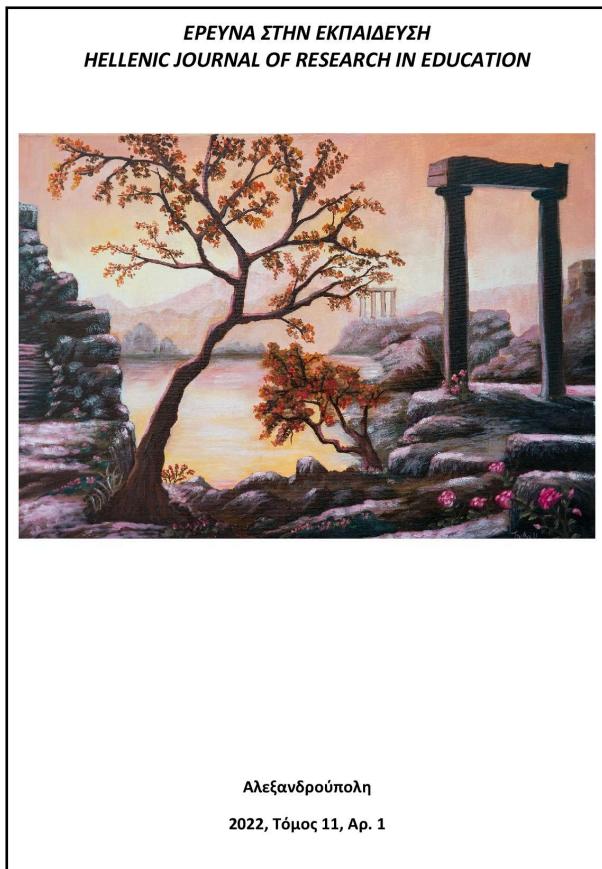


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**Identity development as a learning outcome: a case study**

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# Identity development as a learning outcome: a case study

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## Περίληψη

Τα μαθησιακά αποτελέσματα και ο ενρύτερος αντίκτυπός τους στη ζωή των ανθρώπων δεν έχουν διερευνηθεί επαρκώς μεταξύ άλλων πτυχών της μάθησης. Θεωρώντας τη δια βίου μάθηση ως ένα φαινόμενο που εμφανίζεται σε όλη τη διάρκεια της ζωής και σχετίζεται με την ανάπτυξη της ταυτότητας, διερευνήσαμε πώς οι δια βίου μανθάνοντες αντιλαμβάνονται τον αντίκτυπό της στη ζωή τους. Στην παρούσα εργασία παρουσιάζουμε μια μελέτη περίπτωσης σχετικά με τις αλλαγές σε στοιχεία της ταυτότητας ως μαθησιακά αποτελέσματα. Ως μέρος μιας ευρύτερης βιογραφικής έρευνας, η αφήγηση των μαθησιακών εμπειριών της Εύας επέτρεψε στους ερευνητές να διερευνήσουν την ταυτότητα ως τη μορφή που μετασχηματίζεται όταν συντελείται η μετασχηματίζουσα μάθηση και πώς η σχετική θεωρία μπορεί να εφαρμοστεί στην έρευνα για τα μαθησιακά αποτελέσματα. Οι μαθησιακές εμπειρίες ανέπτυξαν σταδιακά την ταυτότητα της δια βίου μανθάνοντας της Εύας, η οποία είχε σημαντική επίδραση στην ανάπτυξη και τον μετασχηματισμό και των άλλων ταυτοτήτων της. Συζητάμε επίσης τη μαθησιακή ταυτότητα ως στοιχείο της βασικής ταυτότητας της Εύας, η οποία την βοήθησε να αντιμετωπίσει τις δυσκολίες αλλάζοντας τις μαθησιακές της επιλογές ώστε να εκπληρώσει τους στόχους της για προσωπική ανάπτυξη.

## Abstract

*Learning outcomes and their wider impact on people's lives are underexplored among other aspects of learning. Considering lifelong learning as a concept that occur throughout life and is related to identity development, we investigated how lifelong learners perceive its impact in their lives. In the current paper we present a case study of changes in identity's elements as learning outcomes. As a part of a broader biographical research, the narrative of Eva's learning experiences allowed researchers to investigate identity as the form that is transformed when transformative learning occurs and how relative theory can be applied in learning outcomes research. The learning experiences gradually developed Eva's lifelong learning identity, which had a significant influence on the development and transformation of her other identities as well. We discuss also learning identity as an element of Eva's core identity that helped her cope with difficulties by changing her learning choices to fulfill her personal development targets.*

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**Λέξεις-κλειδιά:** διά βίου μάθηση, ανάπτυξη ταυτότητας, μετασχηματίζουσα μάθηση, μαθησιακό αποτέλεσμα, βιογραφική έρευνα.

**Key words:** lifelong learning, identity development, transformative learning, learning outcome, biographical research.

## 1. Introduction

Learning is a complex concept and is considered a necessary means for any kind of individual development in liquid modernity. Lifelong learning takes place throughout life (lifelong), continuously or occasionally, and in all aspects of life (lifewide) (Barros, 2012). The term "*learning outcomes*" has been used more often in recent years in Europe (Cedefop, 2022). Despite the importance of learning outcomes, they

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remain the least researched aspect of learning, because many of them appear some time later in learners' lives and it is very difficult to determine the appropriate methods and time for measuring. Furthermore, the small-scale qualitative approaches to effects of learning are limited not only in number but also in terms of conceptual content of these effects (Schuller et al., 2004). The actually achieved learning outcomes can only be identified following the achieved learning in real life. Therefore, the recently increased research in learning outcomes (Schuller & Desjardins, 2007) is about lifelong learning trajectories, learning journeys, learning lives and identities, and the wider benefits of adult learning.

To identifying learning outcomes is necessary to determine the target area of learning. In the key question for the field of transformative learning by Robert Kegan (2000) "*what form transforms?*" Adult Education theorist Knud Illeris(2014) proposed that the most appropriate term regarding what is transformed by learning is identity, because it includes in addition to the internal processes that take place in the individual and the external ones, i.e. the interaction of the individual with the social environment. Identity transformation through learning involves changes in the way a person thinks, feels and acts.

Illeris (2014) defined transformative learning as "*learning which implies changes in the identity of the learner*" (p. 40) and conceptualized identity as the "*mental center of the individual and its self-understanding, self-confidence and self-realization*" (p. 37) that includes three levels: the core identity, with relatively high stability, and the more peripheral levels of personality and preferences. These three levels exist not only in core identity but in every type of part-identities, such as national/cultural, professional, family, religious, political, etc. The closer to the core identity the individual assesses the changes to be, the more avoids or resists them.

Transformative learning is commonly understood as a progressive change, when learning leads to improvement. However, a positive learning outcome does not occur in all cases. Illeris (2014) argues that there are four types of transformative learning, progressive, regressive, restorative, and collective. Regressive transformative learning occurs when the learner feels unable to cope and needs to stop the learning process and remain in a "safe position" (p. 94). This is also a noticeable change in identity, as the individual moves from a growth mindset with a strong commitment to learning, to one of retention and stagnation. If after regressive transformative learning the person manages to realize what went wrong and overcome it, then there is a restorative transformation.

Furthermore, Illeris (2016) notes that the term development includes both learning and the biological maturation of the individual and that learning depends on the age of the individual, in the sense of the life course (Illeris, 2003). He divides life into four periods, childhood, youth, adulthood, and mature adulthood and he notes that learning motivations change with age (Illeris, 2003). Children want to capture their world, young people want to construct their own identities, adults pursue their life goals, in many life areas: social, professional or family and mature adults seek wealth and harmony. He underlines that gradually the individual learns more autonomously and gains control over its learning, leading to more conscious learning choices.

Even though lifelong learning is considered necessary for all, learning outcomes are often researched in terms of employability, restricting understanding of learning's wider impact on individuals' lives and changes in elements of identity. Nevertheless, the way of experiencing learning is completely individualized and each person's learning and development path is unique. That is why approaches and analyzes of long-term data (Bynner, 2002) are often used to investigate the phenomenon of learning and in particular to study changes in the lives of learners over time. At our recent research on learning outcomes we followed biographical narrative interviews (Creswell, 2012) to explore how health scientists experienced and interpreted their learning and working life/trajectories.

## 2. Material and Methods

This article reports on a case study which was collected as part of a research project investigating the role of lifelong learning in personal and professional development of healthcare scientists. The narrative is presented to hypothesize that changes in identity consist transformative learning outcomes. The criteria for the participation of the narrators of the research were to be: a) health professionals working with a permanent employment relationship in Greek public hospitals, b) lifelong learners and c) aged over 30.

The identification of this hidden population was achieved through snowball sampling, which is indicated when the researcher is trying to sample hard-to-reach populations due to the absence of a sampling frame (Bryman, 2017). The primary informants were people whom the researchers know personally from their

educational and professional background, so that they recognize that these are key people from the population of interest, who have the characteristics, knowledge and social networking to help them lead to the identification of other members of the population [14:58-59, 15:77]. The study conformed to ethical guidelines for research. Participants provided voluntary informed consent to participate in the study. Where there were potential concerns about possible threats to anonymity, this was highlighted for the participants.

Data collection took place from April to June 2021 with narrative biographical interviews via Skype due to the precautionary measures for the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview followed three phases, as suggested by Fritz Schütze: first they were asked to tell their life story, followed by the phase of explanatory questions and closed with the phase of debriefing and free questions (Tsiolis, 2014).

The transcripts of the interviews were then analysed. The NVivo 12 software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018) was used for the analysis, following narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) and thematic analysis (Issari & Pourkos, 2015). Each narrative was then coded both inductively and deductively. The initial themes investigated related to professional identity and learning identity. The thematic analysis was intended to highlight transformative areas of development in the identity of the participants. The case of Eva presented in the current study was chosen because it is a typical case of the sample and as she was the first participant in the research, her life history determined the initial themes.

### 3. Results

Eva's life history is presented based on the four life ages as presented by Illeris (2003).

#### 3.1 Eva: short presentation

Eva is a 55-year-old woman who works as a nurse in a public general hospital in Athens, Greece. With many and varied learning experiences throughout her life, she experienced several role transitions in her career and life, to which she was called to respond. Through her narratives we see the role of learning and the impact it had on her life.

#### 3.2 Eva's childhood and learning

Raised in a peasant family in the Greek countryside with a low level of education, Eva's ability to manage learning begins to develop, as from an early age she is forced to learn independently, due to a lack of guidance in her studies. Through the need to study alone, she learns by playing the role of teacher:

*I had found a very nice way through the game to learn the lessons. Since we didn't have dolls and toys, the wood from the fence was my students and the board was the wall from the house. I used to take the pencil I had at school and whatever I learned at school, I learned it on logs.*

Eva begins to realize her learning abilities through comparison with those of her older sister, who was an excellent pupil at school. This competition seems to have reinforced Eva's desire to learn:

*On the contrary, I, who did not understand how to solve an exercise, when I finally found the way, because I had gone through various paths to find the solution, I could then explain it and let the other understand it much better than my sister who was considered an intellect. And I considered this is what made me unique and I liked it!*

By finding that she begins to build her personal path to learning, develops self-esteem and recognizes her capacity for self-directed learning and an appeal to teaching. Even her uniqueness as an individual is interpreted through the learning identity that had begun to form as an aspect of her core identity. Later on, her experiences enrich this identity and lead her to develop a pattern that she repeats itself as a learning process. She likes to discover new knowledge, acquire new skills, and when she reaches a point of saturation then she seeks a new object of learning.

*In general I am engaged in this: I knit, embroider, sew, do various things with my hand, various constructions, never the same, I mean, for a while I'll be busy making bags. I will make too many...until I get bored! Then I'll go make something else.*

Regarding the attitudes of the family that influenced her view that learning and work are inextricably linked concepts, Eva states:

*My mom raised us like this: "Study, get out of here, from the village, from the hard life of the peasantry."*

In summary, we observe that during childhood Eva begins to develop her learning identity as an element of her core identity. Learning led to changes in her self-confidence and self-realization. She begins to learn independently from an early age and discovers the joy of new knowledge and creation. Nevertheless, knowledge, and particularly studies, has an instrumental character as a means of achieving social progress.

### 3.3 Youth and learning

At a young age, Eva was found studying nursing by chance in the field of a profession she did not want and the only motivation for her studies was the possibility she thought it would provide her for a quick promotion to an administrative position. She also experienced the educational process of her student years negatively, due to the large audience that attends the courses:

*We couldn't fit in the teaching rooms. We didn't have a chair to sit on. Most of the time we sat on the floor, on the windowsills... There was so much noise that you never heard what the professor was saying.*

The student years did not offer her the learning experiences and supplies that she believes should have been provided:

*I finished school and I really had the impression that I had learned nothing from nursing!... What I had learned was only by reading theory on my own, due to pass the exams...*

The problems of the educational process contributed to the further development of the capacity for self-directed learning, although it has not become fully autonomous since the goals of the learning process are not determined by her, but by the curriculum.

### 3.4 Adulthood and learning

After receiving her degree in nursing, Eva became a wife and mother and remained unemployed for six years. Her family identity developed while unemployment deprived her of the financial independence she had as she worked from a young age. Referring to the way of experiencing unemployment, Eva says:

*It was a traumatic experience during those years when I was out of work... And I wasn't unemployed just by my own – I also had a child and that was hard to me...*

Therefore, she turns towards claiming a permanent job in the public sector, in order to ensure permanent work, good salary and a balance between family and work. She was then appointed as a nurse with a permanent employment relationship in a general hospital in the capital. Her entry into the nursing profession coincided with the acquisition of civil servant status. The simultaneous development of these two aspects of professional identity was decisive, both in her learning and in her professional choices. Despite the security provided by the permanent job, during her introduction to the profession she experienced also negative emotions, such as fear, due to her incomplete knowledge, which she tried to cover through work learning (from her colleagues). As Eva had turned her attention to cultivating practical skills, she neglected her scientific development. Eva mentions an event, which has the characteristics of a disorienting dilemma:

*One day, I was working in the surgery clinic and a lady came and asked me: "My dad is going to have bowel surgery tomorrow and the doctor told me that he will do a colostomy in the ascending limb... So where will the colostomy be"? I was stuck! What is anion? Where is it? Where will he have the colostomy? I felt so little! So irrelevant!... I don't know what I said to her... However, I felt very bad. I got home, took out the surgery book and started reading. And after the surgery book came the nursing book and various other books...*

This event was of a great importance for the course of Eva's life and had a great influence in her self-realization. It is still a strong internal motivation for her to participate in lifelong learning:

*I think THIS event marked me. It made me consider and always try to have as much knowledge as I can to respond to my role, whatever this is... And I also have this motto, that: from everything you learn, nothing is wasted. At some point in your life the right timing will be found and you will use it. It makes me feel good, to step on my feet.*

Eva got back on a learning trajectory, with self-directed learning, participating in educational programs, conferences, post-graduate level studies and obtaining a nursing specialty. Participating in post-graduate program motivated her to obtain certifications in English and computers. While Eva was on such a developmental trajectory, upon completing her studies and returning to work she experienced a major disappointment, as her knowledge was not utilized by her service:

*I had come back (to work) full of dreams and plans and things I wanted to change and do. And*

*suddenly I realized that no one expected this from me. Simply, they sent me to do training and that's it. There wasn't any planning from the service in relation to people making an extra effort.*

Despite the disappointment she experienced, she decided to remain in nursing profession and continue her studies, a decision she attributes mainly to her fear of lost the permanent employment position. By this point of view, holding the permanent position in the public hospital limited her educational and professional options. The memory of unemployment was defining to her.

It is interesting, however, that her self-understanding on her professional competence and efficiency was gradually transformed through her interaction with other health scientists:

*Until then, the doctors made a (medical) visit and I was hiding, because I was afraid that I couldn't answer if they asked me anything. From the moment I got the master's degree and the nursing specialty I saw that I felt more confident about myself. I went to the visit, answered, talked and asked... without feeling bad for I don't know everything. There were things I didn't know. No one knows everything. Then I gained this confidence.*

In addition to the positive effect the learning had on her empowerment and recognition by other health professionals, she also faced negative attitudes, always coming from fellow nurses:

*There was a colleague who called me: "level" ... ironically... I, however, was very happy... From my colleagues, I faced more jealousy and ironic comments.*

Nevertheless, the positive impact of learning in her competence was such that it provided her with resilience to malicious comments, which she attributed mainly to jealousy and competition.

After years, Eva succeeded in being placed in a position with teaching and administrative duties and moved away from clinical work. She characterizes this period as the best of her working life, because:

*They were new things and in general as a person I liked to learn new things. I get bored easily. If I learn something, or think that I have learned it, I know it and then I want to change and go to something newer.*

This period of Eva's life was revealing for her. She developed her administrative skills and gradually the professional identity of the administrative officer. At the same time, she realizes that lifelong learning satisfies her inner need for renewal, change, development. She defines herself and interprets her choices through that identity. She is certified as an adult trainer and also obtains a certified pedagogical training.

Eva had at that time a mindset of continuous growth and was not just focused on achieving a goal:

*Just because I went there and got the position and liked it, it didn't mean that "Ok, now I got the position - I stopped." I was interested in what I was doing to develop it and learn to become better through studies.*

Eva's narration changes at this point, as after four years in this position, she moves again to clinical nursing position, a transition that corresponded to a previous stage of her professional development. She characterizes this fact as "*big defeat (!). It was a step backward for me. Ugly!*"

Her removal from this position presented a new disorienting dilemma for her:

*When I asked: "Why are you moving me? ... Was my performance bad?" They told me: "No. But, we are in greater need of hands, of workers. We want workers and not intellectuals" ... for me it is not a justification to say to the other person that "I know you have qualifications, but I need you as a worker".*

This point was crucial in Eva's life. We observe that the culture of the organization exerts a strong influence on the employee, particularly in light of the commitment created due to the permanent employment relationship. Eva consciously stopped the efforts for professional advancement and moreover for professional learning. She also stopped volunteering and even teaching, as learning and teaching always went hand in hand for Eva. The disappointment she experienced when she lost this position despite having all the qualifications, taught her experientially that the acquisition of qualifications does not imply professional development.

Summarizing the period of adulthood, we follow Eva on a developmental path. Her sense of self-efficacy is strengthened through social and professional interaction. She further develops the skills to manage learning and the resources required for lifelong learning, and those skills began to expand and in managing her career. The conflict that occurred between her personal aspirations and the culture of the employment organization put Eva in a situation where she remained for several years and we consider this to be what Illeris (2014) calls regressive learning.

### 3.5 Mature adulthood and learning

Despite the difficulty that exists in separating adulthood from mature adulthood, we believe that the aforementioned crisis marked a change of course and meaning for Eva. Eva's motivations for participating in learning processes have been changed and she recognizes that learning has an impact on her life shift from the professional arena to the realm of personal development. Gradually, she started re-engaging in learning through her hobbies, the crafts she had learned to create from an early age and offered her the joy of discovery, creation and renewal. She chose the learning that will contribute most to her personal development.

After a few years she applied for and occupied a new non-clinical position, with administrative and educational duties. She attends certified seminars related to the subject of the new position. Eva managed to find a way to respond to the challenges again and face the difficulties and now her learning acquired a restorative orientation, according to Illeris (2014) definition. That crisis, however, has left its traces to this day, creating a feeling of insecurity in Eva and of disrespect regarding the contribution of education to professional development:

*I feel this insecurity all the time. That yes, I went, I worked, I tried, but others arrange our fates in there and not with objective criteria. This is what the public (sector) taught me: Not to say my opinion.*

Eva's shift from learning that aimed at enhancing professional skills to learning activities for personal development is also evident in her future plans:

*Enough with the business. Ok. The next step I'm going to take is to go learn dance.*

In an account of the impact of learning on her life Eva says:

*I feel more confident as a person (thanks to learning), but I know that in my workplace this is not recognized. At an objective level it has no impact. I can feel confident that wherever they put me to work in the hospital I will succeed, because I am who I am, because I know what I know, because I like the job, I love it. I will make it. But, it doesn't depend on that. I'm telling you again. They're not looking for people like that at work.*

Eva has realized the empowerment that lifelong learning has given her and that she is now a competitive professional. However, this empowerment does not provide her with coverage against a possible harmful change in her professional situation:

*In an attack that will happen to me... I will just put my head down and go. I will be saddened like the other times, but I will be forced to go because I feel that I have no other choice financially.*

Eva's self-presentation is of interest, as a person ready for change, even a big one, in all areas of her activity, which she associates with continuous learning:

*In general, I am a person who likes to change, both in my work, and in my life, and in everything, to change as much as I can and to learn as many things as possible. And I think human never stops learning, one way or another.*

In other words, she considers that any kind of transformation presupposes a kind of learning. It is essentially a cycle: learning leads to transformation, which in turn leads to new learning. The motivations of participation in any kind of education are also potential influences on learners lives (Karalis, 2013) and this positive impact consist a new motivation for further learning. In fact, Illeris (2014) argues that the development of learning identity in childhood and adolescence is crucial for the possibility of transformative learning in adults.

Eva also believes that the possession of academic qualifications is considered necessary for professional development. The wider benefits of lifelong learning, such as the cultivation of a developmental culture and the development of social networks and social skills, are recognized by Eva:

*All these programs, in addition to the strictly professional knowledge, I think that they "open" your mind, through social contacts, conversations, contacts with your classmates, your fellow students, the administrative staff. All this teaches you things. It opens your horizons, it opens you socially... it makes you a more sociable person. And all these acquaintances are very important, they are always needed somewhere and help.*

At the end of the interview, Eva makes an assessment of her path, which is tinged with frustration:

*No career... what I gained all these years was of course my independence, my financial self-sufficiency. But, at the level of everyday life, I am left with an anxiety.*

Eventually the acquisition of many academic qualifications related to nursing was for Eva an obstacle for a possible work transition. In the period of mature adulthood, Eva makes more conscious choices, mainly

aimed at empowerment and personal development. Despite the change of direction in her learning choices, we notice that her identity as a lifelong learner is still strong. Learning once again is for Eva a way of life and a means of coping with life's challenges.

#### 4. Discussion

The narrative of Eva's learning experiences confirms Illeris' (2014) position that transformative learning leads to identity transformation, when the emotional dimension of learning is very strong. This element appears not only when a sudden event that changes conditions occurs, such as experiencing a role transition, but also through chronic processes. We saw how Eva's learning path started at a more relaxed pace and gradually progressed towards her full dedication to this development, as if each experience was an internal motivation for the next one. In particular, the distillate from her educational path is related to the educational processes, the structure, the quality and organization of the entire educational system, and general support of the learning process, with means and human resources emphasizing the importance of the learning process (Kedraka & Dimasi, 2016).

In Eva's narrative, we notice that the meaning of learning experiences takes place within a broader context of development. From childhood, the narrator defines herself through her learning abilities and gradually becomes fully autonomous academically. Possessing a perception of constant readiness to learn, she assesses the impact of learning on her life by referring to the more general and significant changes it has brought about in her life. It does not refer to specific knowledge and skills, but to the change of identity and therefore the sense of competence. Illeris (2014) also argues that the change of identity implies a change in self-understanding and therefore in the individual's sense of competence. In fact, he believes that ability is shaped by the interests and strengths of one's identity. Competence is a learning outcome, which gives the individual the ability to autonomously apply his knowledge and skills in practice, something that Eva reports in her narrative.

Most of the changes in Eva's life, as expected, concern the level of personality. Change at the level of personality is the preeminent domain of transformative learning (Illeris, 2014). We notice that the more Eva's feeling that she is a competitive professional is strengthened, the more her competence increases, but also her readiness for further transformation. To be Eva in constant readiness for learning means to be in constant readiness for changes in identity. In order for Eva to respond satisfactorily to the life and work challenges of liquid modernity, she had to be in "learning mode" throughout her life, which refers to a self-regulated meta-competence that shapes self-directed learning (Heslin et al., 2020).

The learning experiences gradually developed Eva's lifelong learning identity, which had a significant influence on the development and transformation of her other identities as well. The interactions between the professional part-identities are considered decisive and need a more thorough investigation. Eva's view of her learning process argues that what learning transforms are elements of identity. The impact of learning in her life was about her self-understanding, self-confidence and self-realization which are the center of identity (Illeris, 2014). An important parameter in the investigation of the way someone gives meaning to his experiences regarding the impact of learning on the development of identity is the understanding of various social and organizational contexts in which learning takes place, which is crucial and necessary in recording the essence of the phenomenon (Kwon et al., 2021).

#### 5. Conclusion

By completing this research, we found that biographical research does provide the ability to give detailed explanations of what people actually experienced as a learning outcome. In the case presented to this article, for example, we were able to identify specifically what new perspectives Eva gained as a result of participating in lifelong learning, as well as what processes she went through to reach such learning outcomes. We were able to identify the kinds of transformations Eva experienced relative to her professional identities or views on the workplace. At last, through biography we were able to report her actual change and understand of distinct social and organizational contexts in which she engaged in transformative learning.

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