

## WHY IS LITERACY NOT ALWAYS A GUARANTEE FOR QUALITY OF LIFE?

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### ABSTRACT

*The claim that literacy is closely linked with the general well-being of people and society is hardly disputable. It enables individuals to acquire the skills that will help them improve their quality of life (QL). Looking closer at the relationship of literacy and quality of life, this study found evidence suggesting that variation in the quality of life begin to emerge once a country reaches a literacy rate beyond 90%, which means that this variation happens only when 10% of the citizens are not functionally literate. Data indicate that the largest variance in the quality of life is noted in countries with 95% literacy as in the case of Turkey and Malaysia. This phenomenon is explained by certain socio-demographic theories one of which is the propensity of the literate people in a developing country, like the Philippines, to migrate to other countries for better employment. This migration pattern brings out ambiguous results. Some will find good jobs that can help generate increased income for the family dependents; others fall prey to various forms of work crisis, which greatly affect the quality of life not only of the migrants themselves but also on the left behind families.*

**Keywords:** literacy, quality of life, migration

### 1.0 Introduction

Living a gratifying life is a universal aspiration. This conscious or subconscious desire is embodied in the so-called European Dream which cited quality of life (QL) as a preferred alternative over the pursuit of material wealth espoused by the West (Rifkin, 2004). Quality of Life is even regarded as far more important than longevity of life. So much effort has been long invested by the advocates of physical wellness to lengthen the life expectancy of people. However, interest is already shifting from longevity to quality of life. The global community is beginning to realize that a person's sense of wellbeing, contentment, and security is of superior importance than his or her lifespan.

Quality of life is viewed by experts as a chemistry of multiple determinants. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Quality of Life Index (QLI) includes material wellbeing, health, political stability, family life, community life, climate and geography, job security, political freedom and gender equality as measures that ensure a rewarding life. Looking into the varying dimensions of QL, one is compelled to consider factors that can serve as an impetus to achieve that ideal state of life envisioned by many individuals.

Literacy is one factor that merits serious scrutiny since it is regarded across the globe as a determinant of human development. Matsuura (n.d.) claims that literacy "provides individuals the opportunities to learn and acquire a host of other skills. Not only does it improve communication skills but it also "gives access to knowledge and builds the self-confidence and self-esteem needed to make decisions." This idea is supported by Stromquist (2005) who says that literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in local and global social community." A report of the European Union, who conducted the project Innovating Advocacy Approaches in Promoting Female Literacy, has also cited that literacy "allows individual persons to develop the capacities to improve their overall quality of life and their role and contribution to their family and community."

Literacy is defined as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. It involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society" (UNESCO 2005:21). On the one hand, failure to acquire this competency is often associated with poverty and stunted human development. On the other hand, benefits that can be drawn from literacy include improved self-esteem: political, personal empowerment, political, social, cultural and economic gains, preservation of cultural diversity; and gender equality as stipulated in the Education for All Initiative.

The Philippines, where education is considered by many as a high-value commodity, has a relatively high literacy rate. In 2015, records showed that 97.5% or 71.5 million individuals who are ten years or older are literate- a big jump from the 20% literacy rate posted before World War 1. This figure continues to surge every year. However, statistics in 2016 indicates that the quality of life in the archipelago is only 60.04%, an achievement which pales in comparison with the 201.53% gained by Denmark in the same year. These data indicate that while the country becomes increasingly literate, the much-sought quality of life remains to be elusive to the majority of its citizenry. If literacy is indeed an empowering tool for achieving the quality of life, there is a need to ascertain where the gap lies particularly in the case of the Philippines.

## 2.0 Methodology

This research paper employed data mining technique to analyze the data. Data mining follows the process of collecting and analyzing information to discover meaningful patterns and trends to be subsequently interpreted and evaluated to generate new knowledge (Tan, Ateninbach, Kumar: 2004). Collecting and selecting online data that interest the researcher was done first. The data were then presented in a graphical form to identify clusters with observable patterns or behaviors. Finally, data points in a group are evaluated for potential similarities or characteristics based on geographical, lifestyle and dimensions.

The data for quality of life index was retrieved from the Numbeo article ([http://numbeo.com/quality-of-life/ranking\\_by\\_country.jsp](http://numbeo.com/quality-of-life/ranking_by_country.jsp)), and literacy rate was taken from different online websites. Only countries with the quality of life index and literacy rate available online were included in the study. Out of sixty-one countries, 42 were found to have available literacy rates. These countries are Denmark, Spain, Lithuania, Poland, Poland, Israel, Qatar, Hongkong, Portugal, Estonia, Croatia, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Greece, Slovakia, Taiwan, Mexico, Chile, Turkey, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Africa, Romania, United Arab Emirates, Hungary, Bulgaria, Jordan, Macedonia, Brazil, China, Singapore, Egypt, Ukraine, and Philippines (See complete list in Appendix A).

The set of ordered pairs of literacy rate and quality of life index was graphed to identify the cluster with observable patterns that became the basis for analysis and interpretation. The maximum and minimum values of a given predictor, that is, literacy rate, and statistics such as average value and variance were considered in the interpretation of the data.

## 3.0 Results and Discussion

Quality of life defines the citizen's wellbeing in the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of their lives. Presumably, more literate citizens translate into greater public good and hence, into the quality of life of the people. However, Cornali (2011) found in her study focused on Italy that this is not always the case. During the conduct of her study, 93.2% of men and 94.3 % of women aged 56 to 65 were mainly illiterate while 63.1% of young people aged 26 to 35 and 59.3% of college graduates were also illiterate. Despite this level of literacy, reports on Italians' social well-being was reported to be "good" or "excellent". This finding prompts the current study to further explore the data on literacy as it relates with the people's quality of life

Figure 1 shows the scatterplot of literacy rate among 42 countries against the measures quality of life of their people. Evidence suggests that variation in the quality of life of these countries begin to emerge only once a country reaches a literacy rate beyond 90%, i.e., only when 10% of the citizens are not functionally literate.

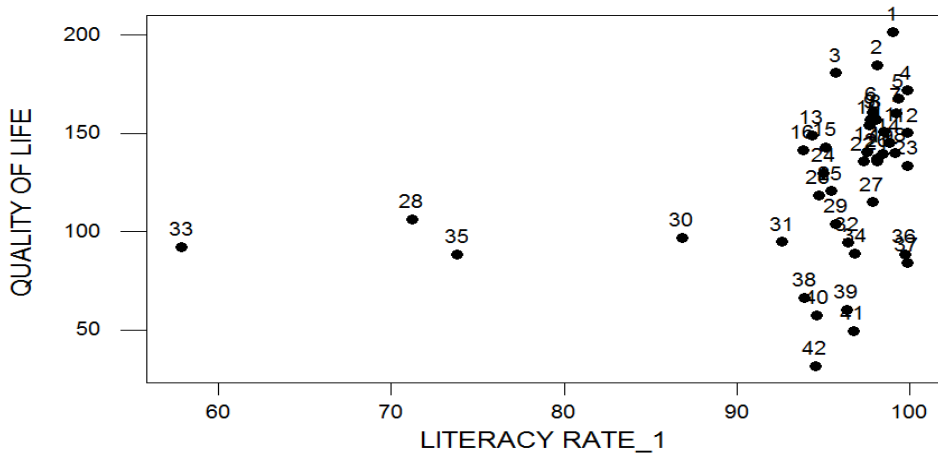


Figure 1. Quality of Life Index and Literacy Rate

Along the primary principal component where the literacy rate of  $x=95\%$  is observed, the largest variance in the quality of life is likewise noted. Countries possessing the literacy rate are equally likely to have better or poorer quality of life. Mexico, Turkey, Vietnam, Malaysia and Jordan belong to this primary axis and the explanatory factor that explains economic development. Vietnam and Malaysia, for instance, have equivalent literacy rates of  $95\%$  but their economic performance is way below that of Turkey. On the contrary, Mexico, for the same literacy rate, has a better economic performance than Turkey.

Why variations in the quality of life of the people are markedly larger for citizens with literacy rate of  $95\%$  may be explained by certain socio-demographic theories. For example, the findings of Cornali's study indicated that the being well-educated and becoming a member of a highly respected profession do not necessarily mean gaining a higher degree of social well-being. It was also found out that increased income is not necessarily a source of increased social well-being. Furthermore, Cornali (2011) hypothesized that the more a person gets educated the more complex his professional roles are thus raising the level of stress and tension.

In the Philippines, it is a well-established fact that better-educated individuals are more likely to be mobile and migratory with a global tendency to settle in economically better off countries. These demographic interactions can cause variation in the nation's economic performance which in turn affects the people's quality of life. For instance, the United States is a preferred destination for many Filipino professionals while Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Europe, Kuwait, and Qatar are priority migration sites for skilled workers. This migration pattern is beneficial to the economy of the receiving countries but detrimental to the Philippine economy.

The Department for International Development (DFID) as cited by Reyes (2008) claims that "migration is not a new phenomenon and that individuals move

as part of their effort to improve their lives and the lives of their families, to learn new skills, to gain new experiences, to find a job or to flee insecurity, disaster or famine.” Reports of Philippine Commission on Women show that about 2.2 million Filipinos are scattered across 215 countries. About 48.3% of these women are employed as domestic workers, nurses, caregivers, and entertainers. Others have jobs in production sector, service sector, and professional sector.

The Filipino workers’ propensity to work abroad is influenced by a world which is shrinking in terms of space and connectivity. Borders across nations are becoming porous, and connectivity among countries is becoming increasingly dynamic. This globalization phenomenon makes way for an increased flow of goods, services, capital and more importantly, migrant workers. The outflow of migrant workers, which is either authorized or unauthorized, has been continuously increasing as more jobs open for low-skilled and highly-skilled workers in the Middle East, Europe and even in East Asia. Filipino labor sojourners are often accepted as guest workers by receiving countries.

Work migration has its positive results. De Vries (2011) claims that OFWs can help reduce poverty by improving the purchasing power of the families left behind; propel community growth by generating employment; improve the country’s fiscal position by stimulating foreign exchange; and contribute to the Gross National Product (GNP). In 2016, OFW remittances amounted to \$26.9 billion mostly coming from Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. Fund remittances can increase household incomes and improve living conditions enabling families to spend for necessities, housing, and education of children (Ang: 2008).

Despite the reported claims of migration’s economic benefits, Ang (2008) cites an Asian Development Bank report indicating that the “compensatory nature of remittances presents a moral hazard or dependency syndrome that will likely impede economic growth as recipients would tend to reduce their participation in productive endeavors” by solely relying on the OFW for financial provisions. De Vries (2011) also claims that much of the remittances is spent on consumption expenditures with a small percentage going to more developmental channels like business and investment operations.

The effects of migration can at times be ambiguous. Aguilar (2012) writes that “although individuals with varied levels of skills migrate for economic reasons, highly-skilled migrants, usually professionals, have a career to speak of which lend their migration a certain level of security, flexibility and high-level status.” Because they are high valued human capital, their perks range from permanent residence and or reunification with their families. This kind of setup is much better compared to the low-skilled workers, who, aside from receiving low salaries cannot call their livelihood as careers. Labor migration, in this case, can be considered as temporary. The migrants are welcomed as laborers, not as settlers. Singapore, for example, fully accepts low-skilled workers but prohibits property ownership and

bans marriage with locals. Japan, on the other hand, frowns on the hiring of low-skilled workers. The temporariness of migration in these countries creates a threat of insecurity and anxiety not only for the workers themselves but also for the families left behind.

In the United States where many Filipinos live their American dream, highly professional workers such as teachers and nurses can have better compensation packages which include good salaries and permanent residence. This fortunate situation provides a better quality of life for the worker and the family. Dollar remittances sent to the Philippines push for the education of children, health care, better housing and other luxury items such as cars and jewelry. On the other hand, overstaying tourists, even the ones who are highly educated, face more difficult prospects that engender constant anxiety and the co-called fear of uncertainty. Most of these itinerants end up taking jobs which are considered dangerous, dirty and demeaning (3Ds)- the exact equivalent of the Japanese *ketanai*, *kiken* and *ketsui* (3Ks). Although these jobs still generate a generous amount of income, security and stability both for the workers and the families left behind are at stake.

Some studies claim that migration can have other ill effects. Ang (2008) cited Jordan for instance, which had to resort to worker importation at one time due to labor shortage driven by excessive worker exodus. Another hovering threat is brain drain as in the case of nurses in the Philippines who often opt to work abroad for better pay. It is a fact that children of OFWs have better career options and can be schooled in renowned institutions. These are advantages that can potentially give them opportunities of international mobility, if not, of internal migration leaving the sending country or community grappling with reduced human resource capability.

Renan (2015) disclosed that for the left behind adolescent children, their parent's overseas work and the wealth and honor associated with it do not automatically bring them the quality of life they perceived to have. Renan's claim affirmed the study of Coppelloni (2011) who purported that the short-term economic value of remittances can be "outweighed by negative psychological, educational and social implications among the left-behind children". Coppelloni further claimed that such impacts can weaken a developing country's human capital potential prospects for long-term economic development and stability.

Reyes (2008) maintains that there is not much improvement in the lives of families left behind by OFWs. His interviews with concerned individuals yielded the information that money received is barely enough to address the household needs. There are even instances when left behind families are unable to receive remittances since some overseas workers are plagued by work crisis. For instance, the Committee on Overseas Workers' Affairs (2011) reported that 26% of OFWs in Saudi Arabia cited unpaid salary as their second most recurring problem next to personal and health issues (27%). Both cases prevent these workers from sending

money to the left –behind families. This scenario is an alarming reality considering that often, Filipino OFWs can travel abroad by incurring debts to cover exorbitant placement fees and transportation costs. This financial liability can become excessively costly whenever payment is delayed due to the exaction of interests.

Migrant workers' indebtedness can escalate even after they have settled overseas as in the case of OFWs in Italy, Qatar and UAE (Basa, De Guzman, and Marchetti; 2012; Dolaman, ;2010). The increased indebtedness can be traced to varying factors. These factors include unpredictable inflation rates; contract violations resulting to low salaries; non-payment of agreed-upon wages; sudden illness among family members; and over-dependency of nuclear as well as extended families. Financial mismanagement can also be a threat. Because of the certainty of money inflow, the migrants themselves or their families can get obsessed with excessive consumerism as well as loose investments on frozen assets such as cars, houses or jewelry.

The realities observed Filipinos tend to confirm to some extent that high literacy do not necessarily lead to quality of life.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

Literacy opens various opportunities that enable individuals to accomplish what they envision for themselves. This ability to process complex information can greatly enhance a person's capability to reach a certain level of gratification. However, in the case of the Philippines, the people's quality of life (QL) remains ambiguous despite the country's high literacy rate. This paper traces this ambiguity to the migration phenomenon currently observed among many educated Filipinos. In search for better employment, Filipino workers leave their families hoping to find financial stability. Some succeed while others do not, thus threatening the QL of their left behind families. Moreover, the success of some OFWs can encourage another cycle of migration among the next generation of workers potentially draining the country of its literate workers. Although life in the Philippines offers few work options, migration has to be moderated in order for the Philippines to retain its most valued human resources.

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## APPENDIX A

		QUALITY OF LIFE	LITERACY RATE
1	Denmark	201.53	99
2	Spain	184.69	98.1
3	Portugal	180.66	95.7
4	Estonia	171.71	99.8
5	Croatia	167.51	99.3
6	Israel	160.72	97.8
7	Italy	160.21	99.2
8	Saudi Arabia	156.98	98
9	Greece	156.8	97.7
10	Slovaakia	154.13	97.6
11	Taiwan	150.62	98.5
12	Poland	150.13	99.8
13	South Africa	148.93	94.3
14	Romania	144.93	98.8
15	Mexico	142.85	95.1
16	United Arab Emirates	141.51	93.8
17	Chile	140.67	97.5
18	Hungary	140.01	99.1
19	Bugaria	139.74	98.4
20	Argentina	137.33	98.1
21	Serbia	135.95	98.1
22	Qatar	135.57	97.3
23	Lithunia	133.37	99.8
24	Turkey	129.65	95
25	Jordan	120.57	95.4
26	Colombia	118.49	94.7
27	Macedonia	114.94	97.8
28	India	106.28	71.2
29	Hongkong	104.02	95.7
30	Iran	96.99	86.8
31	Brazil	94.75	92.6
32	China	94.59	96.4
33	Pakistan	92.28	57.9
34	Singapore	88.86	96.8
35	Egypt	88.35	73.8
36	Russia	88.53	99.7
37	Ukraine	84.07	99.8
38	Indonesia	66.39	93.9
39	Philippines	60.04	96.3
40	Malaysia	57.4	94.6
41	Thailand	49.48	96.7
42	Vietnam	31.48	94.5