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Ethnographic Insight into the Developmentally Diverse Worlds of Twins: “L & J”

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Ethnographic study involves gaining knowledge about a culture through observation of participants in their own environment. For my honors project, I was given the unique opportunity to ethnographically dive into the convergence of two cultures (hearing and deaf) through observations of fraternal twin boys, “L and J.”

In studying the ethnography of L and J, I recognized that a cultural divide exists between the deaf and hearing cultures that deserves consideration. Once a deficiency in hearing is detected, hearing parents most often will consider medical interventions to “fix” their child’s “disability”. Many deaf adult proponents contend that deafness is not a “disability,” but a condition that creates a difference in experiencing the world which in turn generates a sense of belongingness, a unique identity and a common unity.

Portraying deafness as a disability can lead to negative identity development for those experiencing profound hearing loss whereas embracing one’s deaf identity and engaging in deaf culture while balancing interactions with the “hearing” world can create a sense of belongingness to both cultures; much like a bilingual or biracial individual might identify themselves as belonging to two cultures.

In September of 2016, “L and J” were born premature at 30 weeks gestation. After several “inconclusive” routine hearing screenings, L was diagnosed with profound sensorineural hearing loss in both ears prior to being discharged from the neonatal intensive care unit in late November of 2016. J was discharged two weeks later in

December of 2016. Beginning in January of 2017, I began my role as a caregiver with the twins. I observed them in the home weekly from ages 3 months to 18 months. I cared for L and J alongside parents, grandparents, and extended family as well as worked closely with early intervention services including a teacher for the deaf. In October of 2017, L underwent surgery to correct his deafness. He received cochlear implants at 13 months of age.

Observing L and J pre/post cochlear implant has offered insights into both twin's individual development. Observations first took place in their home but extended into new environments as the twin's development progressed. Observations typically occurred in the context of the twin's daily routine during meal, nap, and play times. In addition to observations, informal interviews were conducted with the twin's parents to better understand the parent perspective of balancing hearing vs. deaf culture and the unique needs of both L and J pre/post cochlear implant.

By anchoring observations to a Social Learning Theory perspective (Bandura, 1977) this project focuses on identifying similarities and differences associated with social learning theory between twin infants, "L and J". J being a hearing child, and L a newly hearing child who, with cochlear implants, has the ability to transition between deaf and hearing.

The over-arching goal of this project is to better understand how differing ways of experiencing the world are expressed during infant social development. By organizing observations of each twin, pre and post cochlear implant into four aspects of social learning: physical skills, emotional expression, cognitive ability, and social interactions, this project captures similarities as well as differences in social learning between deaf

and hearing infants. This comparison defines developmental differences between hearing and deaf cultures, as well as illustrates how receiving cochlear implants may bridge the two cultures.

As their cultures converge, what are the challenges that L will face as he feels the need to “catch up” to J in expected developmental milestones? What are the challenges J will face as he seeks to integrate new ways of communicating and relating to his twin? This ethnographic study attempts to answer these questions by capturing L and J’s development regarding their social learning, as they grow into toddlerhood. It also captures how L and J’s parents’ coping strategies and decision-making processes attempt to honor and balance the unique needs of both their hearing and deaf child’s identity.

I approached my honors project wanting to find the answer to a major question. How can you ensure that a child with hearing loss is given the best quality of life for further development, whether the child receives cochlear implants or not? Although there is no definite answer to this question, I strongly believe that by honoring the needs of the child’s identity, hearing or deaf, understanding necessary adaptations and modifications, and supporting the child in the achievement of developmental milestones builds a solid foundation for further positive, healthy, development.