

Enabling Young Filipinos to Dream Big and Achieve Bigger

Centering Youth Aspirations in
Education Reform

Cleve V. Arguelles
Joel Paulin Mendoza



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Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni
Magsaysay Avenue, University of the Philippines
Diliman, Quezon City 1101

Telephone: (02) 8981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268 / (02) 8426-0955

Email: cidspublications@up.edu.ph

Website: cids.up.edu.ph

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UP PRESIDENT
EDGARDO J. ANGARA
FELLOWSHIP

The **UP President Edgardo J. Angara (UPPEJA) Fellowship** is a grant for pioneering policy research. It aims to promote high-level policy discussions and research on a wide range of topics that address national development goals and imperatives, such as science and technology, economic development, environment and climate change, good governance, and communications.

The Fellowship was established by the University of the Philippines Board of Regents on September 29, 2008 in honor of the late Senator Edgardo J. Angara, who served as UP President from 1981 to 1987 and concurrent UP Diliman Chancellor from 1982 to 1983.

Angara, also a former Senate President, is known for his contributions to Philippine education, serving as the Chairperson of the First Congressional Commission on Education in 1990, which was credited with a number of pioneering reforms in the education sector, including its “trifocalization” and the Free Higher Education Act.

In addition to his notable contributions as a legislator, Angara’s leadership also gave rise to the **UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS)**, which he initiated during his presidency.

Officially established on June 13, 1985, and originally called the University Center for Strategic and Development Studies (UCSDS), CIDS serves as a think tank that leverages the multidisciplinary expertise of UP to address the nation's most pressing challenges. The core objectives of CIDS encompass the development, organization, and management of research on national significance, the promotion of research and study among various university units and individual scholars, the securing of funding from both public and private sources, and the publication and wide dissemination of research outputs and recommendations.

For 2024, the Higher Education Research and Policy Reform Program (HERPRP) served as the UP PEJA Fellowship Awards secretariat in partnership with the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II).

From the Executive Director of UP CIDS

It has been a long time in the making, but I am pleased to see the UP PEJA Fellowship finally coming to fruition. After all the forums, meetings, presentations, and threads of communication between and among the PEJA Fellows, UP CIDS' Higher Education Research and Policy Reform Program (HERPRP), and the Second Congressional Committee on Education (EDCOM 2), we now have a series of papers that tackle the various facets of Philippine higher education. The series includes the study you're reading.

For much of its history, the UP PEJA Fellowship has been housed in and implemented through the Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS), the University of the Philippines' policy research unit. Over the years, the Fellowship has funded and published the studies of policy scholars, many of them luminaries in their respective fields.

In 2023, after a few years' hiatus, not least because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UP PEJA Fellowship resumed and began looking for a new set of Fellows. This time, however, UP CIDS, through its Higher Education Research program, embarked on a historic partnership with the Second Congressional Committee on Education (EDCOM 2).

Linking directly with the government in administering the UP PEJA Fellowship was a first for UP CIDS. And that this was a partnership with a national-level policy-making body made it even more special.

As I have always maintained, this type of linkage is exactly what UP CIDS, as a policy research unit, must do: embedding research within a framework of stakeholder engagement.

Guided by the policy objectives of EDCOM 2, the PEJA papers not only tackle the complex issues in education, but also show stakeholders – the state, civil society, and the teachers themselves – how we can tackle them. For all our efforts in improving education in the Philippines, what else can and should we do?

Many thanks to the PEJA fellows for their valuable contribution, and to the UP CIDS Higher Education Research Program for shepherding this important undertaking. With collaboration, great things do happen.

Rosalie A. Hall, PhD

Executive Director

UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

From the Convenor of UP CIDS-HERPRP

We at the Higher Education Research and Policy Reform Program serve as a convening body that builds partnerships and networks that pursue a shared research agenda and build an evidence basis for policy. Our activities include fellowships for scholars who publish with us and consultancies for junior researchers who wish to begin a career in higher education studies. We maintain databases, conduct events, and publish various manuscripts on higher education.

For 2024, our full attention was devoted to the UP PEJA Fellowship Program, serving as a secretariat for the researchers who studied higher education as it intersected with government and finance, industry and agriculture, regulation and tuition and technical and vocational education, training and lifelong learning, the UP PEJA Program awards grants for pioneering work on a wide range of topics that address national development concerns. This was the very first time that the program focused on a singular topic. This demonstrates the commitment of the University of the Philippines to higher education.

With the support of the UP Foundation, we have assembled what we have been calling the *Avengers* of Philippine education. They are preeminent scholars whose findings and recommendations directly address key policy concerns. Their papers at once draw from empirical data as well as their professional expertise for which they have been identified as a UP PEJA fellow.

Fernando dIc. Paragas, PhD

Convenor

Higher Education Research and Policy Program

UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

Letter from the Executive Director of EDCOM II

The **Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II)** is collaborating with scholars across various institutions to provide valuable insights for the development of evidence-based policies that address the unique challenges and opportunities in the Philippine education landscape.

Our commitment to excellence, integrity, and ethical conduct in advancing research and disseminating knowledge, which we share with our research partners, is defined by the following principles:

The Commission is dedicated to upholding the highest standards of academic rigor in the evaluation, review, and dissemination of research publications. Our pledge is to ensure the integrity and quality of the knowledge we contribute to the scholarly community.

The Commission is committed to fostering transparency and data integrity in all aspects of research. This includes transparent communication, disclosure of methodologies and data sources, and providing clear guidelines to authors, reviewers, and the broader academic community.

The Commission promotes ethical research conduct, emphasizing the responsible and respectful treatment of research participants.

The Commission places a strong emphasis on accessibility. We are committed to facilitating the translation of research findings into accessible formats in order to engage the broader public, taking into account ethical and legal considerations. Our goal is to promote public understanding and awareness of scientific advancements.

In adherence to these principles, the members of the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) pledge to be stewards of good scholarly research for a better, more inclusive educational system for the Filipino people.

Karol Mark R. Yee, PhD

EDCOM II Executive Director

Declaration of Funding

This research was conducted in collaboration with the Second Congressional Commission (EDCOM II).

The funding source played no role in the design of the study, data interpretation, or decision to publish the findings as the author(s) maintained complete autonomy in the research process, ensuring objectivity and impartiality in the presentation of results.

Declaration of Interest

None

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Enabling Young Filipinos to Dream Big and Achieve Bigger

Centering Youth Aspirations in Education Reform

Cleve V. Arguelles¹ and Joel Paulin Mendoza²

Executive Summary

Youth aspirations play a crucial role in shaping both individual futures and broader societal outcomes, particularly in resource-constrained nations. These aspirations drive critical decisions related to education, career, and personal and social life, serving as a guiding force for young people to achieve positive life outcomes. In contexts where economic resources are unevenly distributed, the ability to aspire can help bridge gaps that mere financial support cannot address. However, the capacity to aspire is socially determined, leading to disparities among individuals. This is where education reform can play a role to address the actual and potential disparities in capability to aspire among young people.

Insights from the University of the Philippines Population Institute's (UPPI) 2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFSS) reveal that young Filipinos generally possess high and meaningful aspirations. A significant 75

1 De La Salle University and WR Numero Research

2 World Bank

percent aspire to earn a college degree, with an additional 10 percent aiming for graduate degrees. This is also a goal shared by many who are currently out of school but intend to resume their studies. Despite this ambition, the desire to return to education diminishes as individuals enter their 20s. Additionally, 64 percent of young Filipinos aspire to work in international labor markets, with some considering permanent migration. For most, personal aspirations indicate a preference for delaying marriage and childbirth later in their young lives.

High and meaningful aspirations among young Filipinos emphasize the need for a national education system that can nurture and translate these aspirations into achievable and tangible outcomes. Their aspirations, including career advancement and strategic family planning, not only fulfill individual goals but also support broader socio-economic development ambitions of the country. However, a significant “aspiration gap” exists, where only 23 percent of Filipinos aged 20-24 complete college, and many are out of school due to socio-economic constraints. Aspiration gap refers to the disparity between an individual’s ambitions and their ability to achieve them due to systemic barriers. This gap may also lead to “aspiration failure,” causing frustration and resignation. For instance, 41 percent of out-of-school youth do not intend to return to their studies, and many marry or have children earlier than their own ideal age. Career aspirations, particularly the desire to work overseas, often do not align with available opportunities, further contributing to disillusionment. Aspiration failure occurs when individuals stop setting goals or strive for higher achievements often because of prolonged or repeated challenges that make their aspirations seem unattainable.

To address aspiration gaps and failures, policymakers must prioritize initiatives that create a conducive environment for nurturing and sustaining high aspirations among young Filipinos. Our study reveals that individual, familial, and community factors significantly shape the education, career, and social aspirations of young Filipinos. Across these aspirations, having good role models plays the strongest influence in forming higher levels of aspirations. Professional role models, such as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and even politicians, are associated with an improved desire to complete higher levels of schooling, compete in the global market, and delay marriage and family life. Similarly, parents’ education plays a significant role in shaping these varied aspirations. Higher levels of schooling completed by parents, especially mothers, strongly increase the likelihood of higher levels of aspirations. Conversely, lower levels of education predict aspiration failure in education, career, or social life. Those

who enter marriage and/or family life in their early youth, possessing lower levels of education attainment, are less likely to develop high and meaningful aspirations than other young Filipinos. Finally, education continues to occupy an important role in shaping an individual's education, career, and social aspirations. Having a higher level of education or being on track to complete a college education consistently predicts an improvement in the different aspiration areas of young people.

To develop and support high and meaningful aspirations for young Filipinos, policies should (1) address gaps in access to role models and disparity in parent's education; (2) identify, anticipate, and respond to the needs of youth at risk of aspiration failure; and (3) improve learner access, retention, and reintegration across varied education pathways. Educational reform must also focus on the holistic development of the youth—equipping them not only with technical skills but also with the self-belief and agency needed to pursue and achieve their aspirations. By initiating these policies, centering youth aspirations in education reform, policymakers can empower Filipino youth to translate their ambitions and dreams into tangible achievements, fostering more educated, skilled, and fulfilled individuals essential both for their own progress and our national development.

Keywords: youth aspirations, education reform, Filipino youth, career aspirations, social aspirations

Introduction

Education is among the most transformative of modern institutions, fundamentally because it empowers individuals to answer the most essential questions of being a human: *What is the life I want to live, and how do I get there?* Societies value education because it provides a framework for individuals to explore their competence, interests, and values, guiding them to desire and plan for fulfilling life goals. More importantly, education instills in individuals the belief that they are the masters of their own lives, a sense of agency so vital not only for personal development and success but also collective social progress. This capability to aspire for a good life and to believe and work for those aspirations are among the essential life skills cultivated through education. This paper is a study of the aspirations of young people in the Philippines and the role that the education system can play to form, guide, and enable their aspirations amidst challenging times. Young people

today are navigating a more complex and uncertain transition to adulthood, encountering more non-linear paths than ever. Education and training periods have lengthened, identities are in flux, and the modern institutions that guided past generations of youth are struggling.

Aspirations play a significant role in shaping a person's choices in education, career, and personal and social life. However, the ability to aspire varies among individuals. Some people possess a stronger capacity to envision and pursue their goals than others. For instance, some can clearly take advantage of opportunities for lifelong learning by aligning it with their expectations on the future of work and consequently their career choices while others cannot. The disparity can significantly impact life outcomes, as those with higher aspirations tend to make more deliberate and strategic decisions regarding their education choices, career paths, and even social life arrangements. High aspiration individuals are more likely to achieve their desired outcomes by locking them in a self-reinforcing process of making ambitions, turning opportunities around them to work for those ambitions, and believing in their capacity to bridge their current status and desired outcome. By understanding the state of aspirations of young Filipinos, educators and policymakers can design interventions that help them develop and pursue their aspirations more effectively, and therefore set them to succeed in life.

Drawing insights from the University of the Philippines Population Institute's 2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFSS), our research finds that young Filipinos generally hold high and meaningful aspirations. They are determined to complete higher education, with 75 percent aspiring to earn a college degree, and a further 10 percent aiming for graduate degrees. This high education ambition is shared even by 75 percent of those who are out of school at the time of the study but plan to resume their studies. Related to this, six in 10 Filipino youth who are out of school intend to return to their studies although the number decreases once they get into their 20s. Aside from the marked education ambitions, most young Filipinos, at 64 percent, aspire to compete in overseas labor markets, including some who also wish to migrate permanently abroad. In terms of personal life, most young Filipinos aspire to marry later in their youth and plan to have children, typically between two to three, also later in their youthhood.

High and meaningful aspirations among young Filipinos emphasize the need for a national education system that fosters personal growth, skill development, and global competitiveness. These aspirations, including career advancement and strategic family planning, not only fulfill individual goals but also support broader socio-economic development. However, a significant "aspiration gap" exists, where only 23% of Filipinos aged 20-24 complete college, and many are out of school due to socio-economic constraints.

Aspiration gap refers to the disparity between an individual's ambitions and their ability to achieve them due to systemic barriers. In the context of this study, the gap is evident in the mismatch between the number of young people who aspire for a college education and those who actually complete it.

Aspiration gaps may also lead to "aspiration failure," causing frustration and resignation. For instance, 41 percent of out-of-school youth do not intend to return to their studies, and many marry or have children earlier than their own ideal age. Career aspirations, particularly the desire to work overseas, often do not align with available opportunities, further contributing to disillusionment. Aspiration failure, then, occurs when individuals stop setting goals or strive for higher achievements often as a result of prolonged or repeated challenges that make their aspirations seem unattainable. This manifests as loss of enthusiasm or motivation, potentially similar to the significant portion of out-of-school youth who no longer intend to return to their studies.

Policymakers must address these issues by creating supportive environments for high aspirations. Key factors include access to good role models, parental education, and pathways for educational attainment. Policies should focus on providing role models, supporting at-risk youth, and improving access to education. This approach will help young Filipinos achieve their aspirations, leading not only to a more educated and competitive workforce essential for national development but also to a nation of individuals each pursuing highly fulfilling lives.

In the next two sections of the paper, we discuss our research questions and objectives, as well as the analytical framework that shapes the motivations of this study. In sections three and four, we talk about our empirical strategy and its results. Finally, the last two sections lay out the findings of the study which informs the identified recommendations.

Research Questions and Objectives

This study aims to address the following questions and objectives:

1. What is the nature of the education, career, and social aspirations of young Filipinos?
2. What factors determine the differences in youth aspirations, if any?
3. How can education reform enable education, career, and social aspirations of young Filipinos?

The first question seeks to understand the specific goals young Filipinos hold for their future. It involves examining their desires for higher education, preferred career paths, and social aspirations such as family life. By identifying these aspirations, the study can highlight the common and unique dreams that motivate Filipino youth.

The second question investigates the socio-demographic factors that contribute to the diversity in aspirations among young Filipinos. Factors including but not limited to age, civil status, education, life satisfaction, mental health state, parent's background, religiosity, role models, and sex are analyzed to identify whether these affect the aspirations of individuals. By recognizing these determinants, the study can pinpoint specific barriers and enablers that affect youth aspirations.

The final question focuses on identifying ways that education reform can support and enhance the aspirations of young Filipinos. It looks at potential policies to be formulated or amended that can create a more conducive environment for students to achieve their educational, career, and social goals. The study aims to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers to help bridge the aspiration gap, address aspiration failure, and improve the capability to aspire of the Filipino youth.

These questions and objectives are guided by scholarly and policy conversations on youth aspirations. In the next section, we discuss how we used the concept of and thinking around aspirations as an analytical tool for this study

Analytical Framework

Aspirations are the hopes, dreams, and ambitions that individuals hold for their future. They represent a vision of what people want to achieve in various aspects of their lives, including their careers, education, personal relationships, and overall well-being. Specifically, aspirations refers to the capability to align individual desires, including goals and preferences, with beliefs about the choices available to them, such as opportunities and pathways (Gardiner and Goedhuys 2020). This alignment also includes expectations about what can be achieved given the circumstances they are born into, encompassing elements of self-efficacy and agency (Dalton et al. 2016). Aspirations are more than just fleeting desires; they are deeply rooted goals that guide decision-making and motivate individuals to take specific actions to realize these goals. Thus, the ability to aspire is not just about having dreams but also understanding the means to achieve them and believing in one's potential to do so. This capability is fundamental to personal development and is influenced by a complex interplay of internal and external factors.

The importance of aspirations lies in their ability to drive behavior and shape life trajectories (Gardiner and Goedhuys 2020). When individuals have clear and positive aspirations, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that align with achieving their goals. For instance, a student who aspires to become a doctor will likely invest significant effort in their early studies, seek out relevant experiences, and aim to align with requirements for a successful medical career. Conversely, a lack of aspirations or low expectations can lead to disengagement and missed opportunities. Aspirations are particularly crucial in the context of education and career development, where they can influence choices and outcomes significantly (Duncan et. al. 1968; Ohlendorf and Kuvlesky 1968). By fostering strong, positive aspirations, individuals are better equipped to overcome obstacles, persist through challenges, and ultimately achieve a higher quality of life.

However, the capability to aspire is socially determined (Appadurai 2004). It is heavily influenced by the social context in which individuals are embedded. Peer frames, role models, and social networks play pivotal roles in shaping aspirations (Bogliacino and Ortoleva 2013; Bernard et. al., 2014). When young people are surrounded by positive influences and see examples of success within their communities, they are more likely to believe in their potential and pursue their goals. Conversely, a lack of such social support can hinder the development of aspirations. Understanding these social determinants is crucial for designing interventions that effectively nurture and support the capability to aspire among the youth.

An important conceptual aspect related to aspirations is the “aspiration gap”. The aspiration gap refers to the discrepancy between the ambitions that individuals hold and their ability to achieve them, often due to structural or systemic barriers (Ray 2006). In the context of education, an aspiration gap may manifest when young people express high hopes for completing higher education or pursuing specific careers, but are unable to follow through because of socio-economic constraints, inadequate access to resources, or the absence of necessary support structures. For instance, a student from a low-income family may aspire to complete a college degree, but the high cost of education, lack of guidance, or the need to financially support their family may prevent them from realizing that goal. Such gaps can lead to frustration and disillusionment, impacting overall well-being and future prospects.

Closely related to this is the concept of “aspiration failure”. This occurs when individuals stop setting goals or striving for higher achievements, often as a result of repeated challenges or persistent barriers that make their aspirations seem unattainable (Ray 2006). When people experience prolonged obstacles that hinder their ability to reach their goals, they may internalize these limitations and resign themselves to more limited expectations.

In the case of young Filipinos, this could mean dropping out of school early or settling for unskilled, low-paying jobs despite previously wanting to pursue higher education or more skilled careers. Aspiration failure is not only a personal loss but also a societal one, as it means that individuals are not fully utilizing their potential to contribute to broader economic and social development.

To mitigate aspiration gaps and prevent aspiration failure, it is crucial to create supportive environments that enable young people to transform their dreams into achievable goals. Aspirations are malleable through policy interventions (Gardiner and Goedhuys 2020). This includes ensuring access to quality education, providing financial support, connecting students with role models, and creating opportunities for engagement with mentors who can help them envision a pathway towards success. Educational reform must also focus on the holistic development of the youth—equipping them not only with technical skills but also with the self-belief and agency needed to pursue and achieve their aspirations.

Given these, we discuss why youth aspirations should and can be made central to education reform efforts in the Philippines. Addressing the aspiration gap and aspiration failure through targeted interventions would help in shaping a more equitable society where every young person, regardless of their socio-economic background, has the opportunity to achieve their fullest potential.

Why should we care about youth aspirations?

Youth aspirations are a critical factor in shaping the future of individuals and societies, particularly in resource-constrained countries like the Philippines. Aspirations drive choices in education, career, and social life, serving as a compass that guides young people towards their goals. When youth have strong, positive aspirations, they are more likely to pursue higher education, seek out meaningful careers, and engage in productive social activities. These choices, in turn, lead to better life outcomes, fostering a cycle of personal and community development.

In countries with uneven distribution of economic resources, the role of aspirations becomes even more significant. When financial and material resources are scarce, the ability to aspire can bridge gaps that economic support alone cannot fill. For example, students from low-income backgrounds who have high aspirations are more likely to aim for academic excellence, seek scholarships, and participate in extracurricular activities that enhance their skills and opportunities. Conversely, those with low aspirations may fail to capitalize on available resources, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limited social mobility.

The differences in aspirations among youth can lead to stark contrasts in life outcomes. Those who are motivated and encouraged to pursue their dreams are more likely to overcome economic and social barriers. In contrast, a lack of aspiration can result in disengagement from educational and career opportunities, leading to poorer life outcomes. This disparity underscores the importance of nurturing aspirations as part of comprehensive educational and social policies.

Incentivizing and supporting youth to develop and pursue their aspirations is crucial for several reasons. First, it helps to create a more equitable society where all individuals, regardless of their economic background, have the opportunity to succeed. Second, it drives economic growth and social progress by maximizing the potential of the entire population. Third, it fosters resilience and adaptability, qualities that are particularly valuable in rapidly changing global contexts.

In the Philippines, addressing the gaps in the capability to aspire is essential for breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to achieve their full potential. By focusing on both structural and cultural barriers, policymakers can create a more supportive environment that empowers youth to dream big and work towards their goals. This approach not only benefits individuals but also strengthens communities and contributes to the overall development of the nation.

Why is youth aspirations an issue of education policy?

For most Filipinos, education is widely regarded as a key to a better future, providing access to fulfilling professional careers and improving the quality of life for individuals and their families. Despite this belief, many Filipino families struggle to access education due to both structural and cultural barriers. Many educational interventions have understandably focused on helping Filipino students overcome structural barriers to education, such as providing free tuition, scholarships, and other forms of financial assistance. However, cultural barriers, including gaps in the capability to aspire, remain largely unaddressed. This scarcity in aspirations can lead to poor life outcomes, beginning with suboptimal education choices. When young people lack the motivation and vision to pursue their goals, they are less likely to take advantage of educational opportunities, even when financial barriers are removed.

Resource scarcity extends beyond financial limitations, affecting various aspects of life that influence aspirations. A lack of access to quality education, mentorship, or social networks can hinder an individual's ability to aspire and achieve their goals. When young people face these broader forms of scarcity, their life outcomes may suffer, not only because of material deprivation but also due to aspirations failure or an aspirations gap. This gap

arises when there is a significant difference between what individuals aspire to and what they believe is attainable. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies that consider the multifaceted nature of resources and support needed to help young people bridge the gap between their aspirations and achievable outcomes.

Legislators must understand that fostering aspirations among young people should also be an education policy priority, especially in resource-constrained countries like the Philippines. When there is an uneven distribution of economic resources across the population, the differences in aspirations and the ability to achieve them become even more critical. In such contexts, individuals with strong aspirations are more likely to overcome economic hurdles and strive for better outcomes. Conversely, those with low aspirations may not take full advantage of available opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limited social mobility.

Given the government's resource challenges, it is unrealistic to expect that all material needs can be met through financial assistance alone. Therefore, investing in programs that improve youth aspirations can level the playing field by empowering young people to envision and work towards a better future. This approach not only addresses immediate educational disparities but also fosters long-term resilience and self-sufficiency among the youth. By prioritizing the development of aspirations, policymakers can create a more equitable and dynamic society, where all young people have the opportunity to reach their full potential and contribute positively to the nation's growth.

Methodology

To answer the questions of this research, we analyzed data from the 2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFSS). YAFSS is a longstanding and comprehensive survey conducted by the University of the Philippines Population Institute since 1982. It targets young Filipinos aged 15-24, providing invaluable data on reproductive health, sexual behaviors, and overall well-being. To date, YAFSS remains one of the longest-running and most extensive surveys of its kind in the Philippines, focusing on aspects such as fertility preferences, sexual behavior, substance use, and socio-demographic characteristics. This dataset serves as a rich source of longitudinal information on the evolving needs and behaviors of Filipino youth, which makes it particularly useful for understanding broader social dynamics of youth life in the country.

Although the original intention of the YAFSS dataset was to collect information about reproductive health, sexuality, and related socio-demographic behaviors, we have repurposed it to gain insights into youth aspirations. Given that aspirations are not directly

covered by the original survey questions, we re-adapted several YAFSS items that, while designed for other contexts, can approximate insights into educational and career goals. For instance, questions about future family formation and desired timing for marriage were reinterpreted to approximate social aspirations of young Filipinos. Another instance is the use of question items on migration intentions to approximate career aspirations among the same population. Through this innovative re-use of questions, we were able to gain valuable insights into youth aspirations even though the survey questions were not originally designed for this purpose. This approach provided an opportunity to explore a different dimension of the dataset and contextualize the importance of aspirations in education reform, helping policymakers address youth needs more effectively.

In our analysis, we utilized several items from the YAFSS dataset, categorizing them into dependent variables (representing youth aspirations) and independent variables (representing socio-demographic factors and contextual influences) (Table 1).

TABLE 1. ITEMS DRAWN FROM 2021 YAFSS DATASET

DEPENDENT VARIABLES	INDEPENDENT VARIABLES
■ Education aspirations ○ What is the highest level of schooling you think you will complete?	■ Age ■ Community organizations ○ Presence ○ Type ○ Membership ■ Education level ■ Family life index ■ Family wealth index ■ Life satisfaction ■ Main activity ■ Marital status ■ Mental health (CES-D) ■ Migration experience ■ Number of close friends ■ On-track/off-track to finishing college ■ Parent’s level of education ■ Parent’s main activity ■ Plans to migrate ○ Within the Philippines ○ Overseas ■ Region of current residence ■ Role models ○ Presence ○ Type ■ Self-esteem and self-efficacy ■ Self-reported state of health

DEPENDENT VARIABLES	INDEPENDENT VARIABLES
	■ Sex assigned at birth ■ Urbanity of residence ■ Work experience ■ Youth organizations ○ Presence ○ Type ○ Membership
■ Career aspirations ○ Given the chance, would you want to work abroad someday?	
■ Social aspirations ○ Do you have plans to marry? ○ What do you think is the ideal age for a man and woman to formally marry? ○ What do you think is the ideal age for a man and woman to have a child for the first time?	

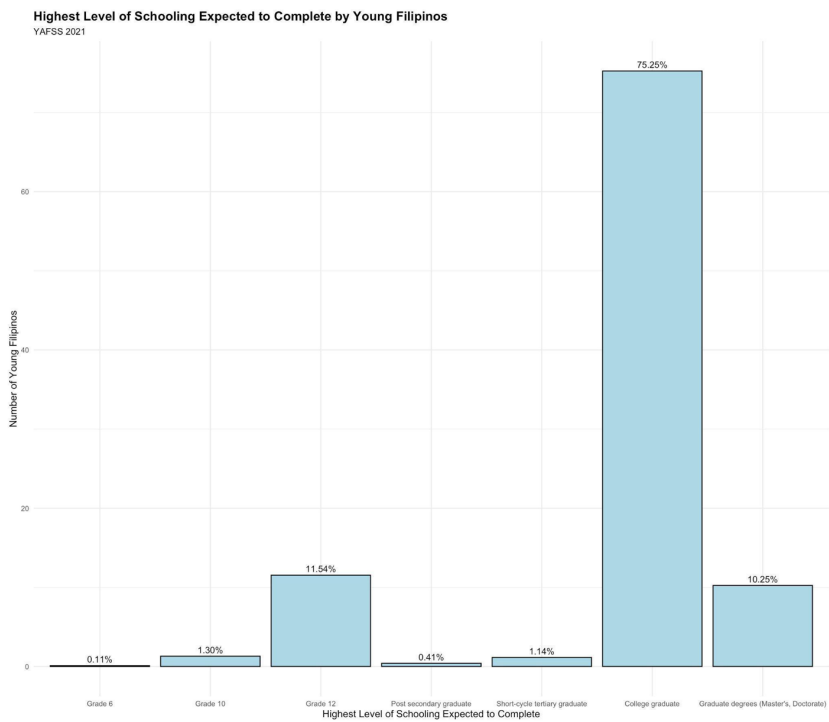
To analyze the associations between youth aspirations and their socio-demographic background, we employed regression models to quantify the relationships between the dependent and independent variables extracted from the YAFSS dataset. Specifically, Ordinal Logistic Regression was used for education-related aspirations, which allowed us to model the likelihood of a young person aspiring to different education levels, based on predictors like sex, parental education, socio-economic status, and role models. Logistic Regression was used for binary outcomes, such as the intention to migrate for work, providing insight into how different socio-demographic factors influence aspirations for overseas employment.

Findings

Education aspirations

Most young Filipinos aspire to complete higher education. 75 percent of Filipino youth aspire to earn a college degree and a further 10 percent aim for graduate degrees. Meanwhile, around 12 percent say that they will only complete Grade 12 or secondary education. Additionally, more than 1 percent believe that they will either complete technical and vocational education and training or only until Grade 10, respectively.

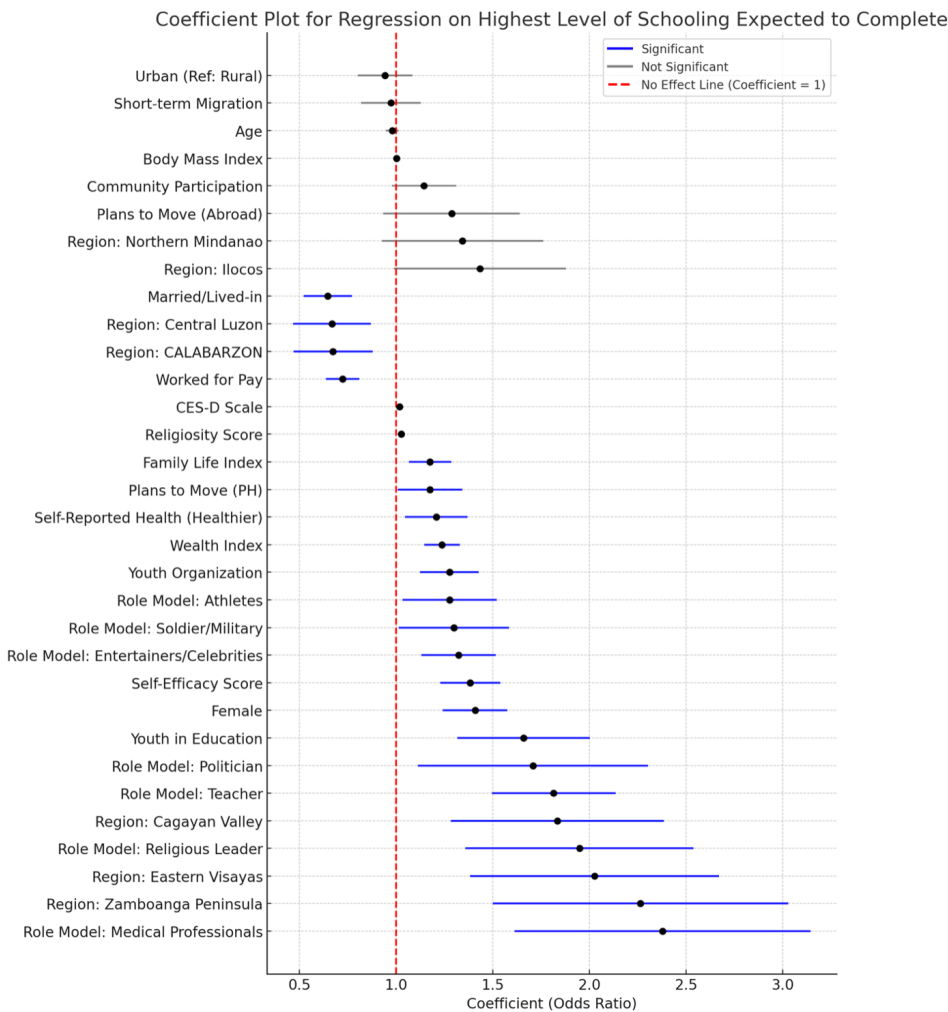
FIGURE 1. HIGHEST LEVEL OF SCHOOLING EXPECTED TO COMPLETE BY YOUNG FILIPINOS



Our study, utilizing ordinal logistic regression, identifies the following factors that significantly influence young people’s aspirations for level of schooling. First, sex and marital status. Females are 41 percent more likely than males to aspire for a higher level of schooling. Young people who have experienced marriage or live-in arrangements are 35 percent less likely to desire a higher level of education.

Second, education aspirations are higher among those intending to migrate, whether within the country or abroad. Those with plans of within-country migration are 18 percent more likely to want a higher level of schooling, and this increases to 29 percent for those seeking to move overseas. Third, role models play a critical role in improving education aspirations. Some role models are more effective than other role model types in increasing the likelihood of higher levels of desired education, including medical professionals (138 percent), religious leaders (95 percent), teachers (85 percent), politicians (81 percent), and other professionals (71 percent). Having role models that are entertainers and celebrities, uniformed personnel like military and police, and athletes also boost education aspirations albeit to a lesser extent.

**FIGURE 2. COEFFICIENT PLOT FOR REGRESSION
ON HIGHEST LEVEL OF SCHOOLING EXPECTED TO COMPLETE**



The socio-economic background of the family, unsurprisingly, is also an important factor. Family wealth positively predicts higher schooling aspirations (24 percent), as does having a good and supportive relationship with the family (18 percent). Parent’s education and occupation can also affect school level preference. A higher level of education for the mother correlates with significantly higher aspirations. Having a mother who completed secondary school (1465 percent), finished technical and vocational education and training (82 percent), reached college (130 percent), completed college (127 percent), and did graduate school (339 percent) predicted a higher expected level of schooling completion for the young individual. In contrast, having a father who only completed early childhood education (92 percent) or working within the country (22 percent) decreases the likelihood

of predicting a higher level of expected schooling completion, as does having a mother who is a housewife (22 percent).

Interestingly, education aspirations also vary significantly across the regions. Those who are from Regions I (Ilocos Region), II (Cagayan Valley), VIII (Eastern Visayas), IX (Zamboanga Peninsula), X (Northern Mindanao), XII (SOCCSKSARGEN), XIII (Caraga) and Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) are more likely to aim for a higher level of expected schooling completion. In contrast, the opposite is observed for those who are from Region III (Central Luzon) and Region IV-A (CALABARZON).

As expected too, being on-track with schooling affects school completion goals. Youth in education and training are 66 percent more likely to predict a higher level of expected education level completed. In contrast, young Filipinos who are off-track because they have been expelled (55 percent), stopped school after marriage or cohabitation (52 percent), or repeated a grade (39 percent) are less likely to predict a higher level of schooling completion. Additionally, having experience of paid work also decreases the likelihood of predicting a higher level of aspired education by 28 percent.

A set of individual-level characteristics are found to significantly shape young Filipino aspirations of education level as well. Higher mental health scores and religiosity scores also significantly predicts higher levels of aspired school level to complete at 2 percent and 3 percent, respectively, albeit notably lower when compared to other factors. The role of self-efficacy appears to be more important. Higher self-efficacy scores increase the likelihood of predicting higher levels of education aspirations by 38 percent.

Finally, community involvement also affects the desired level of schooling to complete. Participation in community activities increases the likelihood of predicting a higher level of schooling completion by 14 percent. Even just the mere presence of a community organization increases the likelihood of predicting a higher level of schooling completion by 28 percent.

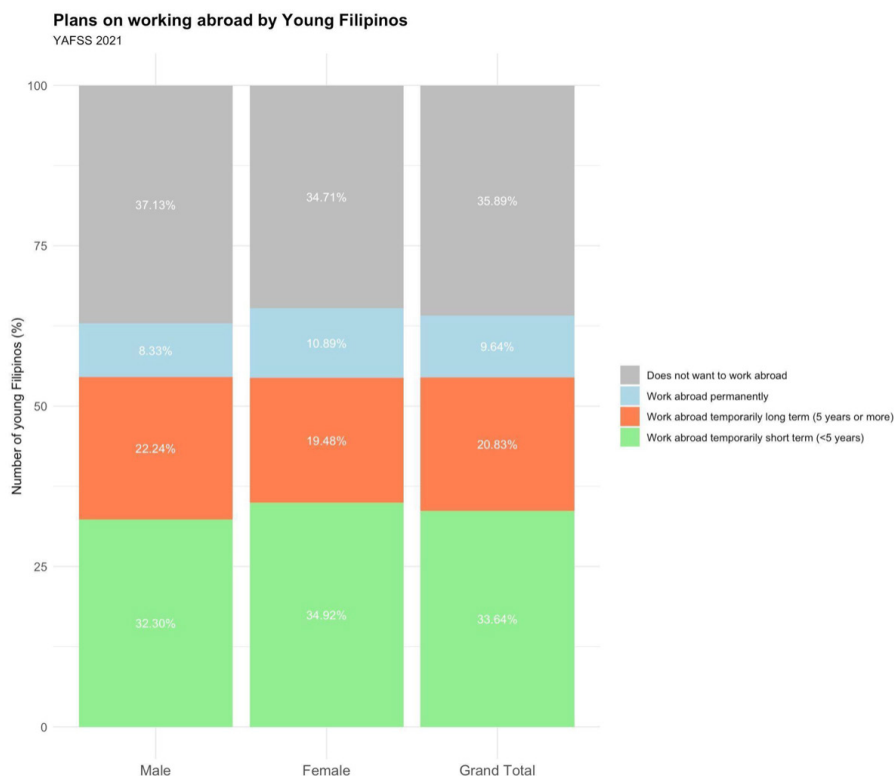
Education aspirations of young Filipinos are shaped by a combination of personal, familial, and community factors, with the strongest influences being having role models and one's mother's level of education.

Career Aspirations

Young Filipinos are more inclined to work abroad in the future, with 64 percent intending to work abroad someday. This includes the 10 percent who wish to work abroad permanently, 21 percent aiming to spend five years or more working overseas, and the 34

percent desiring to do work abroad only temporarily and in the short term. In contrast, about 36 percent of Filipino youth say that they do not have plans of working overseas.

FIGURE 3. PLANS ON WORKING ABROAD BY YOUNG FILIPINOS

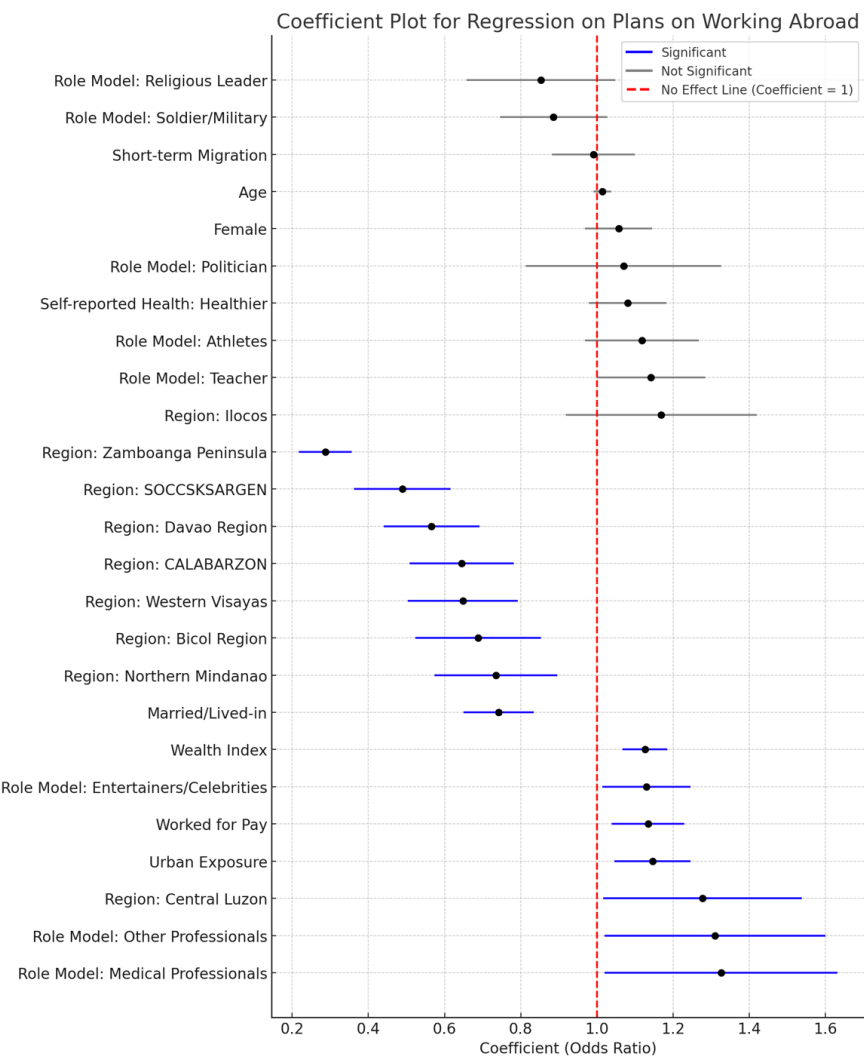


As expected, education level significantly affects overseas work aspirations. Compared to college graduates, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) graduates are 72 percent more likely to aim for job opportunities outside of the Philippines. Undergraduates also show a strong aspiration to work abroad, being 25 percent more likely than college graduates. Those who only reached elementary education, however, are 45 percent less likely to strive to work in other countries. In comparison, their parents' educational level also influences their desire to work in other countries. Those who have fathers with post secondary non-tertiary education are 96 percent less likely to want to work abroad.

Among other familial factors, having a parent who is working outside of the country emerges as a key factor in the youth's aspiration to do the same. Specifically, individuals whose mothers are Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are 45 percent more likely to want to work in a foreign country. If the father is unemployed and looking for work, young Filipinos are 35 percent more likely to want to work abroad. Similarly, those whose mothers

are engaged in housework or are unpaid family workers are 18 percent and 28 percent more likely, respectively, to desire working overseas. Family wealth is an important factor too with those higher wealth 13 percent more likely to aspire for employment abroad. Similarly, those who have urban exposure are 15 percent more likely to want to work abroad someday.

FIGURE 4. COEFFICIENT PLOT FOR REGRESSION ON PLANS ON WORKING ABROAD



Interestingly, aspirations to work overseas also vary significantly among regions. Only those from the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) (21 percent) and Central Luzon (28 percent) scored higher than their National Capital Region (NCR) counterparts in their

aspirations to go abroad for work. In contrast, those who are from Zamboanga Peninsula (71 percent), SOCCSKSARGEN (51 percent), Davao (43 percent), and CALABARZON (36 percent) are less likely to want to move abroad for work than their peers in NCR.

Moving to individual level characteristics, higher self-efficacy scores increases the likelihood to want to work abroad by almost 40 percent. Paid work experience drives up the aspiration to work globally by 13 percent. Furthermore, those active in community activities are 16 percent more likely to desire pursuing opportunities overseas. Having role models is a crucial factor too, including medical professionals (33 percent), entertainers/celebrities (13 percent), and teachers (14 percent). These were found to be more effective than other types of role models at increasing the likelihood of aspiring to work internationally.

Several factors further impede their aspiration to work abroad. Being married or in a cohabiting relationship reduces this likelihood by 26 percent. Higher scores on the family life index, also decrease the likelihood by 8 percent. Additionally, greater satisfaction with their family's financial situation and their overall happiness also decrease the likelihood of wanting to work abroad by 2 percent.

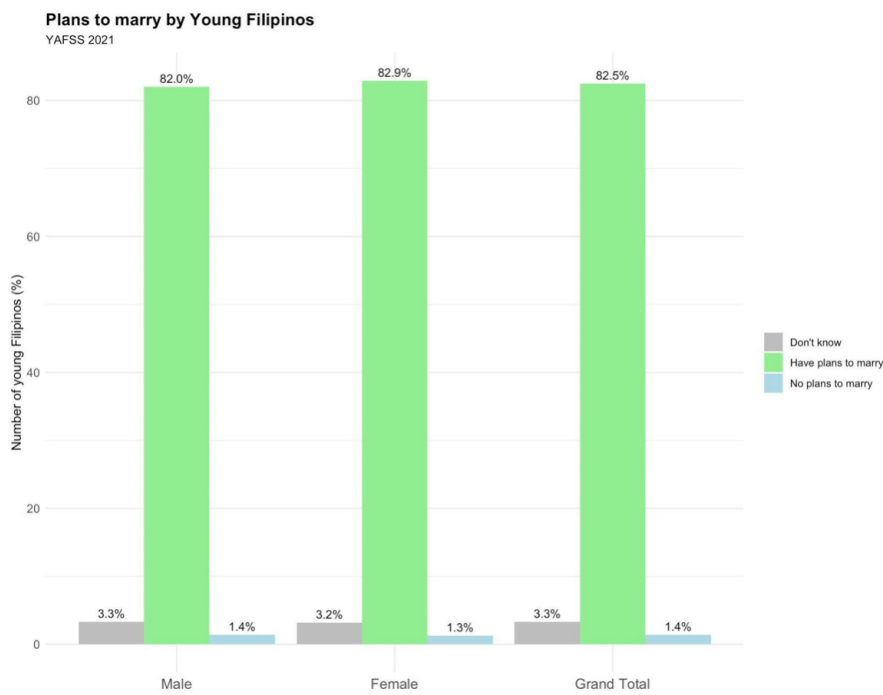
Young Filipinos are determined to work abroad. Among personal, familial, and community factors, this aspiration is strongly influenced by their educational attainments, having mothers already working abroad, and their role models.

Social aspirations

Ideal age for men and women to marry

At 83 percent, most young Filipinos aspire for a married life later in their young adulthood. Overall, they believe that the ideal age for marriage is between 24-26 years old for both men and women. Further, multiple regression analysis shows that certain factors influence whether they would suggest a higher or lower ideal age for marriage.

FIGURE 5. PLANS TO MARRY BY YOUNG FILIPINOS

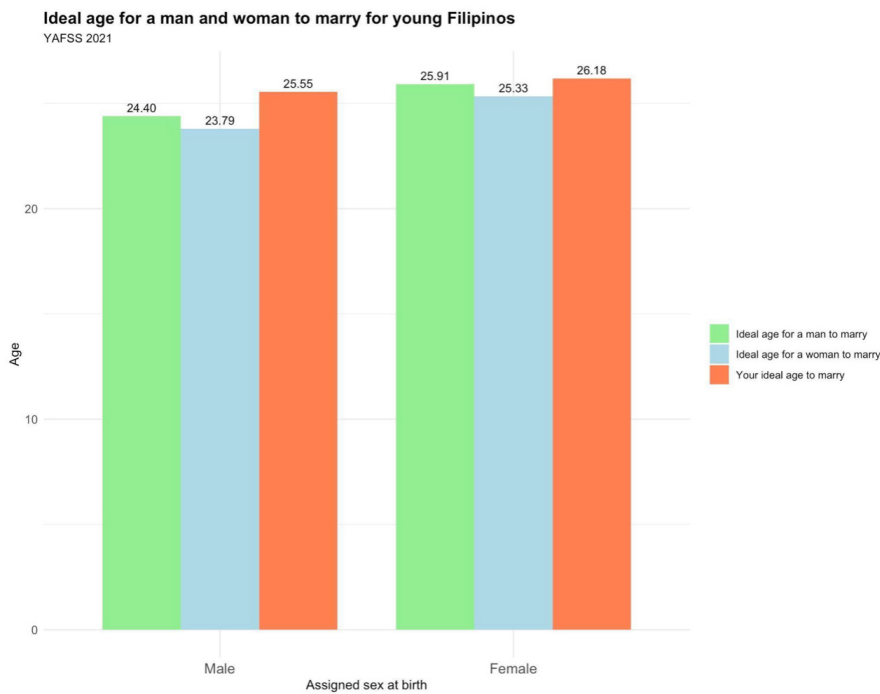


Female and older respondents suggest a higher ideal age for both men and women. Compared to male respondents, female respondents suggest a higher ideal age for both women (1.5 years higher) and men (1.4 years higher). Young Filipinos who plan to move abroad tend to believe that the ideal age for getting married is slightly older by 0.36 years for women and 0.38 years for men.

Role models can also influence perceptions of the ideal age for marriage. Those who look up to professionals propose a higher ideal age for getting married at 0.46 years older for women and 0.60 years older for men. In contrast, those who have athletes and relatives as role models tend to think that the ideal age for marriage is about 0.45 years younger for women and 0.47 years younger for men.

Aside from role models, regional differences are also observed. Those in Western Visayas (Region VI) or Ilocos Region (Region I) suggest a higher ideal age for marriage for both women (0.754 years) and men. On the other hand, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), has a significantly lower ideal age for marriage for both women (-1.06 years) and men (-1.18 years). Respondents from Cagayan Valley (Region II) show significantly lower ideal age for men (-0.54 years).

FIGURE 6. IDEAL AGE FOR A MAN AND WOMAN TO MARRY FOR YOUNG FILIPINOS



The influence of education level and the family’s socio-economic background is also evident. Youth currently in education and training also believe in a later ideal age for marriage. Those highly educated mothers also agree on a later ideal age. In contrast, lower educational attainment is generally associated with a lower suggested ideal age for marriage. Those with only elementary school education suggest younger ideal ages for marriage for both women (-0.85 years) and men (-0.99 years), compared to those who have completed college.

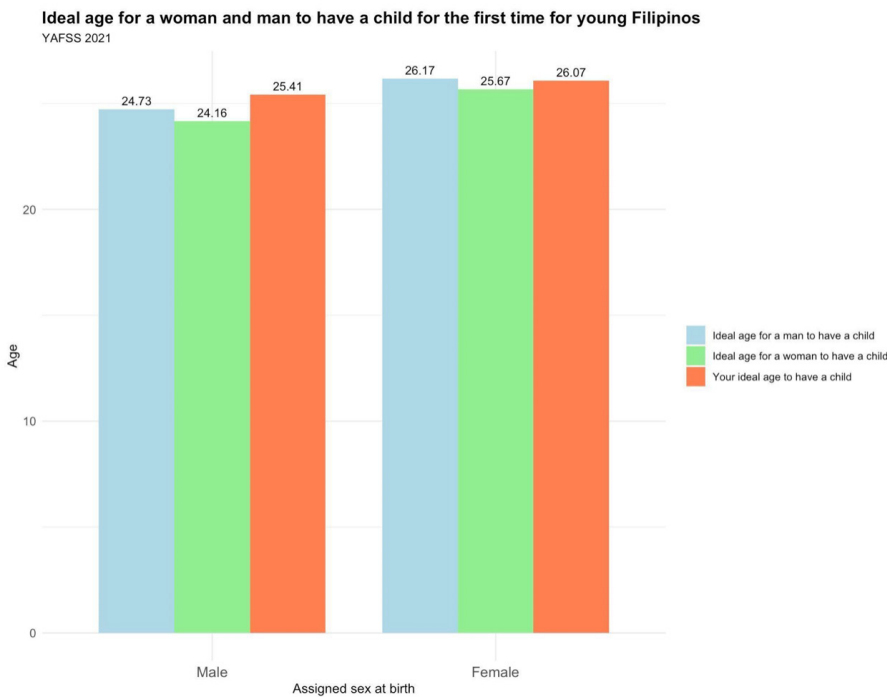
Another factor in the lower ideal age is parental occupation. If the father is working within the country, the ideal age for marriage is suggested to be lower for both women (-0.33 years) and men (-0.37 years). Moreover, if the mother is involved in housework, the suggested ideal age for marriage is lower for both women (-0.28 years) and men (-0.24 years).

Those who have been married or had a lived-in partner also indicate a younger ideal age for marriage, approximately -1.56 years younger for women, and -1.43 years for men younger. Having work experience also shows a lower ideal age by 0.12 years. Meanwhile, individual level factors such as self-efficacy (0.13 higher) and higher life satisfaction, suggest a higher ideal age for both women (0.12 years) and men (0.11 years).

Ideal age for men and women to have their first child

Similar to the ideal age of marriage, the ideal age for having their first child is generally between 24-26 years old for both women and men. This is according to 95 percent of young Filipinos who plan to have a child or children. Regression models further provide insight into the factors affecting this particular aspiration.

FIGURE 7. IDEAL AGE FOR A WOMAN AND MAN TO HAVE A CHILD FOR THE FIRST TIME FOR YOUNG FILIPINOS



Women believe the ideal age to have their first child is 1.42 years higher, at around 27 years old compared to men. In contrast, among those who have ever been married or had a lived-in partner, the ideal age is -1.75 lower for women and -1.65 lower for men. Meanwhile, age and migration plans did not show to have a significant effect on this aspiration.

Role models also play a key role. Having teachers, politicians, religious leaders, and other professionals as role models increases the ideal age, ranging from 0.23 to 0.37 for women and between 0.23 to 0.40 for men. On the other hand, those who have athletes/sports figures and even friends as role models are found to decrease their ideal age by 0.22 and 0.23, respectively.

Education and socio-economic factors also influence the perceptions on ideal ages for parenthood. Those in better financial situations increased their ideal ages by 0.21 for women and 0.11 for men. Meanwhile, those who have higher levels of education and have parents who have done so as well, are generally associated with a higher ideal age. In particular, those who are in education and training have a higher ideal age, especially for women. On the other hand, previous work experience lowers the ideal age for both genders. This is also more seen among currently employed men.

Moving to individual factors, higher self-efficacy is tied to an increase in ideal age by 0.17 years. On the other hand, struggling with mental health concerns are linked to lower ideal age for parenthood.

Conclusion

The high and meaningful aspirations among young Filipinos hold substantial significance for several reasons, highlighting the need to consider these aspirations in reshaping the national education system. High educational ambitions reflect a desire for personal growth and development, enhancing individual skills and competencies essential for contributing to a globally competitive workforce. Aspiring to compete in global labor markets aligns with aspirations for career advancement and economic prosperity, driving national competitiveness and growth. Furthermore, delaying marriage and childbirth indicates a strategic approach to family planning, which can positively impact health outcomes, economic stability, and overall societal development by allowing individuals to pursue education and career goals before starting families. Thus, nurturing these aspirations among young Filipinos not only fulfills personal goals but also supports broader collective socio-economic objectives.

However, notable aspiration failures and gaps significantly characterize the state of young people's aspirations in the Philippines. Only 23 percent of Filipinos aged 20-24 complete college education, and four out of every ten young Filipinos aged 15-24 are out of school. This disparity highlights a pressing "aspiration gap," where the aspirations of young Filipinos often outstrip their actual educational outcomes due to socio-economic constraints, unequal access to quality education, and limited support systems.

Unmet goals can lead to frustration and eventual disengagement, resulting in "aspiration failure." The 41 percent of Filipino youth who are out of school and do not intend to return to their studies may be experiencing aspiration failure, where their educational aspirations have been significantly lowered due to various internal and external factors. Additionally, many are marrying, living with partners, or having children earlier than their ideal age for these social aspirations. For instance, 29 percent of Filipino youth aged 20 to 24 are already

married or living with partners, despite a preferred age of 26 for these arrangements. This aspiration gap has a particularly gendered aspect, with at least 5 percent of female Filipinos aged 15 to 19 having ever been pregnant, far from the ideal age of 26 that most young women in the country believe is the best age to have a child for the first time.

Aspiration failure is also pronounced regarding the career aspirations of Filipino youth. While most aspire to work overseas, this goal does not align with the opportunities and pathways available in global labor markets. Although between one to two million overseas Filipino workers (OFW) are deployed every year (Statista 2024), it is unreasonable to expect the global labor market to absorb the 64 percent of young Filipinos desiring to participate in it. Furthermore, many OFWs end up in elementary occupations, which may be misaligned with their high educational ambitions. In this case, their career aspirations to work overseas do not align effectively with the opportunities available to them, likely leading to unmet goals and potential disillusionment.

To address aspiration failures and gaps, policymakers must prioritize initiatives that create a conducive environment for nurturing and sustaining high aspirations among young Filipinos. Further analysis of the 2021 YAFSS survey reveals that individual, familial, and community factors significantly shape the education, career, and social aspirations of young Filipinos. Across these aspirations, having good role models plays the strongest influence in forming higher levels of aspirations. Professional role models such as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and even politicians are associated with an improved desire to complete higher levels of schooling, compete in the global market, and delay marriage and family life. Similarly, parents' education plays a significant role in shaping these varied aspirations. Higher levels of schooling completed by parents, especially mothers, strongly increase the likelihood of higher levels of aspirations. Conversely, lower levels of education predict aspiration failure in education, career, or social life. Those who enter marriage and/or family life in their early youth, possessing lower levels of education attainment, are less likely to develop high and meaningful aspirations than other young Filipinos. Finally, education continues to occupy an important role in shaping an individual's education, career, and social aspirations. Having a higher level of education or being on track to secure one consistently predicts an improvement in the different aspiration areas of young people.

To develop and support high and meaningful aspirations for young Filipinos, policies should address gaps in access to role models, identify, anticipate, and respond to the needs of youth at risk of aspiration failure, and improve learner access, retention, and reintegration across varied education pathways. By initiating these policies, policymakers can empower Filipino youth to translate their aspirations into tangible achievements,

fostering a more educated, skilled, and competitive workforce essential for their own progress and national development.

Recommendation

Education reform in the Philippines can play a pivotal role in nurturing youth aspirations, reducing disparities in the ability to aspire, and addressing aspiration failures and gaps among young Filipinos. To achieve these goals, a comprehensive approach is required, beginning with an in-depth evaluation of the National Career Assessment Examination (NCAE). This evaluation should review the examination's purpose, implementation, and outcomes to ensure it effectively guides students toward their career paths.

Additionally, developing an early warning system, complemented by anticipatory action-oriented programs, is essential for identifying and engaging youth at risk of aspiration failure or gaps. This proactive approach will help in providing timely support to students, ensuring they remain on track to achieve their goals. Counseling plays a critical role in implementing an early warning system. To fully support at-risk students, guidance counselors are expected to develop and provide frontline anticipatory action-oriented programs and services. But, they can only fulfill such roles if broader reforms are also introduced to the guidance and counseling landscape in the country, beginning with filling much-needed vacant positions for registered guidance counselors across our schools.

Expanding the scope and objectives of Brigada Eskwela to include a community brigade of role models and other aspiration movers is another critical recommendation. This initiative would involve the broader community in developing and nurturing the aspirations of Filipino learners, creating a support network that extends beyond the classroom. Moreover, initiating targeted campus and industry immersion programs can provide students with real-world experiences and insights into various career fields, thereby broadening their horizons and aspirations.

Furthermore, it is imperative to strengthen programs and diversify opportunities for young people to engage with their communities and assume leadership roles. Such initiatives can instill a sense of responsibility and empowerment among youth, encouraging them to actively participate in their own progress and their communities. Through these recommendations, education reform can significantly contribute to shaping a future where young Filipinos are equipped with the aspirations, skills, and opportunities needed to succeed and contribute meaningfully to their families, communities, and the nation.

Biographical note

Cleve V. Arguelles is a political scientist studying political and social change in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. He is President and CEO of public opinion research firm WR Numero Research where he leads a team of more than 200 researchers in building innovative computational, qualitative, and quantitative research methods to understand the attitudes and trends that shape Philippine politics and society. He is also Assistant Professorial Lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Development Studies at De La Salle University Manila. A recipient of numerous research awards and grants, Cleve has published more than 20 book chapters, journal articles and public reports as well as co-edited special issues for academic journals. Since 2022, he has been consistently listed as among the top 10 political scientists and 100 social scientists in the Philippines based on research citations (AD Scientific Index 2022-2024). He also strongly contributes to public scholarship through consulting and policy work with leaders and organizations in civil society, development, and government. In 2023, he was named a UP President Edgard J. Angara Fellow, a fellowship awarded to scholars that have made an impact on the public policy landscape of the Philippines. Most recently, WR Numero Research under his leadership was also recognized at the 2024 Freedom of Information Awards.

Joel Paulin Mendoza, MA, LPT, is an education research specialist with experience in the development and education sectors. He has contributed to policy research projects with organizations such as the World Bank and the Research Institute for Teacher Quality (RITQ). He holds an MA in Applied Policy from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and a BSed (Mathematics) degree from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines.

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Telephone (02) 8981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268
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