

Adrian Butler explains the Council of Europe's key role in promoting 'plurilingualism'. The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation based in Strasbourg that provides a unique pan-European forum for its 46 member states

The Council of Europe has been running pioneer programmes about language education policy since 1957. These cover national languages, regional varieties of them and regional, minority or immigrant languages as well as foreign languages learnt at school or acquired by other means. Fundamental to this work is the concept of plurilingualism: "the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction where a person ... has proficiency of varying degrees in several languages and experience of several cultures."

Europe is multilingual and multilingualism (i.e. the coexistence of languages in a given area) is on the increase. Knowledge of languages plays a vital role in promoting social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, human rights and democratic citizenship, and policies are needed to promote language learning in our national education systems. Here, the Council of Europe has made an important contribution.

It has developed the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf, which provides a common basis for developing language curricula, exams and textbooks across Europe including clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning a foreign language. The Council's *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe* www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Guide_Short_EN.pdf extends the concept of plurilingual education to include education for plurilingual awareness: education to promote linguistic tolerance, awareness of linguistic diversity and democratic citizenship.

The European Centre for Modern Languages

The Council of Europe's work on plurilingualism is undertaken by two units with distinct but complementary missions and working methods. The Language Policy Division in Strasbourg is concerned mainly with policy development and standards. The European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz, Austria, focuses on the implementation of policy through the promotion of innovation and good practice in language teaching. It helps member states to implement effective language teaching policies and to improve teaching and learning of languages. It runs language education projects primarily for teacher trainers, researchers and multipliers in the field of languages, who are nominated to participate by their national authorities. The ECML's documentation and resource centre is a mine of information for language teachers, and copies of its publications may be downloaded free of charge. For further details go to www.ecml.at.

Bilingualism and early language learning

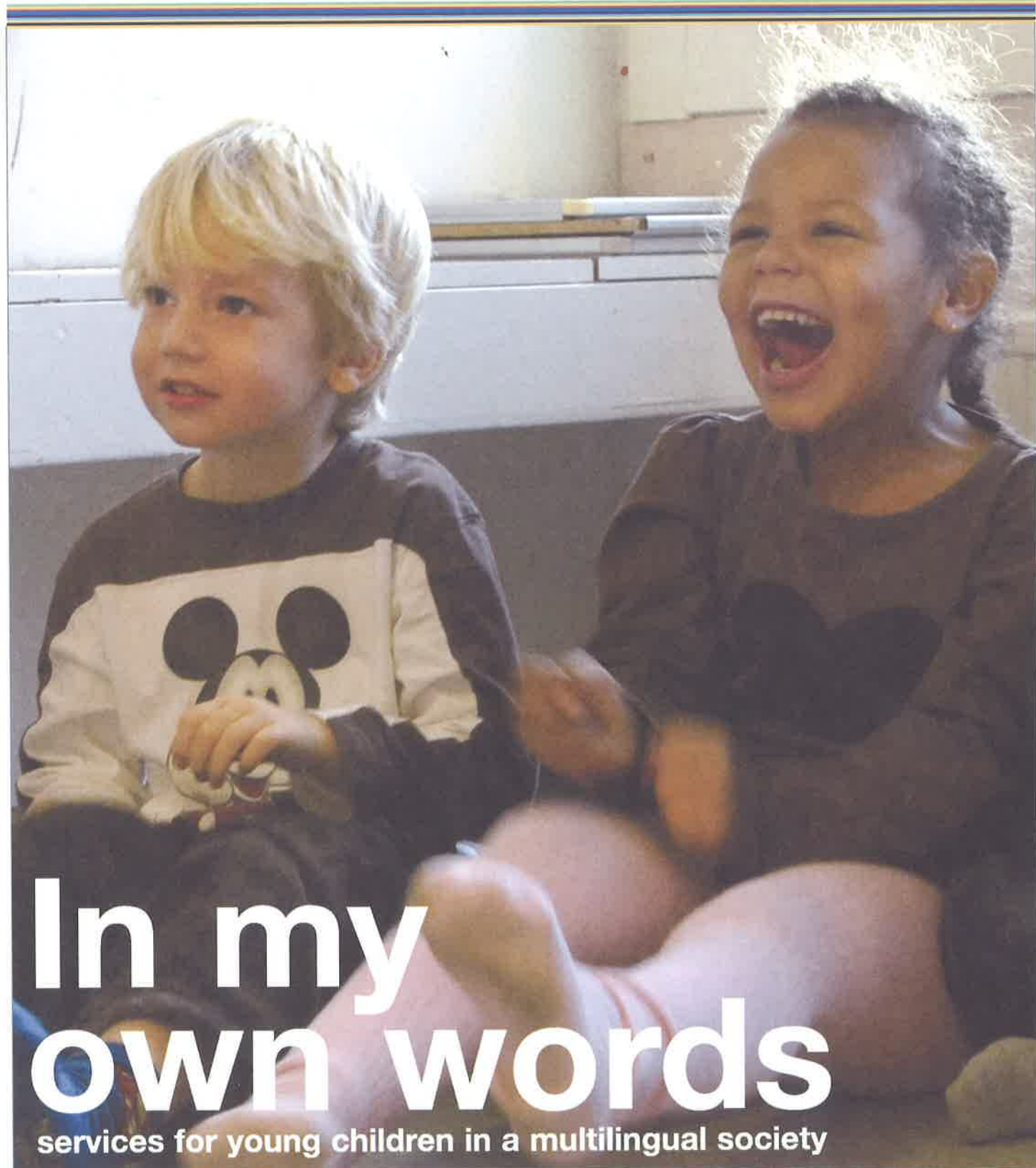
The Council of Europe highlights the value of plurilingualism and the proven potential for all individuals to become plurilingual through adequately organised educational provision. This positive view extends to young children. However, it is not the Council's role to give specific advice to parents about early language learning or on the education of children growing up in plurilingual circumstances. Its concerns in this field are of a political nature and are

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expressed more in terms of the dangers for children who are not schooled in their own native language or language variety. These dangers include the stigmatisation attached to failure to achieve competence in the language of schooling (usually the "national" language), or the abandonment by children of their language of primary socialisation and, as a consequence, of their ethnic identity.

A number of ECML projects have been devoted to the question of the teaching of languages to young learners, mostly though of primary school age. For example, *Janua Linguarum – the Gateway to languages*, a project in 16 European countries, promoted "awakening to languages". Rather than being taught a specific language, children are introduced to the diversity of languages and cultures: listening to the sounds of many languages, seeing how they are written, understanding how they work, taking interest in those who speak them (www.ecml.at/doccentre/abstract.asp?r=58&l=E). While a current project, *Developing Teachers of Modern Languages to Young Learners*, aims to develop, pilot and implement an innovative programme for teachers of modern languages to young learners, (www.ecml.at/mtp2/TEMOLAYOLE/). ■

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In my own words

services for young children in a multilingual society



A joint publication by a network of magazines from ten countries in Europe

www.childreninScotland.org.uk/cie