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## STRATEGIES TO MANAGE THE ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN SRI LANKA: SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

Diversity has become a challenge in many communities for their socio-economic and political development. Overlooking the positives benefits of diversity, considerable attention has been given to negative aspect instead. Hence, there is a potential to build a rich civilization through proper management of diversity. Education plays a key role in managing the diversity by enhancing social identity of children. Hence, this research aims at explaining the strategies and plans adopted by the education ministry in Sri Lanka to promote social cohesion and exploring the challenges that faced by the decision makers in implementing these strategies and plans in schools. For this purpose, the present study employed a qualitative research methodology based on textual and document analysis along with open-ended interview protocol. Nine people who are in decision-making position in the process of implementation in different levels; national, provincial, zonal and school were selected for the interview. This research used interviews, textual and document analysis to collect the data. Curtailment of cultural acceptance, insufficient awareness on multiculturalism, segregated system of schooling; inadequate trained-teachers and poor coordination were found in this study as major challenges to promote social cohesion through education. This research recommends addressing these issues prior to implement the strategies on social cohesion in order to maximize the result.

*Keywords:* Social Cohesion, Peace Education, Ethnic Diversity, Education, Sri Lanka.



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## INTRODUCTION

Diversity is a common phenomenon in the world today. Diversity became an issue when people started to think of their identity and cultural association (Ely & Thomas, 2001). The consciousness of “other” increased amongst people in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting out of the discussion on “identity” (Inglis, 2008, p. 29). People mobilization across the nations for various reasons is another factor that increased the perception of “other” (Inglis, 2008, p. 28).

As Apple (2001) declared, “We are living in a period of crisis” on globalization, the crisis of globalization affected all walks of life including the perception on “other” (p. 409). Homogenous cultures as well as socio-political and economic spheres of countries are changing into heterogeneous due to globalization (Hassi & Storti, 2012). Enough number of people have studied the diversity and its consequences from different approaches. In brief, the impact of diversity depends on the method that you imply to manage the differences (Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010). Hence, proper mechanism is essential to benefit from the diversity; otherwise it becomes a challenge for social harmony and development.

Inglis (2008) found education as a powerful instrument to manage the diversity and to promote social cohesion (p.19). Education shapes people’s minds and hearts towards peace (Putnam, 2004). It helps to foster understanding and mutual respect among nations. Understanding others and their cultural variation creates respect and mutual trust in our multi-cultural society. Education is viewed as an important institution that contributes to cohesion by socializing the new members of the society, providing them with knowledge and skills in order to facilitate their social participation. In this respect, education is seen as a primary mean in the promotion of social cohesion through its role in the transmission of knowledge and attitudes that help individuals to cope with diversity and change (Herath, 2015, p. 49). In other words, education cultivates a civilized society by articulating each member of the society to inculcate moral and ethical values.

The curriculum, medium of instruction, school organization and delivery are important elements in education that the policy makers need to consider in promoting diversity management through education (Inglis, 2008, p. 39). However, Heyneman (2000) found four ways that education can contribute to social cohesion: (a) by teaching students the basic principles of what it means to be a good citizen and the consequences of not adhering to those principles; (b) by providing students with an experience consistent with these principles that brings them closer to those of different ethnicity and background; (c) by providing equal opportunities to all students; and (d) by providing students with a common understanding of citizenship, while incorporating the interests of diverse communities.

Even though education plays a crucial role in bridging the huge chasm that exists among different cultures of our global community and spiritual and emotional attachment among the individuals in general (SCPEU, 2008, p.ii), there are scholars arguing that the education might contribute to the violence and conflict within a multicultural society. (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2009). Davies (2009) not only endorsed the possibility of two faces of education but also explained the role of education in enhancing possible “multiple fault lines” of conflict (p. 1).

Referring to Nef’s ‘pedagogy of violence’ (2003), Davies (2009) explains that the role of education in creating disharmony in multiple ways includes teaching, pedagogical strategy as well as curriculum. For instance, after the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, education became an explicit ideological battlefield in which the teaching of violence became acceptable (Davies, 2009, p.2). He continues and said that the mujahidin used education to radicalize the people with their own militant ideology. Ironically their curriculum and textbooks were funded by the United States of America (Davies, 2009, p.2). Radicalization through education, according to Davies (2009) continued during the reign of the Taliban government. Indeed, this “defence curriculum” was not limited to Afghanistan, but also remain use in a range of countries from the Balkans to South Korea where children were taught to use weapons (Davies, 2009, p. 2).



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Hence, structuring the education in line with social cohesion and peace is vital. Since the independence of Sri Lanka in 1948, the Sri Lankan government took several initiatives to ensure the education would promise social harmony in the country. These include policy implementations as well as various government and non-government interventions.

However, managing the cultural diversity is still a major challenge in Sri Lanka. The cultural misunderstanding and the ethnic violence in the country not only destroyed the human lives and brought a huge economy lost, but it was also the main cause of the loss of opportunities. The United Nations has estimated civilian deaths in the final fighting between the government and LTTE (Liberation Tamil Tiger of Eelam) to be around 40,000 to 70,000 (OISL, 2015) while International Crisis Group (ICG) estimated 150,000 lives over 30 years of ethnic war (ICG, 2017). In addition to the forfeiture of human lives, there are studies highlighting the huge economic loss due to the violence (Arunatilake, Jayasuriya, & Kelegama, 2001). According to them, Sri Lanka has lost an average of 2.53 percent annual growth rate due to the direct effect of ethnic violence. If Sri Lanka had no such conflicts, it would have achieved an average of 10.06 percent growth during the period of year between 1978-2005 (Santhirasekaram & Amirthalingam, 2010).

Furthermore, there is also the failure of managing the diversity destroyed enriching different cultural benefits as well as accelerated the migration of intellectuals and local investors. In addition to the brain-drain, Sri Lanka lost the positive inspiration of diaspora and beautiful image building which usually attract the foreign investors. Hence, the peace through proper management of diversity is vital in Sri Lanka.

Since peace is the key of socio-economic and political development of countries (Adan & Pkalya, 2006, p. 19), the Sri Lankan government has also taken initiatives to promote peace and social harmony even though they have been involved in war with radical groups for years. The government particularly focused on education to manage the racial and cultural diversity and to bring peace and social harmony in the country. At the end of war against LTTE in 2009, the urgency of peace was highly realized by every Sri Lankans. Hence, the government has given a special consideration to education and channeled their resources to the education sector in order to build trust and understanding among Sri Lankans (Herath, 2015, p. 51).

However, recent violent incidences across the country has raised questions on these initiatives, on whether the government initiatives to manage the diversity and to promote social cohesion are truly ineffective. The present study, therefore, explores the strategies and initiatives taken by the Sri Lankan government authority as well as international organizations to promote social cohesion and to discover the challenges that are faced by the decision makers in implementing these strategies.

## **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

Since independence in 1948, education is the top of the priority for the government of Sri Lanka (Perera, 2000). Following the report of the Special Committee on Education -which is known as the Kannagara Committee- in 1943, the medium of instruction in school became an issue in the milieu of social cohesion (Balakrishnar, & Thanaraj, 2011).

Sri Lanka's National Education Commission Report in 1992 provided a platform to address social cohesion systematically through education. In this report, three goals out of nine were particularly relevant to social cohesion and peace; (1) the achievement of national cohesion, national integration and national unity, (2) the establishment of a pervasive system for social justice and (3) the active partnership in nation-building activities to ensure the continuous nurturing of a deep and abiding concern for one another (NEC, 1992).



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However, the NEC Report in 1997 focused social cohesion through education in Sri Lanka. Section 5.1.1 of this report recommended social cohesion through education in order to develop proper attitudes and patterns of behaviour of school children relevant to social responsibilities, civic consciousness, national integration and harmony (NEC, 1997, p.15). Further, the NEC Report 1997 suggested to include elements related to social cohesion in the school curriculum. It says, "Concepts relating to peace education national harmony, democratic principles, human rights, gender equality and environmental conservation will be built into the Social Studies and other subjects as appropriate" (NEC, 1997, p. 15).

Under the recommendation of NEC Report 1997, the Social Cohesion and Peace Education Unit (SCPEU) was established in the Ministry of Education. This development reflects government's serious involvement in promoting social cohesion through education. It also highlights the government's interest to centralize the various peace initiatives through education (Herath, 2015).

SCPEU studied the various peace initiatives in the country and found a lack of coordination among these initiatives. Hence, SCPEU came up with a national policy on social cohesion through education (SCPE) with five objectives: to generate innovative strategies which build on existing provision; to provide coherence across the various organisations and activities involved; to provide coverage and avoid gaps; to avoid unnecessary duplication; to ensure sustainability (SCPEU, 2008, p. vii).

In order to coordinate peace education activities, SCPEU introduced seven strategic areas namely curriculum, teacher education, second national language, whole school culture, integration, co-curriculum and research (SCPEU, 2008, p. vii) as well as two ways to achieve these strategies; (1) the establishment of an Advisory Board to coordinate 93 Zonal Committees for Peace; (2) the provision of infrastructural support (SCPEU, 2008, p.vii). Furthermore, systematic monitoring and evaluation body was also established to check the entire process in coordination with SCPEU at provincial and Zonal levels. This body not only monitors the process but also coordinate the research network (SCPEU, 2008, p.vii).

The NEC Report in 1997 also proposed Second National Language (2NL) to students at primary and secondary levels in schools (NEC, 1997, p. 17) as another mechanism to promote mutual understanding among the different ethnic groups in the country. According to this proposal, all government schools in the country are expected to teach Tamil for Sinhala medium students and Sinhala for Tamil medium students for two class periods a week (both of forty minutes' duration) between Grades 6 and 9 (Perera, 2011).

In addition to the structural reformation, the NEC Report in 1997 also proposed a new emphasis on pre-service and in-service education on human values, human rights, national cohesion, democratic principles, gender rights, the environment and language skills in all three languages (SCPEU, 2008, p. 1). Teachers are expected to develop skills of empathetic listening, democratic leadership, developing children's self-esteem and conflict resolution through role-plays (SCPEU, 2008, p. 1).

In 2003, the proposals for a National Policy Framework on General Education Sri Lanka re-emphasized the recommendations of NEC 1997 on social cohesion. This proposal included two special goals; (1) Nation building and the establishment of a Sri Lankan identity through the promotion of national cohesion, national integrity, national unity, harmony and peace, and recognizing cultural diversity in Sri Lanka's plural society within a concept of respect for human dignity, and (2) creating and supporting an environment imbued with the norms of social justice and a democratic way of life that promotes respect for human rights, awareness of duties and obligations and a deep and abiding concern for one another to achieve social cohesion (Herath, 2015, p. 48). These two goals combine the ethics of unity, harmony and dignity with social justice, democracy and human rights.

These goals were further enhanced in the 2006 Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 48). This framework includes four themes. Theme 2: the economic impact, and



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social relevance of education discusses the racial conflict and ethnic segregation as a challenge to the quality of education and emphasizes the importance on promoting values, ethics, civic consciousness and social cohesion in schools (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 48).

In addition to these peace educational projects, there are various other innovative interventions fostering social cohesion especially designed to educate children who affected by the war (UNICEF, 2009, p. 48). Herath (2015) prepared a table to provide an overview of some of these interventions as follows (pp. 54-55):

Table 1

*Education Intervention for Children Affected by War in Sri Lanka*

Intervention	Programs
Providing flexibilities in the education system	<p><i>Administrative flexibilities:</i> Provided educational facilities for IDP children. For example, students and teachers were attached to more accessible schools during wartime.</p> <p><i>Open School Program:</i> this programme provides an opportunity to the children who have dropped out of regular school. There was no age limit. Students can learn in the evenings and on weekends. There were no fixed locations for classes to be held. They can vary depending on where the fighting was taking place.</p> <p><i>Home-school modules</i> – When children could not attend school every day, a designated adult worked with them. A teacher circulated to these locations.</p> <p><i>Remedial Education programs</i> – Helped school dropouts and slow learners catch up.</p>
Creating child friendly and safe environments	<p><i>Support transportation</i> – Provided children bicycles to facilitate the commute to school.</p> <p><i>Ensure safety of the route to school</i> – In conflict areas, check-points often delayed the commute to the school and often students were late coming to school. This experience triggered school dropouts. So a student register was given to the checkpoints and a teacher or other personnel were assigned to assist the process.</p> <p><i>Develop emergency preparedness plans</i> – Schools were asked to prepare their own plans.</p> <p><i>Community solidarity</i> – Programs to prevent adolescent abduction.</p> <p><i>Peace and community cohesion education</i> – Conducted to provide opportunities for children to think about various types of conflicts and develop non-discriminatory attitudes.</p>
Developing skills of children	<p><i>“Child-led risk reduction”</i> – Led by Save the Children in Sri Lanka. This program helped children to develop awareness, skills of mapping and mitigating risks, and ideas for advocacy.</p>
Monitoring and looking out for school dropouts	<p>The Ministry of Education and UNICEF have asked individual teachers to go out and find children who have stopped coming to school.</p>
Setting up mechanisms within the government to respond to emergencies	<p><i>National Child Protection Authority (NCPA):</i> Established to protect children from any kind of harassment and violation.</p> <p><i>National Council for Disaster Management and Disaster Management Centre.</i></p> <p>Teacher Centres and Educational Resource Centres have been set up across the country as focal points for education in a time of emergency.</p>

(Source: Herath, 2015)



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Hence, Sri Lankan government as well as International organizations like UNESCO and GIZ-Germany have initiated several projects in Sri Lanka to promote social harmony through education.

However, the interim evaluation report on education for Social Cohesion (ESC) showed only 50% of success in these initiatives (OECD, 2010, p.6). Increasing violent trend particularly school children and their active participation in racial violence (Harees, 2018) has encouraged the educators and social activists to think seriously on the benefits of peace initiatives through education.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical foundation for this study has been adopted from the study on intercultural education for social cohesion in Malaysian context (Kaur, Awang-Hashim, & Noman, 2017). It is formulated based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Social Identity Theory is a sense of belongingness to group. Meanwhile, group gives an individual a sense of social identity. Hence, the individuals increase their self-image by enhancing their status in the group. In order to enhance their self-image in the group they might discriminate and prejudice out-group. The central hypothesis of social identity theory is that the individuals in a group will search for self-image by finding negative aspects of an out-group. This approach uses the diversity and differences as a mechanism to celebrate and pride. Hence, failure to manage the diversity is that it brings potential for conflicts and prejudice as well as widens the gaps between people. As conflicts and violence bring destructions and annihilations for all communities, proper management of diversity and social cohesion is vital to avoid that.

Kaur et al. (2017) used ecological system theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) in order to highlight the importance of peace education in early years of child development. This theory discusses the identity formation of children in the context of their environment. Since school is highly influential in the formation of children identity, experience in school in term of interaction, socialization as well as social intelligence will help to enhance children identity with social cohesion.

From the above-mentioned theoretical foundation, the researcher found school as an agent to transform individuals' social identity by articulating values and principles that motivate the children to behave friendly with others in classrooms as well as school while working for peace and social harmony in the society. Hence, effective strategies to promote social cohesion in school, particularly in early years of children might help to inculcate humanistic values and appreciating social behaviour. The researcher based on this assumption which formulates the conceptual framework as follows:



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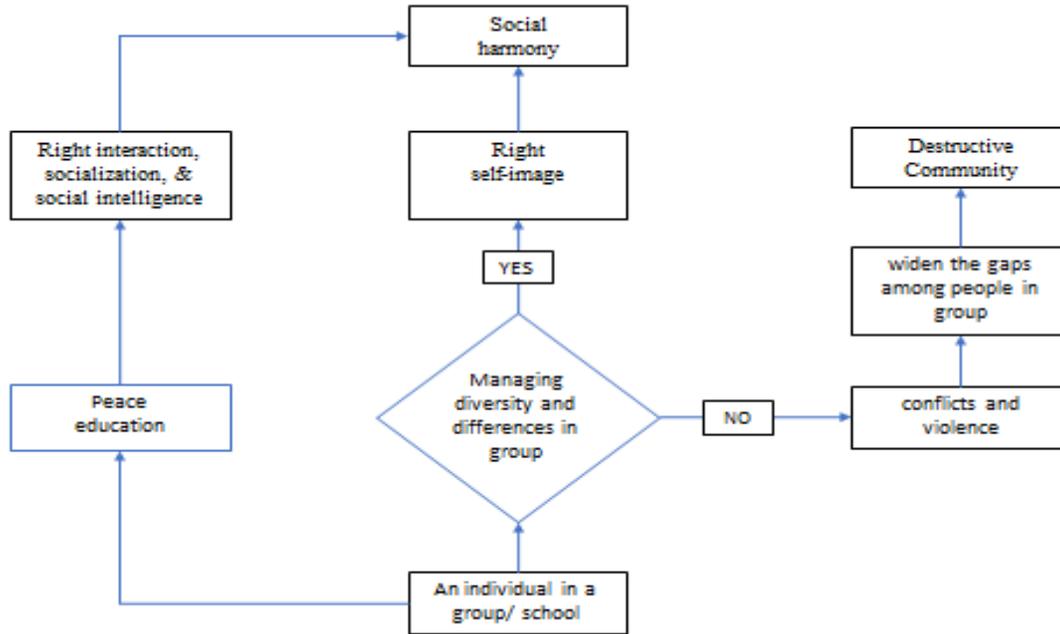


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of creating Social harmony

## METHOD

### *Research Design and Participants*

This study focused on investigating the government and non-government initiatives to manage the diversity in Sri Lanka. It also explored the challenges faced by the decision makers who strategize the policy implementation in regard to social cohesion through Education. This research searches for answer to the questions about experiences of decision makers in implementing policies and strategies in different levels including national, provincial, zonal and school level, it uses the qualitative method to finding data (Morse, 1995). Thus, this study adopted a qualitative research design and used interview protocol to collect data in addition to textual and document analysis.



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Table 2  
*Details of the Participants for in-depth interviews*

Position	ID	Gender	Age	Race
National Education Directors	N <sub>1</sub>	Female	60	Muslim
	N <sub>2</sub>	Male	62	Singhalese
Provincial Educational Directors	P <sub>1</sub>	Male	52	Tamil
	P <sub>2</sub>	Male	46	Muslim
Zonal Educational Directors	Z <sub>1</sub>	Male	37	Muslim
	Z <sub>2</sub>	Female	58	Sinhalese
School Principals	S <sub>1</sub>	Male	61	Muslim
	S <sub>2</sub>	Female	51	Tamil
	S <sub>3</sub>	Male	52	Singhalese

The decision makers in the implementing process were chosen using purposive sampling techniques aimed at generating suitable representation of members involved directly in the education process. The intended selection criterion for the study was to have fair representation of each race for each category. The participants were invited personally to participate in the study and were promised strict confidentiality of their responses. The decision-making level people were chosen on the basis of their leadership position in national, provincial, district and zonal level, and their experiences through the snowball sampling technique. The participants were all involved in implementing peace strategies in the national, provincial and zonal level across Sri Lanka. Table 1 provided the details of the participants for in-depth interviews in the study.

### **Data Collection**

The data from the textual analysis were collected over a period of few months while the interviews were carried out within two weeks of time. In the face-to-face interview, the participants were interviewed at a place where they feel convenient. An interview protocol was designed by adopting the informal conversational interview (Turner, 2010). In each interview session, the interviewees were given a brief introduction of the research background and objective of the research. The interview protocol used open-ended questions related to government policies and strategies to manage the diversity as well as challenges in implementing these strategies. Researchers also used several probing questions to maintain the direction of the main inquiry. Each interview continued from 15 minutes to 20 minutes. All the data were then recorded with the participants' consent.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher adopted 'Carney's ladder of analytical abstraction' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 224) to analyse the data. In the first stage, researcher transcribed the audio-recorded transcripts of the interviews then read the transcripts carefully and excluded irrelevant information and repetitions. The transcript data was sent to the participants in order to check the data as a way of increasing the accuracy (Harvey, 2015). Then the data was logically grouped and categorized following the guideline of data coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.224) to ensure fitting these data across the categories. In the second level, data was 'repackaged' to find themes in accordance with underlying nature of the data. The classification in repacking process enabled the researchers to identify adoption factors logically. In the third level, an explanatory framework was developed in accordance with research outcomes. As the data in qualitative research do not speak for themselves, metaphoric process was used to analyse the data considering strategies to promote social cohesion through education for initial coding (Chenail, 2012).



## **FINDINGS**

This section discusses the findings of the research drawing from the data. These findings are supported by verbatim evidences. The researchers used several approaches and strategies to discuss the data. The findings on the government and INGOs initiatives to promote social cohesion through education and the challenges in implementing process brought several aspects of peace education in Sri Lanka. This research also has highlighted important preparations and requirements before executing the strategies and plans for social cohesion in schools. These findings are categorized under two broader themes; preparation of school environment and the resources as well as removing obstacles to implement the peace education projects in schools. The first theme consists of sub-themes such as creating awareness on the positive aspects of diversity, creating cultural acceptant environment and empowering teachers with peace education. There are two subthemes in the second theme namely; abolishing ethnic base segregated school system and reforming the education system. The first theme underlines the initiatives required to be taken by different peace education stakeholders particularly the education ministry, school administration, provincial and zonal education officers and the teachers while the second theme seeks the attention from the policy makers.

### ***Preparation of School Environment and the Resources***

- **Creating Awareness on the Positive Aspect of Diversity**

The research findings identified the required preparation before implementing any peace education strategies and plans in schools. The research found that the awareness among education officers, school administration, teachers and the students on the diversity and its positive impact on the society is an important pre-requestee of any peace education projects. An interviewee who works for peace education in school in the national level highlighted the important of diversity and said,

*“Diversity is the reality and it is beautiful. I have many friends with different ethnic and religious background. We share and helpful. I am so happy to have these friends. However, diversity is bad when it is used for bad purpose” (N<sub>2</sub>.10918-15-16).*

It shows that any peace education programme could not ignore this reality. The social cohesion and peace education projects in Sri Lanka failed or did not give expected result due to insufficient awareness on diversity among the different peace education stakeholders. This also highlights that the diversity has potential to be used either positively or negatively. The positive approach brings cultural richness while negative approach will bring destruction and social misbehaviour. Hence, the awareness on diversity is needed in different levels including education officers, school principals, teachers, parents as well as students.

The research finding highlights that the peace education initiatives are considered as co-curricular activities in the education sector. Therefore, a majority of education office in provincial and zonal levels has given this responsibility to the person in charge for co-curricular activities. Since organizing co-curricular activities in school level is a big task, the peace education programmes are perceived by these officers as an extra burden as described by an interviewee working as a provincial education officer. He said,

*“The officers in crucial position also consider social cohesion programs as extra burden due to the ignorance on the diversity” (P<sub>1</sub>.10918-1-3).*

Hence, these officers organize some programmes on social cohesion in school level for the sake of carrying out the orders without passion and interest, as mentioned by another interviewee, a director of education in zonal level. He said,



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*“Many officers who organize social cohesion programme in school level are lack of awareness on value of multiculturalism and positive diversity. They organize some programmes in order to prepare the report to the ministry. They do not take it seriously. They have pressure from the authority and have fund, so they do” (Z<sub>1</sub>.10918-1-3)*

Therefore, the officers in charge for peace education programmes in education offices should be educated about the importance of diversity and be motivated to conduct the social cohesion programmes with passion and interest.

This study also found that inadequate awareness on diversity among school principals made them to ignore or give less priority to the government initiatives to promote social cohesion through schools. One of the interviewees from the Ministry of Education says,

*“Even though we sent the strategies and programmes on social cohesion to schools, the majority of schools did not take it seriously” (N<sub>1</sub>.10918-18-19).*

It shows the school principals are not taking the peace education programme seriously even though they receive instructions from the ministry. Due to the lack of awareness on the diversity and its benefits, the school principals in Sri Lanka are not only interested in conducting social cohesion programmes in their schools but also not ready to send their school children to other schools as participants in peace education programmes as described by a school principal, one of the interviewee in this research. He said,

*“Majority of schools do not organize social cohesion programme but also not ready to send their children to neighboring schools when these neighboring schools organizing any peace education programmes”. (S<sub>2</sub>.10918-1-3)*

The research also found the principals in majority community schools, particularly are not serious in organizing peace education programmes as explained by an interview, a school principal as follows;

*“the principals in majority community schools hardly take initiatives to conduct these programmes as they do not understand the value of diversity compare to the minorities” (S<sub>1</sub>.10918-1-3).*

Research finding further elaborate that inadequate awareness on diversity not only demotivate the officers, school managements but also misguided religious leaders and local politicians who could influence the school management. An interviewee of this research said, *“Religious leaders sometime misguide the people in having social cohesion programmes in schools.” (S<sub>1</sub>.10918-9-11).* The provincial level education officers highlighted the local politician’s intervention in peace education programmes due to lack awareness on diversity. He said, *“The political intervention also disturbs social cohesion project in the schools” (P<sub>1</sub>.10918-8-11).* A school principal who has given interview for this research also had similar experience. He said, *“Politicians also influence the school management and encourage them not to support any social harmony initiatives.” (S<sub>1</sub>.10918-15-17).*

The research particularly highlighted the perilous consequences among the school children due to insufficient awareness on the diversity. Due to several reasons and influences, the negative aspect of diversity is popular among school students today. Thus, these school children not only avoid interaction with other communities but also perceive them as their enemies. This negative perspective on diversity in early age pose a great challenge to promote any social cohesion programmes in school as described by an interviewee, the higher officer in the ministry of education. She said,

*“The awareness on diversity is important. It is because, those days when we went to school, we interacted with others. Even though there was no any peace education initiative in our school like today, we were able to laugh together with others regardless of their ethnicity, religion or culture.*



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*Today, this situation has totally changed, and the students are influenced by social media and chauvinistic ideologies. Their social media postings and comments underline how far they are influenced by ethnic and prejudiced perspective” (N<sub>1</sub>.10918-3-12).*

The negative aspect of diversity and differences isolated the school students in young age and encircled them within their own sphere. This exclusive approach in social life made them to think to find a world without diversity. Hence, awareness on diversity in all levels is crucial before introducing policies and strategies on social cohesion in schools.

- **Creating Culturally Acceptant Environment**

The finding highlights the cultural sensitivity in implementing strategies to promote social cohesion through education. Every human being is unique in term of his or her beliefs, culture and thoughts. Respecting this uniqueness is the essence of social cohesion. The individuals in a society transform from ethnic oriented into broad-minded in realizing this reality. An interviewee described the significant aspect of cultural sensitivity and said,

*“For me, cultural sensitivity is the biggest challenge to implement strategies and programmes to promote social cohesion in school. It seems the societies are divided sharply by cultural sensitivity” (S<sub>2</sub>.10918-28-30).*

This study found that creating an environment to accept one’ culture, beliefs and thought is crucial before implementing peace building programmes. Ignoring this cultural sensitivity in implementing peace initiatives in school caused failure of many peace projects through education. One of the participants in the interview shared his experience in sending a group of teachers to a ‘Teachers’ Day’ programme, organized by the social cohesion unit, the Ministry of Education Sri Lanka. He said,

*“On the request of provincial education office, I had to send teachers representing my school to Teachers’ Day programme to another school. Lady teachers were not ready to participate in this programme due to cultural sensitivity, particularly their way of dressing.” (S<sub>2</sub>.10918-34-36).*

Thus, according to this research findings, cultural sensitivity has become a great obstacle in implementing social cohesion programme in school. School teachers and students avoid many social interactive programmes with other communities in school due to cultural sensitivity. The school principal who had given interview shared his experience in inviting other faith school teachers and students to his school to celebrate Sinhalese New Year as a way of teaching others’ culture to his students.

*“The staffs, students and parents became so emotional when the Buddhist monk started to chant, Buddhist students staged a dance in their traditional cloths and the teachers inaugurated the even by oiling the lamp” (S<sub>2</sub>.10918-48-50).*

The research indicated that even though co-curricular activities, particularly sports, are very effective mechanisms to promote interaction and integration among the different ethnic and religious communities, cultural sensitivity has become barrier to have proper integration between different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. One of the interviewees explains this barrier and said that the Muslim girls hardly participate in outdoor co-curricular activities due to cultural sensitivity. Muslim girls are not allowed to wear sport dress as practiced in Sri Lanka as they need special permission to wear sport cloth covering their *awrat* (top to toe). However, Muslim girls in Sri Lanka do not seek permission to wear their sport cloth in order avoid cultural sensitivity. Rather they choose not to participate in any outdoor sport events” (S<sub>2</sub>.10918-53-55). Hence, the culture sensitivity prohibits the Muslim girls to participate in outdoor co-curricular activities.



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The research finding further elaborated the negative consequences of cultural sensitivity. Despising one's culture like appearance or dressing is the primary cause of ethnic violence in many parts of the world. Hence, acceptance of one's culture and appearance as well as expression of aesthetic feeling should be developed among children from early years of their schooling. The school principal who participated in the interview endorsed it as follows;

*"Awareness on different way of dressing and cultural appearance should be articulated among students and teachers in schools. It is because, ethnic consciousness mainly develops in school by criticizing others' cultural appearance. "S<sub>1</sub>.10918-19-21)*

It shows the sense of accepting others with their culture, appearance and expression is vital in multi-ethnic country, particularly in school before implementing peace education programmes.

- **Empowering Teachers with Peace Education**

Data collection revealed that teachers play a crucial role in promoting peace and social harmony. Teachers are agent of peace and any peace strategy in school is impossible without the help of teachers. They have to play the main role in promoting social cohesion in the classroom. In order to adopt peace education methodologies in the classroom, they should be educated and empowered with peace education policies and methods. This training enabled them to adopt peace-building materials in their teaching pedagogy.

Unfortunately, teachers are not equipped with peace education methodologies. Therefore, as revealed in the research findings, almost all schools in Sri Lanka need teachers who can teach peace strategies through their pedagogical experience. The shortage of trained teachers with peace and social cohesion understanding in schools is one of the reasons for failure of peace education programmes in schools. A school principal who gave interview for this research said,

*"Lack of teachers who are able to teach social harmony course and to contact peace building programme in school is an important reason for the failure of any peacebuilding strategies"( S<sub>1</sub>.10918-49-51).*

Insufficient trained teachers in peace education not only challenge the implementation social cohesive programmes in schools but also act as a barrier to promote social interaction. A national level participant in the interview said,

*"Teachers are not interactive with other communities, so they do not encourage the students to have good interact with others. Even though there are vacancies in Sinhalese school to teach Tamil as second National Language (2NL), qualified Muslim teachers are not ready to work in these schools as they are not trained to interact with other communities" (N<sub>3</sub>.10918-69-71).*

Learning Second National Language is one of important programme introduced by the ministry of education in Sri Lanka to promote social cohesion through education. However, this project is not implemented successfully due to insufficient trained teachers with peace and harmony even though they are experts in language.

Hence, the first theme of this research explains the government initiatives to promote social cohesion through education as well as challenges in implementing process under three sub-themes. These sub-themes elaborate the areas to be address before implementing the peace strategies through education. These themes also highlighted the responsibility of different peacebuilding stakeholders' responsibility in the country. The next theme of this research discusses the issues to be attended by policy makers and higher authorities. This theme is discussed under two sub-themes; abolishing ethnic base segregated school system and reforming education system.



### ***Removing Obstacles to Implement the Peace Education Projects in Schools***

- **Abolishing ethnic base segregated school system**

The finding of this research suggests abolishing ethnic base segregated school system in the country. In Sri Lanka, the government schools are divided into ethnic based schools; Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslims. This segregated school system eradicates all avenues for students to socialize with different ethnic and religious groups. Henceforth, the students in Sri Lanka formulate their identity in an exclusive environment without having any interaction with other communities. Their identity therefore was shaped with their own community's principles and values while they was deprived of having any exposure to other culture, attitudes and behaviours. This exclusive identity formation becomes great challenge to promote social harmony through education. A director in Zonal Level who participated in the interview said,

*"Ethnic based school is the great challenge to promote social cohesion. It is because, students have no idea about others unless they interact in business mall or hospital. So, segregated school should be abolished" (Z<sub>1</sub>.10918-5-7).*

The grave consequence of ethnic base school is further elaborated by some other participants. For instance, school principals who gave interview to this research said,

*"ethnic based school is the root cause of division among people. It should be abolished. It is because, the ethnic based segregation in early stage of a child caused permanent disparity. So, it should be abolished as a way of promoting social cohesion" (S<sub>2</sub>.10918-60-62).*

Hence, the educators and school administrators also feel that the segregated school system is a challenge in implementing peace education programmes in school and social harmony in the society. On the other hand, national school system can accommodate students from all races under one roof and thus provide a strong platform to promote social cohesion. A participant in the interview shared his experience in national school and said,

*"Indeed, there was not any ethnic based school before 1970. I mean, there were schools based on different language but not ethnic, so anybody was able to go to any school. Muslims who wanted to continue their education in Sinhalese medium, they were given admission to Sinhalese medium school and whoever wanted to continue their studies in Tamil medium, Tamil medium schools admitted them. However, this situation changed after 1970. Sinhalese started to go to Sinhalese schools, Tamil students started to go to Tamil schools and Muslims go to Muslim schools" (S<sub>1</sub>.10918-40-41).*

According to his experience, the students who studied in other faith-based school are broad minded, opened and inclusive. They become the agents of peace between communities. This experience underlined the national school concept which allow and accept everyone regardless of their ethnic and cultural identity.

- **Reforming the education system**

Finally, this research finding underlined the need to reform the present education system in Sri Lanka. Since school is the right place to implement the strategies of social cohesion as it prepares young generation for future, government initiatives to promote peace and harmony through education have failed due to present education system. It is because the present education system in Sri Lanka is exam oriented and there is no proper place in the system given to inculcate values and principals. In addition to that, this exam-oriented system is a challenge in implementing any peace education initiative in school. The national level interviewee of this research underlined this issue with expectation from the policy makers and said,



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*“The big challenge to implement the strategies of social cohesion in schools is our education system. It is because, our education system is exam oriented and the principals, teachers and the students are busy in preparing exams. Hence, they have no time to think of anything other than exam” (N<sub>1</sub>.10918-37-39).*

This reality is further elaborated by another national level participant to interview for this research. He said,

*“The education system in Sri Lanka is a big challenge to promote social cohesion. It is exam oriented and nobody has time to promote values and principals as they are busy in preparing for exam” (N<sub>2</sub>.10918-10-13).*

Exam focused system of education in the country not only act as a hurdle to implement peace education programmes but also challenge to social harmony as it sets high competition among school children for higher education and employment opportunities. Therefore, Sri Lankan education system itself has become obstacle to promote social cohesion through education.

Research findings elaborated issues in implementing social cohesion programmes in schools and suggested abolishing the ethnic based-segregated education system in Sri Lanka while demanding to reform present education system from exam oriented into value-based education system in order to promote social cohesion and harmonious living through education.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The low rate of peace initiatives’ achievement through school level (OECD, 2010, p. 6) underlines the urgency of reviewing the social cohesive strategies through education. The increasing violent trend among youths in Sri Lanka (Harees, 2018) has also raised the question on social cohesion programmes through school system in the country. This research demands enough attention from the stakeholders of peace and harmony on effective mechanism to promote social harmony through education. The present study searches for answers to the questions on strategies to promote social cohesion through education and the challenges in implementing these strategies by collecting data from the people who involve in implementation process in different levels such as national, provincial and zonal education directors as well as school principals. Face-to face in-depth interviews with open-ended questions were used to collect the data in addition to textual and document analysis. The findings were then summarized into two main themes with few sub-themes that reflect the situation and challenges in implementing strategies to promote social cohesion in Sri Lanka.

The first theme highlights the importance of creating awareness among the different stakeholders of social cohesion and peace prior to implement any social cohesion strategies and plans. Awareness on diversity and social harmony among the zonal education office and school principals can be organized through leadership trainings, special courses, leadership camps and media using different means such as video presentation, case studies, discussions as well as social media. This finding supports the study of Kaur et al. (2017) on intercultural education for social cohesion in Malaysian context. Kaur et al. (2017) study also found that creating awareness on multiculturalism as pre-requestee of implementing peace education strategies in Malaya. This will help to broaden their perspective and transform them into agents of peace (Jansen, Chioncel, & Dekkers, 2006). Further, this awareness will help the zonal level and school level education administrators to take social cohesion strategies and plan seriously. Particularly, awareness among teachers on peace and social harmony will help to transform the students and youths into an amicable society (Quaynor, 2015).



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The participants in this research highlighted the essence of cohesion. Awareness on 'respecting others' is the fundamental of multiculturalism and coexistence (Kearns & Forrest, 2000). Hence, creating awareness on social cohesion primarily emphasise on respecting others and their cultural differences including dressing, appearance, eating and celebrating their days.

The cultural sensitivity is an important aspect of multicultural society. The evidences from the data findings in the research showed that cultural insensitivity is a challenge to promote social cohesion. Cultural sensitivity means being aware of people with different religious and cultural background without assigning them a value; positive or negative, better or worse, right or wrong (Bennett, 1986). Failure to accept people with their culture causes ethnocentric orientation either by denying or defending the culture and people become more culturally sensitive, they progress from ethnocentric orientation to a more ethnorelative worldview (Bennett, 2009). Thus, cultural sensitivity disturbs peace education process and all efforts to promote social cohesion through education. The social cohesion strategies, therefore, should include plans to address the cultural insensitivity in school environment, particularly among teachers and students.

Most of the participants in this research found segregation of school in term of medium and race play a crucial role in widening the gaps among the people. Cardozo (2008) also identified segregation; Sinhalese children go to Sinhala medium school, Tamil children to medium school, as a crucial factor that divide Sri Lankans quoting from Bush and Saltarelli (2000). In Sri Lanka, the government manages all schools except international private schools. However, these government schools are segregated in terms of medium as well as race. There are Sinhalese medium schools as well as Tamil medium schools. Among Tamil medium schools, for example, Muslims manage few schools and Tamils manage the rest. Therefore, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims are divided since the early years of their schooling. There is great possibility to enhance the social cohesion when the children from different racial and cultural backgrounds study together under one roof (Loader & Hughes, 2017).

Teachers' role and their commitment in implementing strategies to promote social cohesion among students is underlined by participants in this research. The policy makers and the authority can formulate policies and strategies; however, teachers are going to implement these strategies in the classroom. Therefore, the teacher's role in peace education is important (Bar-Tal, 2002). Bar-Tal (2002) argues that peace education is teacher dependent. He said that the success of peace education is more dependent on the views, motivations and abilities of teachers. It is because the peace education mainly refers to the acquisition of values, attitudes, skills, and behavioural tendencies by pupils. This means that teachers who teach peace education must also be in line with its objectives (Bar-Tal, 2002). Hence, the evidences from the findings also highlights the role of teachers in implementing the strategies of social cohesion as they transform their views and understanding to their students in different pedagogical strategies. Therefore, peace strategies should include proper teacher training mechanism to widen their views and to accept others. The courses and programmes without enhancing teachers' capacity will not be productive and helpful in peace education (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007, p. viii).

The exam-oriented education system in Sri Lanka is described in findings to be a disadvantage for social cohesion. As the school administration, teachers and students are busy in preparing for exams, they have no time to inculcate values and principles (Mwaniki, 2013, pp. 21-22). The higher education is controlled by the government in Sri Lanka. Since higher education is free in the universities, there is a high competition to get the admission. Only around 9 percentage of students who sit for the government general qualification examination (GCE) Advance Level (A/L) can obtain admission to universities (Liyanega, 2013). As government jobs depends on students' qualification, students try to grab the opportunity to get the admission in universities in their desired field. Thus, the government has to change the education system from exam oriented into a more comprehensive and value based in order to archives peace education goals.



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The present study on social cohesion and challenges to implement its strategies through education explicitly describes education as an effective mechanism to achieve peace and social harmony in Sri Lanka. The data revealed that education, even though it can play a key role in creating positive society and nation-building, it is not actively engaged in laying the foundations for peace and to eliminate prejudice. Therefore, people have been disturbed by conflict frequently (SCPEU, 2008, p. 1). Consequently, social cohesiveness and citizenship consciousness among youths in Sri Lanka has become bad to worse (Nipunika, 2015).

According to Nipunika (2015), loss of emotional attachment with the country and proper integration might be the cause for this situation among youths. Hence, peace education and effective implementation is necessary for to harmonious live together and for the future development of the country.

Diversity of people in term of religion, culture and ethnicity is natural and unavoidable in the present world. The development in transportation and communication technology each part of the world has becoming diverse and dynamic. Hence, the positive aspect of diversity needs to be elaborated in order to ensure social cohesion through education as the education plays key role in identity formation of children. As education is an effective mechanism to widen the perspective of children, positive aspects of diversity could be elaborated through education. It would not only improve the students' critical thinking and problem solving, but also promote team work and other skills related to nation building and social cohesion.

Hence, the stakeholders of peace and social harmony in different levels such as policy makers, strategic officers, intellectuals, education ministry officers, school principals, teachers, parents, religious leaders and politicians as well as students have to play their role in creating an environment to promote peace education in schools. The policy makers particularly need to consider reforming the education system of Sri Lanka as well as abolishing racial based segregated school system as a mechanism to promote social cohesion.

However, educational institution cannot single-handedly achieve social harmony even though it has long term positive effects in building a culture of peace. Other sectors such as socio-economic development units of the country also have to support to the course. As national policy on social cohesion and peace education is vital in the development of Sri Lanka, the implementation process requires more attention in all levels.

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