

Lifebook Reaction

Amber N. French

Western Washington University

Creating the lifebook was an incredible experience this quarter. This project enhanced my awareness of working within the human services field at Child Protective Services (CPS) and showed me the relationship between learning about human development and being able to apply it to a real person. Having this ability is going to be essential when working in the field and I feel it is wonderful that it has been incorporated in this course.

Reading through the case files at Child Protective Services about my child and his family really showed me what it takes to work in the human service field. The case notes were full of information and details about family visits and reports. I was surprised with how many volumes there were and how much information was frequently repeated within each one. Looking back, it makes sense to have certain information in the file at different points, depending on what the paperwork is about, to provide some background information. It was also interesting to learn more about the process families go through when they are put into the system; there is quite a bit more work than I expected put into each piece of paper that was filed.

Learning about my child through his case files at CPS as well as speaking with him in person, allowed me to relate what we learned in class about human development to a real person, currently working through a legal system within the field of human services. It was thought-provoking to compare what I was learning about in class to what I was reading about in the case file. At the beginning I had a preconceived idea that working with him, an adolescent growing into an adult, was going to be more difficult than if he were still a child. I had the idea that he wouldn't be as interested, or as willing, to tell me and my partner about himself and what he wanted to be included.

In our text book “Life-Span Human Development” by Carol K. Sigelman and Elizabeth A. Rider, adolescents are described as being intensely focused on their physical self, how they experience puberty, as well as significant moral growth. It is common to see changes in attitude as well as physical appearance. Due to all of the changes I know my lifebook child has experienced coming into adolescence, and now almost reaching adulthood, I was not surprised to understand he relates most to Kohlberg’s conventional level of moral development. After having been through a tough childhood and being under the stress of the legal systems he is a part of, I can recognize why he has more of this mentality. When I spoke with him he was already familiar with what he wanted to do as a career, he seemed to have a good mindset on goals for his life and what he wanted to do, and according to Kohlberg, this is also when an individual will begin to make decisions based around the moral standards they were raised with. I have no doubt that my lifebook child will turn into a successful person with excellent moral judgment.

Each week being required to relate the course material to the development of my child was beneficial for me. It helped me to look at each bit of development and really relate to it while analyzing another person and how it has played a part in their life. This allowed me to be able to relate it to my personal life as well and understand how I think, act, and learn. I was able to reflect on myself and learn that I can relate much to Kohlberg’s conventional level of moral development and Piaget’s formal operations stage of cognitive development. I can think abstractly, rationally, and form idealistic decisions based around social norms and moral standards I was raised with. One of the biggest decisions I believe I have made using both of these models was my choice to go into the human services profession and prepare by attending school here at Western Washington University. I find it intriguing to think about how I came to many of the decisions I have made over the years and how much of an influence my experiences

were. It's also enjoyable to be able to relate them all to models and theories we have discussed in class or read about.

At the beginning I thought creating the lifebook was incredibly intimidating. I am not entirely sure if it was because we were working to create this scrapbook for a real person or if it seemed like too much to handle over the quarter. Whatever the reason was, I was wrong to think it was going to be anything but a wonderful opportunity to grow and learn. Reading through the case files and piecing together information was the most difficult part. There were so many pieces to fit into the puzzle and so little time to get it done. After a couple weeks of reading and flipping through the folders my partner and I finally had some information to work with. There was a lot about his family and what happened with them over the years but there wasn't a whole lot to work with as far as creating the lifebook. We still didn't know much about him. This is why it became very beneficial to meet with our child and to speak with him to get a better understanding of what he wanted in it and what he was like. Once we got to meet I was able to see how he has grown from his experiences and how they shaped him over the years. This is one of the reasons I am happy I had an older child to work with rather than one who was 4 or 5 years old. Gathering information from him was quite difficult though; he didn't want to talk much about his past and didn't want to think about it either. He reacted better when we focused the topic on him currently or what his goals were in the future. I didn't find this to be surprising because I too have been through some tough experiences and choose not to focus on them. This being said, I was able to understand that his experiences have influenced him to do better in life and to improve rather than let them hold him back. He was excited to be adopted and to move on with his life and continue to grow. I can see that he has an excellent mind set socially and morally and he only has more great decisions to make ahead of him.

When it came down to actually creating the book it was more difficult than I had planned. There weren't any materials that could be used for an older teenage boy. Most of the paper, stickers, and decorations were for girls; this made it a bit more complicated and I had to be more creative than I had originally anticipated. Thankfully my partner and I were able to come up with some artistic ideas of how to make it work and get the information he wanted while keeping the book looking appealing and interesting. There were a lot of challenges when creating the lifebook because my child didn't want many of the required material, my partner and I had conflicting schedules, contacting the case managers proved to be problematic, and there were very few available materials. Even though there were mountains to climb my partner and I knew we had to put our best foot forward and do everything we could to make it work out well in the end. Every life has its obstacles and mountains; the power to get over them is what makes all the difference.

Moving on from this experience I think my lifebook child, my partner, and I will all continue to grow. I predict he will not show much reaction or enthusiasm when receiving the book, but if he chooses to keep, as the years pass he will greatly appreciate the memories it brings along with it. Reflection on the experience is key to growth; he may not understand this now, but as he grows morally and cognitively, he will make decisions that may have been influenced by the lifebook activity. I feel everyone involved in this project, within the context of our class and the families we are making the books for, will grow and be more appreciative of what we have in our lives and better understand what influences our decisions. Personally, this project has brought out much needed awareness in the human services field and has been a necessary experience teaching me to understand how everything in life is interconnected. Creating the lifebook and working with the case files was an experience I am grateful to have.

References:

Sigelman, Carol K. & Rider, Elizabeth A. (2009). Life-span human development. (6th edition).

K. Makarewycz & M. Molcan, (eds.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.