Learning Through Life Books: Teaching Human Growth and Development in an Emotionally Rich Community Context

John Korsmo, Jacquelyn Baker-Sennett, and Trula Nicholas
Western Washington University

One challenge experienced by many educators working in pre-professional programs involves designing courses to support students as they learn how to apply subject area knowledge to professional practice. This article describes a successful collaborative community-based project that contextualizes the often abstract and predominately linear theories of human development through the creation of life books for children in the foster care system. The learning activity includes upper division undergraduate Human Services students reviewing case files, contacting, interviewing, and meeting with members of the adoptive child's families, researching the child's medical background, and documenting the child's life story to date. This method supports students' understanding of human development within the context of the systems in which they will be working.

This paper supports the use of community-based teaching methodologies to bring contextual awareness to the classroom. In this paper we outline the implementation of an emotionally rich community-based learning activity in a required Human Development course and describe how this program supports the learning of students in the pre-professions. Collaborating with the Washington State Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), students in our undergraduate Human Services program create "life books" for children who are in the foster care system. This opportunity to engage in an emotionally rich community-based learning experience contextualizes the often abstract and predominately linear theories of human development.

Requisite Courses in Human Growth and Development

Professional preparation programs in fields such as education, social work, counseling, nursing, and human services commonly require courses in human growth and development. National standards for the education and training of human service professionals, board certified and entry-level school counselors, teachers, school social workers, and school psychologists include at least one standard devoted to this subject. The Council for Standards in Human Service Education, for instance, specifies that the curriculum shall include individual human development theory (Council for Standards in Human Services Education, 2005). Similarly, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2002) provides standards for the education and training of practicing school counselors. Standard 3 (Human Growth and Development) states that "accomplished school counselors apply comprehensive, in-depth knowledge of human growth and development to improve student learning and well-being" (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002, p. 34). Likewise, the Council on Social Work Education

(2001) incorporates a standard stating "social work education includes theories and knowledge of biological, sociological, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development across the life span" (Council on Social Work Education, 2001, p. 9). The National Association of School Psychologists' (2000) standards require that "School psychologists have knowledge of human development processes" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2000, p. 15). Finally, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, the accreditation body for nine major counseling areas, includes human growth and development as required curriculum for graduate level practitioners (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2001).

While these organizations and accreditation bodies acknowledge the need for professionals to understand human development, none speak of how best to contextually integrate subject matter knowledge with professional practice. Course texts have traditionally addressed human development theory from psychological perspectives that highlight individual development in-- or compared to-- middle class Caucasian-American culture (Dixon, 2000). With relatively few lifespan development texts approaching development from a pre-professional, multicultural, or contextual perspective (Greenfield & Suzuki, 1998; Paludi, 2002; Rogoff, 2003), it is becoming increasingly important to supplement reading materials with learning activities that capture a more culturally diverse and professionally grounded understanding of lifespan development and provide experiences expanding upon classroom learning (Hugg & Wurdinger, 2007). Given that many pre-service professionals will eventually work with diverse groups of clients in emotionally demanding community-based settings, it is important to provide pre-professional students with the opportunity to make meaning of specific subject matter for their own professional practice (Fox, Katz, Eddins-Folensbee, & Folensbee,

2007; Fusco, 2000; Kolb, 1984; McIntyre, Grout, Jennings, & Poppei, 2001).

One way of helping pre-profesional students acquire a rich understanding of human growth and development is through participation in contextually meaningful and experientially grounded learning activities. Owens and Wang (1996) argue, "Effective learning engages both head and hand and requires both knowing and doing…[and]…decontextualized learning fails to enable students to examine the ideas they bring to the learning situation, to learn from their errors, or to look for patterns [in their thinking and learning] (p. 6). This notion aligns with the extensive literature base relating to experiential education dating back more than a century (e.g. Flexner, 1910; Kolb, 1984; Lewin, 1942, 1946; Thorndike & Woodworth, 1901) and recently advanced by sociocultural and activity theorists who argue that learning results from participation in social and cultural activities that take place in real-world communities of practice (e.g. Chaiklin, Hedegaard, & Jensen, 2003: Rogoff, 2003; Tuomi-Grohn & Engestrom, 2003).

Life Books for Adoption Placement

Life books are a "collection of information about a child's life that includes historical data, recollections, memorabilia, and stories by and about a foster child" (Beste & Richardson, 1981, p. 529). As stated by Backhaus (1984), the life book "generally includes a narrative describing what has happened to the child" (p. 551). More recent sources describe life books as chronological compilations comprised of "photographs, letters, and documents such as birth certificates and report cards…include[ing] a narrative of the child's life" (Holody & Maher, 1996). Holody and Maher (1996) suggest that "Life books are well-established as effective tools for helping children in family foster care cope with past events and future plans" (p. 321).

According to the Washington Department of Social and Health Services (n.d.), the life book serves "primarily [as] a bridge to the adopted child's past. It is a way to help the child understand that what happened [to have him or her removed from the home] is not his or her fault and was beyond the ability of the child to have changed or influenced [his or her past]." Biggert (1978, as cited in Backhaus, 1984, p. 3) explains this by stating:

> So many children in foster care are subject to the trauma of repeated moves and lack continuity in their lives, it is exceptionally difficult for them to develop complete, intact personal identities. The information that forms the foundation for identity is fragmented or absent from their conscious memory. (Backhaus, 1984, p. 552)

According to Backhaus (1984), when a child leaves the foster care system "without the facts about their years in care [the child will] find it virtually impossible to integrate those years into their life experience…life books [are] a tool for establishing continuity" (p. 552).

Creating life books for children who are being adopted through the foster care system in Washington State (USA) has been a requirement for State caseworkers for more than 26 years (D. Gomi, personal communication, June 7, 2006). With a total of 8000 children in licensed foster care and 3,500 children in kinship care (Caseload Forecast Council, 2008), individual caseloads for state adoption workers commonly exceed 30 families per worker (M. Bader-Nesse, personal communication, March 17, 2008). Given this caseload, DCFS workers rarely have the time to complete meaningful life books for children. Based on the actual need for life books to be created, a partnership was launched with DCFS to develop a course assignment that is mutually beneficial for the DCFS office, the children and families receiving the books, and the university students who create the books. The creation of life books has become a powerful and popular service learning experience through which students are able to learn of human development in context by studying an actual child and his or her real life experiences.

Implementation of Assignment

The undergraduate Human Services major at Western Washington University is an interdisciplinary major that prepares students to work primarily in non-profit, government, and educational organizations in direct service positions. Requirements include a course in Human Development and Human Services, typically taken during a student's first or second quarter in the Program. In partnership with the State DCFS offices, students in the course are assigned to create a life book chronicling the life and developmental milestones of a child who is being adopted and the history through which the child came to be placed in foster care or pre-adoption placement.

Four upper-division classes, with a total of 85 students, have created twenty-three life books for children in foster care during a two-year period. Students are oriented to the project by the professor and DCFS staff, who serve as project partners throughout the quarter and are available to address students' questions, help navigate volumes of case materials, and debrief with students. During the first quarter of the project, one of the co-authors of this paper completed a faculty internship assisting the Child Protective Services unit at DCFS and participating in creating life books on-site in the DCFS offices with small groups of students who were involved in the life book

assignment. Additionally, all three authors completed a life book for a child who was in care, working under the same timeline and requirements as the students in the course.

The learning activity includes reviewing case files (frequently more than a thousand pages), contacting, interviewing, and meeting with members of the child's biological, foster, and/or adopting families, researching the child's medical background and biological family history, and documenting the child's life story to date. Scrapbook supplies and materials are provided to the students by the DCFS office. While students are given creative liberty to determine how the information is presented, the life books typically include the following:

• Birth information and statistics (where child was born, date, weight, size, etc.)
• Biological and adoptive family trees/ connections
• Developmental milestones (rolling over, walking, talking, etc.)
• Personal interests/hobbies of the child
• Photos and artifacts (birth photos, birth/death certificates, passports, awards, medical documents, and growth charts)
• Messages from influential people in the child's life (teachers, biological and/or foster family members, case managers, etc.)
• Creative space to add to the life book over time (future oriented)

Students work in small groups of between two and four members to complete the life books. At the end of the quarter, workgroups present the completed life books to other class members and to DCFS staff. In many instances, foster and/or adoptive families attend the presentation with their children and are given their life books directly from the students. During their final presentation of the completed life book, students discuss connections between their child's case and the overall course content, including the literature and classroom lectures and discussions.

Contextualizing Learning

A goal of this learning activity includes supporting students' understanding of human growth and development within the family and community context of the systems in which they will be working. A review of the literature finds that faculty sometimes supplement human development course readings with teaching techniques and activities that include observations, class demonstrations (Corpus & Eisbach, 2005), autobiographical analysis (New, 1996), case studies (Sudzina, 2000), service learning opportunities (Lundy, 2007), panels of discussants representing different age-groups (Vacha-Haasce, 1996), and

improvisational role play and performances (Fusco, 2000). It is reported that these methods result in deeper understanding of course content (Corpus & Eisbach, 2005), higher exam scores, and increases in emotional empathy (Grant, 2001; Lundy, 2007).

Our course engages students in community-based learning specifically to support understanding of the complexities of human growth and development. Community-based learning is grounded in cognitive research and used in many forms (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Carter, Cadge, Rivero, & Curran, 2002; Cooper, 2007; and Sleeter, 2001) including "field trips, observational projects, service learning projects, [and] community-based internships" (Carter et al, 2002, p. 158). In this vein, we are using the collaborative engagement with DCFS to provide pre-service interaction in the environments where many of our students will be working in the future. Students consistently report the value of embedding their learning within a contextually rich learning assignment. As one student described in a written reflection,

I have taken many Human Development classes over my college career [and] have been assigned reading on many theorists such as Freud, Piaget, Vygotsky, and many others. Even an occasional presentation was required for the class. However, none of my previous Human Development classes have given me an opportunity like the life book assignment. It provided a tangible experience where we could see firsthand what we learn about every day. Not everything we learned about in class is represented in the assignment, but we were able to take an individual and look in depth at different stages of their life. The life book assignment provided an outlet to look at the development of an individual and gave me an opportunity to apply concepts to an individual's life. To add to everything, this assignment evokes some emotion because looking at the history of this individual brings up different feelings. (Post-project student reflection paper)

This student's perspective is echoed in numerous ways by other students' accounts of enthusiasm for learning of human development experientially, in the context of their chosen practice. The life book project has been viewed by students as a substantive supplement to traditional classroom-based learning. As one student noted,

It allowed for me to make connections between what we were learning in class and reality, something we don't get the opportunity to do often. It provided the group a sense of purpose to the

class and its applicability to the human services field. (Post-project student reflection paper)

Emotional Foundations of Learning About the Life Course

With the goal of contextualizing learning through an emotionally rich pre-professional experience, we aim to support undergraduate students as they prepare for the emotional, social, and cognitive demands of applying their learning of human development to their future professional practice. The life book learning experience is intentionally designed to support students' understanding of the emotional aspects they will encounter when providing services to children, families, and communities in real world settings. It is designed with the intent that students will retain and understand how to apply course concepts when information is reinforced through an emotionally salient learning experience. The course is intentionally placed early in the sequence of learning to give prerequisite knowledge and opportunities to experience real-world, emotionally laden situations as a group, prior to moving into the field independently as an intern.

Our expectations are guided by research in the area of cognition, learning, and memory (Davidson, McFarland, & Glisky, 2006; Neisser & Libby, 2000) as well as pedagogically oriented investigations with pre-service teachers such as that conducted by Grant (2001), who followed pre-service teachers as they participated as literacy tutors in a service learning project. Grant (2001) found that very successful tutors could be distinguished from less successful tutors by the way they understood the complex relationship between emotions and learning. Similarly, research by Lundy (2007) found that students in a life-span development course who participated in an emotionally rich, community-based service learning experience scored significantly higher on course exams and emotional empathy assessments than students who participated in other project options such as interviews or a course research project.

Remarks from the students who engaged in the life book project indicate that this was indeed an emotionally rich learning experience, with students consistently self-reporting both an increased understanding of course content and a high degree of emotional empathy. As one student noted,

> [The project] was a very emotional experience for us. We have never experienced so many traumas [sic] and misfortunes in our lives than "Joshua" has experienced in just his four short years of life. The strongest feeling of empathy, sorrow, and anger came over me. I wanted to do everything to help this child and ensure that he is going to be in a

better living environment. (Post-project student reflection paper)

To assess student perceptions of learning as a result of participation in the life book assignment, a combination of pre- and post- questionnaires with five Likert-scale questions and three open-ended questions was developed. The questionnaires asked students their opinions about the efficacy of life books in connecting adopted children to their past, the degree to which the assignment was positive and useful, the degree to which the assignment was emotionally challenging, and perspectives of how the assignment aided each student in learning about his or her own development. Students reported via the pre-project questionnaire that they expected to gain a heightened sense of self-awareness through the life book assignment. For instance, all responding students (n=80) reported that they believed the assignment would help them learn about their own development, with 46% somewhat agreeing and 43% strongly agreeing. Upon completion of the project, on the post- project questionnaire (n=41), 61% of students indicated that the assignment had been 'emotionally challenging' (37% slightly agree and 24% strongly agree).

In addition to the pre- and post-project questionnaires, more in-depth qualitative data was obtained through reflection papers (generally 4 to 6 pages) that described what and how students learned about lifespan development by completing the project. The emotionality of the assignment was prevalent in these reflection papers as students frequently reported a "roller coaster" of emotions, with a cycle of initial excitement about the prospect of obtaining experience in the field, stress related to completing the assignment in a community setting, and multiple emotions associated with reading and learning about family tragedies and egregious acts perpetrated on children.

Reflection papers frequently opened with statements such as: "The life book project was an extremely emotional process"; "I was really excited about doing the life book, unfortunately my excitement turned into frustration"; "More so than any other project, this has evoked the most stress, but has [been] the most rewarding as well"; and "Overwhelmed was the feeling I had throughout the life book. I was overwhelmed with excitement….because we were finally able to do something helpful and meaningful, rather than just learning in a classroom setting." Some students described their learning experience as being emotionally difficult and painful. Reading voluminous case files about children who were frequently removed from their homes for shocking and heinous acts inflicted on them, and who were sometimes 'bounced' from one placement to another,

took its toll on the students. The personal nature of the assignment was frequently cited as influential in tempering the degree to which students were emotionally engaged in the process of learning. Using such analogies as 'roller coasters,' 'waves,' and 'storms' of emotions, students expressed a general pattern of experiencing excitement, anxiety, fear, intimidation, empowerment, and joy as their assignment progressed and they learned about human development through the life of a child and his or her families.

The range of emotions experienced through the project, together with the ultimate satisfaction of having both learned the intended content matter and having made a lasting contribution, is well stated in the following segment of a final reflection paper:

A life book is in essence the story of someone's life. The creation of one, for someone who is unknown is a daunting and extremely rewarding task. It has caused me many mixed emotions but at the same time a wonderful sense of excitement, both in anticipation of what the girl who we created the book for will think as well as for myself. The process has been a long one, but it is not an experience that I would trade for anything. I found it to be one of the most rewarding things I have done…

When I first heard of the project, my initial reaction was excitement. Here I was in my major, and I was getting to do a real life project in a real life human services position. I felt like I was getting a real [professional] experience with this…My initial excitement faded away the first time I set foot in DSHS …I became overwhelmed…I sunk lower and lower into my chair…Looking into the case files of our little girl was the most daunting thing I had ever done. I could feel my stomach twist in knots. It was so hard…she had been through so much. I experienced so much frustration and anger that day. Her life was something that I had, until that point, only read about in text books…I was close to tears….but this is an experience I would not trade for anything…The glimpse that I have had into this girls' life has had a tremendous impact on my own life… (Post-project student reflection paper)

Learning about Human Development

As indicated in the post-project questionnaire, according to 73% of respondents, the life book assignment helped them learn about human development across the lifespan. Similarly, 88% of the respondents either slightly or strongly agreed (20% and 68% respectively) with the statement "Our life book assignment has been a positive learning experience for me." The qualitative data obtained through student reflection papers has generated insights into both the *product* and *process* of students' learning about human growth and development in a community-based context. Using a grounded approach to identifying categories, or common themes and characteristic features of the students' experience (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994), we identified areas of both *what* students learned and *how* they learned it. While explaining the learning process, one student expressed, "The life book project was something completely new and unique to my learning experience. I had never before been given the opportunity to be so hands-on with a real situation that directly pertained to what I was interested in." Numerous students echoed the significance of learning about children and families through the life book experience. The following segment from a student reflection paper is presented to provide a closer look into the process of learning through the eyes of a student:

The life book project gave me the opportunity to deal with an actual child and see everything that he has been through. I was shocked by some of the stories that I heard and determined to create a meaningful book for this child in his new life. As I set out on this quest to complete this project I had no idea what I would find or how it would eventually affect me….Although parts of this project were difficult, I thoroughly enjoyed the whole process….This project has really had an impact on me. People are always talking about how resilient children are, but to actually be able to see the extent of this boy's resilience was rewarding…. This project was amazing and […] I liked that I received the opportunity to see a child grow. I wish that every class allowed me to interact with children like this. (Post-project student reflection paper)

With regard to what was learned, students frequently expressed a deeper understanding of early childhood and adolescent development and issues surrounding attachment, bonding, relationships, identity, and developmental transitions. While considering such aspects of human development, one student reported, "Another issue that came to mind as we constructed the life book was the issue of attachment and social relationships…I feel that since he was placed with his grandparents and previously had a lot of experience with them, it most likely made the transition a lot easier."

Students were also able to develop an understanding of the socio-cultural and ecological contexts of development in relationship to biological contributions. One student stated, "Stories of abuse, medical neglect, and health problems brought me back to our reading about lifespan development and how environmental influences at a young age can drastically impact children." Another example of the consideration of the concept of nature versus nurture is evident in the following segment of a student reflection paper:

> After doing some further research about "Jim's" biological father, we came to discover that his dad was a talented musician. An interesting connection to this fact is that "Jim" has shown a passion towards music. His foster mother mentioned that he loves to make different sounds and uses anything as an instrument to make music…I remembered in class one day, we had an open discussion about this very idea. How did each of us come to be skilled in certain hobbies? Did we get these talents from our parents or somewhere else? Jim has never met his father…he has never even heard of his existence. It would be fascinating to see when Jim gets older whether he will follow in his father's footsteps toward music. (Post-project student reflection paper)

Emphasis was given to differences in normative and non-normative development, particularly regarding children who were born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and affects from other types of substance use by the biological mother during pregnancy. Many of the children who were recipients of life books had been severely physically or sexually abused and/or neglected by family members and caregivers, leaving them with physical and emotional consequences. Learning about abuse and neglect in a community-based setting allows students to put textbook principles into practice and assists them in making professional connections between family and community contexts and human growth and development.

One theme that has emerged from the implementation of the life book project is a general appreciation from participating students for the relevance of the assignment to the profession. Students report the life book assignment as relating directly to the work they plan to perform in the field, blending areas of research, interviewing, and case management with a conceptual understanding of risk and resiliency and various aspects of human development and growth across the lifespan. For many students, this assignment was their first experience working with "real" clients, and they experienced first-hand what it is like to directly influence the life of another human being in the helping professions. Often, the highlight of the class came for students when they were able to present the life book to the child and his/her family at the end of the quarter.

Our experiences with the life book learning activity, based on the perceptions of students and course outcomes, indicate that this contextually based learning activity provides pre-service professionals with an understanding of the complexities of human development across the lifespan. Perhaps more salient than the assessments of the efficacy of the life book project as a learning tool, determined by faculty members, are the sentiments of learning as perceived by the students. In the words of one such learner,

> Because this Human Development class was about applying what you learned to the people and community around you, the experience will stick with me for a long time. Knowing the ideas the theorists come up with is good but knowing how to apply it and hold onto it will help me even better in life and my future career. All the class assignments and discussions made me think about knowledge gained in previous classes and how I can use it to work with people in all stages of their developmental growth. (Post-project student reflection paper)

Given the mutual benefits to the students, the professor, the DCFS staff, and the adopting families, the life book project is now in its third year and is becoming institutionalized within DCFS and within the Human Services curriculum. Not only has the implementation of this project offered a way to help students make meaning of the often decontextualized learning that takes place in human development courses, it also provides important opportunities for acculturation into professional practice shortly after students enter their major. By embedding the life book project within the broader scope and sequence of the curriculum, students have the opportunity to engage with clients early on. They are also able to understand and translate professional artifacts such as case records and child/family assessments for the foster children who will be recipients of life books. Students have the opportunity to learn about the lives of foster children and the professionals who work with them while also obtaining an understanding of how content and theories related to human development are incorporated into professional practice, and it becomes clear through this project that an understanding of human development is necessary but not sufficient for successful work with children, families, and professionals.

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JOHN KORSMO is an Assistant Professor of Human Services at Western Washington University. John's scholarly interests relate to youth and family systems, and their development in context. This theme includes field-based service provision and systems of care that support – or hinder- the development and growth of people in poverty. A focus is on youth work, and youth worker education – particularly related to serving youth in situations of poverty and social injustice; family culture and development and; issues relating to effective use, and misuse, of privilege. John can be reached at john.korsmo@wwu.edu.

JACQUELYN BAKER-SENNETT is Associate Professor of Human Services at Western Washington University, with areas of teaching and scholarship focusing on human services and childhood studies. Ongoing research examines sociocultural processes of children's learning and development in real-world contexts. Jacquelyn can be reached at bakersj@wwu.edu.

TRULA NICHOLAS is an Assistant Professor of Human Services at Western Washington University with teaching and scholarship focusing on community well-being. Specific interests include community organizing and development, experiential education, and the health of the nonprofit sector. Trula can be reached at Trula.Nicholas@wwu.edu.