

LIFELONG EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: EREDICATING ILLITERACY OR SOCIAL SAFETY NETS?

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Abstract

A basic principle to any education system is to allow people access to education, at least to make them able to read and write to fulfill various needs of daily lives. Normally, a government introduces an education system as a mechanism to achieve one development standard, which is measured by literacy rates amongst the population. Meanwhile, there are also some needs of the people to get education as far as they want, anytime and anywhere, in order to help nation achieves its rapid development. This paper attempts to explain the aim of lifelong education provided in Malaysia, whether it is just as to ensure every citizen is able to read and write, in order to achieve the standard of nation's development, or aimed at preparing future work force who can survive in the wave of nation's development in the future. Results of analysis revealed some findings, which is mostly in supportive of the idea about the needs for education systems, including lifelong education, is merely as Social Safety Nets to each individual to survive in the ever competitive environment in the future.

Keywords: Lifelong education, illiteracy, Social Safety Nets

Introduction

One very important contributor towards political, social and economic development is education. Governments of the world normally introduce public policies in realizing their political, economic and social philosophies through education. Nations which are not prioritizing or unable to develop effective educational systems will find it very difficult or may not be placed amongst group of developed nations.

The main indicator of a nation's education standard can be seen by the illiteracy rate within the population. This standard may have some degrees of influence onto development of one nation because, a nation can only produce many skilled workers when its population can read and write.

Unskilled workers, as most foreign workers are, only eligible for part-time or seasonal jobs in few sectors.

There are some approaches to be used by nations in eradicating illiteracy. One of them is by allowing access to one concept in modern system of education – namely lifelong education.

Methodology

This paper is produced based on literature research, which is highly supported by secondary data and information. For the purpose, several sources were consulted such as books, statistics reports, journals, as well as previous researches. Data and information were manually analyzed and presented via descriptive approaches.

Conceptual definition

This paper attempts to discuss three main concepts, i.e. lifelong education, illiteracy and social safety nets. Then, discussions will comparatively explain the relationships among the concepts and the outcomes of all those relationships.

a) Lifelong Education

Lifelong education refers to a concept where one can get opportunity to access education anytime, anywhere for the whole life up the highest level he can afford to. Web page of Dictionary.com refers lifelong learning as ‘the provision or use of both formal and informal learning opportunities throughout people’s lives in order to foster the continuous development and improvement of the knowledge and skills needed for employment and personal fulfillment’. Whereas Field (2006), defines it as ‘the ongoing, voluntary, and self-monitored pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons’.

Lifelong education can only be succeeded with participation of both parties – the providing party and the receiving party. The providing party means the government, whether through public or private initiative, to fulfill the national education policy. Whereas, the receiving party refers to the public, whether the citizen or non-citizen of the country.

b) Illiteracy

Illiteracy refers to one’s ability. One is considered illiterate if he or she is not able to identify and understand any language by its writings. This equals definition by UNESCO on literacy as ‘one who has reading ability or simply, can read’, or ‘one who has formal education and at least some form of informal education’. There are some individuals who can read but cannot write, whereas, individuals who can write may automatically read. One is

not considered illiterate as long as he or she can understand instructions conveyed via writing, although he or she cannot write.

Meanwhile, there is one type of illiteracy suffered by an isolated group of individuals. The group consists of individuals who can read and write, but cannot understand instructions include in particular questions. This type of illiteracy is known as technical illiteracy. It can occur to some group of individuals who live in society within a national educational system which is too much stress on the results (result-oriented), compared to the quality of the outcomes. Consequently, the like of pre-programmed 'human robot' will be created. They can only hear, read and write, then, sit for examinations and answer multiple choice questions. If this is the system that we prefer, it is not impossible for some individuals to reach certain education levels with just only have to pass some examination hurdles of that type. An illiteracy problem will only be realized when those individuals in the group have to pass examinations at certain levels, which require candidates to write critical and analytical answers (in essay type questions).

c) Social Safety Nets (SSNs)

Generally, SSNs refers to services provided by a state aimed at achieving wellness and well-being of the people. SSNs normally includes all necessities including various types of welfares, medical and health assistance, and other subsidies. It is aimed at helping the poor, low income group, and other vulnerable groups, such as elderly, single parents and disabled. Furthermore, SSNs also allocate several types of emergency (ad hoc) assistances to the people who are suffering from any sort of manmade or natural disasters. This is tally to the meaning of SSNs underlined by Besley et.al. (2003), which stated that SSNs is a kind of government intervention intended at fulfilling 2 functions, namely;

- i) To channel resources needed by the poor or the needy, and
- ii) To provide opportunities to individuals to recover from the aftermath of disasters

There are various types of instruments used by countries in the world to fulfill their obligations to their people. These instruments can be divided into 2 kinds, i.e.;

- i) in the kind of payment contribution, and
- ii) in the kind of non-payment contribution

Web page of the Law Dictionary summarizes the meaning of SSNs as 'a community provided welfare service at local and state level geared towards reducing poverty in the community. It can provide housing, jobs and money for utility bills and food coupons'.

Coady & Harris (2004) further added that, SSNs can be implemented in many types because of the different needs and effects of its

implementation in different countries in the world. For example, countries like the United Kingdom and Sweden provide assistance in the kinds of subsidies, good cause contributions, discounted utilities bills, and food coupons. Where others, like the United States, provide SSNs programmes in the kinds of health assistance (such as the Medicare), and medical assistance (such as the Medicaid).

Lifelong education and illiteracy in malaysia

The development of education in Malaysia has been much influenced by the background of its multicultural society. Although the system is merely a creation of the British colonial, Malaysia still allows its major races to follow their own education streams with adjustment to the national education curriculum.

In Malaysia, illiteracy rate among the population is still significant. Appendix 1 shows the facts and figures of literacy in Malaysia (Table 1 and Table 2). The government has taken many steps to eradicate illiteracy. These include providing all resources and facilities to access lifelong education. Every year the government allocates from the annual budget, some huge amount of money on education sector, along with the introduction of public policies to ensure every citizen is getting access to the highest possible level of education he or she is willing to. The existence of private institutions of higher learning proves the statement accordingly. Nevertheless, any Malaysian may have no reason to claim for not being able to read and write while living in this country.

Lifelong education in Malaysia is provided in several stages. This can be explained as follows:

- a) basic education – this stage covers from Year 1 (7 years old) to Year 6 (12 years old) but parents can sent their children as early as 5 years old to kindergartens or pre-schools. Basic education stage ends at Primary School Assessment Test (UPSR)**
- b) lower secondary education – this stage covers Form 1 to Form 3 education. The stage ends at Lower Secondary Assessment test (PMR) **
- c) higher secondary education – this stage covers Form 4 to Form 5 education. The stage ends at Malaysia Certificate of Education (SPM) **
- d) upper secondary/pre-University education – this stage includes Form 6, matriculation, and foundation studies. The stage ends with the awarding of certificates by each institution respectively **
- e) higher education – this stage offers education at diplomas, first degrees (bachelor), post-graduate (masters and PhD), and post-doctoral diplomas

*** indicates possible dropped-out here*

Basically, education policy in Malaysia allows education to be offered either via public or private initiatives, as far as they are in compliance with the respective national education curriculum. However, this condition only applied to the requirements for basic education to those who intend to enter the civil service. For example, some Chinese parents have opted their children for Chinese medium at secondary education levels, and then furthering studies abroad like in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. After graduating, they then work in the private sector or become self-employed.

Referring to the lifelong learning process in Malaysia, there are two groups of individuals who are still cannot free themselves from the illiteracy traps. The two groups are:

- a) a group of the elderly who had never gone to school at all
- b) a group of individuals who are dropped out at the basic education (Year 6), and some others at the lower secondary education levels (Form 1, 2 and 3)

For that purpose, the government has provided several avenues to ensure that those groups of individuals are not excluded from the national education mainstreams, as far as they want to. Among alternative avenues are:

- a) technical and vocational education – via technical and vocational schools
- b) skills trainings and apprenticeship - at skills institutes, training institutes, MARA training centers, etc.
- c) education in community – at community colleges
- d) in-service trainings – for academic and career purposes to those already and still in service

However, all obligations are burdened on the shoulder of the government as a provider, and not on to the receiver (the public) because it is contracted on voluntary basis. Laws only require parents to give access to their children basic education but the children are not required to necessarily able to read and write, which is one of indicators to literacy.

Lifelong education and social safety nets in malaysia

Each individual may want to get education as far as he wants. Education becomes an important agent to improve one's quality of life – whether his economic, political or social status.

As discussed earlier, Malaysia has provided several levels and alternative routes for the citizens to get access to lifelong education. This is to ensure that all citizens can achieve their intended quality of life, at

anytime and anywhere they want in the country. This can be considered as one type of social safety nets provided by the government.

However, the path of lifelong education system in Malaysia is still creating somewhat called 'death traps' which may throw out an 'idle group' at any level (marked with **earlier). These 'idle groups' include those who are filtered out from the national education mainstream. These idle groups may include the followings:

- a) individuals who fail to continue studies and illiterate
- b) individuals who fail to continue studies but not illiterate

Individual in group (a) may include individuals who had not registered at all into the education system mainstreams. Individual in group (b) may be dropped out at higher levels than individuals in group (a).

Overall, individuals in both groups may have two possible options as the followings:

- a) not continue their studies
- b) continue their studies via alternative routes

Individuals in group (a) normally will proceed with their traditional lives (roughly speaking, in subsistence economic). Not many individuals from this group will enjoy success in lives if they are illiterate, unless they inherit certain amounts of fortunes. One study (Mahmood et. al., 1997), found individuals belong to this group are the major contributor to social problems in the country. However, if not illiterate, individuals in this group can still try to get jobs which can earn their living – normally lower paid jobs, unless those who inherit fortunes as in earlier case.

Individuals in group (b) are more motivated in improving their quality of life. In addition, the current demands require individuals to have higher academic qualifications to succeed in both, life and career. This is in line with the vision of the nation, better known as Vision 2020, to make Malaysia a developed nation by the year of 2020. Hence, to become always competitive, one should follow the lifelong learning process, either through the mainstream or alternative routes.

In this context, it seems that individuals merely use 'education' as a mechanism to get out from the so-called 'vicious cycle' of life, which may lead people into poverty and other social problems.

In Malaysia, rarely individuals who are in the capacity (get opportunities and affordable) to further studies, will simply reject it. They, on the other hand, will try to make it as far as they can afford to. All facilities and the lifelong education opportunities facilitate those who choose education as one kind of social safety nets.

Eradicating illiteracy or social safety nets?

Earlier discussions explained the meaning of lifelong education, illiteracy and social safety nets. The paper also co-related lifelong education to illiteracy and social safety nets.

Next, the paper will explain about the real aim of lifelong education in Malaysia, whether targeted at eradicating illiteracy, or more as a social safety nets. This will be divided into several perspectives as the followings:

a) basic education

Provisions of laws in Malaysia (Education Act 1996; National Education Policy) require parents to allow access to basic education for their children. However, no legislation requires the children to at least able to read, write or both.

On the other hand, most parents will continue to allow their children access to education voluntarily. Parents always have in their minds that education can make brighter future to their children. So, they will support their children by all means, in education, as far as their children want. Rarely found cases where parents ask their children to quit schools. Instead, their children are always encouraged to work hard and compete for good scholarships and various educational assistance, which they think may reduce their household expenses.

b) idle group

The system of lifelong education in Malaysia goes through several stages – early, middle, high and some alternative routes (marked by **earlier). At the end of every stage, there will be hurdles before individuals can proceed to the higher stages. These hurdles produce what is known as a 'death trap' which will filter out individual under the 'idle group' who cannot be used as manpower at entry level of the next stages. Refer Appendix 2 (Table 3). The lower of stages the idle group fall into the death trap, the lower values they are in the labour market. Rather, individuals belong to this group may not be able to get into the labour market at all if they are illiterates.

In this context, the role of government to provide lifelong education is to decrease number of individuals in the idle groups, and create for them opportunities to proceed their journey in education system via alternative routes. The aim of the government is to provide group of knowledge-workers in the future. The government's obligations are considered accomplished when no one is denied access to education at any level they want to.

It can be summarized that government makes continuing education projections and plans to fulfill its obligations. No one will be sued if not

taking opportunities to pursue education. On the other hand, the government would be punished if not providing such opportunities to the people. For example, the government may be thrown out power or may lose seats in legislature during elections.

c) alternative routes to education

The government has taken several steps to encourage the citizens who want to get access to lifelong education. These include steps in providing alternative routes, apart from getting access to mainstream education. The alternative routes can be in the forms of private education, out campus, distance learning, executive programs, in-service trainings, technical and vocational education, and education in community.

Those alternatives however, are seen as efforts or opportunities initiated by the government to the people, who on voluntary basis as recipients. There is no compulsory for the people, who are affordable and qualified, to fulfill it. Normally, in this context, only individuals with forward looking visions and highly motivated to improve their quality of life, will grab the opportunities.

d) political demands

Performance of government has always been related to its success in improving the wellness and wellbeing of the people. So, the goal of improving the quality of life of the people will continue to become prime agendas in the political process. It has always been set as an important agenda in manifesto of all political parties, especially during elections in Malaysia.

During election campaigns, rarely found political parties which make promises about eradicating illiteracy. Instead, most of them always promise to help creating more education, skills and job opportunities. Appendix 3 (Table 4) explains about manifestos of political parties during election in Malaysia These all are actually mean to improve the quality of life of the people, which is considered as a kind of SSNs provided by the government.

e) framework of the nation's development

Development of a nation has always been related to the evolution of its civilization. The evolution of a civilization normally can bring about a nation into one stage of development. Development can be measured based on the nation's development stages. It can be classified into three stages, namely least developed, developing and developed stages.

Development of a nation may include its political, economic and social developments. Development also may increase demands for quality human resource. This is in line with the latest development of technologies

and industries to suit the standard of developed nation. These demands require human resource to equip themselves to be more competitive in order to meet the pre-conditions of knowledge-workers. Individual citizens will try to put themselves on track of achieving the goal of knowledge-workers. Hence, the real aim of individuals go beyond their efforts to become literate. Instead, they put their aims on how to survive within political, economic and social environments in the future. This also reflects that individual's needs for lifelong education emerges as another perspective of social safety nets in order to equipped themselves in meeting demands of the ever changing world.

Conclusion

Malaysia provides various facilities to allow all citizens get access to education. This includes lifelong education, where one can get education as long as he is willing to, anywhere at any time, in line with the rapid development of the nation. However, there is always a question of whether education provided by the nation is only aimed at ensuring citizens able to read and write in order to achieve the development standards, or to produce workforce who can survive in the country with rapid development.

The question about eradicating illiteracy versus social security nets has been analyzed and discussed in this paper. Several findings show that an aim towards social safety nets becomes the major goal of individuals to access lifelong education, although eradicating illiteracy becomes the prime agenda of the government in allowing all citizens access to that education system.

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Appendix 1

Table 1
LITERACY RATES IN MALAYSIA
Youth (15-24 years old)

GENDER/YEAR	1980 (%)	1991(%)	2000(%)	2010(%)
<i>Male</i>	89.50	97.91	97.21	98.38
<i>Female</i>	86.53	95.22	97.27	98.46
<i>Total</i>	87.97	95.56	97.24	98.42

Adult (15 years old and above)

GENDER/YEAR	1980	1991	2000	2010
<i>Male</i>	78.50	88.56	91.97	95.43
<i>Female</i>	61.25	77.28	85.35	90.75
<i>Total</i>	69.52	82.92	88.69	93.12

Source: Index Mundi.com web page at
[www.indexmundi.com/facts/malaysia/
literacy_rate](http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/malaysia/literacy_rate)

Table 2
OVERALL PROGRESSION OF LITERACY RATES
IN MALAYSIA (1957-1999)

YEAR	RATES (%)
1957	46.1
1970	62.1
1980	72.0
1990	78.0
1999	89.0

Source: Education in Malaysia web page at <http://educationmalaysia.blogspot.com>

Appendix 2

Table 3
ENROLMENTS AND DROP-OUTS AT SCHOOL LEVELS
IN MALAYSIA

Levels	Total	Enrolment	Drop-out
Pre-primary	3,500,000		
Primary		3,000,000	500,000
Survive Primary	2,976,000		24,000
Secondary		2,044,512	931,488
TOTAL	3,500,000	2,044,512	1,455,488

Source: Education in Malaysia web page at <http://educationmalaysia.blogspot.com>

