*Developmental Context*

*Students will demonstrate knowledge of the multiple environmental contexts in which children grow and develop, and will be able to analyze systems that support children’s well-being.*

Throughout my college career I have taken multiple courses in which we have examined the complexities of the multiple environmental contexts in which children grow and develop. Prior to attending California State University, Chico I truly did not have an in-depth definition or concept of differing environmental contexts and their influence on children’s development. We need to be conscious of the fact that differing social classes, family structures, and other influences have a huge impact on a child’s development. Through my vast variety of undergraduate coursework, I now wonder how I could have been so naive in my lack of awareness of the role of multiple environmental contexts in the daily lives and development of children.

The impact of environmental contexts can begin as early as during prenatal development. If a child’s family is of a low socioeconomic status they may not be collecting a large enough income to feed themselves properly. If a mother is malnourished, she is not providing the essential nutrients to allow her child the opportunity to reach their optimal development. Some potential negative developmental side effects from malnourishment during pregnancy could include low birth weight, central nervous system damage, lower brain weight, organ damage, cognitive impairment, stunted growth, and even miscarriage.

The environmental context of family structure can also impact a child’s development greatly. In today’s society, the family structure has merged away from nuclear families as the dominant structure to now having a higher percentage of single parent households. Being a single parent means not only more responsibility as a parent but also financially. Single parents may have to work extensive hours at work to gain an income that supports the basic needs of their families. This responsibility leaves not only less time at home with their child, but also potentially additional stress from their workplace that may unintentionally influence their relationship with their child.

This is not to say that only single parents are faced with such circumstances. Single parents, nuclear families, parents of all education levels, and families of every race are faced with challenges that may lead to the entanglement of a variety of not ideal environmental contexts. If a family is faced with economic hardships, they may not be able to have their children attend the best schools or they may live in neighborhoods that are not the safest. By not having access to the best schools, children are placed at the disadvantage of not receiving a stimulating education that would have potentially fostered a positive growth, independence, and passion for learning. If children are raised in a neighborhood that may not be potentially safe, they are exposed to both individuals and situations that could have a lasting impact on their overall development.

As professionals that work in the field of Child Development, we need to be aware of the differing environmental context layers that are present in the lives of the children and families we work with. These environmental contexts may not always be visible to the naked eye, but it is our role as professionals to always be observant to all aspects of each child’s life. Whether conflicts may be present within the microsystem level (i.e. a child’s relationship with immediate family members), or even within the exosystem (i.e. stresses brought back home due to conflicts that may occur at a parent’s workplace), each and every environmental context has a lasting imprint on a child’s growth and development.

In a Children in a Changing World course, I was able to choose a nonfictional book to read for a course assignment. This book was titled Girl Solider: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda’s Children, and this book encompassed the journey of a young female’s experience of being forced into the role of a child soldier in Northern Uganda. After the completion of the book, we were required to write a paper that reflected a summary of the book as a whole, compare direct quotes from the book with course materials, and conclude the paper with a personal reflection. I decided to provide this paper as supporting evidence because it demonstrates how multiple levels of a young girl’s environmental context influenced her growth, development, and overall life experiences. I found this assignment to be so powerful because it opened my eyes to environmental contexts so different than my own and so unlike anything I could have ever imagined.

In an Access and Equity in Education course, we were provided with the opportunity to create a poem, in a PowerPoint format, that incorporated 1) where we ourselves came from and 2) environmental contexts that surround our daily existence. It was my decision to place this poem as supporting evidence because I felt as if it allowed me to take my preexisting knowledge of environmental contexts, and then use this knowledge in a creative way to illustrate the complexity of the world around us. It was an assignment that encouraged me to break the mold of traditional writing assignments, and instead provide the audience with a personal reflection of my interpretation of the multidimensional global context of the world surrounding all of us.