

Children

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working for children and their families

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LANGUAGE HIERARCHIES 'DAMAGING LEARNING'

Hierarchies of language are still being enforced in early years and education settings, resulting in reduced self-esteem and learning problems among multilingual children, a special conference hosted by Children in Europe has found.

'In my own words: services for children in a multilingual society', held in Edinburgh today (1st June), examined the benefits of nurturing indigenous language from the earliest age.

Speaking at the conference, Serap Sikcan, co-director, Kinderwelten Project, Berlin, Germany, said: "Children are still being given the message that monolingualism is important and multilingualism is not."

"This must change if we are to develop positive and responsible attitudes towards the diversity of children's languages and cultures," she added.

Latest estimates show that more than half the world's population live in 'multilingual' areas, with 23 official languages, and hundreds of immigrant minority languages spoken in Europe alone.

Dr Priscilla Clarke, executive director, FKA Children's Services, Australia, said that language hierarchies could have a profound effect on children's learning.

She said: "The devaluing of children's home culture and indigenous language can result in a loss of feeling of self-worth, loss of intimacy and the ability to build relationships, and, crucially, loss of motivation for learning."

Naomi Eisenstadt, director, Social Exclusion Task Force, the Cabinet Office, who chaired the conference, called for a more genuine and

complete approach to language diversity in order to counter these problems.

She said: "The notion of anything being 'standard' or 'normal' in relation to language is dangerous. We need a much more holistic understanding of diversity. Good citizens value each other, celebrate diversity and have an interest in difference. The idea that it's either or, or one or the other, is unhelpful and damaging."

Joanna McPake, co-ordinator, council of Europe Valeur Project, who also spoke at the conference, discussed the growing recognition of the benefits of plurilingualism.

She said: "A stronger focus on plurilingualism could open doors to the mainstreaming of community languages."

Support and resources for children from diverse backgrounds must be strengthened if multilingualism is to be given the same priority as monolingualism, the conference concluded.

Bronwen Cohen, chief executive of Children in Scotland, said: "Language promotion policies are seldom aimed at young children, despite the fact that it's precisely this age group that is most open to different languages. From an early age young children should be encouraged to learn from and absorb linguistic diversity around them."

"We need to recognise much more specifically the links between devaluing language and devaluing people. In Europe's year of equal opportunities for all, we believe this is fundamental and we will be returning to this issue in the months ahead."

For more information, email csmall@childreninscotland.org.uk, or phone 0131 222 2419

Notes for editors:

Conference packs are available. For more information email: lgilmour@childreninscotland.org.uk

Vygotsky: the impact of a Russian psychologist - A special publication published to coincide with the 17th Annual Conference of the European Early Childhood Association (EECERA), will be published in August.

Equal Opportunities for All, issue 13 of Children in Europe, will be published September 07