



## Exploring the Lived Experiences of Participants in Rural Community Literacy Programs: A Phenomenological Study

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### ABSTRACT

Community-based literacy programs play a crucial role in addressing educational disparities, especially in rural and marginalized communities. While much research has focused on the quantitative outcomes of such programs, there remains limited understanding of the lived experiences of participants and the deeper social and personal impacts these programs have on individuals. This study addresses this gap by exploring how community-based literacy programs affect personal empowerment, social connections, and cultural awareness through the lens of phenomenology. Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 participants from a rural literacy program, and thematic analysis was employed to interpret their experiences. The findings reveal that participants not only improve their literacy skills but also experience greater self-confidence, stronger community bonds, and increased cultural awareness. These key qualitative findings emphasize the multifaceted impact of literacy programs beyond academic achievement, highlighting their role in fostering social cohesion and personal growth. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of literacy programs and suggests that future research should further explore the long-term and cross-cultural effects of such programs.



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### INTRODUCTION

Community-based literacy programs have long been recognized as essential tools for addressing educational disparities in underprivileged regions (Rinawan dkk., 2021). These programs are particularly significant in rural areas where access to formal education is limited due to factors such as geographical isolation, lack of infrastructure, and socio-economic challenges. As literacy is foundational to broader social and economic development, these programs play a crucial role in empowering individuals and fostering community cohesion. The focus of these literacy initiatives goes beyond just teaching reading and writing; they aim to foster a sense of agency among participants and contribute to their overall social inclusion.

Despite their importance, the understanding of how community-based literacy programs influence participants' lives remains underexplored, particularly from the perspective of the participants themselves (Has dkk., 2024). While existing literature often focuses on the outcomes of literacy programs, such as improvements in literacy rates or employment opportunities, little attention has been given to the subjective experiences of those involved. The lived experiences of participants, especially in marginalized communities, can provide valuable insights into the social, emotional, and cultural impacts of literacy. These personal narratives are vital for gaining a deeper understanding of the complex role literacy plays in reshaping individuals' lives and their relationships with their communities.

There is a growing need to explore the meanings participants attach to their experiences in these programs. This exploration, rooted in the phenomenological approach, emphasizes the

significance of subjective experience and personal perception. The phenomenological approach is particularly well-suited for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the personal meanings participants attach to their learning experiences, focusing on the essence of those experiences in a way that traditional quantitative methods cannot. By examining how participants make sense of their learning journey, we can better understand the broader social implications of literacy programs. This research aims to fill the gap in literature by providing an in-depth exploration of the personal meanings and experiences associated with community-based literacy, offering a more nuanced understanding of its role in individual and communal development.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become an increasingly important area of study, particularly within the field of education and literacy. The phenomenological approach, which focuses on understanding the essence of human experiences, has emerged as a powerful method to explore how individuals interpret and make sense of their personal realities (Wenang dkk., 2022). In the context of community-based literacy programs, this approach is particularly valuable as it offers insights into how participants experience learning in a setting that is shaped by their social, cultural, and economic contexts. Through phenomenology, researchers can uncover the complex, nuanced meanings participants attach to their experiences, something that cannot be captured through traditional quantitative methods.

However, capturing the depth of these experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Conventional research designs, particularly those relying on quantitative data, often fail to explore the subjective and emotional aspects of participants' experiences. While these approaches can provide valuable statistical evidence on the effectiveness of literacy programs, they do not adequately address the personal meanings and transformations that participants undergo. The limitations of these methods become apparent when trying to understand the profound changes that occur in individuals' lives through community-based education, where learning is intertwined with broader social and cultural experiences.

The reliance on quantitative measures or broad generalizations has led to an incomplete understanding of the full impact of literacy programs. This gap in knowledge has hindered a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Cintyamina dkk., 2021). In light of these challenges, it is clear that a phenomenological approach, with its emphasis on capturing the essence of lived experiences, offers a more effective and holistic method to explore how literacy programs influence individuals on a deeper level. By focusing on the participants' perspectives and emotions, this research aims to bridge the gap in understanding the real, lived impact of community-based literacy.

Existing solutions to understanding the impact of community-based literacy programs often rely on practical, outcome-oriented approaches, such as quantitative measures that assess the effectiveness of these programs in terms of literacy rates or economic benefits. While these methods provide useful data on the overall performance of literacy initiatives, they are limited in capturing the depth of personal experiences and the profound meanings participants attach to their involvement. The use of surveys, tests, and statistical analysis offers valuable insights into how many participants improve their reading and writing skills, but it fails to address the individual transformations or emotional shifts that occur within participants as they engage with the program.

These limitations reveal a significant gap in our understanding of the lived experiences of participants. Despite the prevalence of outcome-based studies, there remains a lack of exploration into the subjective, personal meanings that participants derive from their experiences (Susanto dkk., 2019). How do individuals perceive the impact of the program on their lives beyond just skill acquisition? What personal, social, and cultural changes do participants undergo as a result of their engagement with the program? These are questions that traditional approaches cannot fully answer.

To address this gap, a more holistic and deep exploration of participants' experiences is needed. The adoption of a phenomenological approach offers a promising solution by focusing on the essence of participants' lived experiences. Phenomenology allows researchers to uncover the underlying meanings, emotions, and personal insights that arise from the experience of community-based literacy, providing a richer, more comprehensive understanding of its impact. This research,

therefore, aims to bridge the gap by using phenomenology to explore how literacy programs influence individuals on a deeper, more personal level, emphasizing the meaning behind the learning process rather than just the outcomes.

Existing literature on community-based literacy programs often focuses on quantitative measures of success, such as literacy improvements and economic outcomes. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of understanding the personal experiences of participants. Several studies have examined the broader impacts of literacy programs on individuals and communities, yet few have used a phenomenological approach to deeply explore the subjective meanings that participants attach to their learning experiences (Faza dkk., 2022). Theories related to empowerment, social change, and community development provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how literacy programs influence individuals beyond basic skill acquisition. However, these frameworks rarely address the individual's emotional and experiential journey, leaving a significant gap in the literature that this research aims to address.

This study proposes to use a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of participants in community-based literacy programs. Phenomenology is particularly suited for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the meaning and essence of participants' experiences in a way that traditional quantitative methods cannot. By focusing on the subjective experiences of participants, this research seeks to uncover the emotional and social transformations that occur as a result of literacy education. The phenomenological approach will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the personal meanings that participants attach to their literacy journeys, directly addressing the knowledge gap identified earlier.

The structure of this article includes an introduction, where the context of the phenomenon under investigation is explained, followed by a detailed description of the phenomenological approach used. The article will also provide a clear explanation of the data collection and analysis processes, focusing on the thematic analysis of participant interviews (Rinawan dkk., 2022). Following the analysis, the discussion will present the key findings, linking them back to the research questions and existing literature. Finally, the conclusion will highlight the implications of the findings and suggest areas for further research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This research adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of participants in a community-based literacy program. The phenomenological design was chosen due to its ability to capture and interpret the subjective experiences of individuals within their natural context, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the meanings participants attach to their engagement in literacy activities (Adelia & Susanto, 2020). This approach focuses on exploring how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences, thus providing rich insights into the phenomena under study. Given the research aim to understand the personal and social impacts of literacy programs, a descriptive phenomenology approach was employed. Descriptive phenomenology was selected because it emphasizes describing the lived experiences of participants without interpreting or theorizing them, allowing the researcher to present an accurate account of the essence of those experiences.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experiences with the community-based literacy program. The inclusion criteria required participants to be adults, aged 18 and above, who had completed at least three months in the literacy program. Those who had not participated in the program for the specified duration were excluded. A total of 12 participants took part in the study, comprising 7 females and 5 males. The average age of participants was 42 years (Palutturi dkk., 2021). These participants were from various socio-economic backgrounds, and they resided in rural areas where access to educational resources was limited. While

the sample size of 12 participants may seem small, the in-depth nature of the data collected through semi-structured interviews allows for a rich understanding of the lived experiences of participants. The small sample size is compensated by the depth of analysis, which provides detailed insights into the nuanced impacts of the literacy program. This demographic was chosen to reflect the community's typical engagement with literacy programs and to explore the diverse impacts of such programs on individuals' lives.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their experiences in their own words while providing enough structure to guide the conversation. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, in private locations where participants felt comfortable and free to share their thoughts. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. A set of open-ended questions was used to prompt discussions around key topics such as the personal impact of the literacy program, challenges faced during participation, and changes in social and community engagement. The interview protocol was adapted from standard qualitative interview frameworks and was modified to focus specifically on literacy experiences within the local community context.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used technique in phenomenological research for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis process followed a systematic approach that involved familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the interview transcripts, followed by the identification of key themes and subthemes that emerged from the participants' narratives. These themes were then grouped into broader categories that represented essential aspects of the participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability in uncovering the depth of meaning embedded in the data. Software tools such as NVivo were used to assist with data organization, but the focus remained on the manual and interpretative aspects of thematic analysis, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Informed consent was sought from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were assured of their right to confidentiality, and all personal data were anonymized to protect their privacy. They were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (Bandzuh dkk., 2022). Written consent was obtained from each participant, and the research adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards, ensuring that the rights and well-being of participants were safeguarded throughout the research process.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings from the phenomenological analysis of participants' experiences in a community-based literacy program. The analysis was structured around key themes that emerged from the data, with a focus on understanding the lived experiences of the participants. These themes provide insights into how the program influenced social change and cultural awareness within the local community.

### **Empowerment through Literacy**

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the interviews was the empowerment that participants felt as a result of engaging with the literacy program. Many participants expressed a sense of newfound confidence and capability in their ability to read, write, and communicate more effectively. This sense of empowerment was particularly strong among those who had previously faced significant barriers to literacy, such as those in remote rural areas or from marginalized groups.

As one participant, Ibu Siti, reflected:

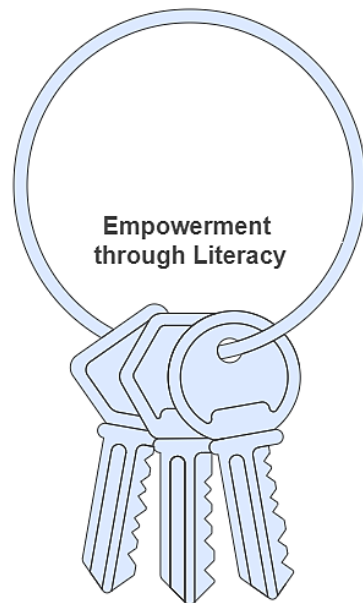
"Before joining the program, I could barely read or write. But now, I feel confident when reading letters or helping my children with their homework. I feel empowered."

Another participant, Pak Ali, shared:

"It's not just about reading and writing. It's about feeling like I can contribute to my community more now. It's a sense of strength that I didn't have before."

These quotes illustrate how literacy is not just a skill but a tool for personal and community empowerment, enhancing participants' roles within their families and local society.

### **Literacy as a Catalyst for Personal and Community Growth**



#### **Confidence**

Represents the participants' increased self-assurance in reading and writing.

#### **Capability**

Highlights the participants' improved skills and abilities to communicate effectively.

#### **Community Contribution**

Emphasizes the participants' enhanced ability to contribute to their communities.

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### **Social Connections and Community Engagement**

A second key theme identified was the strengthening of social ties and community engagement. Many participants noted that the program created a space where they could interact with others in their community, fostering relationships that went beyond the classroom setting. This theme also highlights how the literacy program acted as a catalyst for increased community participation and solidarity.

As noted by participant Budi:

"The program helped us connect with each other. We would meet every week, share stories, and learn from one another. It brought us closer as a community."

Another participant, Ibu Nur, explained the broader impact:

"It opened up opportunities for us to work together. I now see people in my neighborhood coming together to solve problems, and it all started because we could now read notices or announcements that we couldn't before."

The program, therefore, not only enhanced individual literacy but also promoted a sense of collective identity and purpose within the community.

### **Overcoming Challenges in Rural Areas**

Despite the positive outcomes, participants also discussed the various challenges they faced in accessing the program, particularly those living in remote rural areas. Many expressed difficulties in attending sessions due to long distances, transportation issues, or competing responsibilities at home. However, they also acknowledged the significance of the program in overcoming these obstacles and enhancing their lives.

Participant Lani described the challenge:

"At first, it was hard to attend regularly. The center is far, and I had to manage my household chores. But I made the effort because I saw how important it was for my family."

Similarly, Pak Jamal added:

"I had to walk two hours to get to the program, but it was worth it. Now, I can read official letters, which is something I never thought possible before."

These responses highlight the resilience of participants in overcoming logistical and personal barriers to education, reinforcing the transformative power of the literacy program despite its challenges.

### **Cultural Awareness and Social Change**

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of literacy in fostering cultural awareness and social change. Participants reported that the program not only improved their literacy skills but also increased their understanding of social and cultural issues. For many, this newfound knowledge influenced their attitudes toward broader societal matters, such as gender equality and community development.

As one participant, Ibu Lestari, stated:

"Through the program, I learned about important issues affecting our society. I feel more connected to the world around me and more aware of my role in making positive changes in the community."

Pak Agus reflected similarly:

"It's not just about reading newspapers. We discuss issues, share opinions, and learn to respect different perspectives. This program has opened my eyes."

These insights demonstrate how literacy programs can serve as a vehicle for broader societal change, fostering greater cultural awareness and activism within the community.

The results of this study underscore the transformative impact of community-based literacy programs, not only on individuals but also on the social fabric of rural communities. The themes identified highlight the importance of such programs in empowering individuals, fostering social cohesion, and promoting cultural awareness. While participants faced challenges, their resilience and the program's role in enhancing literacy, community engagement, and social change were central to their experiences.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of participants in community-based literacy programs. Through a phenomenological approach, it was revealed that these programs not only enhance basic literacy skills but also foster personal empowerment, strengthen social connections, and promote cultural awareness (Widayanti dkk., 2020). The key themes identified—empowerment through literacy, social connections, overcoming challenges, and cultural awareness—serve as essential components in understanding the deeper impacts of literacy programs. These findings are directly tied to the central question raised in the introduction: how do community-based literacy programs shape the personal and social lives of participants?

The research answers this question by highlighting that the true value of community-based literacy programs lies in their ability to transform participants' self-perceptions and their roles within the community. Participants reported a newfound sense of confidence and empowerment, illustrating that literacy goes beyond just reading and writing—it enables individuals to engage more fully in their communities and improve their social standing. Furthermore, the programs create spaces for social interaction, allowing individuals to form deeper bonds and work together to solve shared problems.

The personal transformation and social impact highlighted by the participants emphasize the multidimensional effects of literacy programs that extend far beyond academic outcomes. This exploration into the personal meanings behind these experiences contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how literacy programs can affect not only individual lives but also the broader social fabric.

The findings align with and expand upon existing literature on the importance of literacy in fostering community engagement and social change. Studies by Ginting dkk. (2021) have shown that literacy programs can strengthen social ties and empower individuals, yet they often focus on more general outcomes rather than the subjective experiences of participants. This study, through its phenomenological lens, emphasizes the significance of individual perceptions and the emotional and social dimensions of literacy. Additionally, the findings complement the work of Zid dkk. (2020), who discussed the role of community involvement in literacy programs, by providing specific insights into how these programs can influence cultural awareness and promote social change. Unlike previous studies, our research highlights the direct, lived experiences of individuals, which may explain why these findings not only support but also expand upon the conclusions of past research by focusing on personal transformation alongside community development. The findings suggest that literacy is not only an academic skill but also a catalyst for social transformation, supporting the argument that literacy programs can significantly impact both individual empowerment and collective community development.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study provide significant implications for both the academic understanding and practical application of community-based literacy programs. From a theoretical perspective, the study underscores the importance of examining not just the tangible outcomes of literacy programs but also the deeper, subjective experiences of participants. The empowerment, social connections, and cultural awareness identified as key outcomes in this research highlight the multifaceted impact of literacy beyond traditional educational outcomes (Panjaitan & Partasasmita, 2020). This suggests that community-based literacy programs should be designed not only to teach reading and writing but also to foster social engagement and cultural exchange. From a practical standpoint, the results suggest that educators, policymakers, and community leaders should recognize the broader social and cultural roles that literacy plays in shaping individuals' lives and, consequently, consider these elements when developing or implementing literacy programs in similar contexts. This study's findings are also relevant to other marginalized or rural populations worldwide, where access to education may be limited, and where literacy programs can act as powerful tools for social change and empowerment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the study provides important insights into the personal experiences of participants in community-based literacy programs, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size of 12 participants, though sufficient for a phenomenological study, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences in broader populations, particularly in different cultural or geographical contexts. Additionally, the research was conducted in a specific rural setting, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to urban or other distinct settings. Another limitation arises from the use of semi-structured interviews, which, despite their ability to capture rich, qualitative data, may still be subject to the influence of interviewer bias or participants' interpretations of their experiences. Future studies could expand the sample size, include different regions, and incorporate alternative data collection methods, such as participant observation or longitudinal studies, to enhance the depth and breadth of understanding.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The findings from this study open up several avenues for further research in the field of community-based literacy programs. Future studies could explore the long-term effects of literacy programs on participants, especially regarding sustained social and cultural changes after completing the program (Wandira dkk., 2022). Furthermore, research could investigate how literacy programs

might address specific barriers faced by marginalized communities, such as gender, age, or disability. It would also be valuable to compare the experiences of participants in different types of literacy programs (e.g., digital literacy versus traditional literacy) to understand how various formats may influence personal and social outcomes. Finally, a cross-cultural comparative study could offer deeper insights into how literacy impacts communities across different socio-economic and cultural contexts, providing valuable knowledge for global educational practices and policies.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of participants in community-based literacy programs, focusing on how these programs impact personal empowerment, social connections, and cultural awareness. The findings revealed that literacy programs not only enhance reading and writing skills but also foster meaningful personal transformations and strengthen community bonds. These results address a gap in the existing literature, which often overlooks the subjective, lived experiences of participants. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research provides a deeper understanding of how literacy contributes to social change and individual empowerment.

However, there are limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. The small sample size of 12 participants, while suitable for a phenomenological study, may not fully represent the diverse experiences of larger populations. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific rural setting limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts, such as urban areas or regions with different socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, the use of semi-structured interviews may be subject to biases that could influence the interpretation of participants' experiences.

Future studies could explore the long-term effects of these programs on participants, particularly regarding sustained social and cultural changes. It would also be valuable to compare different types of literacy programs, such as digital literacy versus traditional literacy, to understand how these formats impact personal and social outcomes. Moreover, expanding the sample size and conducting research in diverse geographical and cultural contexts would provide more comprehensive insights into the broader impact of literacy programs. This research lays the groundwork for further investigation into the role of literacy in shaping both individual lives and the social fabric of communities.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, with no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the results or interpretation of the findings.

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