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'It's my responsibility': Perspectives on Environmental Justice and Education for Sustainability among international school students in Singapore

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‘It’s my responsibility’: Perspectives on Environmental Justice and Education for Sustainability among international school students in Singapore

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Opening Framing

- Research project about climate change education in international schools in Singapore – online survey, and focus groups in-person
- Fall 2019: creation of survey questions & data collection planning
- Dec. 2019: Online survey distributed to schools; Dr. Jeremy Jiménez traveled to Singapore to visit the schools and conduct focus groups
- During our research, the International Climate Strike (worldwide student mobilization against the climate crisis) gained momentum Sept. – Dec. 2019

Setting & Participants

- 2 International Baccalaureate schools in Singapore
- December 2019
- Student survey online
 - Multiple choice questions & open-ended questions
- Focus group interviews in-person
 - Open discussion, conversations

More about Singapore



- Singapore is well-known for sustainable projects
- Vulnerable to rising sea levels – will be affected by climate change before other developed countries
- Striking and some types of protests are illegal – but students have unique perspectives on education for sustainability and environmental justice issues

Research Questions

- **To what extent do students view climate change in environmental justice terms?**
- **What lifestyle and school policy changes do students prioritize to promote sustainable development?**
- **How do students acknowledge privilege in addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation?**

Collection of Data

- Survey
 - Anonymously filled out by over 250 students
 - 53% completed entire survey, 47% partial completion
 - Qualitative & quantitative data from multiple choice, Likert scale, & open-ended questions
 -
- Focus group interviews
 - 19 groups
 - About 20 students per group,
 - Total participants – approximately 300 students
 - Audio-recorded & transcribed

Preliminary findings

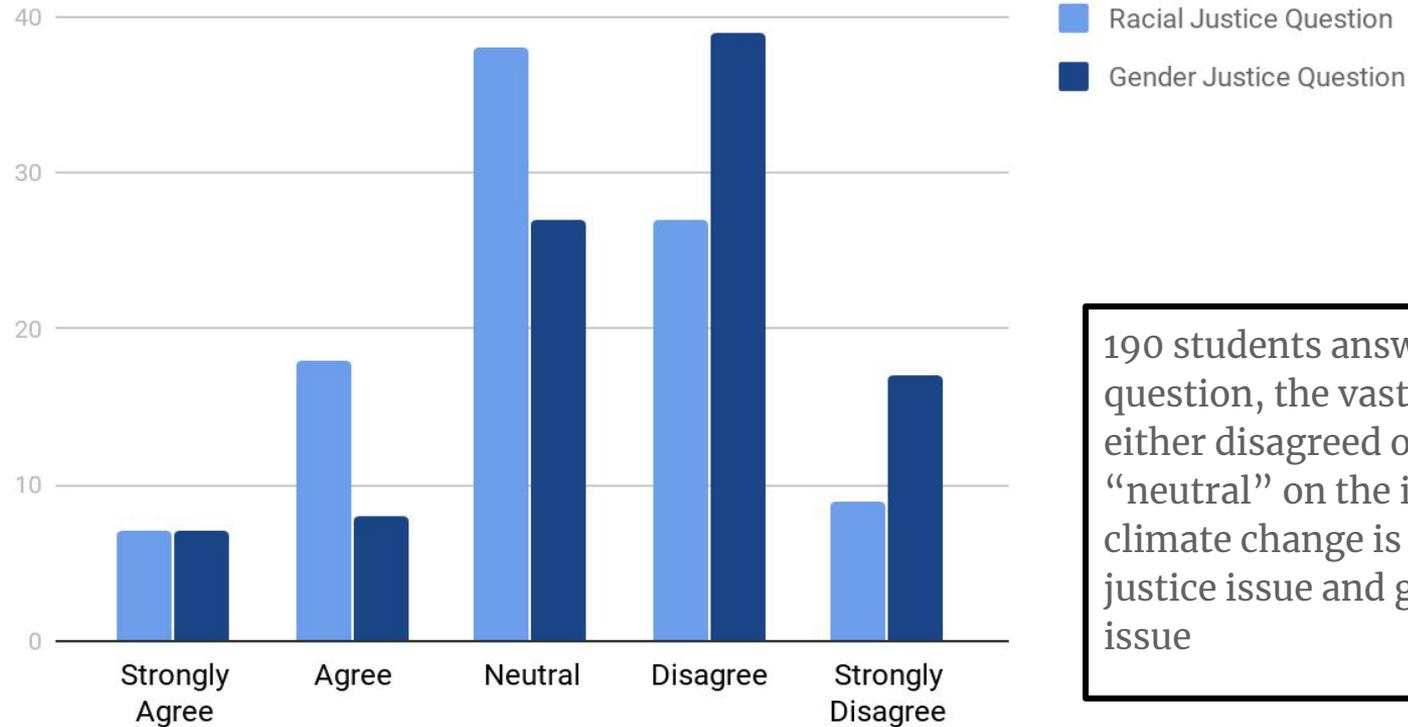
Looking at the survey & focus group results together

To what extent do students view climate change in environmental justice terms?



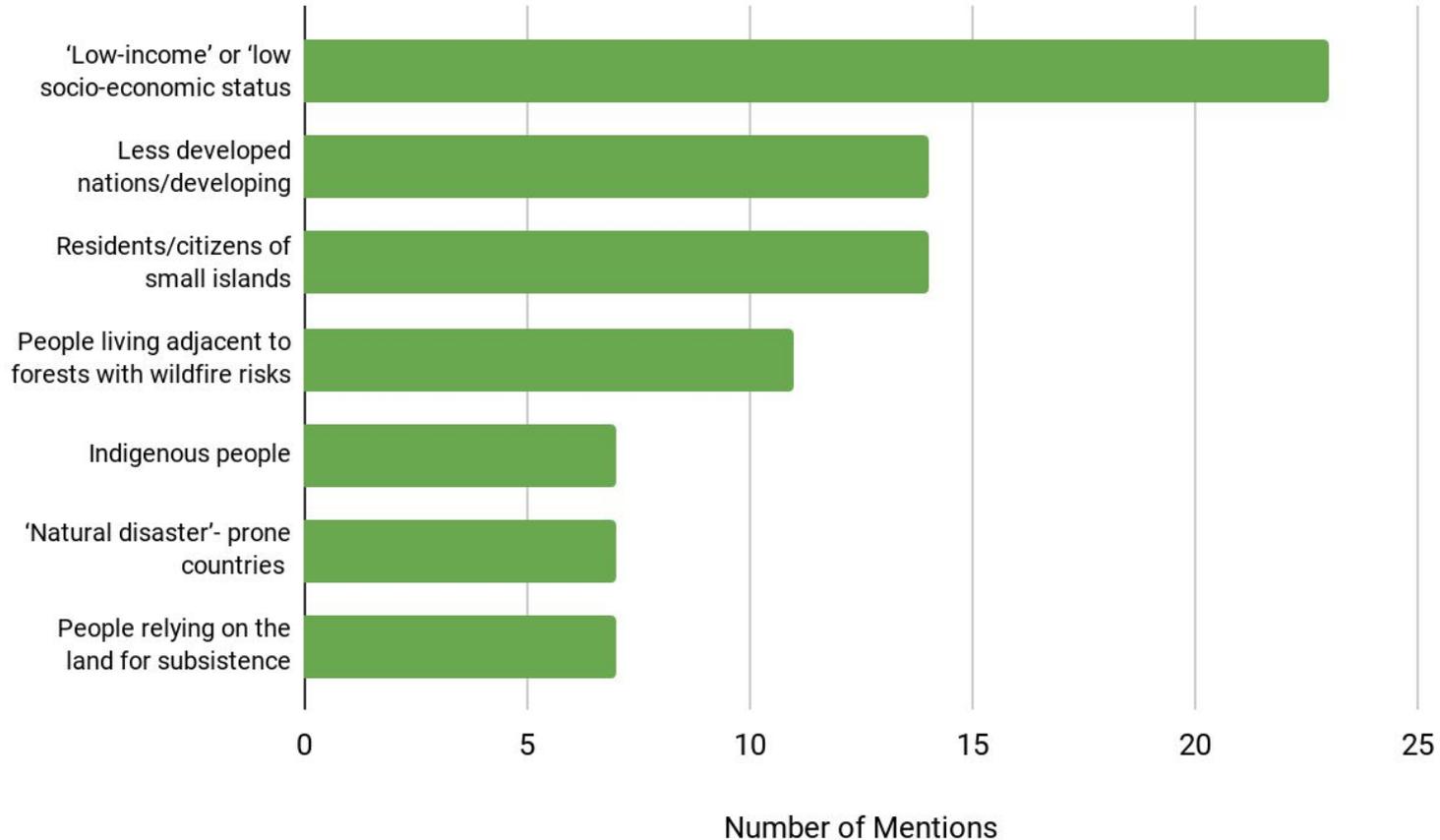
Is climate change a racial justice issue? Is climate change a gender justice issue?

Survey Results Racial & Gender Justice



190 students answered each question, the vast majority either disagreed or were “neutral” on the idea that climate change is a racial justice issue and gender justice issue

Open Survey Question: What people (i.e., social/ethnic/national groups) are more likely to be disproportionately and negatively impacted by climate change?



Other answers to the open response survey question

	Times Mentioned
Coastal communities	3
Animals	3
People impacted by air pollution	3
Racial/ethnic minority groups	3
Communities living in “dry,” “arid,” or “prone to desertification” terrains	3
People living in the Arctic and/or close to the North Pole	3
City or slum dwellers	3
People of color	2
Women	2
People living in low-lying areas	2
Greta Thunberg	2

Note the low number of survey respondents who indicated that women and people of color were disproportionately impacted by climate change.

The Global North and South Divide

Survey Question: The impacts of climate change are likely to cause increased natural disasters, war, and conflict, particularly in countries that have the least greenhouse gas emissions. Should countries that are more stable take in refugees from the countries that have been negatively impacted by climate change?

98% of respondents reported that Western countries had some obligation to help developing countries.

- 48% “countries able to should have the obligation to help those impacted.”
- 50% opted for the qualifier that “countries should limit refugees allowed in if it begins to significantly impact their resources.”

Focus Groups on Climate Refugees

Students pointed out:

- The marginalization of climate refugees since the UN does not consider fleeing climate change as a valid reason to apply to asylum
- Countries that
 - “can’t take any more migrants ... [have an] obligation ... to intervene in climate change, a lot more than other countries, and really take responsibility.”

Global North and South Divide cont. – Hypothetical Tax

Because the developed countries of the Global North (primarily in North America, Europe, and East Asia) have been most responsible for contributing greenhouse gases to the atmosphere in the 20th century, the citizens of these countries should be required to pay a special tax to developing countries in the Global South (such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Colombia), so they can better prepare for the various climate crises now unfolding there.

- 147 responses
- 52% supported the tax (20% strongly agree, 32% agree)
- 9% did not support the tax (8% disagree, 1% strongly disagree)

Focus Groups on Global South economic development

Students pointed out:

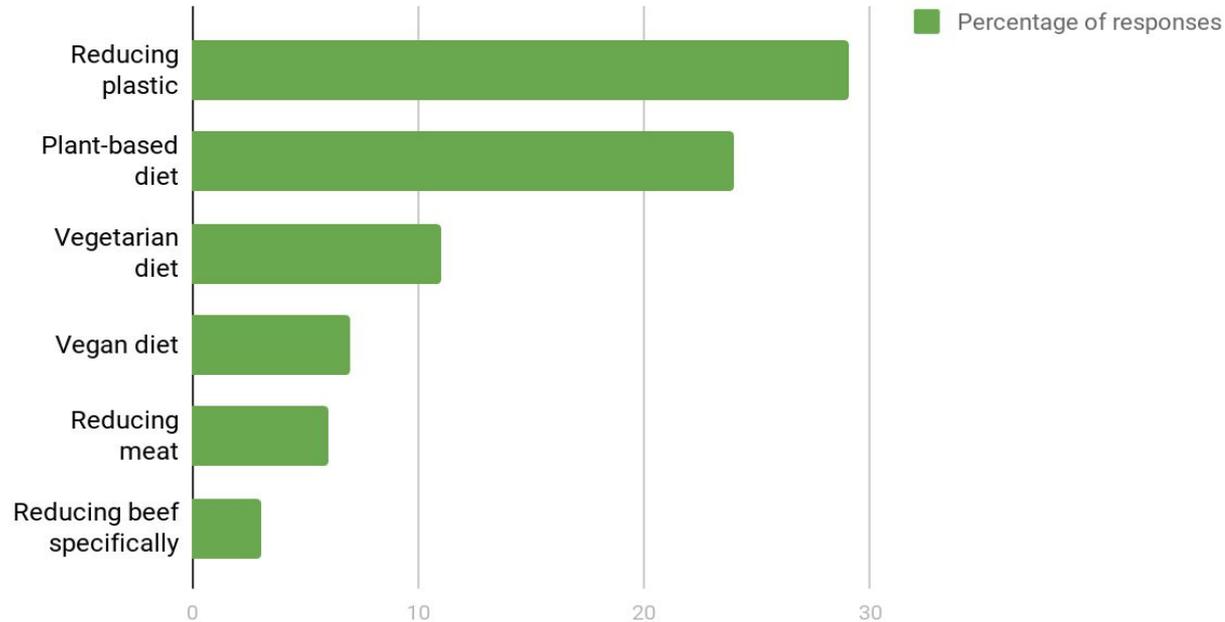
- Continued economic growth and modern civilization – not possible without fossil fuels
- Moral dilemma that economic development involves in terms of environmental justice, ethics
- “In terms of economic equity, countries should be able to use their [resources] in a manner that gets them to a place where they can sustain themselves. [...] But if you’re looking at it in terms of equity, it is possible, yes, but whether it should be done or not is a question of moral values and ethical values.”

What lifestyle and school policy changes do students prioritize to promote sustainable development?



Name one or more things you think your school should start doing and/or that you'd like to start doing at home to promote a more sustainable lifestyle. Out of 136 responses, 86 % mentioned reducing consumption:

Open Response Recommendations on Reducing Consumption



Open Response continued

Out of 136 responses, 20 % mentioned education and advocacy

A notable open response from a survey participant:

Teaching philosophy and/or ethics as its own subject or by integrating it more into other subjects — by making students think deeply about their own responsibilities and moral code, they are more likely to consider why or why not they partake in climate action. Although it is difficult, I think honesty with oneself often leads to people being more active in helping others (e.g. addressing climate crises). We should also promote better understanding of where our various resources come from, and our local environment (e.g. through nature walks in Biology class, material sourcing in Design and Technology classes), so that we as students and teachers feel our complete connection to the natural world around us.

Focus Groups on Lifestyle changes to promote sustainable development

- Our focus groups brought up population reduction, though it did not come up in survey open responses. Some representative direct quotations that highlighted population reduction as imperative to limiting humans' detrimental environmental impacts from focus groups are shown here:
 - “Make families pay [for] the second child”
 - “More countries should have China’s one-child policy”
 - “The problem is that too many young people in other countries can cause instability”
 - “Show families the benefit of smaller families”
 - “Money discounts for having less kids”
 - “Rations on how much a family can use, to reduce family size”

How do students acknowledge privilege in addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation?



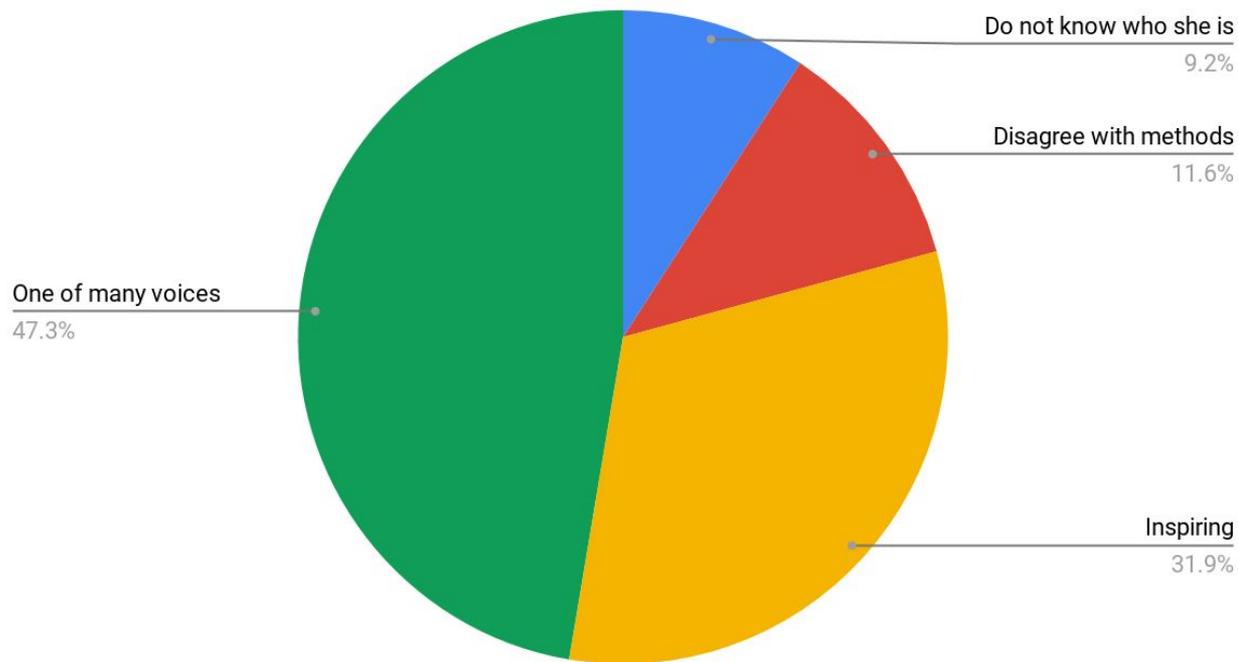
Focus Groups Discuss Privilege

Students in focus groups acknowledged their fortunate positions and educational backgrounds in climate change adaptation:

- Singapore “ha[s] the resources to be able to dodge things like rising sea levels,” but developing countries “would not be able to develop in time to build such fortifications.”
- “It’s my responsibility not only as someone who comes from such a great school [that] [...] instills these values in us, but also as a member of this planet that this is my responsibility to look after it by telling people, ‘Okay, look, this is wrong,’ because they might not get that education or that sense of awareness that we do in this school.”

Greta Thunberg

What do survey respondents think of Greta Thunberg?



Focus Groups on Greta Thunberg

Students were sometimes critical of Thunberg's methods for climate advocacy, the judgment she receives because of her gender, and were aware of Thunberg's privilege to be able to strike.

- “Most of the boys don't believe in Greta Thunberg, and the girls are more likely to believe.”
- “She's a little bit of a hypocrite because ... she comes from a wealthier family, and sometimes they fly to go to her talks.”
- “I do agree with her protesting and her trying to really make it powerful. But the whole thing about not going to school — I don't really agree with that. Because I was just thinking that a lot of people don't have education, and I think that maybe finish your education first, because it's really important.”

Concluding Thoughts

- Students understood climate change in environmental justice terms in some ways but not others
- Students offered recommendations for lifestyle and policy changes
- Students discussed privileges in terms of environmental justice

Areas for Future Research

- Need for curricula to help students understand the disproportionate effects of climate change on marginalized groups, including how their own privileged lifestyles are impactful
- Need for further discussion addressing the global disparities in financial wealth and the consequent educational privileges and deficits

References

Jiménez, J., Moorhead, L., & Wilensky, T. (2020). *'It's my responsibility': Perspectives on Environmental Justice and Education for Sustainability among international school students in Singapore*. Manuscript submitted for publication.