Life-course development defines the change that a species experiences through its lifetime, from conception to death. As John Santrock (2004) explains, “the study of life-span development is provocative, intriguing, and informative. The life-span perspective offers insights into who we are, how we came to be this way, and where our future will take us” (Santrock, 2004, p. 7). In combining many disciplines of psychological study, life-course development focuses on developmental change not just through childhood but also adulthood. (Birren & Schaie, 2001; Overton, 2003; Salthouse, 2000). The life-course perspective is, according to life-span development expert Paul Baltes (1987, 2000), “lifelong, multidimensional, multidirectional, plastic, multidisciplinary, and contextual, and involves growth, maintenance, and regulation. (Santrock, 2004, p. 9).

The tensions between nature and nurture, continuity and discontinuity, and stability and change define perhaps the most important issues, and reveal perhaps the most important questions, in the study of life-course development vis-à-vis theories of learning and development. For instance, is development primarily influenced by nature’s biological inheritance or by nurture’s environmental experiences? Is development a gradual process that continues over a cumulative lifetime or a series of distinct and discontinuous stages? And, at the issue’s very core, is life-course development best described by the simplified definers of stability or change, that is, “the degree to which we become older renditions of our early experience or instead
develop into someone different from who we were at an earlier point in development” (Santrock, 2004, p. 24)?

Considering the complexity of life-course development and how it impacts learning, it is necessary to acknowledge the quintessential element of context in learning. As Sonia Nieto (1999) states in *The Light in Their Eyes*, “a comprehensive view of learning needs to include multiple factors: curricular and pedagogical approaches, strategies, programs, and policies, and also less tangible factors such as the ideologies, attitudes, and behaviors of teachers and students. All of these factors can promote or impede student learning” (Nieto, 1999, p. 1). Nieto’s belief is that there are five interrelated principles of learning beyond developmental concerns that can impinge on learning, and these consider learning from a sociocultural and sociopolitical perspective: “learning is actively constructed; learning emerges from and builds on experience; learning is influenced by cultural differences; learning is influenced by the context in which it occurs; and learning is socially mediated and develops within a culture and community” (Neito, 1999, p. 3).

Social context influences learners and learning at all points on the continuum of life-course development, particularly socio-emotional, cognitive, and cultural social-cognitive transactions. According to Mary Gauvain (2001) in *The Social Context of Cognitive Development*, “For the organism, who must develop and function as a unified social-emotional-intellectual whole, the interrelation of these three aspects of development is crucial to everyday activity” (Gauvain, 2001, p. 6). Continuing to explore the value of understanding social context, White and Siegel (1984) wrote: “The contexts in which children live are, with minor exceptions, social contexts…To understand cognitive development across time and space requires seeing it deeply embedded in a social world of occasions, formalities, etiquettes, and dramaturgy” (White
and Siegel, 1984, p. 239). Lastly, Gauvain (2001) explains, “cognitive development is the process by which basic biological capabilities are shaped in ways that fit with the social context in which these capabilities will be used. In essence, the human biological system is coordinated with the social context in ways that ensure certain patterns of growth” (Gauvain, 2001, p. 45).

Finally, understanding and accepting the interplay between cognition and culture is at the core of life-course development. As noted in Adolescents’ Worlds: Negotiating Family, Peers, and School, it is important to focus on, “the individual as mediator and integrator of meaning and experience in contrast to single-context approaches that compartmentalize aspects of adolescents’ lives—those studies that examine peer group, family, and school variables independently of one another” (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998, p. 4). The Students’ Multiple Worlds Model is developed with the notion that the concept of culture is central to learning, for it, “refers to people’s values and beliefs, expectations, actions, and interactions, as well as the meanings people construct about what is appropriate, inappropriate, normative, and aberrant. In short, cultural knowledge is what people need to know in order to think, act, and behave appropriately (Spindler, 1982, 1987)” (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998, p. 7). The Students’ Multiple Worlds Model correctly places self at its epicenter, with family, school, and peers, along with the transitions amongst them and the larger socioeconomic community, as the key social-cognitive, correlational and developmental building blocks to life-course development and learning.
References


