

## news

### N IRELAND

By Catherine Gaunt

A new pre-school education programme launched in Northern Ireland is proving successful in encouraging young children to respect each other's differences.

An evaluation of the pilot, which started in February last year and involved three- to five-year olds in ten pre-schools, was published last week.

The programme will now be extended to reach more young children in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, so that every child in an early years setting will be able to access it by 2008.

The Media Initiative for Children is a collaboration between the early years organisation NIPPA and the US-based Peace Initiatives Institute.

The initiative combines animation and activities in early years settings to help young children understand more about physical, racial and cultural differences. Children watch a series of cartoons featuring characters playing in the park and situations where they are excluded and included, to highlight issues of prejudice.

Children also play with puppets, puzzles and games to help them talk about how they feel in situations when they are excluded or meet people who are different to themselves.

The evaluation of the Northern Ireland pilot was carried out by Dr Paul Connolly of Queens



Twins Emily and Rebecca Collin complete one of the puzzles to help launch the Media Initiative for Children programme

Photo: Paul Sweeney

## Children bridge sectarian divide

University. He said, 'The research results from the pilot study are compelling and illustrate the potential that this initiative can have in encouraging young children in Northern Ireland to embrace diversity and to be inclusive of others.'

Evidence from the pilot found that after only three weeks, those who took part in the programme in five pre-schools showed more awareness of children being excluded because of their differences, more empathy with those being excluded, and more willingness to play with and be inclusive of others, including those different to themselves.

'If this can happen in just three weeks, just imagine what could be achieved in the longer term,' Dr Connolly said.

Previous research he had carried out in Northern Ireland, he said, showed that 'children at this age are already beginning to have their attitudes and beliefs shaped by the ongoing community divisions'.

Early years experts have said the programme could be the key to building a culture of respect in both countries.

Siobhan Fitzpatrick, chief executive of NIPPA, said the Media Initiative for Children was 'a unique programme which will offer new opportunities for children, parents and practitioners to discuss, explore and find new ways of accepting and including others who are different from us, rather than ridiculing, fighting or rejecting them'.

For information on the programme see [www.mifo-pii.org](http://www.mifo-pii.org).