

Challenges Facing Literacy in Guatemala and the United States

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Research Question: How does the issue of literacy affect communities of varying development, and how can reader engagement best be taught to children in the evolving modern era?

Abstract: *In the modern world, the issue of literacy is constantly evolving, with the rise of the digital age resulting in shifting standards. In developing nations such as Guatemala, even those with deceptively high literacy rates, rural indigenous communities continue to lack fundamental literacy resources, exacerbating long-standing cycles of poverty. On the other hand, developed nations such as the United States face a decline in reader interest and attention span some ascribe to the rise of the internet and social media, with consequences yet unknown.*

What is Literacy?

Literacy is a key component of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal #4, a quality education. Definitions of literacy, however, vary, especially in an evolving



age where digital skills are prized. Per UNESCO, “Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts,” and also generally includes basic arithmetic, and is often expanded to include writing. At its essence, literacy is the fundamental skill needed to engage with one’s community and society, and a necessary ability in order to pursue higher education

Literacy in a Developing Nation: Literacy in Guatemala and Disparities

While, like all literacy statistics, there is no universally agreed upon number, the World Bank lists Guatemala's 2021 literacy rate as 83%. While this is by no means a poor statistic, it still leaves nearly one in five Guatemalans over 15 illiterate, an unacceptable reality. Moreover, native populations, rural populations, and women are disproportionately affected, and in certain rural areas, literacy rates can fall as low as 25%.

Rural populations in Guatemala, especially indigenous populations, where the illiteracy rate is as high as 33%.

In Guatemala, 12 years of education are necessary on average to support just a two-person family above the poverty line, but an astounding 90% of impoverished Guatemalan children never reach this threshold.

Programs in Guatemala

- ❖ Unfortunately, while service projects are very common in Guatemala, literacy programs are not. However, there are a few notable programs working to address the issue of literacy, particularly in indigenous and rural communities, the most prominent being the Guatemala Literacy Project.

The Guatemala Literacy Project:

- ❖ The Guatemala Literacy Project is the primary literacy-focused program in Guatemala. It is an international, multi-district, and multi-club Rotarian collaboration that began in 1997 and has since supported hundreds of thousands of students and involved hundreds of clubs

worldwide. The GLP partners with impoverished communities in rural Guatemala, particularly indigenous communities, to provide quality literacy education, textbooks, computers, and scholarships, building self-sufficiency and helping to break the cycle of poverty in rural Guatemala.

- ❖ The GLP has received widespread acclaim. 2017-2018 President of Rotary International, Ian Riseley, stated, “If you want to look for a project that meets the characteristics of Rotary, the GLP is the gold standard.”

The GLP has 4 major programs focused on promoting literacy at all ages:



The Spark Reading Program: The GLP’s Spark Reading Program reaches 141 schools and over 30,000 students in rural Guatemala, and trains local primary school teachers to effectively teach literacy skills to young students and implement a strong

foundation for literacy from a young age, while also providing high-quality children’s books to the schools. This method helps implement long-standing sufficiency in rural communities. First-grade students in the Spark Reading Program score nearly 50% better in reading comprehension than the national average.

Promoting Technological Literacy: With the rise in demand for digital skills, the GLP has established 55 computer centers in the Western Highlands of Guatemala



Providing Textbooks: The vast majority of rural Guatemalan schools lack textbooks, which negatively impacts learning time and classroom

engagement. Over the past 26 years, the GLP's Textbook Program has provided over 80,000 textbooks to nearly 200 schools to combat this issue, and observed a



reduction in dropout rates as high as 16%, keeping students in school for longer.

Rise Youth Development Program: The Rise Youth Development program provides scholarships to indigenous Mayan students and emphasizes career readiness, broad worldviews, and a spirit of giving

back to the local communities, and provides social and academic support to the students. Over half of the program graduates now pay for a younger sibling's education, helping to break the cycle of poverty in indigenous communities.

Additionally, benefactors can personally sponsor a student in Guatemala.

More on the Grant:

- ❖ Per Julio Grazioso, a member of the GLP's Advisory Board, "Each year a grant is developed in different schools in Guatemala and the [total] amounts in recent years have been above \$500k. Approximately 80 clubs and 20 districts participate in each grant, the latter receiving matching contributions from The Rotary Foundation. The amount that the clubs contribute ranges from \$1,000 to \$25,000. The amount depends on the possibilities of each club and the projects in which it is involved."
- ❖ The Edina Rotary recently approved a \$2500 grant to the GLP.

Other Programs:



ADOPT-A-VILLAGE
in Guatemala

Adopt-A-Village is another program focused on rural Guatemalan communities, specifically Mayan, with literacy and bilingual early education. Additionally, the program provides essentials such as fertilizer, seeds, and livestock aside from school supplies and books.

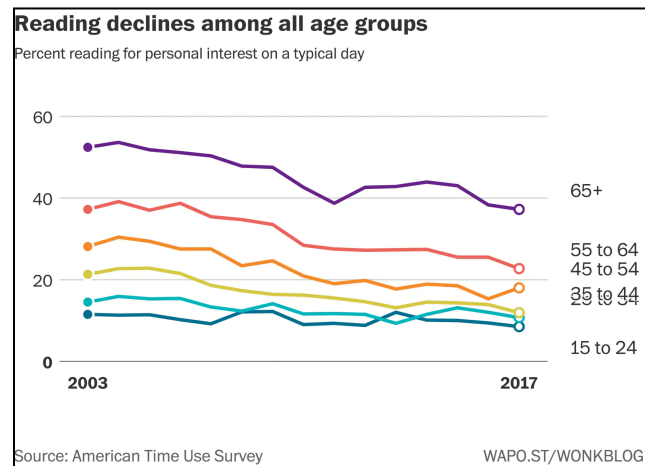


Pencils of Promise works to train teachers in public schools in Guatemala, working carefully with local communities, and supporting nearly 150 teachers through workshops, community meetings, and coaching sessions.

Literacy in Developed Nations: What about the US and the Digital Age?

While the US has a very high basic literacy rate (though statistics greatly vary depending on the threshold for what is considered “literacy”), another issue is quickly rising: the issue of reader engagement.

The Washington Post claims that the number of readers who read for pleasure has plummeted by 30% since 2004. Additionally, a commonly used statistic is Pew Research Center’s yearly report that nearly a quarter of American adults had not read a book in the past



year, a statistic that has roughly continued since 2014 and is repeated by Gallup- the statistic floats roughly between 17-25%. Furthermore, in 2022, Gallup reported that on average, Americans read 12.6 books a year, a significant decrease from 15.6 in 2016, however only 27% reported reading more than 10 books, with heavy readers clearly driving up the average.

The digital age and social media have ensured that the majority of Americans read constantly and quickly. However, the short nature of social media, packed into brief captions or clips, has had a notably detrimental effect on the attention span of young people in particular. In support of this observation, various sources link excessive internet use to a lack of concentration in students.

While no firm connection has been established, some see the pastime of reading books as a dying one, and some theorize that the consumeristic, short attention spans of teenagers and young adults is to blame. Additionally, the Washington Post cites television, not social media or handheld technology, as the primary competitor for reading, as adults frequently cite family time and TV over reading as an ideal way to spend free time. However, anecdotal experiences of shortened attention spans, especially in professions requiring in-depth analysis like law, have been prevalent for many years, as noted by Lisa A. Mazzie of Marquette Law School.

College graduates have additionally shown a significant decline in readership, however, interesting enough, the most significant dropoff has been in older groups, and the reading disparity between old and young is disappearing, challenging the notion that youth are reading less due to social media.

Guatemala vs. The US

Despite high literacy rates in both countries, literacy is far from universal and still faces distinct challenges. In Guatemala, a rural disparity disproportionately affecting women and impoverished indigenous communities, is prevalent, with some rural communities having literacy rates as low as 25%. This unfortunately reinforces the cycle of poverty and deprives children of an essential skill for future success.

The US, on the other hand, faces a decline in reader engagement, though whether the internet and content consumption is to blame remains up for debate.

Small independent bookstores in the US have struggled post-pandemic and with the rise of ebooks and online marketplaces as easy means to obtain books. Independent bookstores offer a personalized and unique experience that cannot be replicated by mass-market stores like Barnes-and-Noble, and their decline rids American communities of a personal link to books, which could result in a decline in commitment or interest in reading. In hopes of combatting this and raising

awareness about these shops, Global Scholars supported an event May 13-14 at which Edina students were offered 10% off at two small independent bookstores.

Additionally, for both nations, shifting measures of literacy, including a move to include digital skills, brings the question of what true literate competency entails,



and means that measures of literacy could be misleading or inadequate at measuring an evolving skill

Conclusion

With a shifting definition and paradigm for literacy, as well as a major disparity both within and between nations in literacy rates and development, literacy remains a prevalent issue in the modern world despite great advances. Ultimately, youth education remains the best tool for increasing literacy rates and opening doors for new opportunities, as well as breaking the cycle of poverty. The shape that education takes, however, varies on a need-based basis and can consist of training preschool teachers, granting scholarships, donating textbooks or computers, or simply incentivizing students to buy books, read, and take time away from their phones. Literacy exists on a spectrum that is constantly expanding, which, while making it difficult to measure, also invites a variety of approaches to engagement and education both in the US and abroad in Guatemala. This also means that literacy education is never 'finished'; rather, there is always room for improvement, and educators should keep this in mind. Supporting programs like the Guatemala Literacy Project and Pencils of Promise ensures that students ongoing support and outreach abroad, while shopping at independent bookstores and raising awareness about the detrimental effect of device usage on focus and attention can help keep American youth engaged with a variety of books for years to come.

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