communication with workers, respect for foster parents’ abilities and opinions, and being considered part of the child-care team.” (MacGregor, et al, 2006, p. 361). Trina and Dave did not have such support when they abruptly quit fostering after the court hearing detailed earlier. After deciding to foster again, though, substantive improvements in the supports from the foster care agency were in place. The tangible supports included transportation. The “good communication” included information about the visitation, about the police investigation, and about the daily plans. Trina also noted during the interview that on the Monday through Thursday scheduled visitation days, she always received a call from the caseworker by approximately 8:30 a.m. letting her know if they would be picking the child up for a parent visit. This consistent communication, in addition to providing the essential information for the planning for this foster child, also communicated to the foster parents that they were an integral part of the team caring for this foster child.

The “emotional support” and “trust” of which MacGregor et al. spoke was communicated here more subtly and more powerfully. When Trina and Dave initially decided to quit being foster parents, it was a sudden and dramatic decision based on the judge’s decision to return a child to the care of the biological parents, but also because of the internal trauma of that decision (“Why are you giving me away?” and “I couldn’t protect her.”). They decided to begin foster parenting again, at least
in part, because they learned informally from other foster parents that there had been positive changes in policies and procedures at the foster care agency. The lived experience for Trina and Dave of these purported changes is that they understood the role of the agency and the caseworker differently. Their horizons expanded. At the court hearing, they feared for the safety and security of their foster child and thus reacted so strongly to the judge’s decision to return the child to the care of the biological parents. For the infant currently residing in their home as their foster child, Trina and Dave knew that when she has a visit with the biological parents, she would be in the presence of the person (people?) who abused this child. Yet they complied with the scheduled visits and they did so on the terms set by the court. The visits were to be held either at the Sharwell Building (where all Children and Youth offices are located) or in the Jersey Shore home of the foster parents, *but with supervision* (“because they’re supervised visits. They’re not allowed to visit without someone being there.”). The court, the foster care agency, and the caseworker(s) were communicating that even though this fourteen-month-old child would be in the presence of those who caused her head injury and broke her leg, the child would not be in danger because there would always be a caseworker present whenever the biological parents were present. The foster care agency developed and implemented the visitation plan. The fact that the agency also communicated that plan to Trina and Dave allowed trust to be built and confidence to be instilled. Trina and Dave are willing to adhere to the terms of the court-ordered and agency-supervised visitation plan apparently for the 22 months that the biological parents have to “get their act together.” (During the interview process, Dave stated that the biological parents had cancelled every scheduled visit for the previous two weeks and that Children and Youth, as of the day of the interview, was not fully certain of the biological parents’ whereabouts.) The fact that Trina and Dave had already discussed what they would do if this child was not returned to the care of the biological parents, (“Then we’ll adopt her. We already talked about it.”) indicated their commitment to fostering this child for the foreseeable future, and to making her a permanent part of their family if that possibility were to arise. The day-to-day lived experience of their second tenure as foster parents
has been vastly different from that of their initial foray into foster care. For Fenwick (2000), individuals learn as they interact and participate with the community. Dave and Trina did. For Lave (1988), knowing is both inventive and intertwined with doing. For Dave and Trina, it was.

Informal learning occurs “whenever people have the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning” (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 28). In these interviews, the eight foster parents, although they never used the term, regularly and routinely engaged in informal learning as they daily lived the experience of being foster parents. All of the participants had the requisite state- mandated training hours. For some, the experience was beneficial and for others it was not helpful at all. What did each interview reveal? The unequivocal significance of informal learning for each of these selected foster parents. Informal learning, occurring daily throughout the life span, has been described as impromptu and unorganized in response to situations that emerge in daily life (Coombs, 1985). Each foster parent encountered situations for which they expressed an unpreparedness in spite of the having completed the mandatory training hours. Each foster parent learned informally as they lived the foster parenting experience. Frank Coffield, editor of The necessity of informal learning and author of its introduction, writes, “If all learning were to be represented by an iceberg, then the section above the surface of the water would be sufficient to cover formal learning, but the submerged two-thirds would be needed to convey the much greater importance of informal learning (Coffield, 2000, p. 1). Through their words and their stories, and their willingness to share both, these foster parent participants conveyed this “greater importance of informal learning” of which Coffield noted.
Chapter 6. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Revisiting the Research Questions

This study was framed by three research questions. Nearly two years ago, I began this research study seeking to understand the nature of informal learning on selected foster parents, what it “looks like” as well as the impact on the lived experience of these foster parent participants. To open this final chapter of the dissertation, I revisit these questions in the light of the findings of the interviews detailed in the preceding chapter.

Marsick and Volpe (1999) discuss six characteristics of informal learning. These will be revisited in an effort to connect the findings discussed at length and in detail in Chapter Five to the research questions that shaped this research study.

I wanted to know about the lived experience of foster parents as they created meaning from the day-to-day experience of caring for foster children. Informal learning is “integrated with daily routines” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p.28). In each of the foster parent interviews, the participants recounted incidents from their daily lived experience of foster parenting as well as they meaning(s) they created. For Kay and her husband, they intentionally sought out learning of other foster parents to deal with the food issue. They also talked directly to their foster children in an effort to understand their understanding of food (“They had to learn to trust us.” “There will always be food. Always.”). Here, learning is tied directly to the action taken by the foster parents based on what they learned informally (“We sat the kids down and we talked to them.” “Basically, over time, they just stopped hoarding food.”). Foster parents set up and attended medical appointments and doctor visits, school and IEP meetings, even the specialized training Sandy received in order to care for Danny in her
home. (“They showed me how to care for the tube, how to clean the abdominal area, how to feed him through the tube, how to change the tube.”). As part of the routine for Lori and Dan in their foster home, Dan would sit down and talk with the foster child on that child’s first visit and explain the rules and routines that would be in place. Will and Sunny also learn about a food issue and take action based on their learning. “Learning is,” as Fenwick (2000) asserts, “rooted in the situation in which a person participates” and is “part of the very process of participation in the immediate situation” (p. 253).

I also wanted to know about the nature of informal learning, what it “looked like” and how it was initiated and carried out. The interviews revealed that a significant amount of foster parent learning takes place in response to the immediacy of the needs of the foster parenting situation. Informal learning is “triggered by an internal or external jolt” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 28). An external jolt can be the situation-specific or child-specific need(s) encountered by foster parents as part of the foster parenting experience. Sandy needed to learn the specific care of a “J” tube while at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia so that she could then transfer that constructed knowledge and those relevant skills to her own home in order to care for Danny. She did not get to “go home” with Danny until she demonstrated what she had learned about caring for Danny’s specific medical needs. An internal jolt can be a situation or course of action that causes a degree of internal tension, such as Kay experienced with the problem of swearing or Lori experienced when deciding whether or not to reveal what her foster daughter confided in her regarding the biological father. What Kay learned from another foster parent informally seemed to address, to some degree, the problem behavior. (“I figured it couldn’t hurt to try.” “It really did cut down on his swearing at school.”). For Lori, the “jolt” was the removal of not one, but two foster children from here home (“And right away. They ended up taking them.”). What informal learning for foster parents “looks like” is an effort to address a sudden jolt that is the lived experience of foster parenting.
Sometimes what this informal learning “looks like” is not so drastic or dramatic in content or context. Informal learning is “not always highly conscious” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 28). Foster parents become foster parents for a variety of reasons. For Kay, it was to provide stability for the foster children. (“I thought it was important for the children to have some kind of permanency in their life.”) She does not indicate that she was highly conscious of the motivating factors anymore than Dan does in expressing his desire to become a foster parent at a relatively young age because he thought it would not be as complicated. (“I thought if I was a little younger it would be easier.”). Will acknowledges he “married into it [foster parenting]” when he married Sunny, that becoming a foster parent in this situation was one facet of becoming Sunny’s spouse. Sandy, on the other hand, does appear more conscious of the learning because she spent two days at CHOP immersed in it and recounts the experience in presence detail. These interviews seem to reinforce the concept that informal learning is “not always” a highly conscious endeavor.

Part of the nature of informal learning, part of what it “looks like” is “haphazard and influenced by chance” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 28). Kay discovers empty food wrappers in the bedroom of her foster children. Dan walks in on the foster son’s sexual contact with the dog. Had Kyla not confided to Lori that she, and not her mother, had shot the biological father, the placement might still be in tact to this day. Had Lori not worked as an instructional aide in the public school system, would she and Dan have learned informally the legalities of the IEP process, and would they have been able to secure a TSS worker for their foster son? Would Amy’s behaviors have changed without the red gummy fish or the “da-de-da” that became part of the morning routine? It is Fenwick (2000) who acknowledges “each different context evokes different knowings through very different demands of participation” (p. 254).
A final question I sought answers to was the reflection on and the impact of informal learning on the lived experience of these foster parents. The interview process provided an opportunity for such reflection and discussion of the impact of this learning. Informal learning is “an inductive process of reflection and action” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 28). Sometimes there is the “fusion of horizons” and reflection leads to new knowing and subsequent action. Sometimes the learning contradicts beliefs and values held by the foster parent, as is the case for Kay with Robbie’s swearing. Her reflection leads to an initial rejection of a possible solution garnered from another foster parent, but further reflection leads her to, if not embrace, at least try a course of action to mitigate the problem behavior. The process of reflection and action is an ongoing one in the process of informal learning. For Sandy, the intensive time spent at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (“I basically lived there for three days.”) allowed time for learning and reflection and for the impact of the learning to become evident as she was permitted to take Danny home with her after demonstrating both the knowledge of how to care for his physical needs as well as the intention of doing so, not in a hospital setting but in her own home. Trina and Dave evidence an anticipatory dimension of informal learning regarding the emergency placement of the toddler in their home and the potential to and intention to adopt her as a permanent member of their family. (“Then we’ll adopt her. We already talked about it.”).

Informal learning is “linked to the learning of others” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 28). Each foster parent participant learned from with and from others. There was collaboration for Will and Sunny as they learned from other parents, not just foster parents. At times the foster parent initiated the learning as Sandy did with getting needed services for her foster child. At times, the learning is initiated by another foster parent, such as when Kay learns an intervention for Robbie’s swearing from another foster parent. There was trust as foster parents learned in their relationships with the foster children as evidenced by the handling of the hoarding of food issues. Sally’s learning was
linked to learning about Danny’s care while learning with those who provided Danny’s care in the hospital. What Dave and Trina could not learn to their satisfaction from the caseworker, they intentionally sought out from the director and assistant director of the county’s Children and Youth agency. (“If I don’t understand something, I just call them up.”). For each foster parent participant in this research endeavor, informal learning was an integral part of the daily lived experience of being foster parents.

For my research, I specifically chose hermeneutic phenomenology so that the selected foster parents who participated in this study would have the opportunity to tell their stories of their lived experiences as foster parents. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the task of the writer is to “stimulate and hold the thought of the reader in a productive movement” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 393). What researchers who employ phenomenology endeavor to accomplish is the construction of an animated, engaging, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions and experiences as they are encountered in the lifeworld(s) of those who live them. Phenomenological descriptions are rich and redolent, invoking in readers the phenomenological nod in recognition of a phenomenon so richly described that they too may have experienced (van Manen, 1990, p. 27). The product of phenomenological research should be simple and straightforward, such that readers who have experienced the phenomenon may analyze their own reality with the identified themes (Swanson-Kauffman & Schonwald, 1988) and that these “themes may be understood” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 622). It is this lived experience that remains “the starting point and end point of phenomenological research” (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). My research herein presented could become such a starting point.

According to van Manen, “Phenomenological descriptions, if done well, are compelling and insightful” (1990, p. 8). The foster parent participants, in the reflecting on and telling of their stories, provided compelling accounts of their lived experience caring for other people’s children. Through
their stories they affirmed and confirmed that the state-mandated, agency-sponsored trainings were not sufficient to meet their myriad needs as foster parents. Phenomenology attempts to explicate “the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld” (van Manen, 1990, p. 11). The foster parent participants learned, and they lived what they learned. They did learn from formalized training opportunities. They also learned from each other, from their foster children, from their situations and situatedness. In the interview process, we engaged in “collaborative hermeneutic conversations” which allowed the selected foster parents to “reflect on their experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 99). For the practical purposes of a hermeneutic phenomenological study, “the researcher needs to be creative in finding approaches and procedures uniquely suited to this particular project and this particular researcher” (van Manen, 1990, p. 163). By arranging the results of the interviews according to vastly varied and quintessentially unique lived experiences of the foster parents, I have offered an opportunity for “a form of deep learning” (p. 163) with potential implications for the foster care system in the United States. In writing “Expanding conceptions of experiential learning: A review of the five contemporary perspectives on cognition,” Tara Fenwick sought to “disrupt conventional notions” and “invite more discussion” about experiential learning (2000, p. 244). Conventional wisdom is that state-mandated training prepares foster parents for the rigors of caring for the children placed in their homes. The foster parents participating in these interviews “disrupt” that “notion” and they do so candidly. It is my hope that these discussions will “invite more discussions” about the place of informal learning in the lived experience of foster parents. Fenwick (2000) asserts, “I nonetheless believe in the possibilities it [presentation of different theoretical perspectives] affords to interrupt and extend our thinking about teaching and learning” (p. 248). I earlier stated that it was not my goal to disparage the more formalized training process
currently in place for foster parents, but I do seek to “extend” the opportunities for foster parent learning by bringing attention to the efficacy of informal learning.

Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT) emphasizes the transfer of knowledge to new situations. Sandy engaged in this by learning the proper medical procedures for her foster son in a hospital setting, and then using that knowledge to care for this child in her home. Lori and Dan knew the special education regulations in Chapter 14 of the state regulations and were able to use that knowledge to secure needed services for their foster son. Kay, Will and Sunny understood the legal mandates regarding food and foster children and adhered to those policies in their lived experience with their foster children. In my own foster parenting, I learned techniques at an agency-sponsored training on passive restraint that I used to keep my foster son from biting himself. Learners “construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 248).

Situated Learning Theory (SLT) affirms that human lives are “situated within meaningful activities, relationships, commitments, and involvements” and that such situatedness opens up “possibilities and constraints for living” (Benner, Tanner, and Chesla, 2009, p. 66). For Fenwick, “Knowledge is not judged by what is true or false or what is erroneous, but by what is relevant in this particular situation” (2000, p. 254). Whether it was dealing with hiding and hoarding of food, inappropriate language, getting forms signed or IEP services in place, or even learning the effectiveness of “da-de-da,” the lived experience of these foster parents was both situation-specific and situation-child-specific. They endeavored to do what would be effective not only in a particular situation, but also with each particular child. For my foster son with the sensory integration issues, I learned to cover his ears before the buzzer sounded at my other foster son’s basketball games and to cut the tags out of his shirts by trying to figure out something that would work for this child in this
situation. Learning is “rooted in the situation in which one participates” and is “part of the very process of participation in the immediate situation” (Fenwick, 2000, p.253). CLT and SLT can complement one another, as the vast and varied experiences of these foster parent participants indicate.

Just as the current training afforded foster parents could be complemented by greater understanding and utilization of informal learning. Barth (2001) asserted that to address the foster care crisis in the United States, and thus improve retention and effectiveness of foster parents in this nation, foster care should go far beyond the current standards of practice and not be “just a vessel in which children float until a decision is made whether they will go home or to another kind of permanent placement” (p. 17). He asked, tongue-in-cheek, if when the biological parents are unable to provide the minimal sufficient level of care, whether foster care places children in situations that provide “the minimal sufficient level of care plus a smoke detector” (Barth, 2001, p. 17). There is more to foster care than merely providing for the basic physical needs and safety of foster children. Much more. As the foster parent stories, experiences, and reflections have indicated, there could be more to foster parent training than the current practice of providing a set number of annual hours of state-mandated, agency-sponsored adult learning opportunities. Foster parents are already learning informally through the lived experience of foster parenting. It is time for foster care agencies to explore, comprehend, embrace, and more fully utilize opportunities of informal adult learning.

There are approximately half a million children in foster care in the United States. To address the needs of these children and the foster parents who care for them, the child welfare system develops, implements, and provides services which are designed to promote the well-being of children by monitoring and ensuring safety, working toward and achieving permanency, and strengthening families to successfully care for children (National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being Research Group, 2012). Recent research suggests that one of the major contributors to
placement disruptions are the externalizing behavior problems exhibited by many foster children
(Chamberlain, 2008; Newton, Litrownik & Landsverk, 2000). All of the foster parents who so
graciously offered to be interviewed for this study experienced behavioral issues, and often the
resulting placement disruptions. The participants, combined, have over one hundred years of
experience as foster parents. All of them commented, sometimes with great emotion and
sometimes with seeming detachment, on their dissatisfaction with the adult learning opportunities
provided to them by their foster care agencies. Even the agency workers I spoke with recognize
how difficult it is to provide meaningful learning opportunities for foster parents. Hein (1991)
notes that learning is an active process, is both contextual and a social activity, and that motivation
to learn is vital. I saw no absence of motivation in the foster parent participants. These were
information-rich interviews (Merriam, 1997). The type of research I have conducted is, as van
Manen (1990) affirms “a caring act” because through these semi-structured interviews, I sought to
more fully understand “that which is most essential to being” (p. 5), in this case the lived
experience of foster parenting. The participants care deeply about the entirety of foster care: the
children, the agencies, each other. They learn. They live. They learn as they live, and live what
they learn. And I learned from them. Indeed, my understanding of foster care will never be the
same because of my own informal learning with and from these eight foster parent participants.
There is, potentially, much to be gained from foster parents learning informally from one another.
But for this to happen, adult education in the foster parent process needs to expand to include such
opportunities. The horizons of those with the power to bring about such change(s) must expand. As
thoughtful understanding of the inherent challenges the child welfare system faces on a daily
basis” (p. 4).
Researcher as Learner

In Chapter Four, I acknowledged five biases prior to initiating the foster parent interviews (Lauver, 2010). One bias was that foster parents become foster parents for a variety of reasons. This was confirmed as interviewees acknowledged their desire to become foster parents to provide stability to children, because of growing up in foster care, because of growing up in an abusive setting, and in order to have additional children in the family. Given the number of participants in my study, I was surprised at the disparity in the reasons given for becoming foster parents; yet the responses given did seem to reinforce this particular bias.

A second bias was that foster parents gain marginal benefit from agency-sponsored training. This assumption was really challenged by the participants, most of whom were adamant that the mandated trainings they received did not have even marginal benefit. They listed in detail specific trainings that did not meet their felt needs for learning (“The Wizard of Oz,” “black hair care,” “Anger is a choice”). I anticipated a contradiction between the oversimplified agency directions and directives (manuals, forms, and policies) and the reality of their lived experience. I did not expect the gap to be so wide. This seems to make it even more incumbent upon foster care agencies to recognize informal learning as an additional tool for foster parents in their lived experience of foster parenting.

A third bias related to how foster parents “fit” into the lives of their foster children (school, medical appointments, extra-curricular activities). The foster parent participants seemed far less tentative than I remember being in my first few years of foster parenting. They are intentional about getting needed medical services for their foster children, securing in-school supports for their foster children through the IEP process, and transitioning their foster children toward independence.

I also began with the assumption that foster parents are resilient and resourceful. The results of my research confirmed the resiliency. These foster parents lived with violence in the home, spent
the time needed at the hospital to learn the proper care for a foster child, and returned to foster parenting even after foster children had been removed from their homes through the court system. While I suspected a degree of resourcefulness, I did not anticipate the depth and breadth of the resourcefulness revealed in the foster parent interviews. Foster parents secured services for their foster children, worked within the constraints of overnight visits, confronted internal conflicts and were open to trying solutions, and became combative with the public school system on behalf of their foster children.

A final bias was that foster parents live in fear. They grieved when foster children were taken from their homes. They feared when a foster child had a court-ordered visit with abusive parents. They lived with and worked through their fear for their safety in their own homes. This bias was confirmed through this research.

Continually working through the Hermeneutic Circle, transcribing the interviews entirely by myself, reading and rereading the transcripts multiple times, member checking, external audits, and the research journal helped me both acknowledge and confront my biases and were integral to my own informal formal of the lived experience of foster parenting throughout this research process. My horizons expanded. As Lauver (2010) affirms, my hermeneutic phenomenology of foster parent informal learning has allowed me to “better understand a particular experience” (p.291).

**Implications for Foster Parent Training and Learning**

The research questions undergirding this study focused on the phenomenon of foster parent learning, specifically the lived experience of the selected foster parents and the nature of the informal learning inherent in that lived experience. I began with the assumption that six hours of state-mandated, agency-sponsored training did not sufficiently address the adult learning needs of foster parents. Perhaps the most significant implication of this research is that the formalized training
process that foster parents undergo annually is but a single learning tool, one that is effectively enhanced by informal learning experiences. By acknowledging “that informal learning has always been the most pervasive type of learning in the workplace [the work setting for foster parents is, after all, the foster home]” foster parents could be afforded another tool or set of tools to address their felt, experienced, and expressed needs for learning about particular issues (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 3). Foster care agencies could purposely and purposefully provide opportunities to understand, encourage, and promote informal learning. Informal learning, while not a “substitute for structured training or education” can nevertheless be “more productive if it is designed, planned, and facilitated in some way” (Marsick, Volpe, & Watkins, 1999, p. 94). Fenwick (2000) notes that “practitioners learn by noticing and framing problems of interest to them in particular ways, and then inquiring and experimenting with solutions” (p. 249). The foster parents in this study, while not asked to articulate an understanding of the precepts of informal learning, certainly expressed a desire to learn. Meaning arises in experience (Langdrige, 2007). There is a difference between the goals of foster parent learning and the process(es) utilized for that learning. If foster care agencies, for example, would recognize the role of informal learning in the lived experience of foster parents and provide opportunities and encouragement for such learning, then “learning-centered people will achieve more of what they want, both for themselves and for the groups…to which they belong” (Marsick, Volpe & Watkins, 1999, p. 95). Similar and expanded studies could shed additional light on the significance of informal learning for foster parents. This will require a relentless research effort, perhaps many of them, for the learning and the lived experiences of foster parents are thick and rich, illuminating what has for too long been a casually accepted enigma. For van Manen (1990), a “good description” is composed and constructed “so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto
unseen way” (p. 39). While this research sheds light on the informal learning of foster parents, there is more to be learned.

On November 22, 2005, then Governor of Pennsylvania Ed Rendell signed Act 73 of 2005, The Resource Family Care Act. (Pennsylvania designates the term “resource family” for “foster parents.”) This legislation went into effect, on January 21, 2006. The Resource Family Care Act is “intended to provide resource parents fair treatment, consideration and respect, and to ensure collaboration among all parties involved in protecting the safety and well-being of children and youth within the foster care system” (Pennsylvania Foster Parents Bill of Rights, 2006). It was this Act which established into law a set of responsibilities for county and private Children and Youth Agencies regarding both information and services mandated to be made available to foster families. This information includes the following:

- a timely response that is open and complete when contacted by a resource family;
- all policies and procedures relating to the role of the resource family;
- information regarding accessing services and how to contact the agency on a 24 hour-a-day, 7 day a week basis;
- the opportunity to be heard regarding practices and decisions of the agency involving the child that resides in the home;
- coordination of services necessary for the child residing in the home and for the resource family; and
- appropriate training to enhance the skills and performance of the resource family (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Department of Public Welfare, 2006).

There are approximately 20,000 children in foster care on a daily basis in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. To provide these children with the care they need each and every day, Pennsylvania relies on more than 12,000 non-relative foster families and nearly 2,000 kinship foster families (Pennsylvania State Foster Parent Association, 2006).
PSFPA is currently working with Spaulding for Children (a non-profit agency that certifies foster families) to develop computer-based training programs for foster parents that will be specific to Pennsylvania laws and regulations. This training will be approximately 24 hours in length when it is finalized and copies of the computer-based training will be available to all public and private foster care agencies in Pennsylvania at no cost “so they can use the training to meet the minimum annual training requirements and ensure that all foster families in Pennsylvania have access to the same training and are trained in the same manner” (Pennsylvania State Foster Parent Association, 2006).

Every foster parent who participated in the interview process for this dissertation recognized the importance of learning opportunities. Every foster parent in the interview process indicated a level of dissatisfaction with the state-mandated, agency-supplied training provided. Yet, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is moving toward more computer-based training for foster parents as an effort to meet the minimum required training hours and to schematize that training (“same training” and “same manner”). While standardization may be appropriate in some areas of social, the unique experiences of foster parents argue against such standardization. As the interviews in this dissertation indicate, standardized training is not always the most efficacious means for foster parent learning opportunities. Customization is key.

One of the most common models of foster parent recruitment (emphasis added) employs a foster parent as a trainer of other potential foster parents. This practice is based on the premise that foster parents are effective as trainers not only because they can answer the questions of potential foster parents, but because they may also provide the most realistic and enthusiastic messages about foster parenting (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989). The federal government defines foster care and the federal government recognizes the value of experienced foster parent “trainers” working with “potential foster parents.” If foster parents are utilized to effectively recruit other
foster parents, then why are foster parents not more widely utilized in educating other foster parents? Cox, Buehler, and Orme (2002) used data from the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents seeking to understand how potential foster parents first discovered or learned about the need for foster parents. Findings indicated that about 36% first heard about fostering through other foster parents, 28% through mass media, 9% through civic organizations, 4% through churches, and 24% through other sources. Foster parents already profoundly influence foster care. A next reasonable step would reasonably be for foster care agencies to embrace what the federal government recognizes and what the research indicates.

For this nation’s foster care system, one in which the formalized training offered and mandated by both states and agencies shows little empirical evidence of effectiveness, and one in which foster parents readily voice the ineffectiveness of this adult learning that they have personally experienced, the time has come for a new approach, one that recognizes a valuable resource heretofore undervalued and woefully under-researched: informal learning opportunities for foster parents to learn, to construct meaning from the situation(s) in which they daily live the experience of foster parenting. If the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania really intends to offer “appropriate training to enhance the skills and performance of the resource family,” then it is time to recognize foster parents for being the resource they are and could be. There is value and authenticity and efficacy when foster parents learn informally from each other.
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Appendix A – Telephone Script

This is the script for what I intend to say when I contact the initial participants by phone.

“Hello. This is Bruce Wehler calling to speak with __________ (participant name) about a research study that I will be conducting for Penn State as part of my doctoral research in Adult Education for Pennsylvania State University. This study in particular involves foster parents who have been foster parents for at least five years, who are willing to participate in this study, and who are willing to be interviewed in their homes about their learning experiences as foster parents. Have you been a foster parent for at least five years? Are you willing to participate in this research study? Are you willing to be interviewed by this researcher (me) in your home?”

(If ‘yes’ responses are received) I would like to speak with you in person about this research study. Is there a time this week when we could meet to discuss this in person? If you have any further question remember my phone number is (570) 220-8437.”

We would then work out a time to meet and I would then use the recruitment script (R-1) in the face-to-face meeting.

This is document R-2.
Appendix B – Informed Consent

Title of Project: Until All The Pieces Fit: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology of the Informal Learning of Selected Foster Parents in Northeastern Pennsylvania

Principal Investigator: Bruce A. Wehler, doctoral candidate in Adult Education
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Advisor: Dr. Melody Thompson, Associate Professor of Adult Education
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1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to understand the experience of informal learning for selected foster parents in northeastern Pennsylvania. The proposed participants are individuals who have been foster parents for at least five years, who are willing to participate in this study, and who are willing to be interviewed about their learning experiences as foster parents in their homes. On any given day in the United States, nearly 500,000 children are in foster care. Foster children deserve foster parents who have, at their disposal, opportunities to participant in meaningful learning experiences, both formalized and informal, to maximize their effectiveness as foster parents.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to discuss your learning experiences as foster parents:
   • how you decided to become a foster parent;
   • your experiences of becoming a foster parent (the agency you chose and training you received);
   • what you have learned from these trainings;
   • your relationships with other foster parents and what you have learned from other foster parents;
   • the number and types of children you have had (i.e., special needs)

Bruce Wehler will also be making notes of observations in a research journal. Wehler will be observing the home environment (i.e., pictures in the home), the significant relationships (children and spousal equivalents), and artifacts (articles from foster care experience).

3. Discomforts and Risks: There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. The questions are personal and may cause a modest level of discomfort. It may be uncomfortable to discuss some of these events and experiences if they have been less than positive, but there are no significant physical or psychological risks to participation.

4. Benefits: The benefits to you include a greater understanding of your experience with the foster care system and how that impacts your experience as a foster parent.

The benefits to society include a greater understanding of the nature of foster parent learning from the perspective of those who have been foster parents for five or more years. Since little is written about the informal learning of foster parents, your participation could expand what is known about informal learning and could impact the training for current and future foster parents.
5. **Duration/Time:** You are consenting to participate in 2-3 interviews, approximately an hour in duration each, during the first six months of 2014.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured at my home in a password-protected file on my laptop computer and on a flash drive in a locked fireproof box. The video and audio recordings will be kept in a locked fireproof box in my home as well. The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

You will be assigned pseudonyms and code numbers for this study to protect your confidentiality. Bruce Wehler is the only person who will have access to this data and, as such, the only person who will know the identity of the participants. Bruce Wehler is the only person who will have access to these recordings. The recordings will be destroyed on December 31, 2016.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Bruce Wehler at (570) 220-8437 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the research team. If you have pertinent questions about the research and research participation, you may contact Bruce Wehler at (570) 220-8437. Should you wish to seek assistance for any psychological issues that emerge during the course of the study, please contact Counseling Services at the Sharwell Building (570) 326-7895.

8. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be asked to sign two copies of this consent form. You will be given one (1) copy of this signed consent form for your records.

________________________     ______________________
Participant Signature          Date

________________________     ______________________
Person Obtaining Consent       Date
Appendix C – Semi-structured Interview Questions

1) How long have you been foster parents and why did you decide to become foster parents?

2) Tell me about the experience of becoming foster parents (the agency you chose and the actual process of becoming certified foster parents)?

3) What type of training(s) from the foster care agency did you have as part of the certification process? (I use the word “trainings” because that is the word foster care agencies I have worked with, use to indicate non-formal educational events.)

4) In what way(s) did these trainings prepare you for the reality of caring for someone else’s child in your home 24 hours a day?

5) What have you learned from agency trainings and in what specific ways has your learning impacted the way you foster parent?

6) Aside from the trainings required and offered by the foster care agency, what else, if anything, did you do to prepare for becoming foster parents?

7) Tell me about the relationships you have with other foster parents. Do you turn to them for support? Respite care? Assistance? If not, to whom do you turn to for support as foster parents?

8) What have you learned from other foster parents and in what specific ways has your learning impacted the way your foster parent?

9) Given that you have been foster parents for more than five years, what factors make you want to continue to be foster parents?

10) If you could, what would you tell your foster parent agency about training foster parents? What suggestions would you have? What might have helped you when you first became foster parents? What type(s) of training or education would you find helpful now?

11) Is there anything else you would like me to know (about your experience as foster parents or your learning to be foster parents)?
Appendix D. Coding Example

indicates becoming foster parent. P d indicates the linear certification and training process. indicates issues of informal situated learning. Rl., indicates application of the learning. indicates possible area for clarification. means used.

- The children have some kind of permanency in their life and that, and some kind of stable home. It also made it alright for me to stay home with my own children. I don't have to go out to work. Did the foster care and I really enjoyed it after we tried. I\\\\\
\textit{\underline{\textbf{Comment (P1)}}:}

K: I remember there were two quite lengthy visits from the caseworker. There was a time. or more long. They asked about our home. how my children were growing up. Let me see what else. They wanted to make sure they had a bed. They had their own. They had a place to keep their clothes in, and they were going to be in a stable at all times.

\textit{\underline{\textbf{Comment (P2)}}:} Initial interview subject. This is about permanency. FM also notes the length of the visit.

BW: What types of training did you have from the foster care agency? Did you have as part of the certification process?

K: I had, and. Like how to bandage arms or legs, and what to do.\textit{\underline{\textbf{Comment (P3):}} My initial interview is this almost recognize the initial statement from the FM.}

K: Some of the ones we had, lived in the city. We had a baby who went back to live with the grandmother. So he wasn't involved in that as much as some of the older children we had. That we had to take that into consideration, ah, when we were raising them. Their past and.

The children's.\textit{\underline{\textbf{Comment (P4):}} Tell the FM person. This was helpful. Mildly redundant?}

K: (long pause) They provided several, ah, training sessions. Some of them were very informative.\textit{\underline{\textbf{Comment (P5):}} Has the interview begun?}

Learned. Think one way was P. C. I have L. And we tried to keep the children from using some of the negative words. Some we didn't know what they meant. Some we did. Some of them were very negative about females and the women in their lives. They called them, um, some not nice names.

BW: The children?

K: Yes. But they did have a grandmother that they looked up to. But some of the other people in their like their mother, they weren't real helpful in raising them and they were hurt that they didn't rise to the occasion to help them when they were in trouble.\textit{\underline{\textbf{Comment (P6):}} Did the FM person. This was helpful. Mildly redundant?}

BW: How did the foster care agency prepare you for the reality of caring for someone else's child in your home twenty-four hours a day?
K: (long pause) Basically, in the main trainings, living family life in your home with someone else’s child or in your home that wasn’t used to your way of living. They told us these were Situations: Some of the things they told us were helpful, some of the things they weren’t.

BW: Help me understand that.

K: Some of the trainings were geared toward younger children, like for hair care and skin care.

BW: Skin care?

K: Basically, they needed a lot of care. We would bathe them. And after a bath to use lotion on his entire body. Things that he couldn’t do for himself. But we got older kids from the agency, and they could do those things for themselves.

BW: So was that helpful.

K: Well, uh, they were a little more open and not as sheltered. What kinds of behaviors to expect from them. They didn’t have routines in their homes. Even something like sitting down to a meal. The foster kids were surprised at first that we all sat down at dinner together and that there was enough food. Remember at first they would put large amounts of food on their plates out of fear that there wouldn’t be enough. We told them that if we wanted to keep them, we wanted to be able to keep them. Just sit down to dinner together and then talk about the family. We would sit down and talk to them.

BW: What did you do about that?

K: Basically, they would get upset and hide it or burn it. If we had cookies or cupcakes or candy on the counter in the kitchen, they would take it and hide it in their dresser drawers. We would find paper under their beds after they had eaten whatever. They were trying to hide that they had eaten the room!

BW: What did you do?

K: They would get upset and hide it. Uh, if we had cookies or cupcakes or candy on the counter in the kitchen, they would take it and hide it in their dresser drawers. We would find paper under their beds. And they didn’t have to hide it. There was to just throwing everything on the floor and not keeping a neat room. We got — let the house because it was swarmed.

BW: Then what?

K: Basically, over time, they just stopped doing this. They had to learn to trust us, to find trust in us that we were not going to keep food from them. It was a good three to four, maybe even six months before they stopped doing that.

BW: What did you do about theHit?

K: They told us about not having enough food at home when he was with the biological father.

BW: How did you come to an understanding?

K: Well, we just sat down and talked to them. At first, that the food would be there. And then, we asked why they were taking food. Then foster son told us about not having enough food at home when he was with the biological father.
Vita
Bruce Alan Wehler

Education
- Bloomsburg University, M.S., Special Education/Exceptionalities, 1998
- Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, M.Div., Theology, 1987
- Lycoming College, B.A., English and Religion (double major)

Professional Experience
- Pennsylvania College of Technology, Williamsport, PA (1990-present) Instructor of English

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