

# Being Malaysian: The Role and Challenges of Citizenship Education

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## Abstract

*Citizenship Education in Malaysia is a product of social fragmentation that carries legal and sociological meanings. This paper aims to pull together citizenship and education as central themes, not legal but the sociological aspects, with 'nation-of-intent' as a conceptual framework. However, the present effort of citizenship education in Malaysia is based on a particular form of 'nation-of-intent' ('Bangsa' Malaysia). The concept of citizenship and citizenship education in Malaysia is prompting only one form of 'nation-of-intent' available in the country, whereas there are other nations as well, apparently. The presence of plurality of 'nation-of-intent' in contemporary Malaysia demonstrates the fact that dissenting voices are present and heard, within and without government. Therefore, in the context of different 'nation-of-intent's which exist, there is a need to explore and clarify what being 'Malaysian' means in its true context.*

**Keywords:** *Citizenship Education, Ethnicity, Diversity, Nation-of-Intent, Malaysian Nation.*

## Introduction

Issues of citizenship and ethnic diversity have been part of the educational agenda of Malaysia. Where meanings and values attached to these aspects have changed over time. Educational policies and programs in Malaysia have reflected these changes, characterized by attention to the fundamental notion of social cohesion that provides an opportunity to unite and strengthen the work in citizenship education. Unavoidably, education is one of the sectors to energize the greater development when attaining national unity is an objective that involves the process or steps taken in bringing together citizen of different races and languages, and molding their orientations towards a new nation, which had previously existed only physically.

### *Understanding the Concept of 'Nation-of-Intent'*

The challenge of this paper is to find ways of addressing and theorizing unconscious ideas in divergent patterns of the nation, especially in Malaysia, which can be fragmented and contradictory and which cut across the traditional fault lines of ethnicity. In a way, there is an opportunity for the concept of 'nation-of-intent' to be explicitly organized around ideas, identification and patterns which are recognizably multiple and sometimes, unstable, with visible contradictions in the Malaysian citizens 'personal locations' in education. Moreover, there is a newly focused understanding of the constructive nature of the process undertake socially and personally as citizens find their place in an identity grouping and explore the understanding of themselves and the social order which this can bring. Therefore, the concept of 'nation-of-intent' is well attuned to the needs of the Malaysian socio-political landscape; as politics becomes more concerned with subjectivity, it more than ever needs a language in which to talk about interrelationships between the consciousness of the idea of the nation and social positioning. The concept of 'nation-of-intent' could, again in principle, supply such a language; it could make sense of the complex business of creating and re-creating 'identities' and building a nation, and of filling these out with content, as well as exploring the intense 'investments' which citizens hold in them, and the deep aggression to which they often give rise.

Shamsul (1996) conceptualized the 'nation-of-intent' as a vision of territorial entity, a set of institutions, an ideal-type citizen, and an identity profile that a group of 'social-engineers' have in mind and try to implement. It will often be an idealistic form shared by several people who identify themselves not only with one another, but with a whole nation whose other members they hope will join their vision. A 'nation-of-intent' can be the idea of statesman wishing to unite different groups under his government's authority,

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of opposing party, a separatist group, a religious or other community. The concept of ‘nations-of-intent’ depicts an idea of a nation that still needs to be constructed or reconstructed. It is employed as the basis for a platform expressing dissent or a challenged to the established notion of a nation. It promises the citizens an opportunity to participate in the process of nation building. It further confirms this highly fluid notion of nationality. The discourse of the nation can be constructed in many different forms. This suggests that the form and content of national identity can be defined and redefined through dialogue and democratic decision. Individuals experience their nationality very differently. Thus, the concept of ‘nations-of-intent’ refers to the various aspects such as of ethnic, class and gender, and are sources of identity that are transcended by the primary identity of nation.

The idea of a modern large-scale republic must appeal to the understanding of shared history, common solidarities, and ideas of self-determination and autonomy which underlie national identity. However, the use of national identity as the foundation of citizenship involves several challenges such as of that national identity in any single case is associated with a particular history and a past which may be exclusive, especially of those potential new citizens who now seek membership. National identity can never be ‘innocent’.

Citizenship in Malaysia is becoming a challenge for a communicative community that is fearful of the threat of normalization, exclusion, and silence. All these features aim to investigate how cultural diversity in Malaysia fosters a sense of overlapping and disputed ‘nation-of-intent’. The impact of competing ‘nations-of-intent’ and social cohesion in Malaysia, the way it is influencing citizenship and citizenship education, hence nation-building is then discussed. Debates on questions related to citizenship and citizenship education in Malaysia have tended to overlook the ‘idea of the nation’ amongst the citizen of a diverse society are indicated. While these discussions invariably discuss topics related to notions of the political community, participation, and individual rights, they are frequently ignored when dealing with more complex specific cultural backgrounds and political traditions of thought. Most of these accounts fail to analyze ideas relevant to a host political practice and range of contextual features such as forms in which the public sphere is built in the context of daily life.

It is entirely in line with the political rationale in Malaysia that its program of National Education Policy emphasizes the need for young people to establish a converging way of thinking about what it means to be citizens and to be prepared to accept instrumental conceptions of their role as a citizen. As a state agent, the education system in Malaysia is seen as having a strong and vital role to play in the social construction of a citizen. Individual service and fidelity to the nation have been promoted in Malaysia as being of paramount importance, and each citizen must continue to demonstrate this fidelity in both public and practical ways. Individual citizenship is described and presented as something that must be constantly re-validated in civil society.

In general, citizenship is not a widely recognized term in Malaysia. People do not have a good understanding of what it means to be a person, rather than one of the subjects of the monarch. Citizenship is not so much a term that has played a central role in Malaysia’s political past. Citizenship in diverse Malaysia needs to consider a few issues – the explicit ideal of inclusive citizenship needs to be developed for diverse Malaysians. Diversity must be given public status and integrity, and Malaysia needs to establish a modern social and cultural agenda capable of cultivating or nurturing ethnic identities. The dichotomy between ‘Malaysian’ and ethnic minority must be overcome and ‘Malaysian’ must be perceived as possessing ethnic minority cultures and societies. Minorities are an integral part of Malaysia, they have as much to offer, and they owe as much allegiance to society as the majority do.

Minority and majority groups in Malaysia must both have space for development, but in relation to each other. This suggests that the form and content of the ‘official nation-of-intent’ can be defined or redefined through dialogue and democratic decision- thus indicating that it is a highly fluid notion. Perhaps, it can be described that the main elements in the

revitalization of the Malaysian notion through an ‘open debate’ of being Malaysian and its

redefinition to accommodate cultural and territorial minorities.

As such, citizenship in Malaysia can be regarded as exclusive as well as inclusive. There is a tendency to ignore the way Malaysian society is marked by structural race and social economic disparity, and the way in which Malaysia education system is defined by distinctive exclusionary. In Malaysia, there is also a divisive nature of citizenship and conflict, for example in finding a balance between person and collective rights, in identifying shared principles that underpin democratic and diverse communities, and in ensuring that all Malaysian people have a true sense of belonging to society. Apart from that, there is also a lack of attention to the debated and frequently elusive existence of basic values such as diversity and inclusion. Although ethnic diversity is recognized, educational responses can sometimes fall into traditional trends. Simplistic and stagnant conceptions of ethnicity can refuse to approach culture in anything other than romantic or ossified ways and reinforce, rather than question, bias.

In Malaysia, the creation of national identity and citizenship could be frustrated unless the framework is prepared to incorporate a genuine exploration of history in the formal curriculum. The instability in contemporary plural and global states is best countered by a genuine analysis of the beliefs and expectations shared by constituent populations than by an effort to preserve an imaginary state unity mythology. The diverse essence of society, the nuanced dynamics of racial identity and the influence of latent manifestations of discrimination need to be thoroughly understood. Thus, the path forward in the education sector undoubtedly has less to do with the discovery of a broadly applicable model of inclusive education and more to do with a genuine informed effort on the part of all education to work toward ethnic myopia, biases, and drawbacks in all fields of education. This explicitly suggests a permeation of educational activity and policy with principles that foster empathy and fairness.

The national education policy, being the foundation for most educational development plans, therefore, forms a crucial and key element with regards to building a nation. The idea of citizenship and citizenship education in Malaysia has been concerned with issues much related to the competing notions of the nation. The cultural conception of citizenship is concerned not only with formal procedures, but such also as who is right to vote and the preservation of an active civil society but also crucially with whose cultural practices are marginalized, stereotypical, and made invisible.

Citizenship in Malaysia is becoming a challenge for a communicative community that is fearful of the threat of normalization, exclusion, and silence. All these features aim to investigate how cultural diversity in Malaysia fosters a sense of overlapping and disputed ‘Nation-of-intent’. This article would discuss issues raised by citizenship education in Malaysia with regards to challenges and possibilities, followed by a debate on the qualitative discourse, interpretation, and explanation regarding the field in the context of the contested notion of the existence of many ‘nations-of-intent’ as a framework. The impact of competing ‘nations-of-intent’ and social cohesion in Malaysia, the way it is influencing citizenship and citizenship education, hence nation-building is then discussed.

Debates on questions related to citizenship and citizenship education in Malaysia have tended to overlook the ‘idea of the nation’ amongst the citizen of a diverse society are indicated. While these discussions invariably discuss topics related to notions of the political community, participation, and individual rights, they are frequently ignored when dealing with more complex specific cultural backgrounds and political traditions of thought. Most of these accounts fail to analyze ideas relevant to a host political practice and range of contextual features such as forms in which the public sphere is built in the context of daily life.

#### *The ‘Authority-Defined’ and ‘Everyday Defined’ of being Malaysian*

Questions and issues surrounding ideas of the nation become political in a new sense. There is a need to learn to balance the ‘authority defined’ and ‘everyday defined’ of being a Malaysian citizen at the same time. This indicates a type of citizenship education that addresses the ‘occasional placeless-ness’ evident in some groups of community with regards to citizenship while seeking to encourage fluid and complex

understandings of the Malaysian nation. This perhaps only becomes possible through movements and educational settings that mutually seek to explore more democratic arrangements and a mutual sense of interconnectedness within the multicultural Malaysian society. Citizenship and citizenship education in Malaysia needs to be redefined as of a ‘form of theory’ that seeks to establish democratic public spaces while simultaneously promoting

a sense of living in connection with several diverse and overlapping cultures in time and space. It will also be important to balance the demand for self-reflection with the understanding that Malaysian citizens reside within overlapping cultures with which they are likely to encounter different levels of connection. The colonial era of Malaya, the attainment of independence, the radical commodification of Malaysian culture, and the continuing ‘work-in-progress’ of building a Malaysian nation- all these mean that citizenship and citizenship education must be re-addressed in terms of a new collection of coordinates that can continue to connect citizens with the practices of the democratic community in process of nation-building. If there is no clear vision of a ‘Malaysian nation’ and without an attempt to re-imagine how all citizens may learn and find community with another one another in the age of globalization, thus radical possibilities of transformational need to be re-thought.

The dichotomy between ‘Malaysian’ and ethnic minority must be overcome. The ‘Malaysian’ must be seen as having ethnic minority cultures and groups. Minorities are an important part of Malaysia and have as much to give and owe as much loyalty to civilization as do the rest. Minority and majority groups in Malaysia must both have room to grow, but in relation to each other. However, there are, of course, several logistical problems that can arise: racial rivalries may make collaboration within the state impossible, national identity may contain cultural aspects that certain ethnic groups find objectionable, and the country may find itself being threatened, either physically or metaphorically. In Malaysia, the idea remains strong that its ethnically separated population will engage in a common project of self-determination through a clear and succinct conception of citizenship and citizenship education.

The most evident aspect is that the concept of a nation in question coexists within a common governmental unit, while at the same time each portion has maintained its own distinct cultural features. However, the blueprint for good nation building in Malaysia requires more than just political integration plus cultural differences. It is proposed that facets of education in particular citizenship education, play a key role in communicating the notion of being Malaysian. Citizenship education is a significant but challenging topic because of its diverse elements, its engagement difficulties, and its connection to diversity. Diversity in the community adds to these challenges, as it turns out that citizenship education is still tacitly committed to homogeneity but must deal with the highly diverse school population in Malaysia.

The ‘Shared Prosperity Vision 2030’ is a government blueprint released in 2020 by the Government of Malaysia to increase the incomes of all ethnic groups. It is a further example for the role of values with regards to economy embedded within the state. There is no doubt about different values existing in different ethnic groups, but the main question to be posed - are these values compatible within these groups? If the construction of a nation in Malaysia is perceived as a value orientation that encourages coexistence and the protection of a multiplicity of cultural cultures within the territory of a state, the question of national self-determination is not a matter of nation building. At any rate, the relation between nation-building and national self-determination is the product of the chaos wrought by the confrontation between one state and several nations. The Chinese and Indians for example have become major occupants of the territory to which they have migrated during the colonial period and gradually became nations through the process of national self-determination. It is necessary for Malaysia being a multi-ethnic country blessed with cultural diversity to examine the impact, relevance, and usefulness of the universal values as they are embedded in the different ethnic and cultural context.

Citizenship education in Malaysia means creating a sense of social solidarity and patriotism and a sense of responsibility and duty to the society and to one's fellow citizens. It also includes the consistency of the initiative and the desire to participate. But the production of these civic qualities was sluggish. Part of the reason for this was the challenge of resolving the resistance of subservience required by the colonial regimes. In part, post-independence governments have acknowledged the possible ambivalence of successful

citizenship education. For the process can undermine the very political cohesion it is designed to promote. Politicians have been very alert to difficulties of nurturing an effectively mature style of citizenship and have placed great faith in the power of education to accomplish this.

### *Citizenship Education and its Challenges in Malaysia*

The complexities of the problem have not always allowed the setting or achievement of clear objectivities. Differences of emphasis have sometimes been evident as between politicians and educationists. Furthermore, practical difficulties have on occasion proved more impervious to the civic educational policies than the planners have anticipated. Whether complementary or mutually at odds, the total array of objectives in programmes of education or citizenship may be listed as: comprehension, integration, participation, and obligation. Malaysia's future lies in the willingness of its people particularly the younger generation, to recognize and trust in all Malaysia's ability to unite national unity without a shared culture is an exercise in futility. In the sense of Malaysia's plural culture, with a history of decades of uneasy co-existence, doubts and concerns as frequent companions, and each group mostly left to its own devices, national unity through a shared identity is difficult enough to conceive, let alone to accept with all its heart.

According to some ethnic minorities, the new government's policies are seen to favor the Malay majority and therefore seek to separate rather than unite its people. Apparently, the new education system is nice as far as it goes, but still, it falls far short of the criteria for establishing a shared culture and a sense of being Malaysian. Ethnic minorities view the success of a nation established as soon as Malaysia has a programme of conclusiveness, justice and equality, and equal opportunities without barriers. As a nation seeks a common identity, the national education system is the only obstacle to national construction.

Moreover, if there are Chinese and Indian primary schools, for example, there is a huge challenge to build a sense of being Malaysian. Malay is a national language and should be a language of instruction in all Malaysian schools. However, Malaysia's cultural heritage is significant. There is also a critical need to look at its utilitarian importance at education. It is assumed that if the education system is depoliticized and tackles the social, economic, and political needs of the country in a reasonable fashion, considering the cultural and linguistic interests of non-Malays, Malaysia would have a greater chance of breaking the ethnic trend and achieving national unity. The difference of language medium had led to differences of language medium had led to differences in attitudes among students. In East Africa for example, it had been shown that differences in school experience had resulted in differences in political views. The study also showed that differences in school experience between missions as opposed to government schools also led to differences in political views. As for the Malaysian school system, it not only expects to produce students who graduate with technical competence, but also with a disposition relevant to the demands for national integration. The national medium was also able to make the non-Malays move in the direction of Malay values and attitudes. In a similar view, Shamsul (2011) commented that the plural, diversified and fragmented Malaysian society is being well reflected in of the education system. Nevertheless, after surviving for a period in the 'state of stable tension', it is currently described as experiencing the process of 'social cohesion' in which he suggested aspects of 'humanizing' the education system that would address specific circumstances of the nation- state. Many critics often claim that national harmony in a western democracy is not based on a common identity, but rather on a shared fidelity to democratic values.

Shared principles are not sufficient. Social unity then requires not only shared principles, but also a sense of shared membership. Being Malaysian means to have a sense of belonging to the same community and a shared desire to continue to live together. Whatever Rawls has drawn upon the question of different nations-of-intent is further raised. Are the political principles among them necessarily different? Rawls (1973) provided perspectives by giving a secular universal philosophical based moral principle without including different religious principles that apparently still divide people deeply, though at the secular level doing good is accepted as universal. This involves everyday life and the officially influenced social life structures in the political realm, people do not perceive things in terms of layers, secular and religious. Often dictated by ideology which drives the ultimate objective of that political existence- the ideology is then articulated in a political form which has content. The ultimate political form is the formation of a nation, before that could be a political party and before that a small political collective. Content could be whatever



ideology that the group shares so in the construction of citizenship education, philosophical elements mentioned by Rawls are important universal values, but it is usually driven by ‘nations-of-intent’ informed by ideologies.

## Conclusion

Citizenship and citizenship education in Malaysia is the struggle for a democratic society that enables a plurality of citizens to lead reasonably meaningful lives that respect the creation of diverse hybrid identities, provide them with a protective social state and give them access to an education system that seeks to explore the possibility of living in a domain-free future. Being Malaysian citizens means engaging in deliberative arguments about what is ethical to become and considering how in specific cultural places and contexts we can lead virtuous and just lives. Citizenship education is vital in the complex Malaysian society that can make sense of contemporary changes and give citizens the space to share and critically question the various experiences and practices, allowing them to consider how they can best ensure the flourishing of everyone as citizens. It would also mean that they are able to recognize themselves as Malay, Chinese, Indian or any other ethnic groups and of course, as interconnected Malaysian citizens that would contribute towards process of building a nation. Such a feat would require, as this paper have sought to emphasize, not only the cognitive capacities to reason, but also a renewed sense of being ‘Malaysian’ as sympathetic and compassionate beings through citizenship education. It is citizenship and citizenship education, as this paper has insisted, thus far, is intimately connected with questions of competing notions of ‘nations-of-intent’ in Malaysia and will continue to be so in the future regardless of how the dominant institutions are designed and developed. As seen over the period of progress in achieving a ‘built Malaysian nation’, these ideals need to be radically re-interpreted to meet the complex challenges of the present. The requirements of diversity and cultural citizenship are challenged by notions of citizenship in Malaysia, and there have been differences as to the unifying habits and attitudes of citizenship. Malaysia is a state without common nation and citizenship is fundamental to forming a democratic nation in the constitution of moral people from different ethnic groups who continue to express different nations of purpose through citizenship education. The concept of ‘nations-of-intent’ further emphasizes the subjective and changeable aspects of being Malaysian and opens the possibility within the same nation of several co-existing or competing forms of identity.

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