



## **7.12.07 MEDIA RELEASE For immediate release**

### **Bilingualism 'can enhance children's learning'**

Bilingualism does not delay children's learning and can enhance it, a special Children in Europe conference on linguistic diversity held in Ireland has concluded.

The conference, *In My Own Words: Supporting and promoting the linguistic diversity of young children in an increasingly multilingual society*, held on 6 and 7 December in Donegal, Ireland, addressed the rise of multilingualism and the issue of children's language learning in rural communities.

The event was a collaboration by Donegal County Childcare Committee, Border Counties Childcare Network, Children in Northern Ireland and Children in Europe.

Dr Priscilla Clarke of FKA Children's Services, Australia, spoke at the conference and challenged the myth that bilingualism could impede children's learning.

She also noted that language hierarchies could impact on children's learning. "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," she said.

Europe now has a rich diversity of languages: 23 official languages, over 60 regional minority languages and hundreds of immigrant minority languages.

Language learning is recognised as being important for identity, culture and economic success. But these same reasons can put

different languages, and those who speak them, into different hierarchies, leaving minority language speakers feeling isolated and devalued.

With the increasing numbers of children from diverse backgrounds, supporting multilingualism in childcare and education settings must be a priority, the conference agreed.

The conference concluded that the government should focus on:

- Finding ways to end the fragmented approach to children's services, which is also a key issue in the voluntary sector.
- Supporting greater awareness of Children in Europe magazine, which is published in 12 languages and 14 countries across Europe, and the role that it is playing as a forum for exchange, practice and information, in deepening understanding of childhood in Europe and in contributing to the development of policy and practice at European and national levels.
- Heeding the findings of the recent OECD Starting Strong II Report, which recognised the need for "a strong and equal partnership" between services for young children and compulsory school.
- Formulating an overarching body in Ireland of a kind similar to those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as represented by Children in Scotland and Children in Northern Ireland.

The conclusions of the conference are being sent to Irish government ministers and a meeting is being sought with ministers to discuss the event's findings and recommendations.

Bronwen Cohen, chief executive of Children in Scotland, the English language publisher of Children in Europe, 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."

The international array of speakers at the conference also included Nichole Leigh Mosty, from Mulaborg pre-school, Reykjavik, Iceland.

The event follows Children in Europe's successful conference, *In My Own Words*, held in Edinburgh in June.

The conference was held at Jackson's Hotel, Ballybofey, Co Donegal, Ireland, today (7 December) and yesterday.

For more information, visit [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/eur](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/eur)

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**Notes for editors:**

- *Children in Europe* is a joint publication by a network of magazines in 11 languages across Europe. The focus is on services for and work with children from birth to ten and their families. The English language issue of the magazine is published by Children in Scotland simultaneously in eight languages twice a year, in March and September.  
[www.childrenineurope.org](http://www.childrenineurope.org)
- Children in Scotland is Scotland's national children's agency, bringing together voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals to improve the lives of Scotland's children and their families.