The role of MLE in enhancing ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka

By David Hayes

In Sri Lanka, children in primary school begin learning their Second National Language (2NL) from grade 3, that is, children from the majority Sinhalese community learn Tamil whilst children from the minority Tamil community learn Sinhala.

By promoting positive interethnic attitudes amongst young children, the objectives of this program go beyond simple learning of another language to encompass broader goals of laying the foundations for social cohesion in a country still recovering from a protracted civil war. These goals are consonant with Goal 4 of the Agenda for Sustainable Development to achieve “inclusive and equitable quality education”. However, the extent to which the goals are being realized in Sri Lankan primary schools remains largely unevaluated.

This paper reports on a research project investigating interethnic attitudes amongst children in primary school, where 2NL education is first experienced, using a Trait Attribution Task as an implicit measure of children’s attitudes in grade 3 and grade 5. It seeks to assess whether children’s attitudes towards the other community are affected by learning its language, to contribute to the understanding of interethnic attitudes amongst school children, and to assess whether official policy with respect to 2NL education is making any contribution to social inclusion and the prevention of renewed ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka in the future. Without genuine equality in Sri Lanka, minority Tamil children will be unable to escape from the marginalization which was a root cause of the 1983-2009 civil war.