|  |
| --- |
|  |
| Developmental Autobiography Paper |
| EAD 723 |
|  |
| **Priscilla J. Ayala** |
| **11/2/2010** |

|  |
| --- |
|  |

There are many experiences that one encounters in his or her lifetime, but truly, a handful of these experiences are significant enough to leave an impact on our lives, whether positive or negative, in regards to how we think, feel, and react. It is safe to say that these experiences have had a hand in shaping the person who we are today. With these experiences, in conjunction with the things that we are taught growing up, is what leads to our development as an individual; cognitively, spiritually and how we view ourselves and the world. We take these experiences to heart, and refer back to them, as we go through a process or reacting, acting and delivering when faced when situations. These experiences, whether good or bad can lead to the makeup of our identity, and our internal perceptions.

Upon arriving at Missouri State for the very first time, I was very much lost, confused and scared. Being a first generation college student, I never had any one in front of me to show me what or how to do things in regards to the college process, so I was at the mercy of my mentor, who encouraged me to interact with several people, like upperclassmen and the graduate assistant in her office. These people took me under their wing, and showed me the ropes of the university. Being the perceptive girl that I am, I refused to be left behind without knowing how to defend myself in the new jungle I found myself in. Being thrown into this experience was a new change, but had a positive impact on me, which challenged me to go beyond what I knew to embrace and unleash new competencies. As the academic year began, so did my new journey as a freshman. My parents could not help me; neither could my friends, and my community that has always supported me were miles and miles away. I had to start over, and build a new support system, that was going to help me throughout the new process. I forced myself to ask questions in order to find my way throughout my undergraduate experience, in order stay on top of the surface and not drown. I made my presence known in the financial aid office and the multicultural student services office. I sought resources, like the TRIO program, and consulted my mentors in search of scholarships for the next semesters. Although I had much help, my first year was still a scary and a critical point in my life. Not only was I supposed to figure many things on my own, such as financial aid and learning effective study habits, but I also had to make sure that I was able to distract my mind from missing home (parents, friends, and Kansas City).

To be productive, I fully emerged myself in as many activities and organizations as I could. This gave me the ability to make friends and make my campus my new home. I always enjoyed being involved in high school, and coming to college, I became involved on campus, which made me feel like I was part of the extended community of Missouri State. I felt less homesick. I believe that this reflects off the Schlossberg’s Transition Theory in regards to the Four S’s with *Self* which is personal and demographic characteristics that affect how I viewed life and the my outside factors such as socioeconomic status and culture played a role in my transition. Also the *Support* piece which is compromised of my support system, such as my relationships, family units, networks of friends, and my stable supports that made my transition easier and harder at the same time. (Evans, 2010 p. 217). In regards to Schlossberg transition Model, I believe that of this new stage in my life, I was in the moving out phase through this process.

Being involved on campus helped me to deal with the everyday pressures of being a minority at a big university. I felt as if my voice was lost in a sea of people, and sometimes felt like I did not have the support or courage I needed in order to make my presence or voice known in a classroom. The majority of the student body was white, and being the only Latina, I felt out of place, especially in my classes. The ratio was literally 1 to 25 in every class I attended, not including the sprinkle of other minority students or international students here and there. I felt alone, overwhelmed, and less competent than my peers because it always felt like they had an advantage over me, in regard to great study habits, preparation skills, and didn’t have to deal with the overwhelming feeling of feeling alone.

As the only Latina in class, it made me have a lot of internal pressures that I had to work through while I was in class next to my peers. This feeling can be evaluated through stage two of Phinney’s Model of Ethnic Identity development which is called Ethnic Identity Search/ Moratorium. In this stage, there is a recognition of my identity as a Latina, and my significance in my classroom but is characterized by “emotional intensity, where the individual will encompasses anger toward the dominant group and guilt or embarrassment about one’ s own past lack of knowledge of racial and ethnic issues this.” (Evans 2010 p. 278). This does relate so much to how I was feeling in the classroom. I was not so much embarrassed or angry, but felt like I had to hold a lot of weight for not only my family, but for the rest of my Latino community because I was it. I was perhaps the first Latino that my peers (as well as my professor) have known, seen, so it was also important to make a good and lasting impression for my own reputation and for the sake of my Latino community that I associate myself with. I felt pressured because if I failed, or slacked off, then I was going to let down a lot of people within my community, or feed into negative stereotypes that my peers might already have had.

In order to gain a sense of peace and support became my reason why I became so involved in several multicultural organizations, and why these organizations became part of my essence, my identity. These multicultural organizations became my identity, and indeed helped me to develop further my ethnic identity. Ethnic Identity can be defined as the association that is developed from a shared culture, religion, geography, and language of individuals, who are often connected by strong loyalty and kinship. (Guardia et al. 2008). Ethnic identity is based off of the identity development models of Erik Erikson, the identity formation studies of Marcia and the cognitive structural work of Jean Piaget, focusing on the psychosocial process of defining self while acknowledging the cognitive complexity of the self definition process (Chavez et al. 1999). My engagement in these organizations became the unique part of me,

It is also important to note that identity development during college influences how students adapt to and manage their college experience, but this is different for ethnically diverse students because their formation of ethnic identity is based on one’s sense of self as part of an ethnic group. (Torres, 2003) In fact Torres claims that this self-identification is mitigated by the choices made between the American and Latino cultures, which makes Latino college student identity development different than any other college student. (Torres, 2003)

Because I love my culture so much, I, very much wanted to be involved on campus with my Latino culture as I was in high school. This gave me fulfillment, a purpose, and made me feel like home. Developing my ethnic identity made it easier for me to find a sense of comfort with where I was at currently in my life. It was important for me to find a Spanish Catholic church, and join organizations that allowed me to be proud of my heritage. I joined the Hispanic American Leadership Organization (HALO) and became part of the planning committee for Hispanic heritage month, including talent shows where I was able to display my talents as a folkloric dancer and poet. I knew that being involved allowed me to pick the momentum back up again from what I was doing in Kansas City. I needed diversity because it was my escape and safe haven when I was insecure in class. This stage can be referred to Phinney’s Ethnic Identity Development stage three called Ethnic Identity Achievement which is characterized by a clear and confident sense of one’s ethnicity. (Torres, 2003). Although I had encountered my first bi-cultural experiences when I was younger does not diminish that I am still able to categorize myself in Torres Bi-Cultural model, in its second orientation called the Latino/ Hispanic Orientation, which indicated my greater comfort with the culture of origin of my parents at this time. (Torres, 2003).

It is amazing to see the process that I went through as a freshman, and the changes that have altered my identity, but in this case, these factors forced me to cling on even more tightly to my culture. According to Vasti Torres findings during her research on Latino students, she was able to develop the concept of the situating identity, which is determined by two factors: the starting point of identity development when students start college and where they are in their identity process because of influences. (Torres, 2003). She also investigated how family influences and generational status can result in a person’s, a Latina’s identity development.

Although I am not first generation in the United States, I am first generation American citizen of two Colombian parents. According to Torres, students who are the first generation in the United States struggled with the unknown expectations of the college environment. Though all students make some adjustments, first generation students struggle to balance the college expectations with those of their parents. (Torres, 2003) According to Torres, she claims that Latino students do not all begin college with the unexamined ethnic identities , but the influences of where they grew up, their generational status in the United States, and self perception of societal status play a major role in situating their identity. (Torres, 2003).

Feeling confident in my Latino ethnicity and identity, I was to strive for me. I was unhappy with how the organizations were run, and how little emphasis was placed on Hispanic heritage month, or issues concerning Latinos. Thus, I decided to head up these organizations in my sophomore year. My sophomore year was my most successful year because I became the president of Hispanic American Leadership Organization. My vice-president (my best friend), and I single handedly reformatted and restructured the organization, bringing the organization from an inactive five people group to a 25-30 membership active organization on campus, with nothing to base the organization from. HALO became visible and was well run. I wanted everyone to feel just as passionate and proud as I did, about my culture. I also wanted and needed to make our Latino voice heard and known on campus. We were here, and not leaving. Along with this, I worked alongside the Hispanic heritage month planning committee, and became a co-chair where I restructured the committee and events, bringing the bigger picture of what we could bring to campus. I was excited for the month, and wanted to go big for the month, thus I incorporated dialogue series, an opening ceremony, and many more events. I felt a sense of accomplishment. To be able to bring two organizations back to life, with the efforts of my committee and myself, I felt valued and appreciated. I felt like if I could do this, then I can do just about anything. Being a part of my community, celebrating my culture, taking pride in my heritage, and being in leadership positions really allowed me to feel confident in my classes, and gave me the courage to be able to network and feel more at ease with my peers in the classroom settings. I continued this momentum, and kept networking and joining organizations. Through this, I met so many people in my life who have influenced me and have truly become lifelong friends. Through these efforts, I truly became a part of the university and a member of my community. Due to my personality, I am a people person, and need to be social and active in order for me to fully function. This stage in my life can be reflected with Erikson’s Identity Development theory, in stage five, called the identity versus identity diffusion (confusion). In this stage, my ego identity is developed through external recognition, and involvement leading to confidence and purpose. (Evans, 2010. P. 50)

The worst experiences I can think of is when I lost my scholarship and changed my major. When I first discovered that I had lost my scholarship due to my GPA, which dropped because I was more focused on my extracurricular activities versus my studies. I had to do drop my extracurricular activities in order to concentrate on my studies. Not only did I drop my extracurricular activities and leadership positions, but I had to pick up multiple jobs to make ends meet with my tuition. This affected me majorly because I did not feel like I had anything to contribute anymore and felt like something was stripped from me. This made me realize that being a part of something definitely became a part of me. Once I was able to balance my extracurricular activities and school, I became active again and felt like I was able to be useful once more. I would evaluate myself in Marcia Ego Identity statuses, in the Identity Achievement (crisis/commitment) status. Due to the fact that I lost my scholarship, became my reality, and crisis. Through this crisis was I able to sort through alternatives and make crucial choices that lead to strong commitments in setting goals to myself, to create a firm foundation. (Evans, 2010. p. 54)

Throughout my undergraduate experience, I had mixed feelings with choosing a major. I believe had I had the opportunity to have had prior experience in my high school career, or in my beginning years at Missouri State, I would have had a grasp of what I wanted to do and choose as my field of study. I always felt like I was a few steps behind the rest of my peers because they were at an advantage. While I was learning the intricacies of how to college and effective studying habits was supposed to work, my peers around me had started off on the right foot and were able to concentrate on other things such as the career they wanted to pursue and what internships they needed for their field of study. I was dealing with being first generation, unprepared, and perhaps culture shock. Piaget explained developmental growth as accommodating discrepancies between one’s thinking and the new information to form more complex perspectives, where concern was based on a perception of ability rather than actual academic ability. (Torres et al. 2004). According to studies, members of many international and minority groups experience a hard time in the classroom, by having to consciously negotiate and even survive educational treatment of invisibility or negative ultra-visiability, lowered expectations, stereotyping, hostility and even abuse and have even have learned to despise their learning environments rather than because of them, which can lead for these students to react cautiously, assertively, or sometimes aggressively towards teachers and peers. (Chaves et al. 1999)

I can say at this point that my ethnic identity was influenced by my cognitive development, and my generation status. (Torres et al. 2004) According to Phinney’s model, he claims that existing ethnic identity theories refer to critical moments or events that can prompt exploration into one’s ethnic/racial identity. (Torres et al. 2004). The existing research focused on ethnic/racial identity development refers to critical moment as the possible starting point of exploration into the development of ethnic/racial identity, yet the process are not fully explored. (Torres et al. 2004)

I changed my major at least five times, which included sociology, crime and society, music and finally education. I was excited to finally decide on teaching and wanted to teach students at a secondary education level. I had started my program in College of Education. Due to the issues with my education, prior to college and my preparation for college, I wanted to help students so that they may not have to go through the experience that I did. If that was the case, at least I could use my experience to base off, in order to bring that understanding in how students learn, and how outside factors can affect what they learn in order to better understand how they interact with one another how determine their problem solving skills. However, I was displeased with the structure of the program because I felt as a Latina, and being the only minority voice not just with my heritage but because I was coming from a bigger city, (Kansas City) and because of my socio-economic class, was unappreciated and devalued. My ideas were too radical, and now that I look back perhaps too advanced for my program to keep up with where I wanted to take the curriculum and structure of my classrooms.

According to Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development, I feel like I was the in conflict with the fourth factor of curriculum, because I was trying to challenge the set curriculum but felt like the set curriculum for the program was not being sensitive to my differences in my background experience, and innovative ideas. (Evans, 2010 p. 70). By exploring my ethnic identity, I would have used a multicultural education framework by Ortiz and Rhoads, and they said cognitive challenges regarding the concept of culture can help with the development of a student’s ethnic identity development in college. This also proves that students with opportunities to explore race and ethnic issues within the classroom as part of other learning opportunities. (Torres et al. 2004).

Because I felt underrepresented, not understood, it resulted in feeling once again incompetent to my fellow peers. I decided to drop my education program and changed my Bachelor of Science in Education to a Bachelor of Arts in History and a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish. In addition, as I continued further in secondary education, I felt like I would be more needed in the higher education realm, and thus decided to continue my studies with a Master’s degree in student affairs in higher education. I would relate this to Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development, the Sixth Vector of developing purpose in my life, because I have been able to find my vocation, (Evans, 2010 p. 69) Torres will also claim that students who came from diverse environments self-selected the descriptions associated with the Bicultural or Latino orientations. Their selection seems to depend on how they perceived the campus’ diversity. The students who found the college environment as not accepting of diversity would identify with a Latino orientation wanting to focus their orientation towards those who share their interest in diversity. Those who acknowledged the lack of diversity, were not as critical of the environment, would self select the bi-cultural description in their orientation. In general these students did not take on the values of the majority culture, but they were also not in a search of their ethnic identity, indicating that there is not a clear fit with Phinney’s first stage of unexamined identity. (Torres, 2003).

All in all, these experiences have made me to be the person I am today. Using these theories, I am able to evaluate myself and my experiences using several theories and concepts. It is good to know, that my experiences has been studies, and used to create new developments, approaches or understanding how to incorporate these concepts into curriculum. It is nice to know that there are studies being done for students like me, and other students with similar experiences in order to make sure that ultimately all students will have a better college experience and are competent in their abilities and identity.

# Reference

Chavez, A.F., and Guido-DiBrito., F. (1999) Racial and Ethnic Identity and Development. New Directions for adult and continuing education. 84

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice.* (2nd Edition). San Francisco: Jossey - Bass.

Guardia, J.R., and Evans, N.J. (2008). Factors Influencing the Ethnic Identity Development of Latino Fraternity Members at a Hispanic Serving Institution. *Journal of College Student Development* *49* (3). DOI: 10.1353/csd.0.0011

Torres, V. (2003) Influences on ethnic identity development of Latino college students in the first two years of college. *Journal of College Student Development 44*(4)

Torres, V., and Baxtar Magolda, M. (2004) Reconstructing Latino Identity: The influence of cognitive Development on the ethnic identity process of Latino students. Journal of College Student Development 45 (3). DOI: 10.1353/csd.2004.0043