

Overview of

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**Beyond cultural diversity.
Exploring micro and macro culture in the early childhood setting
An Australian study**

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Experiences in the early years of life are increasingly recognised as significant predictors of long-term cognitive and psychosocial behavior. This thesis focuses on one aspect of early development: the cultural identity of the young child and investigates the influence of 'continuity of practice' between home and the child care centre in this development.

Australia and other OECD nations are becoming more multicultural. The use of child care services for very young children has increased dramatically in the past two decades. For the first time in history there may be more babies aged 0-3 years in care situations than babies who are cared for at home. This impacts upon the child's micro-culture (individual, unconscious practices guided by beliefs, norms and values) and macro-culture (ritualistic, symbolic behaviour, often conscious which is tied to belonging to an ethnic group). Many researchers have investigated the implications of this social change but very few studies to date have focused their analyses on the implication of home - centre continuity in the development of micro and macro-cultural identity of children aged 0 - 3 years.

The ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) and the theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986, 1989b) provide the theoretical framework for this thesis, whilst the refining of brain research and reconceptualisation of early childhood service delivery serve as guiding forces. This study investigates the way in which child care centres contribute to the development of micro and macro-cultural identity in very young children. This study was originally designed to increase the knowledge base about the ways in which interactions with children (particularly in relation to sleep and feeding micro-cultural practices) differ between home and child care service and the implications of these differing practices. As the study progressed a new focus was developed. The study evolved into an analysis of communication processes between parents and staff and the effects of those communication processes.

Qualitative methods of non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and semi-structured questionnaires were used to address the research questions. Initially a pilot study was conducted in one child care service in order to develop and structure the research framework. The results of the pilot were significant in refocusing subsequent aspects of this study. It was shown that despite literature to the contrary, families from diverse macro cultural backgrounds were not concerned about inconsistencies in micro and macro cultural practices for their young child. Two subsequent studies investigated this further focusing on communication between families and early childhood staff.

Significant findings include:

1. Parents who use child care centres value integration for their child into Australian society.
2. Staff practices are sometimes carried out in a furtive manner. This results in feelings of disempowerment for parents and jeopardises parent/staff partnerships resulting in a *Cycle of Mistrust* (De Gioia).
3. The designation of a centre based Community Representative significantly assists the partnership building process for early childhood settings.
4. Some policies and regulations (such as the *Australian Quality Improvement and Accreditation System* and the *New South Wales Centre Based and Mobile Child Care Services Regulation* (No 2) 1996) may work counter to their own aims for parent/staff 'partnerships'.

Recommendations from the study focus on setting level and policy issues. The early childhood sector is called on to redress notions around communication and partnership building with parents.