

Multicultural Practice in Secondary Schools With Multicultural Background

Lanka Nilmini Priyadarshani Wedikandage
University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, after 30 years of civil war, multicultural education is being seen as important to help change students' attitudes towards different ethnic and religious groups. Therefore, the major aim of this study was to investigate the views of students and staff about the multicultural policies and practices in Sinhala-medium secondary schools with multicultural background. The sample of the study comprised of 321 students, 116 teachers and five principals from five Sinhala-medium schools. In addition, four education policy-makers also contributed to the study. The key findings indicated that the majority of Sinhala and Tamil students were engaged in the school activities but Muslim students less so. In addition, all five schools had a variety of extra-curricular activities that were designed for minority ethnic groups. This is a good example for other multicultural schools in Sri Lanka. Research findings show that overall the majority of teachers suggested that they wanted some training about multicultural education. Most students were satisfied that their teachers know some expressions in the language of different students. However, teachers in these multicultural schools wanted language training to build a good intercultural relationship between teachers and students. Counsellors and teachers did not have the knowledge and skills required to provide cross-cultural counselling. Therefore, both teachers and counsellors need proper training. The research makes clear how extra/co-curricular activities are important to promote social cohesion in Sri Lanka

Keywords: multicultural education, intercultural relationship, social cohesion, cross-cultural counselling

Introduction

Colonization, immigration, regionalization, and travel for education and employment purposes have resulted in increasingly multicultural societies in many countries over the past decades. In such societies, students bring to school racial and ethnic heritage with a wide range of histories, perspectives, experiences, expectations, and approaches to learning (Hixson, 1991). Multicultural educational policies have therefore become a regular part of education for many countries in the world.

From 1970, the democratic political system and the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka came under threat as a result of the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) that lasted nearly 30 years (Coperahewa, 2009; Harris & Lewer, 2008). In war, children are the most affected group. Perera, Wijethunga, and Balasooriya (2004) explained that generations of children in the north and east have known nothing but war. They learned fear, prejudice, hatred, and violence and came to demonise the enemy and idealise martyrdom. Children living in the other parts of Sri Lanka, even those unaffected directly

by the war, learned some of those same lessons. Now Sri Lanka has peace and multicultural education in schools is seen as important to help change students' attitudes regarding how to live in a multicultural society.

The current study drew extensively on Banks (1989; 1994; 2006) who, from his work across a number of international contexts, formulated guidelines for multicultural education which identify principles for decision-making in schools and classrooms about the shape and content of a systemic whole school approach to multicultural education. What Banks (1989; 1994; 2006) called a "multi-ethnic" ideology provides one useful means of analysing some of the policies, and curriculum and practices apparent in Sri Lanka. In the discourse associated with this ideology:

- Minority ethnic cultures are viewed as well-ordered and highly structured but different in terms of language, values, and their behaviours;
- In the curriculum, the materials and teaching styles that are used are representative of the cultures in the classroom.
- The goal of the curriculum should be to help students function more successfully within their own ethnic cultures and encourage self-direction in learning and behaviour.

Banks (1993) also identified five dimensions of multicultural education that should be core to the development of courses, programmes and projects in multicultural education. Schools with rich multicultural backgrounds need to focus on these five dimensions.

- *Content integration* is focused on expanding the curriculum to acknowledge the experience and contributions of diverse groups.
- *Knowledge construction* helps students to understand how people's beliefs are based in their own cultural background.
- *Equity pedagogy* refers to the use of strategies that lead to higher achievement for students of all races.
- *Prejudice reduction* helps students develop more positive attitudes about people of different races and ethnicities.
- *An empowering school culture* examines the impact of school policies, such as academic streaming and discipline, on students from different backgrounds to enable those students to have some decision-making in their own education.

Method for the Study

The research questions are following:

1. What are some of the important issues associated with schools of multicultural background?
2. Do students of all ethnic backgrounds feel included in these schools and are relationships between them and with staff harmonious?

The research questions were investigated through questionnaire and interview schedules adapted from Banks's (1981; 1989; 1993; 2008) tools developed for research into multicultural policy and practice at international, national, and school levels across the world, including the UK and Indian subcontinent. Data were collected in the Sinhala medium and transcribed into English. Later, qualitative material was thematically analysed by hand, and quantitative through SPSS.

Sample

The participant sample included 321 students from different ethnic backgrounds, 116 teachers and five

principals from five Sinhala-medium secondary schools, two girls', two boys' and one mixed, in the Colombo region.

Of the students, in the whole sample there were:

- around 50 in each age group, 12-16 years, and between 35-40 aged 17 and 18 years;
- 163 males and 158 females;
- approximately 45% Sinhala, 39% Muslim, 13% Tamil, and 3% other.

All students took the examinations in Sinhala medium except those in the mixed school which had some students who chose English medium.

Of the teachers:

- the numbers of participants in each school ranged from 22-25;
- 98% were Sinhala;
- 76% were female and 24% male;
- just over 25% were in each age range 20-30, 31-40, 41-50 years, and around 20% were over 51 years;
- over 50% had less than ten years' teaching experience.

Of the schools, three were categorised as located in poor socio-economic areas, and the other two in average areas. The mixed school was a National school, whilst the other four were categorised as 1C. These schools had been recognised as having good multicultural practice (Social Cohesion and Peace Education Unit [ESCP], 2008): "The processes of these schools and the students' experiences need to be studied and good practice disseminated to other schools" (p. 17).

In addition four policy makers from the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of Education and the Education Commission also contributed to the study through interview. Their responsibilities covered decisions about text books for the second national languages (Sinhala and Tamil), national initiatives related to peace education, and, in the one case, the whole education system.

Findings

Inclusion of Students of All Ethnicities and Religions

Different ethnicities and cultures were accommodated to different degrees in these five schools. This issue relates particularly to the study of religions, participation in extra-curricular activities, a sense of personal safety, the visibility of cultures around the school, and availability of resources relating to the range of students' cultural backgrounds.

A significantly greater proportion of Muslim than Sinhala students and Tamil than Sinhala students reported that they did not have opportunity to study all subjects in the school curriculum. The particular issue here seemed to be that of religion. Focus group interviews indicated that Muslim students did not have the chance to learn about their own religion in two of the schools. As a student in one school commented, "I am Muslim but I don't have a chance to study Islam in my classroom". When more Muslim and Tamil students felt they were not allowed to study any subject, there may be some concern. This finding may, however, be explained by the fact that it is common practice for teachers of minority religions to be hired by schools on a fixed term contract. Sometimes, schools do not have the resources to continue the contract (verbal discussion with a vice principal). Lack of access to subject areas related to ethnic background did not apply across the whole curriculum. However, most students from all ethnic groups reported that they were able to study some of

their own history. In these schools, Buddhism was the dominant religion. However, students of all ethnic groups agreed that they have a chance to celebrate their religious festivals.

Overall, the majority of students engaged in school activities and sports teams in all schools. However, the participation rate of Muslims was low even though schools had a variety of extra-curricular activities that were designed specifically for minority ethnic students. Table 1 indicates a significant difference in the level of participation between student groups ($p \leq 0.001$).

Table 1

Numbers of Participants in Additional School Activities and/or Sports Teams

Background of students	Active participation	Little participation	Total
Sinhala	90	52	142
Muslim	50	75	125
Tamil	22	16	38
Totals	162	143	305

Notes. Results of contingency table X^2 statistical test; Data: contingency table.

Expected: Contingency Table

Background of students	Active participation	Little participation	Total
Sinhala	75.4	66.6	142
Muslim	66.4	58.6	125
Tamil	20.2	17.8	38
Totals	162	143	305

Notes. Chi-square = 15.0, Degrees of freedom = 2, Probability ≤ 0.001

Further analysis revealed that this difference is explained by the high participation of both Sinhala and Tamil students, and the low participation of Muslim students. One suggestion here might be that schools should consider very carefully the nature of extra-curricular activities and how Muslim ethnic might be encouraged to take a greater part. Perhaps the Muslim community might be consulted about this issue.

There are clear indications that students often associate positively with peers from different ethnic backgrounds. For example, students were encouraged to eat their lunch together. They often worked with partners or in peer tutoring relationships and with co-operative learning groups in the classroom. Teachers supported this peer group collaboration by helping students to manage group work and share responsibilities. There were a very few racist incidents reported in all five schools with, importantly, no significant differences between ethnic groups in terms of complaints about being bullied (see Table 2).

Table 2

Comparison of Numbers of Students Who Complained to a Teacher About Being Bullied Because of Ethnic Background

Background of students	Yes	No	Total
Sinhala	21	120	141
Muslim	27	99	126
Tamil;	9	31	40
Totals	57	250	307

Notes. Results of contingency table X^2 statistical test; Data: contingency table

Expected: Contingency Table

Background of students	Yes	No	Total
Sinhala	26.2	115	141
Muslim	23.4	103	126
Tamil;	7.43	32.6	40
Totals	57	250	307

Notes. Chi-square = 2.3, Degrees of freedom = 2, Probability = 0.309

Rules and regulations were designed to take account of cultural differences. Most importantly, almost all students of all back grounds reported that they always, or usually, felt safe at school (see Table 3).

Table 3

Students' Feelings of Safety in School by Ethnicity

Ethnic group	Always		Usually		Never		No answer		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Sinhala	101	70.6	40	20.8	0	0	2	1.4	143	100
Muslim	74	58.7	52	41.3	0	0	0	0	126	100
Tamil	31	77.5	6	15.0	1	2.5	2	5.0	40	100
Burgher	3	50.0	3	50.0	0	0	0	0	6	100
Malay	5	83.3	1	16.7	0	0	0	0	6	100
Total	214	66.7	102	31.8	1	0.3	4	1.2	321	100

All students appeared to feel valued. For example, they reported that they were valued in the classroom and experienced a warm welcome when they first arrived at the school. Both teachers and students commented that their schools had a planned program induction and orientation for all students. There were reports of a mutually supportive relationship between these five schools and community groups and agencies that should be fostered.

All five schools employed counselors to support their students. The students reported that when they talked with counselors they felt that these counsellors understood them as people. However, there may be an issue here that requires some serious consideration. Although students seemed happy with the response they experienced from counsellors, teachers felt that the counselling services did not match students' academic and social needs because counsellors themselves did not have the requisite training. Neither counsellors nor teachers had the knowledge and skills required to provide cross-cultural counselling. If counselors and teachers provide such support for their students, clearly there is a need here for high level diversity-awareness and counselling training.

The multicultural literature suggests that the range of ethnic backgrounds should be visible around the school so that all students feel included. However, the visibility of different races and cultures varied across the schools. Students were allowed to wear traditional clothes that were important in different cultures, for example. This finding reflects the central government policy. School displays included the work of students from different backgrounds and classroom routines were clearly organized and responsibilities were shared out fairly between all students. The majority of Sinhala and Tamil students felt school assemblies were often about different cultures.

In terms of resources, both teachers and students agreed that class textbooks and the curriculum helped students understand people from different backgrounds. It is also very important to provide library facilities that support students to develop an understanding of all cultures in the school and elsewhere, and some teachers reported a lack of library facilities. Given the importance of access to books, it may be relevant here to suggest

that the government might require schools to carry out an audit of their library facilities and the range of books available to schools in relation to different cultures and ethnicities.

Professional Development

Most teachers reported that they wanted some training about multicultural education to enable them to understand their students' backgrounds and cultures. However, most teachers also reported that they did not have the opportunity to participate in multicultural education training which would enable them to respond more appropriately and effectively to the different student groups. The literature on multicultural education suggests all teachers should be aware of all students' ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Developing this awareness seems to be what Sri Lankan teachers were requesting. Provision for such professional development appears therefore to be an obvious necessity. Generally, the majority of teachers were of the opinion that teachers in general liked to teach students with the same backgrounds. However, teachers with higher level qualifications and training were more likely to say that their peers had no preference for teaching students from the same backgrounds as themselves. Most students were satisfied that their teachers knew some expressions in the languages of different students. This is an important finding given that the teachers themselves felt that they should respect the cultural, racial and ethnic differences of their students and be aware of the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of all students in their classroom.

The majority of teachers felt that schools should offer multicultural education. Newly recruited teachers and those with a degree agreed it is possible to plan lessons for the various student groups.

Language Competence

Language issues were highly problematic in this study. Whatever the literature and public policy might say about the strengths of a policy that recommends multi-lingualism to enable all students to participate fully in Sri Lankan society, this was far from being achieved in the schools that were researched. Tamil and Muslim students reported themselves to be more competent in using three languages. The findings of the students' questionnaire about speaking different languages at school and competent reading of languages reflect this finding. There was a significant difference between ethnic groups in terms of speaking languages other than their own with friends at school ($p < 0.001$, see Table 4).

Table 4

Comparison of Numbers of Students Who Spoke the National Language, not Their Own, With Friends at School

Language spoken at school with friends	Sinhala	Muslim	Tamil	Total
Other national language	1	80	27	108
Own national language	123	17	4	144
Both languages	16	25	6	47
Totals	140	122	37	299

Notes. Results of contingency table X^2 statistical test; Data: contingency table.

Expected: Contingency Table

Language spoken at school with friends	Sinhala	Muslim	Tamil	Total
Other national language	50.6	44.1	13.4	108
Own national language	67.4	58.8	17.8	144
Both languages	22	19.2	5.82	47
Totals	140	122	37	299

Notes. Chi-square = 181, Degrees of freedom = 4, Probability ≤ 0.001

Muslims and Tamils were much more likely to converse with friends in the national language that was not their own. While more Sinhalese could read only two languages, and these were Sinhala and English and did not include Tamil. More Muslims and Tamils could read more than two languages (Sinhala, Tamil, and English). However, Sinhala students reported that they became more competent in multilingual skills the longer they had been at these schools. It is clear here that there is a need for more highly trained teachers especially where some students seem to depend so highly on their secondary schooling to become competent multi-linguals.

Discussion

Social integration is a key goal in Sri Lanka. Recently, the Ministry of National Language and Social Integration introduced the “National Policy Framework for Social Integration” (Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration [MNLSI], 2013). This document identified that access to education is fundamental to achieving social cohesion. MNLSI are expected to work in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education, and Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development to adopt a strategy that:

- the school curriculum should promote social cohesion with special focus on learning of a second national language, English as a link language.
- language and comparative learning of religious, ethnic, civic and human values.
- teaching techniques and the syllabus shall reflect and value diversity and unity, and strengthen capacities for interaction and integration through core-curricular activities.

The MNLSI intends to conduct a special programme on the principles of social integration for school principals, teachers, and non-academic staff.

The goals of multicultural education (as identified by Banks, 2008), peace building, good citizenship, and social cohesion, are therefore compatible with the goals of Sri Lankan education policy documents.

Salient issues arising from this study include access to further professional development for teachers with high level diversity-awareness and counselling training that would acknowledge the importance of respect for religious difference and balance between culture and ethnicity in the availability of books and other resources and the organisation of, for example, extra-curricular activities, assemblies, and so on, and the potential for developing culturally responsive pedagogy among the teachers as an appropriate response to the learning needs of all students in multicultural classrooms. Above all, there is an over-riding need to consider how to improve the teaching of additional languages.

Professional Development

The current research indicated a very strong view among all the teachers surveyed in the five schools in Sri Lanka that access to the kind of professional development that might assist them to audit their current skills and competencies in teaching in multicultural classrooms. Developing the ability and courage needed to apply culturally responsive teaching should begin in pre-service teacher education programmes and further continue in in-service professional development. Pre-service teacher training programmes should involve information about cultural characteristics and contributions, pedagogical principles, and methods and materials for ethnic and cultural diversity. Gay (2010) commented on the importance of learning about multicultural practices in real life contexts of school classrooms in commenting that theoretical information

...should be supplemented with supervised practices in designing and implementing replacement models, for example, determining what ‘authentic assessment’ means within the context of ethnic diversity and, culturally responsive teaching. How might professional assessment be modified to better accommodate the component of the learning styles of different

ethnic groups? Or what changes are needed in structured academic controversy (SAC) approaches to problem solving to make them illuminate culturally responsive teaching ideologies and methodologies? (p. 246)

Overall a number of components need to be created to support in service teacher training programmes to implement culturally responsive teacher training in Sri Lanka. These include (Gay, 2010, p. 246):

- staff development to acquire knowledge of ethnic diversity and culturally responsive teaching;
- availability of necessary instructional materials;
- systematic ways in which teachers can receive constructive feedback on their efforts and recognition for their accomplishments in implementing culturally responsive teaching;
 - activities in other aspects of the educational enterprise, such as administration, counselling, curriculum design, performance evaluation, and extracurricular activities, comparable to (but jurisdictionally appropriate) culturally responsive classroom teaching; and
 - clearly defined techniques for meeting the opposition that culturally diverse people and programmes may encounter in both the school and the community

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Educational programs and practices in multicultural classrooms must acknowledge all ethnic groups and their contribution to the development of Sri Lankan's history, life and cultures in order that all students can acquire the knowledge, values, and skills that they need to use effectively as citizens of the multicultural society of Sri Lanka. If intellectual ability and different ways of knowing within the cultures of the students in the school are recognized and used in the school instructional process for ethnically diverse students, educational achievement of all can improve (Banks, 1993).

One effective approach to supporting all students within multicultural classrooms in Sri Lanka to achieve involves the practice of what some (Gay, 2010, p. 31; Bishop & Berryman, 2010) call "culturally responsive pedagogy". Culturally responsive teaching incorporates curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, classroom management and performance assessments, using different frames of reference and representation of "various ethnic and cultural groups in teaching academic subjects, processes and skills" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Spring's (1995) definition of a cultural frame of reference is useful in considering what culturally responsive pedagogy may comprise. He defines it as "those elements that cause a cultural group to interpret the world...in a particular manner" (p. 5), or the filter through which impressions of, experiences with, and knowledge of the outside world are ordered and made meaningful. Such a pedagogy engages with high-status, accurate cultural knowledge about diverse groups in to subjects and skills taught. At the same time as academic achievement, culturally responsive pedagogy promotes social consciousness, and critique, cultural affirmation, competence in social exchange, community building and personal connections, individual self-worth and abilities and an ethic of caring (Gay, 2010). Further it develops cooperation, collaboration, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility among students and between students and teachers, attributes that are crucial to the Sri Lankan government's drive towards peace education.

In practice, and in terms of the multicultural curriculum, Teel and Obidah (2008) emphasised that cultural differences, such as those that are apparent in Sri Lankan schools, should be seen as assets, and culturally different individuals and heritages valued. The cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities should guide curriculum development, classroom climates, teaching strategies, and relationships with students racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance should be challenged so that the pedagogy that is developed can contribute to change in the direction of social justice and

academic equity. Culturally responsive teachers teach the whole child and encourage intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by using cultural resources to teach knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. As Hollins (1996) explained, “education for students with different backgrounds should incorporate ‘culturally’ mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content” (p. 13). In this way, culturally responsive teaching can help to maintain identity with students’ own ethnic groups and communities and also develop a sense of community and camaraderie with students of different backgrounds. These skills should be integrated with all curriculum and classroom routines so that students can learn from one another and internalize the value that learning is communal, reciprocal and interdependent and demonstrate it in their behavior.

The role of teachers is clearly crucial as the implementers of culturally responsive pedagogy which implies, as Gentemann and Whitehead (1983) commented that teachers should be regarded as “cultural brokers”. More specifically, Diamond and Moore (1995) categorized teachers’ roles under three major headings that are relevant to the Sri Lankan context, cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and orchestrators of social context for learning:

- As organizers of social contexts for learning in Sri Lanka, teachers need to make the teaching process consistent with the social cultural context and frames of reference of students with different cultural backgrounds. The goal in Sri Lanka would be to create communities of Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and other culturally diverse learners who affirm one another and work collaboratively for everyone’s mutual success.
- As cultural mediators teachers can provide opportunities for students in Sri Lanka to understand conflicts among cultures and disparities between different cultural systems. Teachers can help all Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, and Malay students to interpret their ethnic identities, respect other cultures, develop positive intercultural relationships, and avoid prejudice, stereotyping and racism. This curriculum should include multi-ethnic components that are integrated across the whole curriculum and cover a wide range of attitudes and experiences and positive and invisible (values, beliefs) aspects of culture (J. A. Banks, & C. A. M. Banks, 2010). In particular, textbooks used by the teachers, the cultural mediators, as the most prominent teaching resources should be seen as “cultural artefacts” (Byrne, 2001, p. 299) implicit in which are the values, norms, disciplines, and society’s approved knowledge that students acquire as part of their school knowledge and understanding. Students need to learn about the many different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Educators should therefore ensure that curriculum content about different Sri Lankan cultural groups is accurate, real and complete (Banks, 1991; Gay, 1988; 1995; 2002).
- As orchestrators of social contexts for learning, Sri Lankan teachers must recognize the important influence students’ cultures have on learning and make teaching processes compatible with the socio-cultural context and frames of reference of their students.

Gay (2010) noted that, to be culturally responsive, teachers themselves must accept that teaching and learning are holistic and therefore be involved in students’ lives so that they can teach knowledge and skills students need to negotiate in the society, which is Sri Lanka in the case of the current study, that currently exists and that may exist in the future. For students to acquire confidence in themselves teachers must always place students in learning environments and relationships that imply a belief in their potential for achievement. The implication here is that culturally responsive approaches can be seen broadly as encompassing two aspects, the affective, where teachers are concerned with the emotions, confidence, self-worth, and so on, and the academic focused on subject-specific pedagogy. Gay (2010) described a profile of what culturally responsive

caring means in action and that could be used as an audit of skills and attributes to be achieved in teachers' professional development in Sri Lanka. It includes teachers (Gay, 2010, pp. 51-52)

- knowing all students both personally and academically, providing safe 'spaces and relationships' where they can 'feel recognized, respected, valued, seen and heard', and responding to students' needs 'for friendship, self-esteem, autonomy, self-knowledge, social competence, personal identity, intellectual growth, and academic achievement';
- helping students to 'develop a critical consciousness of who they are, their values and beliefs, and what they are capable of becoming';
- enabling students to be 'flexible in expressing their thoughts, feelings, and emotions', supporting them to develop as competent, compassionate and courteous individuals and also 'receptive to new ideas and information';
- being both 'academically demanding' and also 'personally supportive and encouraging';
- 'treating everyone with equal human worth' and at the same time acknowledging individual difference, socially, culturally, ethnically, racially and linguistically;
- providing 'intellectually challenging and personally relevant learning experiences' for the diversity of the student population

In summary, therefore, culturally responsive teaching is an appropriate approach to consider for extending the inclusivity of Sri Lankan multicultural schools because it would be both validating and affirming of students as culturally located individuals (Gay, 2010; Bishop & Berryman, 2010). It would acknowledge the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of students' own ethnic groups, both as influences over students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as content to be taught in the formal curriculum. It would build bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences that are between students' lived realities and the academic abstractions implicit in school learning, using a wide variety of teaching approaches that are connected to different cultural frames of references. It would encourage students to know and praise their own and one another's cultural heritages by incorporating multicultural information, resources, and materials across all the subjects and skills routinely taught in school.

Culturally responsive teaching involves teachers, counsellors, administrators, and support staff in classrooms and schools in a formal way such as policies program and practices and in an informal way such as extra-curricular activities, school image and community relations.

Language Competence

In the current study a major finding was the concern about the language competence of many of the teachers and students, despite the focus on language from central government. If students lack communication skills and teachers do not understand their students, it is obvious that students' academic performance is likely to be reduced. Boggs (1985) commented: "The attitudes and behaviour patterns that have most important effect upon children....[are] these involved in communication" (p. 301). The communication of multicultural classrooms is multidimensional and multi purposed. It includes verbal and nonverbal, direct and tacit, literal and symbolic, formal and informal, grammatical and discourse component. "Language is at the very heart of teaching" (Smith, 1971, p. 24). Teachers use language through their whole teaching process, for example devising assignments, giving directions, explaining events, interpreting words and expressions, proving propositions, justifying decisions and actions, making promises, dispersing praise and criticism, or assessing capability. It is clear that the potential and realized achievement of students with different cultural backgrounds depends to a large extent on the communication skills both of themselves and their teachers. "Teachers have the power to shape the future, if they communicate with their students, but those who cannot communicate are powerless" (Dandy, 1991, p. 10). At a very basic level, therefore in Sri Lanka all should be offered the

opportunity to acquire competence in the two national languages, at least, and also in English, the link language as well.

Vygotsky (1962) recognized the reciprocal relationship among language, culture and thought in his argument that the development thought is determined by language as well as socio-cultural experience. Embedded within language and communication styles are systems of cultural notations and the means through which thoughts and ideas are expressively embodied. Embedded, too, are cultural values and ways of knowing that strongly influence how students engage within learning tasks and demonstrate mastery of them. Teachers who do not know or value these communicative frames of reference, procedural protocols, and rules of etiquette of their students will not be able to fully access, facilitate, and assess most of what these students know and can do because the two sides will not be able to genuinely understand one another nor will students be able to fully convey their intellectual ability.

Perera et al. (2004) identified some factors as being the principal ones to consider about language teaching: the political will and determination to sustain the initiative of teaching both official languages to all children, the incentive and directives given to the school system and students that would influence the preference a student might have for learning the 'other' official language, the nature of the school climate for teaching and learning in these languages and the motivation of teachers to teach the languages.

In relation to the need for promoting national unity further, and subsequent to the civil war, the New Education Act for General Education in Sri Lanka (National Committee for Formulating a New Education Act for General Education, 2009) suggested the possibility of organizing multi-ethnic schools in areas where the communities are multi-ethnic. The government's expectation is that, in these multi-ethnic schools, all three languages can be used as a medium of instruction and children grow up together as Sri Lankans while understanding their heritage and respecting the culture of other communities. The researcher's personal experience is that such multicultural schools were in existence prior to 2009, but that the focus on multi-culturalism in schools has been brought into sharp relief by deliberate moves to finding solutions to inter-ethnic conflict.

As reported by the policy makers in the current study, government language policy is in place as are the resources and the study hours in schools to support-tri-lingualism. However, findings from the five schools as outlined imply that central government policy was undermined by a number of complex but inter-related factors. Firstly some ethnic groups appear to be advantaged in terms of language learning and competency in relation to the majority group. This immediately implies that the expressed intention to bring about social cohesion through tri-lingualism and ensure equality across all ethnic groups is threatened. Secondly, there appears to be a lack of competency in multi-lingualism that would be required to sustain government policy among the teachers who were interviewed. To address this issue would require consideration of some of the points made by Perera et al. (2004).

Conclusion

This study raised a number of issues that are important to the equitable inclusion of all students in multi-cultural schools:

Firstly, training opportunities in multicultural education were low, however. The evidence implied that teachers with training may have more positive attitudes about multicultural education. Generally students of all ethnic groups reported feeling comfortable and safe at school. The research indicated quite a lot of evidence

that, in these schools, students are encouraged to engage in peaceful interactions with peers from other cultures. Students were encouraged to eat their lunch together. They often worked with partners from different ethnic groups or in peer tutoring relationships and with co-operative learning groups in the classroom. This may be one contributory factor in ensuring that there is little reporting of racism and bullying. The research makes clear how extra/co-curricular activities are important to promote social cohesion in Sri Lanka. The key findings indicated that the majority of Sinhala and Tamil students were engaged in school activities such as sport, but Muslim students less so. How to increase the participation rate of Muslim students in the co-curricular activities should be considered carefully.

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