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Educating Malaysia's Multi-Ethnic Youth for Global and Ecological Citizenship: Climate Change, Identity and Social Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores multi-ethnic Malaysian students' perceptions of global citizenship and ecological citizenship as components of global competence, examining how these concepts instill civic responsibility and environmental stewardship in the context of climate change. It also assesses the impact of competing and common "nation-of-intent" – differing visions of national identity – on these students' orientations toward global environmental issues. Primary data were collected via a questionnaire survey (n = 238; 122 Malay and 116 Chinese undergraduates at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) and follow-up in-depth interviews with 12 students. Results indicate that Malaysian youth lack a clear conception of citizenship, especially ecological citizenship, and that understandings of good citizenship diverge between ethnic groups. Many students emphasize responsibilities and community participation over rights, and display limited engagement with environmental action, revealing a need for more explicit citizenship education. The findings suggest that Malaysia's nation-building vision has yet to fully integrate a unified civic identity that encompasses environmental responsibility. The study concludes that citizenship education in Malaysia should be reformed to explicitly cultivate global and ecological citizenship values—such as empathy, justice, and respect for diversity to better prepare youth as active contributors to social change and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Global Citizenship; Ecological Citizenship; Nation-of-Intent; Environmental Values; Climate Change; Multi-Ethnic Youth

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and pressing transnational challenges have redefined the role of education from instilling a narrow national identity toward fostering a broader sense of belonging to a global community. Issues such as climate change and environmental degradation are global challenges that demand collective awareness and action beyond national borders. To solve such complex global problems and promote sustainable development, education systems worldwide are increasingly expected to teach not only cognitive knowledge but also critical values, attitudes, and skills for global responsibility. This emphasis on global citizenship education (GCED*)* marks a paradigm shift in educational discourse: traditional curricula focused on academic achievement are being re-evaluated for their relevance in addressing dynamic social and environmental issues like climate change. Promoting global competencies through education is seen as vital to empower students to engage with controversial socio-political issues and participate in solving them collaboratively on a global scale.

Malaysia, like many countries, faces the challenge of integrating global citizenship ideals into its education system, especially given its multi-ethnic society. Malaysian youth today are influenced not only by national

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narratives but also by global media and values, creating a complex identity landscape. This context raises important questions about how young Malaysians conceptualize citizenship, whether primarily as legal status, as participation in a community, as loyalty to the nation, or as a broader membership in humanity concerned with global issues. Climate change, as a global threat with local impacts, is an issue that can illuminate these perceptions. Education is increasingly recognized as a strategic resource to mitigate and adapt to climate change, yet in Malaysia it remains underutilized for this purpose. There is a noticeable gap in Malaysia's educational framework when it comes to climate change education within the GCED context. Most research and discourse on global citizenship education have been dominated by Western contexts, and there is a need to understand how these concepts play out in non-Western, culturally diverse settings like Malaysia.

This paper addresses that need by examining Malaysian university students' perceptions of global citizenship and ecological citizenship, particularly how these relate to environmental issues such as climate change. We focus on Malay and Chinese youth, the two largest ethnic groups in Malaysia; to investigate how cultural backgrounds and 'nation-of-intent' (differing visions of the nation's identity and future) might shape their civic values and sense of responsibility toward the environment. Our aims are twofold: (1) to explore students' understanding of global citizenship and ecological citizenship as part of their global competencies, including the values and civic responsibilities they associate with climate change; and (2) to assess the influence of competing or common national identity narratives on their attitudes toward global environmental issues. In doing so, we hope to shed light on how education can cultivate a sense of ecological citizenship among youth in a multi-ethnic society. The following sections present the theoretical framework guiding this study, the methodology employed, the key findings, and a discussion of their implications for citizenship education and social change in Malaysia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Global Citizenship and Ecological Citizenship

Contemporary scholars argue for expanding the concept of citizenship beyond the confines of the nation-state to meet global environmental challenges. Andrew Dobson's work on environmental and ecological citizenship is particularly influential. Dobson (2003) conceptualizes environmental citizenship as grounded in sustainable development, where individuals are encouraged through rights and responsibilities to adopt environmentally responsible behaviors for the common good. This notion implies that citizens consent to certain obligations (and claim certain rights) regarding environmental wellbeing, often enforced or encouraged by policies (incentives or penalties). However, Dobson argues that such externally motivated changes may not yield lasting results. Thus, he introduces ecological citizenship as a more radical, post-national form of citizenship not bounded by territory. Ecological citizenship emphasizes non-contractual, personal responsibility for one's ecological footprint, extending beyond one's immediate community or nation. Those in wealthier, high-consumption societies are seen as having asymmetrical obligations to reduce their environmental impact more substantially, given their disproportionate contribution to problems like climate change. Ecological citizenship also values actions in the private sphere such as lifestyle changes, as much as public political engagement, highlighting that personal choices have global environmental consequences. In short, while *environmental citizenship* operates within existing political structures (emphasizing policy compliance and rights to a healthy environment), *ecological citizenship* calls for a more profound shift in identity and responsibility that transcends national borders and is motivated by justice and care for distant others.

A key element of ecological citizenship is the idea of justice, doing what is fair not only for one's own community but for vulnerable populations and future generations who bear the brunt of environmental degradation. David Horton (2003) notes that environmental rights (like clean air or safe workplaces) often intersect with issues of class, gender, and ethnicity, since disadvantaged groups typically suffer first from environmental harm. Thus, concepts of citizenship must expand to address these inequities. Derek Humphreys (2009) similarly argues that ecological citizens are driven not just by reducing their own footprint but by a desire to advocate for those who cannot easily represent themselves in environmental decision-making. This means giving a voice to marginalized communities and future generations in climate policy, aligning with the notion of global justice.

The academic literature on environmental and ecological citizenship, while growing, is still relatively young and has predominantly emerged from Western contexts. Empirical studies are limited. One notable example is Wolf et al. (2009), who explored how people in Canada perceived and practiced ecological citizenship in response to climate change. They found a strong sense that "acting on climate change is part of being a good citizen," with participants expressing collective responsibility and solidarity that extended to future generations and people in other countries. Such findings suggest that elements of ecological citizenship (like intergenerational and international solidarity) can resonate in practice, motivating individual action on global problems.

However, theoretical ambiguities remain. Prior to Dobson's clear distinction, terms like environmental citizenship were sometimes used in ways that overlap with what we now call ecological citizenship. For instance, a study by Burgess & Harrison (1998) in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands examined how communication could foster sustainability. It found that Dutch initiatives focused on voluntary individual actions in the private sphere, what we would now classify as ecological citizenship, though at the time it was labeled environmental citizenship. This highlights that our understanding of citizenship's scope has evolved: originally tied almost exclusively to public, state-mediated actions, it now increasingly encompasses private and global dimensions. In general, there has been a shift from viewing governments as the sole stewards of environmental well-being to recognizing the significant impact of individual and community choices. This broadening of the citizenship concept requires citizens to see themselves as agents of change in both local and global contexts.

Environmental Knowledge, Attitudes and Behavior

Fostering ecological citizenship among youth is closely linked to education about the environment. Research in environmental education often examines the knowledge–attitude–behavior nexus, positing that increasing people's knowledge about environmental issues will shape their attitudes and, in turn, lead to more responsible behavior. While this linear model is debated, it provides a useful framework for understanding youth engagement.

Environmental knowledge can be defined as awareness and understanding of environmental issues, facts, and relationships in natural systems. High knowledge is expected to help individuals recognize environmental problems and understand the benefits of pro-environmental actions. For example, someone informed about the causes and effects of climate change is more likely to know *what* actions (such as reducing energy use or supporting green policies) could mitigate it. However, simply possessing knowledge does not guarantee action. Studies have shown that the leap from knowledge to behavior is mediated by attitudes and other factors, meaning reality is more complex than the straightforward 'knowledge leads to action' assumption. Still, knowledge is widely considered a necessary precondition for pro-environmental behavior, since making informed choices is hard if one has misinformation or lacks basic understanding of the issues. As Gifford and Nilsson (2014) note, one cannot easily make environmentally sound decisions with incorrect or insufficient information. Likewise, Jensen (2002) argues that knowledge empowers individuals by providing the tools to interpret environmental problems and envision solutions.

Environmental attitudes refer to the collection of beliefs, values and feelings individuals have regarding environmental issues and activities (Panth et al., 2015). These attitudes typically encompass two components; environmental awareness (understanding of environmental processes and problems, and concern for environmental quality) and environmental concern (the extent to which one cares about environmental problems and supports efforts to solve them). For instance, an individual with strong pro-environmental attitudes not only recognizes issues like pollution or climate change but also feels concerned and morally obliged to address them. Such individuals are generally more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors. Studies have emphasized that attitudes have cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Martinez et al. (2015) describe how institutions and culture can shape these attitudes, affecting consumers' ecological behavior. Importantly, attitudes also include a behavioral intent, a readiness to act which connects how people feel to what they do (Olsson et al., 2016). Thus, nurturing positive environmental attitudes in youth (for example, a sense of responsibility or emotional connection to nature) is a key step toward motivating action.

Pro-environmental behavior (PEB) encompasses the concrete actions individuals take to minimize their negative impact on the environment or to positively improve environmental conditions. These can range from simple acts (recycling, conserving water) to more significant lifestyle choices (reducing meat consumption, using public transport) and civic actions (volunteering for environmental causes, advocating for policy changes). Steg and Vlek (2009) define pro-environmental behavior as behavior that "harms the environment as little as possible, or even benefits the environment". Similarly, Sawitri et al. (2015) describes it as conscious actions by individuals to lessen the negative impact of human activities on the environment. The goal of environmental education and policy, in many ways, is to encourage such behaviors across society. Research indicates that while knowledge and attitudes influence pro-environmental behavior, numerous other factors (social norms, economic incentives, structural barriers, etc.) also play a role (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). This explains why even informed individuals with positive attitudes may not always act consistently (the so-called *value-action gap*). Nonetheless, instilling strong environmental values and a sense of efficacy in youth is believed to increase the likelihood of their engaging in PEB.

Global citizenship education (GCED) aims to cultivate the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to address global challenges, including environmental issues. GCED can be transformative, providing students opportunities to become active contributors to a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world. A critical aspect of GCED is encouraging learners to critically analyze issues from local and global perspectives and reflect on their own identities and assumptions. However, scholars caution that concepts like "global citizenship" are interpreted differently depending on cultural and ideological context. In Western contexts, global citizenship often emphasizes universal values and cosmopolitan identity, whereas in other contexts it might be viewed with suspicion or adapted to local norms. In Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, for example, one must consider how *national citizenship* (with its ethnic and cultural dimensions) intersects with or diverges from *global citizenship*. Education in such a context must balance fostering a shared national identity with promoting openness to global responsibilities. There is also the concept of 'nation-of-intent' in Malaysia, referring to an envisioned ideal of the nation that different groups may hold. The majority's *nation-of-intent* (as in the government's Vision 2020 of a united *Bangsa Malaysia)* may differ from minority visions, potentially leading to competing narratives of identity. These differing identity narratives could influence how youth perceive their role as citizens and whether they prioritize national versus global or environmental duties.

In summary, the theoretical framework guiding this study integrates concepts of global/ecological citizenship and environmental knowledge-attitude-behavior dynamics, viewed through the lens of Malaysia's cultural diversity. It suggests that to empower ecological citizens who will act on climate change, education must do more than impart facts; it must also nurture empathetic and responsible attitudes and address identity-based perspectives on citizenship. This framework informs our research questions and methodology, focusing our attention on students' values and self-conceptions as citizens in a multi-ethnic, rapidly changing society.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey questionnaire with follow-up semi-structured interviews. The target population was Malaysian undergraduates from different ethnic backgrounds, to capture a range of perspectives in a multi-ethnic context. The research was conducted at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), a leading public university with a diverse student body, which provided a suitable setting to explore our questions about citizenship, identity, and environmental issues among youth.

Survey: We designed a questionnaire to quantitatively assess students' perceptions of citizenship (national, global, and ecological) and their attitudes and behaviors related to civic engagement and environmental issues. The survey instrument included sections on:

- ***Demographics:*** including ethnicity (with a focus on Malay and Chinese, the two largest groups in Malaysia), to examine differences between these groups.
- ***Conceptions of Good Citizenship:*** items asking what qualities or responsibilities define a "good citizen" (e.g., obeying laws, community participation, patriotism, protecting the environment, etc.). Respondents rated the importance of various attributes and could also provide open-ended descriptions.
- ***Civic Engagement and Identity:*** questions on their involvement in community service or civic activities, sense of belonging to the nation, and views on the role of youth versus government in national development.
- ***Views on Democracy:*** a question on whether they believe full democracy is attainable in Malaysia, to gauge political outlook and potential cynicism or optimism.
- ***Environmental Values and Behaviors:*** items on environmental knowledge (self-assessed understanding of issues like climate change), attitudes (concern about climate change, sense of responsibility), and behaviors (participation in environmental activities, willingness to act). One key question asked whether they believe youth in Malaysia can make a difference in addressing climate change.
- ***Global Citizenship Orientation:*** a few questions on awareness of global issues and whether they see themselves as part of a global community with responsibilities to people outside Malaysia.

The questionnaire was administered to a representative sample of 238 students in late 2024. We employed stratified sampling to ensure roughly equal representation of the two target ethnic groups: the final sample consisted of 122 Malay students (51.3%) and 116 Chinese students (48.7%), reflecting an almost even split. All participants were third- or fourth-year undergraduates at UKM across various fields of study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey primarily produced quantitative data (Likert-scale responses, yes/no questions, and some multiple-choice), which were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify prevailing trends and differences between Malay and Chinese respondents. We also analyzed open-ended responses qualitatively to capture any nuances in students' own words (these informed the design of interview questions).

Interviews: To delve deeper into the reasons behind the survey patterns, we conducted follow-up interviews with a subset of respondents. We used purposeful sampling to select 12 students (6 Malay and 6 Chinese, equal gender representation where possible) who completed the survey and agreed to be interviewed. The interviewees were chosen to include those who gave particularly insightful or representative answers in the survey, as well as to cover a spectrum of views (e.g., some who were highly engaged and optimistic, and others who were less so). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and followed a semi-structured protocol. Key topics in the interviews included:

- Personal definition of *citizenship* and what being a Malaysian citizen means to them.
- Reflections on the qualities of a good citizen (following up on their survey responses, asking for elaboration and examples).
- Views on *patriotism* and *national identity* versus *global identity*: how they balance loyalty to country with concern for global issues.
- Discussions on climate change: whether and why they feel youth can (or cannot) contribute to solving environmental problems; any experiences they have with environmental education or activism; what might motivate or hinder youth action on climate issues.
- Perceptions of how their educational experience (school civic classes or university curriculum) has shaped their civic values and awareness of social/environmental issues.
- For Chinese and Malay students specifically, any perceptions of differences in outlook between their ethnic community and others, particularly regarding civic duties and environmental concerns (to probe the 'nation-of-intent' concept implicitly).

All interviews were conducted in English or Malay according to the participant's preference (with translation later as needed). The interviews were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed. We performed a thematic analysis of the transcripts: coding responses for recurring themes and notable differences. This qualitative data helped contextualize the survey findings, allowing us to uncover *why* students held certain views and how they conceptualized ideas like citizenship and environmental responsibility in their own terms. It also enabled us to capture direct quotes that illustrate the youths' perspectives.

Methodologically, using both survey and interviews provided a complementary mix of breadth and depth. The survey gave a broad overview of trends and the distribution of opinions among a relatively large sample, while the interviews provided depth, revealing the nuances behind those numbers and illuminating the influence of cultural background on each student's views. By triangulating these methods, we aimed to increase the validity of our findings on this complex social topic. In the next section, we present the results, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings to provide a comprehensive picture of Malaysian students' perceptions of global and ecological citizenship.

RESULTS

Perceptions of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility

Overall, the research found that citizenship is not a salient or clearly understood concept for many Malaysian youth in the study. Until recently, the idea of citizenship beyond legal status has not featured prominently in Malaysia's political or educational discourse, and this was reflected in the students' responses. Only a minority of participants could articulate what being a "citizen" means to them in substantive terms, and even fewer had considered the notion of an *ecological citizen*. Nonetheless, when prompted, students were able to identify various qualities they associate with a "good citizen," which provides insight into their values.

From the interviews, we derived three major themes regarding the characteristics of a good citizen: (1) Participation in society, (2) Obedience, and (3) Moral responsibility. These themes were common across ethnic groups, though with some variation in emphasis:

- ***Participation in Society:*** An overwhelming number of students, both Malay and Chinese believed that actively participating in one's community is a hallmark of good citizenship. Frequently mentioned attributes included being socially aware, helping others in the community, and fulfilling public duties. For example, students talked about *"showing concern for society, actively participating in one's community, and offering services to those in need"* as important duties of a good citizen. Both groups agreed that contributing time and effort to community development (through volunteering, community projects, etc.) is vital. One Chinese student explained that a good citizen *"cares about the society and is willing to get involved in community work whenever possible."* This reflects a view of citizenship tied to civic engagement and communal solidarity.
- ***Obedience:*** Many students emphasized obeying and respecting the law as a fundamental duty of citizens. Adhering to rules and regulations was seen as the baseline of being a 'good' member of society. Notably, Malay and Chinese students alike endorsed law-abiding behavior, but Chinese students went further to mention specific obligations such as paying taxes and voting as part of good citizenship. Some Chinese interviewees pointed out that being knowledgeable about the political system and staying informed on current affairs are important, demonstrating a somewhat more civic-institutional view of obedience (understanding and participating in formal processes like elections). As one Chinese student noted: *"A good citizen has to be knowledgeable about the political and government system and current affairs... and has to fulfill his duty such as voting in elections."* Malay students fully agreed on the importance of obeying laws and rules,

though they did not specifically mention civic duties like voting as often in interviews; their conception of obedience was more tied to general respect for authority and order.

- ***Moral Responsibility:*** Students from both ethnic groups highlighted personal moral and ethical qualities as crucial to good citizenship. These include good character development (being unselfish, helpful, compassionate), integrity and honesty, self-discipline, and a strong sense of responsibility towards others. Many felt that without a moral foundation, other aspects of citizenship become hollow. For instance, one interviewee said a good citizen should *"try not to achieve his/her goals through illegal or immoral means, but instead act with conscience."* Both Malay and Chinese respondents believed that schools should teach these moral values as part of civic education.

While these three themes were common, there were notable differences between Malay and Chinese students in the nuances of their responses, reflecting different cultural priorities:

- ***Patriotism and National Identity:*** Malay students were much more likely to emphasize patriotism as an essential trait of a good citizen, whereas Chinese students rarely mentioned it spontaneously. Most Malay interviewees tied good citizenship to *loving one's country* and being willing to *sacrifice* for the nation. They gave passionate statements such as: *"A good citizen should love the country and even be ready to serve and sacrifice for the good of the nation."* Another Malay student said, *"First of all, a good citizen is someone who loves and is concerned about the country... As citizens in a democratic state, people ought to contribute to the country in any way required."* These sentiments indicate a classical or nationalistic view of citizenship among the Malays, where loyalty to the nation-state and maintaining its well-being are paramount. Malay participants often linked this view to what they were taught in Islamic Studies or Civic classes, suggesting that the education system and perhaps community or religious institutions, instills patriotism as a core value. In contrast, Chinese students did not explicitly mention patriotism in their definitions of good citizenship. Their focus was more on the social dimension (community welfare, obeying laws, individual integrity) rather than national pride or identity. This divergence was corroborated by the survey results, where Malay respondents gave significantly higher ratings to patriotism-related items than Chinese respondents did, indicating a stronger national consciousness among Malay youth.
- ***Rights vs. Duties:*** Chinese students tended to describe citizenship in terms of a reciprocal relationship with the state involving both *rights* and *responsibilities*. For instance, a Chinese student explained, *"A citizen in a society has both rights and responsibilities. Relative to the government, a citizen is a person who receives social services; therefore, at the same time, he has duties towards society."* This view sees citizenship as a two-way street: the government provides benefits and protection, while citizens contribute and comply in return. It aligns with a more social-contract notion of citizenship, encompassing civil rights and public obligations. On the other hand, Malay students generally described citizenship more in terms of identity and loyalty (e.g., being Malay or Malaysian and thus feeling obliged to the nation), and less in terms of explicit rights. Many Malay respondents implied that being a good citizen is about fulfilling duties (as given by the country or religion) and not necessarily about claiming rights or expecting services. Individual rights were not a focus in their discussions; indeed, both ethnic groups paid relatively little attention to rights compared to duties. The interviews revealed that youth found it easier to talk about responsibilities than about rights, a point we return to later and when rights were mentioned, students mostly referred to basic civil rights, like freedom of speech, rather than social welfare rights.

In summary, participation and morality are shared values for good citizenship among Malaysian youth, but patriotism distinguishes the Malay perspective, and civic/legal obligations (like voting, paying tax) are more salient to the Chinese perspective. Both groups show an inclination toward what could be called a 'dutiful' citizen model rather than a 'rights-based' model – emphasizing what citizens should do for society over what they should demand from the state. This reflects a somewhat traditional view of citizenship, possibly influenced by Malaysia's nation-building narrative and communitarian cultural values. It also suggests that environmental citizenship which often frames environmental protection as a new citizen responsibility, might resonate with their existing duty-oriented mindset, provided it is effectively incorporated into civic education.

Civic Engagement, Democracy, and National Outlook

The survey included questions to gauge students' engagement in civic activities and their perspectives on governance and the country's future. The findings reveal both challenges and opportunities for fostering active citizenship:

***Low Civic Participation*:** Only 44.9% of the students surveyed reported having ever participated in any form of community service or volunteer activity. This indicates that less than half have practical experience in civic engagement, despite their stated beliefs in its importance. The interviews suggest that many students feel disconnected or lack a sense of belonging to their community, which may explain the low participation. Some students expressed that they *"did not know how to get involved"* or *"didn't feel it would make a difference."* This lack of guidance and motivation is a concern, as practical engagement is crucial for developing civic skills.

Poor Knowledge-Sharing: Among those students who had engaged in community service, only 23.5% said they had shared their experience or knowledge gained from those projects with peers or the broader community. The vast majority (76.5%) did not disseminate what they learned. This finding is important because knowledge-sharing can amplify the impact of service projects, spread awareness of community needs, and inspire others to get involved. The low rate of sharing points to a missed opportunity in building a culture of civic learning and mentorship. It might also reflect a lack of platforms or encouragement for students to reflect on and communicate their experiences. One interpretation is that students treated community service as an isolated task (perhaps done to fulfill a requirement) rather than as part of an ongoing collective effort. As the analysis noted, sharing knowledge is a key factor for the success of community initiatives, facilitating new projects, avoiding duplication of effort, and fostering innovation.

Youth vs. Government Responsibility: Students were asked whether they agreed with the statement *"It is the government's responsibility, not the youth's, to improve the country's condition."* A substantial 63.2% disagreed with this statement, asserting that civil society and youth have a crucial role in national development, whereas 36.8% agreed or were inclined to put responsibility solely on the government. This is an encouraging sign: most of the youth do acknowledge the importance of their own involvement in improving societal conditions, rather than adopting a passive, government-dependent stance. Those who disagreed often commented that *"change starts with the people"* and that government alone cannot solve problems without active citizen participation. This attitude can be a strong foundation for promoting civic engagement programs since many youths already believe in taking initiative. However, the fact that over one-third still leaned towards expecting the government to handle things shows that a significant segment may be disengaged or feel powerless, highlighting a need for empowerment and awareness.

Views on Democracy: When asked if they believe Malaysia can achieve a fully democratic system, only 40.8% answered yes, while 59.2% responded that they do not believe full democracy is attainable in Malaysia. This indicates a notable skepticism among youth regarding the country's political development. Less than half are optimistic about democratic progress, which might be due to current or historical political constraints, perceived corruption, or lack of trust in electoral processes. This cynicism is worrisome because it can dampen young people's willingness to engage in political or civic matters. If they feel their participation will not influence outcomes (since "true democracy" is seen as out of reach), they might retreat from public life. The interviews echoed this sentiment: some students described democracy as an ideal that *"sounds good in theory but isn't the reality here,"* citing examples such as limited freedom of expression or unfair advantages for certain groups. This outlook presents a challenge for educators and policymakers to find ways to increase youth confidence in democratic processes, perhaps by highlighting gradual improvements or avenues where their voice can count (local governance, student organizations).

National Optimism: The survey also inquired whether students believe they will have a good future in Malaysia. A majority, 62.9%, expressed optimism, saying they expect to live well in Malaysia, whereas 37.1% were unsure or not optimistic about their future in the country. While it is reassuring that most students are positive, the sizeable minority with doubts points to underlying issues. Through the open-ended responses and interviews, reasons for uncertainty or pessimism emerged: concerns about economic opportunities, social inequalities, and brain-drain (some felt they might have better futures abroad). Ethnic differences also played a role; a few Chinese students subtly alluded to feelings of marginalization or fewer opportunities (likely referencing Malaysia's affirmative action policies favoring Bumiputera/Malay citizens), which made them question their prospects in the country. Malay students, conversely, more often believed the country would provide for them but were concerned about issues like political instability or moral decline. The common thread in the optimistic group was a sentiment that Malaysia is generally peaceful and improving, and that *"if we work hard, we can succeed here."* Those unsure often said *"it depends on how things go with the government/society in the next few years."* This metric of national optimism can influence how willing youth are to invest their efforts locally or whether they disengage and look outward.

Collectively, these results sketch a picture of a youth population that values civic participation in principle and does not wholly subscribe to a passive citizenship model yet is not highly engaged in practice and harbors some cynicism about political structures. The gap between students' stated beliefs ("civil society is important") and their actions (low volunteering and sharing) suggests barriers such as lack of empowerment, insufficient encouragement or platforms, or competing priorities. This gap aligns with the earlier notion from literature that knowledge or attitudes don't automatically translate into action without supportive conditions.

Environmental Values and Ecological Citizenship Tendencies

A core focus of the study was how students relate citizenship to environmental issues, specifically climate change. While the term "ecological citizenship" was new to many, the survey and interviews probed their environmental values and whether they see addressing climate change as part of their civic responsibility. Key findings include:

Environmental Values Recognized: Students generally acknowledged a set of values they believe an ecological or environmentally responsible citizen should have. When asked (in interviews and an open-ended survey question) what values are important for someone who cares about climate change, respondents across ethnicities mentioned a common slate of virtues. The most frequently cited were empathy, respect, cooperation, responsibility, justice, equity, integrity and altruism. Notably, there were no significant differences between Malay and Chinese students in the values they emphasized; both groups converged on these principles, indicating a potential area of common ground in otherwise diverse outlooks.

Table 1 below summarizes the key environmental values highlighted by the students, along with their descriptions:

Table 1. Core Values for Ecological Citizenship

Value	Description (based on students' perspectives)
Empathy	Ability to *"step into others' shoes"* and feel compassion for those affected by environmental problems. (Many students gave examples of feeling distress when hearing of communities hit by floods, indicating shared emotional responses.) Empathy shifts one's thinking from self-interest to common interest. Students saw it as crucial for motivating action on climate change, as it connects them emotionally to distant sufferers and future generations.
Respect	Appreciation for both the natural environment and the cultural heritage within it. Students stressed *respecting Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape and environment*, implying that development should not destroy historically or spiritually valuable sites. Respect also means recognizing the rights of nature and other communities and acting with due regard for the environment in daily life.
Cooperation	Working together and supporting one another in environmental efforts. Students noted that individuals have unique strengths, and co-operation allows those talents to complement each other for the greater good. In the Malaysian context, this also implies collaborating across ethnic lines: environmental issues affect everyone, so responding to them can unite people towards a common goal.
Responsibility	Personal and collective accountability for environmental protection. This means individuals feeling in charge of making environmentally conscious choices and possibly holding others (peers, organizations) accountable as well. Many students agreed that youth must take responsibility rather than wait for others to act, even if their sphere of influence is small.
Justice	Fairness in how environmental benefits and burdens are shared, both globally and within society. Students brought up the idea that the poorest are suffering the most from climate change despite contributing least to the problem. Thus, they saw environmental justice as ensuring support for vulnerable communities (e.g., through climate policies that help the poor or international aid for affected countries). They also linked justice to opposing practices that cause harm to others for profit.
Equity	Commitment to equality and fairness, not just in outcomes but in processes. In context, students felt an ecological citizen should recognize everyone's equal right to a healthy environment and be willing to advocate for policies that, for example, require the wealthy or high emitters to do more to reduce emissions. Equity may entail those with more resources or impact bearing a greater responsibility (*"sacrifice for the sake of others,"* as one student put it).
Integrity	Acting with honesty and strong ethical principles in relation to the environment. Students described an ideal environmentally conscious individual as *truthful, transparent, and consistent* in their actions. Integrity builds trust—if youth are advocating for sustainable practices, they must also embody those practices to be credible. This value also relates to not being corrupt or hypocritical about environmental issues.
Altruism	A selfless concern for the well-being of others and the environment, even when there is no direct personal gain. Many students admired those who would *"go the extra mile"* or inconvenience themselves to help others or protect nature. In their view, such altruistic behavior (like planting trees without reward or helping flood victims in distant areas) exemplifies true ecological citizenship.

Students clearly understand these values on a conceptual level, and many could provide local examples or personal anecdotes illustrating them. For instance, about 78% of survey respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that *"when I see news of fellow Malaysians suffering from severe floods, I feel their pain and want to help,"* reflecting the value of empathy in action. The emphasis on respect for Malaysia's cultural-environmental heritage also shows an interesting blend of environmental and cultural consciousness; recognizing that environmental conservation in a multi-ethnic nation includes protecting sites and practices important to various communities.

Lack of Empowerment on Climate Action: Despite acknowledging these values, a striking finding is that most students do not feel empowered to make a difference on climate change. 67.9% of respondents indicated they do *not believe that youth in Malaysia can make a change* in addressing climate change, whereas only 32.1% believed that they could. In other words, about two-thirds are skeptical of their own generation's ability to impact this global issue. This pessimism likely correlates with the earlier noted low participation: those who have never engaged in environmental action are less likely to see its potential. The interviews revealed several reasons behind this mindset. Some students felt climate change is too large-scale and requires government or international intervention beyond what ordinary people can do. As one student put it, *"We're just students – what we do hardly matters if industries keep polluting."* Others pointed out the lack of visibility of youth-led climate initiatives in Malaysia; they rarely see or hear success stories, which diminishes their belief that youth efforts are effective. A few mentioned cynically that societal or political barriers (e.g., lack of support for environmental movements, or more pressing economic issues) prevent youth from making an impact.

Disconnect between Environmental Knowledge and Action: The data suggest that many students intellectually understand climate change and may even rank environmental values highly, yet do not translate that into personal engagement. The phrase *"they do not seem to take the question of their relationship to the wider environment seriously"* emerged from discussions. Even though the students generally agreed that environmental responsibility is part of good citizenship in theory, few thought of citizenship in environmental terms spontaneously. In fact, when asked open-endedly about 'citizenship', almost none mentioned environmental stewardship until prompted. It was only in direct questions about climate change that they connected the dots. This indicates that ecological citizenship is not yet integrated into their mental model of what being a citizen entails.

Emphasis on Responsibilities over Rights in Environmental Context: Mirroring the general citizenship outlook, students felt more comfortable talking about responsibilities to protect the environment than about any rights to a good environment. They commonly asserted that youth "need to be made aware of their environmental responsibilities." Many interviewees struggled to articulate any notion of environmental rights such as the right to clean air or safe climate, which is consistent with the broader trend that rights discourse is less pronounced among these youth. When rights were mentioned, a few considered access to a clean environment as important but immediately couched it in terms of duty, e.g., *"we have a right to clean air, so we have a duty not to pollute."* This perspective, while altruistic, can sometimes lead to an overly moralistic view where individuals take on blame that might also belong to systemic actors. But it also means students are predisposed to accept calls for personal and collective action, like reducing waste, conserving energy, as a citizen's duty if properly educated.

Two Models of Citizenship among Youth: Through the interviews, it became apparent that when discussing their role in society, students oscillated between two models:

1. A responsibility-based model rooted in community membership; where being a citizen means contributing, helping others, and being loyal (this was the dominant model for most, especially Malays).
2. A less active, membership model, where being a citizen simply means belonging to a community or nation-enjoying membership but not necessarily taking initiative. This second model was observed as an underlying assumption in some who equated citizenship with just being a Malaysian by birth and following the norms - this appeared in both groups, often implicitly.

Notably, few students spontaneously conceived citizenship in 'social-environmental' terms, meaning incorporating environmental action as a core element of citizenship. This highlights a critical gap: while they may volunteer at a local charity or obey laws as part of being a good citizen, they do not yet internalize things like reducing carbon footprint or community recycling drives as equally 'citizen-like' behaviors. It underscores the novelty of ecological citizenship as a concept in this context.

In summary, Malaysian multi-ethnic youth in our sample show awareness of key values that align with ecological citizenship and express moral responsibility towards the environment when asked directly. However, they largely lack confidence in their ability to effect environmental change and have not integrated environmental action into their identity as citizens. The findings expose a participation gap (low engagement despite stated concern) and an empowerment gap (low belief in efficacy) regarding youth and climate change. These gaps are where education and societal support could play a transformative role, as we discuss below.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study must be understood against the backdrop of Malaysia's complex socio-political context, in which questions of citizenship and identity are continually negotiated. Malaysia is a nation characterized by plural identities and a strong state that has historically driven a particular national narrative. Our findings reveal that Malaysian youth, Malay and Chinese, navigate these dynamics in forming their civic attitudes, and this has implications for their engagement with social change issues like climate change.

One key theme emerging from the data is the decoupling of nation and citizenship in the era of globalization. In Malaysia, the nation (an ethnic-cultural concept) and the state (the political entity) have traditionally been fused in the model of the nation-state. The Malaysian state, since independence, has promoted a unitary national identity (the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* or 'Malaysian nation' espoused in Vision 2020) as a mechanism for social integration. However, globalization and internal diversity mean that the *nation* and *state* are not as tightly coupled as before. The state remains powerful, but the idea of the nation is fragmented into multiple interpretations (*nation-of-intent*) held by different communities. Our study illustrates this: Malay youth tend to align with the official nation-of-intent that emphasizes Malay/Malaysian identity and patriotism, whereas Chinese youth exhibit an alternate focus, viewing citizenship more in civic terms and feeling less emotionally bound to the national narrative of unity in diversity. These can be seen as competing nations-of-intent, one centered on ethno-national loyalty and another perhaps leaning towards a more pluralistic, civic nation concept.

This pluralism poses challenges to citizenship as a unifying idea. When citizenship means different things to different groups (for Malays, national loyalty; for Chinese, mutual obligations; etc.), forging a common civic culture is difficult. The data showed some common ground, both groups value community participation and moral virtues, which could serve as a foundation for unity. However, the divergence on patriotism signals that any attempt to promote active citizenship (or ecological citizenship) must be sensitive to these differences. Chinese students' relative silence on patriotism might reflect feelings of exclusion from the national narrative or simply a pragmatic focus on societal functions of citizenship. For Malay students, deeply tying citizenship to ethnic-national identity could limit their embrace of more global or ecological dimensions that seem to transcend the national frame.

Our findings also suggest that citizenship education in Malaysia has thus far been narrow, reinforcing a singular nation-of-intent, likely the one aligned with the majority's perspective) and not fully addressing the realities of diversity and global interdependence. This is evidenced by the confusion and gaps students demonstrated: they have learned to be law-abiding and patriotic (at least the Malays), but not necessarily to appreciate democratic pluralism or to see environmental action as part of their civic duty. In the literature, *citizenship education* is seen to prepare individuals to participate in democratic society and to understand their rights and responsibilities. In a diverse democracy like Malaysia, citizenship education becomes more complex because it must also help youth navigate cultural differences and foster a sense of shared civic belonging that is not exclusively defined by a single ethnic narrative.

The lack of emphasis on rights among the youth is a double-edged sword. On one hand, focusing on responsibilities can create diligent, community-minded citizens who are willing to contribute, as seen in their strong sense of duty and volunteerism ideals. On the other hand, rights-awareness is a crucial component of democratic citizenship, it empowers citizens to hold authorities accountable and to strive for justice, including environmental justice. The fact that students struggled to talk about rights, especially social or environmental rights, suggests that Malaysian civic education and discourse may underplay these, perhaps to prioritize social harmony and duty. However, in the long run, this imbalance might hinder the development of an active civil society that can advocate for change. A citizen who understands their rights is more likely to demand environmental protections or transparent governance, which are necessary for substantive social change.

The pervasive skepticism towards democracy among respondents is a concerning sign of disengagement that could have cultural and structural roots. It resonates with political science debates: when young citizens feel that formal democratic processes will not yield results, they might either withdraw from public life or seek alternative means to express themselves (some might channel energy into social movements or even emigrate). In Malaysia's case, decades of single-party dominant rule and curtailed civil liberties may have bred cynicism. The challenge is how to overcome this and instill a belief in democratic engagement. Interestingly, the majority's stance that youth should help improve the country (rather than leaving it to the government) is somewhat at odds with their doubt about democracy – perhaps they envision change through community and social avenues more than through politics. This aligns with what political theorist T.H. Marshall (1950*)* noted: people often find local or tangible community engagement more meaningful than abstract loyalty to a large national community. Universities and civil society can capitalize on this by providing more avenues for local engagement, as some students suggested. Our results indeed showed that when students did engage in community service, it fostered personal growth, such as reduced stereotypes, greater cultural appreciation). Such experiences are valuable in a multi-ethnic country as they build social capital and trust across groups, a critical ingredient for social cohesion and collective action on any front, including environmental issues.

The lack of youth empowerment in climate action highlighted by this study is both a national and global issue. Globally, youth climate movements have gained traction (e.g., school strikes for climate), but in Malaysia such movements are not (yet) mainstream. The students' belief that "youth can't make a difference" is precisely the barrier that global citizenship education seeks to break by emphasizing that every individual's actions matter, and that youth can be powerful agents of change. The empathy many students feel for climate victims and their theoretical willingness to help is a strength to build on. It suggests that the raw material for a youth climate movement or at least participation is there; they care when they see suffering, but it needs activation through education, leadership opportunities, and success stories to shift their efficacy beliefs.

Our findings resonate with the concept of cultural citizenship in a diverse society, the idea that citizenship is not only a political/legal status but also about inclusion in the cultural community. Many Chinese students, by not voicing patriotism, may implicitly feel a weaker sense of cultural citizenship in the Malaysian nation as constructed by the state. To engage all youth in a common project like combating climate change, it is essential that they all feel equally recognized as members of the nation. This is where the notion of ‘unity in diversity’ vs. ‘equality in diversity comes in. The current approach seems to emphasize unity (everyone should be Malaysian, presumably subsuming differences) but perhaps falls short on equality (ensuring all groups feel equally valued and heard). An inclusive citizenship education would encourage dialogues about what it means to be Malaysian from multiple perspectives, thereby addressing grievances and building a more robust shared identity. As noted in the results, when asked about being Malaysian, a Malay student immediately said, *“you have to acknowledge you are Malay”*, conflating ethnic identity with national identity. In contrast, a more inclusive view would allow a Chinese student to say “I am Malaysian” without having to become Malay in identity. Encouraging youth to see that one can be proudly Malay or Chinese and fully Malaysian and globally responsible at the same time is crucial. This kind of identity reconciliation can be fostered through educational initiatives that highlight common values (like the environmental values we identified) and shared destinies (e.g., how climate change will affect all Malaysians).

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICIES

Broadening Citizenship Education: Malaysia’s education system might consider revising its civics curriculum to incorporate global citizenship concepts and ecological responsibility explicitly. This means teaching students about issues like climate change in a way that connects to civic duties – not just as science or geography content, but as something that requires ethical deliberation and action. It also means discussing vocabularies of citizenship beyond the official line, including how different cultures in Malaysia might envision being a good citizen. Such an approach could reduce confusion and make citizenship a more tangible, lived idea for youth.

Empowering Youth Action: Schools and universities should create more avenues for students to engage in service-learning and environmental projects, and importantly, to lead and share those experiences. The low rate of knowledge-sharing we found suggests that when students do participate, the lessons learned remain siloed. Educators could, for instance, integrate reflection sessions or presentations after community service, so that peers learn from each other. This will help build a narrative of youth efficacy.

Encouraging Critical Democratic Engagement: Even if students are cynical about democracy, giving them controlled, constructive experiences in democratic practices can build confidence. University student councils, debates, and community decision-making exercises can allow youth to practice having a voice. When students see small wins (like convincing the university to adopt a recycling program or organizing a successful campus event on climate awareness), it chips away at the notion that they are powerless. Over time, these experiences can increase their trust that broader democratic participation is worthwhile.

Integrating Cultural and Environmental Narratives: Malaysia’s cultural diversity can be an asset in environmental education. Different communities in Malaysia have traditional practices and values that respect nature (e.g., indigenous knowledge of forests, or Islamic teachings on stewardship (khalifah) of the earth). Incorporating these perspectives can make ecological citizenship feel more locally grounded and culturally relevant, rather than a Western import. It can also create a sense of shared pride, seeing that all cultures within Malaysia have something to contribute to sustainable living can strengthen national unity. Our respondents’ emphasis on respect for cultural heritage within environmental values hints at this potential synergy.

In reflecting on the concept of post-national citizenship, which suggests forms of community and belonging beyond the nation-state, one might ask whether Malaysian youth are moving in that direction. The data show they have not abandoned national identity – Malays strongly embrace it, and Chinese acknowledge it to an extent – but they also have not fully embraced a cosmopolitan identity either. They are in an in-between space where globalization affects their lifestyle and awareness (they know about climate change, they speak of global goods and references to other countries in interviews), yet the nation’s internal dynamics are still very salient. The idea of a post-national ecological citizenship could be appealing to some youth, especially if they feel the nation-state is not addressing their concerns (like climate). Education can introduce this idea by highlighting global youth movements and showing students they are part of a worldwide generation facing common challenges. However, it would need to be framed carefully so as not to be seen as undermining national loyalty. Ideally, students can be taught that caring for the global environment is not in conflict with being a good Malaysian; indeed, as a nation vulnerable to climate impacts, Malaysia needs its citizens to be globally minded and environmentally proactive.

The discussion underscores that citizenship and citizenship education in Malaysia are at a crossroads. They must evolve to handle the competing notions of nationhood and the exigencies of global issues like climate change. Our research suggests that Malaysian youth have the capacity for empathy, responsibility, and cooperative action – qualities that bode well for social change, but these qualities need to be harnessed through a more inclusive and future-oriented civic education. By doing so, Malaysia can cultivate a generation of citizens who are not only proud of their cultural identities and nation, but also equipped and motivated to contribute to solving global problems, thus bridging cultural practices and social change in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how multi-ethnic Malaysian youth perceive global and ecological citizenship, and how education can shape a new generation of citizens committed to social and environmental change. The findings reveal a nuanced picture: Malaysian youth value social participation, moral integrity, and community well-being as key aspects of citizenship, yet their understanding of citizenship remains largely within conventional national and social frameworks, with ecological concerns only beginning to surface in their civic identity. There is a clear indication that the Malaysian nation needs a more explicit form of citizenship education, one that articulates a vision and direction for its youth in line with true Malaysian ideals of unity and diversity, and one that integrates environmental stewardship as a core component.

Despite national rhetoric on multicultural harmony, our research suggests that current approaches to citizenship education may be perpetuating a singular, 'authority-defined' vision of the nation (primarily reflecting the majority's narrative) without adequately bridging it with the 'everyday-defined' experiences and aspirations of all youth. In practice, this has left many young people, especially from minority groups, feeling that the concept of citizenship is abstract or even exclusionary. One implication of this disconnect is that promoting the idea of ecological citizens in Malaysia has been fraught with confusion and lack of priority. If citizenship itself is not uniformly understood or embraced, adding the layer of environmental responsibility becomes even more challenging.

However, Malaysia's diversity needs not be an obstacle; it can be turned into a strength for social change. The presence of a plurality of 'nation-of-intent' among Malaysian youth means that multiple voices and visions are alive. Rather than viewing this as a problem, educators and policymakers could engage these differing perspectives through democratic deliberation, allowing young people from all backgrounds to discuss and define what it means to be Malaysian in the context of global challenges. In a sense, the very debates and sometimes disagreements about national identity could fuel a more creative and inclusive form of citizenship, one that acknowledges differences (diversity of culture, opinions, and priorities) while building common cause around shared values like justice, responsibility, and care for the environment.

In concrete terms, the study concludes that unity and diversity in citizenship education must go together in Malaysia, just as active citizen participation and democracy go together. Tolerating and respecting diversity (cultural, ideological and even diversity of 'nations-of-intent') is not antithetical to unity; rather, when managed within principled limits, it is the very thing that can make unity meaningful and robust. Indeed, the tensions that arise from debates over diversity can be constructive if they are channeled through democratic education—fueling critical thinking, empathy, and innovative solutions, instead of being suppressed or ignored. As our data indicated, the more students were exposed to those of different backgrounds (e.g., through community service or campus activities), the more they grew in understanding and reduced stereotyping. This is a promising sign that engaging with diversity can produce the kind of empathetic and open-minded citizens needed for social progress.

For Malaysia to prepare youth to address global environmental issues such as climate change, it must radically reinterpret and broaden its citizenship ideals. This means moving beyond a narrow focus on loyalty and discipline, to include global awareness, critical inquiry and a commitment to sustainability. It means educating young Malaysians who can proudly identify as Malay, Chinese, Indian or Indigenous equally as Malaysians and global citizens, without seeing any contradiction among those identities. The goal is to nurture citizens who are empowered intellectually, morally, and emotionally to ensure the flourishing of their society and the environment.

In closing, we assert that taking care of Malaysia's youth as citizens in the fullest sense will have a profound payoff. By investing in citizenship education that is inclusive, future-oriented, and justice-centered, Malaysia can cultivate a generation of engaged citizens capable of driving positive social change. These youth will be better equipped to tackle climate change and other shared challenges, acting not out of compulsion but from a genuine understanding of their role in a democratic society and an interdependent world. In essence, nurturing enlightened and empowered youth citizenship is not just about building national unity, it will transfuse goodness and well-being, into both the environment and society, securing a better future for all Malaysians. By reflecting critically on its current practices and embracing an expanded notion of citizenship, Malaysia stands at a pivotal moment; a climate for change, where the synergy of cultural diversity and social responsibility can be harnessed to foster a more equitable and sustainable nation.

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