



Exploring Literacy and Social Identity Transformation in Marginalized Communities

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ABSTRACT

Literacy is widely recognized as a key foundation of education and human development, shaping opportunities for participation, agency, and empowerment within society. In marginalized communities, however, literacy extends beyond technical skills and functions as a transformative social process that reshapes identity and belonging. Despite this significance, little is known about how individuals themselves experience such transformations, leaving unanswered the question of how literacy programs influence the lived reality of social identity among marginalized populations. This study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the subjective meanings attached to literacy participation and to reveal how these experiences contribute to identity reconstruction. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with adults engaged in community-based literacy programs and analyzed thematically to capture the essence of participants' narratives. The analysis revealed four interrelated themes: rediscovering self-worth, shifting social recognition, building confidence and agency, and experiencing literacy as a bridge to collective transformation. These themes demonstrate that literacy programs not only improve functional skills but also empower individuals to redefine themselves and strengthen their role within the community. The findings highlight that literacy should be understood as a lived phenomenon, emphasizing identity, empowerment, and social inclusion as central outcomes. By foregrounding participants' experiences, this study advances current knowledge of literacy as a social practice and offers insights for designing literacy initiatives that go beyond technical training. However, this study is limited by its small sample size and context-specific focus, which may not fully represent the diversity of marginalized groups in other settings. Future research should expand the scope to include comparative or longitudinal designs to examine how literacy-related identity transformations evolve over time and across different cultural contexts. These results provide valuable implications for theory, practice, and future research in education and community development.



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INTRODUCTION

Literacy has long been recognized as a fundamental pillar of education and human development, shaping individuals' ability to engage with society, access resources, and exercise agency in everyday life. Within many communities, particularly those in marginalized or rural contexts, literacy extends beyond functional skills; it represents a gateway to social inclusion, empowerment, and recognition (Ntatamala, 2025). Community-based literacy programs, therefore, play a crucial role not only in improving reading and writing competencies but also in fostering social participation and collective identity.

The significance of literacy is deeply embedded in its subjective dimension. For individuals who have historically been excluded from formal education, acquiring literacy often signifies a profound transformation in self-perception and social standing (Zhong et al., 2025). The act of learning to read and write can alter how individuals see themselves and how they are perceived by

others, creating new pathways for agency, confidence, and community recognition. Previous studies have shown that literacy initiatives contribute to empowerment and participation, yet much of the existing literature emphasizes measurable outcomes such as literacy rates or skills acquisition rather than the lived meanings participants attach to these experiences.

In this context, the need arises to move beyond quantitative indicators and explore the deeper layers of human experience that literacy embodies (Kativu et al., 2025). Understanding how individuals experience literacy as a transformative phenomenon how it reshapes identity, fosters belonging, and influences relationships within the community requires an approach that privileges the subjective voice of participants. A phenomenological perspective is particularly relevant, as it allows for a focus on lived experiences and the meanings individuals construct in their social and cultural worlds. By foregrounding these experiential narratives, research can illuminate the essential role of literacy as both an educational and social process, addressing dimensions that remain underexplored in current scholarship.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals participating in literacy programs has increasingly gained importance as scholars recognize that literacy is not solely a cognitive or technical skill but also a deeply personal and social phenomenon (Delina, 2025). Studies have shown that literacy can shape identity, empower marginalized groups, and foster new forms of community engagement. Yet, despite growing attention to these dimensions, the subjective experiences underlying such transformations remain insufficiently explored.

One of the major challenges in this area lies in methodological orientation. Much of the existing scholarship relies heavily on quantitative indicators such as literacy rates, test scores, or program outcomes, which, while useful, fail to capture the nuanced meanings that participants attach to their experiences. These approaches often reduce literacy to a measurable outcome, overlooking the way it reshapes personal identity, self-worth, and social standing within community life (Owiredu et al., 2025). In contexts where literacy carries symbolic value beyond its practical use, this limitation creates a significant gap in understanding.

Consequently, prior methods have proven less effective in addressing the complexity of literacy as a lived phenomenon (Choi, 2025). By prioritizing numerical outcomes over narrative voices, many studies neglect the experiential depth that defines how literacy is internalized and enacted in everyday life. This shortcoming underscores the need for a methodological approach capable of engaging with participants' perspectives in their own terms, attending to the richness of meaning that emerges from their narratives. A phenomenological approach, with its emphasis on subjective lived experience, offers a powerful framework for uncovering the essential dimensions of how literacy transforms individual and social identity.

Existing approaches to community-based literacy programs have largely emphasized practical outcomes, such as improvements in literacy rates, functional reading and writing skills, or measurable gains in social participation (Gil Ortega et al., 2025). While these studies contribute valuable insights into program effectiveness, they often adopt frameworks that prioritize quantifiable results over the lived realities of participants. Such orientations have produced understandings that are informative yet limited, offering only a surface-level account of how literacy operates within marginalized communities.

The limitation of these approaches lies in their inability to capture the deeper meanings and transformations embedded in participants' experiences. As (Peattie, 2025) suggest, literacy is not only a tool for communication but also a powerful medium through which individuals reconstruct self-identity, renegotiate their roles in society, and experience recognition within their communities. However, these experiential dimensions remain underexplored, as dominant methodological choices fail to account for the subjective and symbolic significance of literacy.

This shortfall highlights the need for an alternative framework that foregrounds participants' voices and privileges their lived perspectives (Rodrigues et al., 2025). A phenomenological approach provides such a lens, offering the possibility to move beyond functional assessments toward a holistic understanding of literacy as a transformative phenomenon. By engaging directly with participants'

narratives and exploring the meanings they ascribe to literacy, phenomenology can illuminate aspects of identity formation, empowerment, and community integration that remain obscured in prior research (Kanosvamhira, 2025). Addressing this gap is essential to advancing knowledge about the social and personal significance of literacy in marginalized contexts.

Previous research has demonstrated that literacy programs can empower marginalized individuals, improve social participation, and alter community relationships (Kiani et al., 2025). However, these studies often rely on quantitative measures or descriptive accounts that do not fully capture the depth of participants' lived experiences. A growing body of scholarship highlights the need to understand literacy not only as a skill but also as a transformative experience that reshapes personal and social identities. The theoretical grounding of this study builds on phenomenology, which privileges the subjective meanings constructed by individuals in their everyday lives (Lockwood et al., 2025). This orientation allows the research to move beyond surface-level outcomes and uncover the essence of literacy as a lived phenomenon.

In response to this gap, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore how marginalized individuals experience identity transformation through community-based literacy programs (Malorni & Wilf, 2025). This method was chosen because it enables the investigation of meaning-making processes, emphasizing both individual perspectives and shared themes. By focusing on personal narratives, IPA provides a pathway to uncover the symbolic and social dimensions of literacy that remain unaddressed in previous research (Diab et al., 2025). In doing so, the study directly responds to the questions raised in the knowledge gap, offering a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The approach emphasizes depth, interpretation, and context, which are critical to revealing the lived reality of participants.

The structure of this article reflects the phenomenological framework employed. The introduction establishes the background and outlines the knowledge gap motivating the study. The method section explains the interpretative phenomenological approach, data collection, and analytic procedures (Moreu & Huo, 2025). The results section presents themes supported by participants' narratives, highlighting the transformative role of literacy (Barboza et al., 2025). The discussion situates these findings within broader theoretical and practical contexts, followed by a conclusion that underscores the study's contributions to both scholarship and community practice (Buddha et al., 2025). This organization ensures coherence and transparency while guiding the reader through the exploration of the phenomenon.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological design with an interpretative orientation, emphasizing the exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribed to literacy within community-based programs. Phenomenology was chosen because it provides a rigorous framework to uncover the essence of subjective experiences that are often overlooked in quantitative research. The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was particularly relevant, as it focuses not only on describing experiences but also on interpreting the underlying meanings within participants' socio-cultural contexts. This design allowed the study to capture the depth and richness of the transformation of social identity experienced by marginalized individuals through literacy programs.

Participants

Participants consisted of marginalized adults actively engaged in community-based literacy initiatives. Inclusion criteria required individuals to have direct experience with literacy programs, be over 18 years of age, and self-identify as members of marginalized groups in their respective communities. Exclusion criteria applied to individuals without sustained participation in literacy activities or those unable to engage in in-depth interviews due to cognitive or language barriers. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the relevance of their experiences to the research focus. The final sample included men and women between the ages of 25 and 55,

representing diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This range of characteristics provided contextual variation while maintaining a shared experiential core relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, guided by a flexible protocol designed to elicit participants' personal experiences of literacy learning and its impact on their social identity. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in community centers and participants' homes to create a comfortable and familiar environment. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences, challenges, and personal transformations. Observational notes and reflective memos were also recorded to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring that recurring patterns and meanings were adequately represented.

Data Analysis

The collected data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This analytic process involved multiple stages, beginning with repeated readings of transcripts to achieve immersion in the data. Meaning units were identified and systematically coded to capture significant expressions of experience. Codes were then clustered into broader categories, which were further refined into overarching themes that represented the essence of participants' experiences. Cross-case analysis was performed to identify both convergent and divergent patterns among participants. Throughout the process, analytic rigor was maintained through iterative reflection, memo-writing, and constant comparison across transcripts. NVivo software was used to assist in the organization of data, but the interpretative process remained central to the analysis.

RESULTS

Rediscovering the Self through Literacy

Participants consistently described literacy learning as a process of rediscovery a reclaiming of self-worth that had long been eroded by marginalization. The ability to read and write was not merely a skill, but a profound marker of personal dignity. One participant expressed:

“When I finally could read a simple sentence, I felt like I was no longer invisible. People used to say I was useless, but now I can see words, understand them, and that makes me proud.”

This sentiment illustrates how literacy functioned as a symbolic act of self-recognition—participants associated the act of reading not only with knowledge but with reclaiming visibility and personhood. Their narratives suggest that literacy reconfigured internalized notions of inferiority into a renewed sense of capability, highlighting its psychological as much as its educational dimension.

This rediscovery was often framed as a personal victory against years of exclusion, enabling participants to see themselves as capable and deserving of respect.

Shifting Social Position and Community Recognition

Literacy was also experienced as a pathway toward social mobility and recognition. Several participants emphasized that being literate changed the way others perceived them, particularly in communal decision-making spaces. One participant noted:

“Before, I just sat quietly during meetings because I could not read the notes or follow the discussions. Now, they ask for my opinion, and I feel I belong.”

Beyond this individual experience, participants collectively portrayed literacy as a catalyst for shifting social hierarchies within their communities. The ability to read and write granted them symbolic authority and participation rights that were previously denied. This transformation reflects

how literacy mediates social inclusion, allowing individuals to transition from passive observers to active contributors in civic life.

Through literacy, individuals gained entry into new social spaces where their voices were acknowledged, signaling a shift in their community status.

Building Confidence and Agency

The acquisition of literacy skills instilled a sense of agency that extended beyond the classroom. Participants articulated how literacy gave them the confidence to navigate daily challenges, from signing official documents to assisting their children’s education. One mother reflected:

“When my son asked me to help with homework, I used to feel ashamed because I couldn’t. Now, I can guide him. That makes me feel like a better parent, and it gives me strength.”

This reflection underscores how literacy became intertwined with emotional empowerment and role identity, particularly in parental and gendered contexts. The sense of being a ‘better parent’ was not merely functional but relational, suggesting that literacy redefined participants’ self-concept within family and community structures. The emergence of agency here demonstrates literacy’s role in reconstructing both personal and social identities.

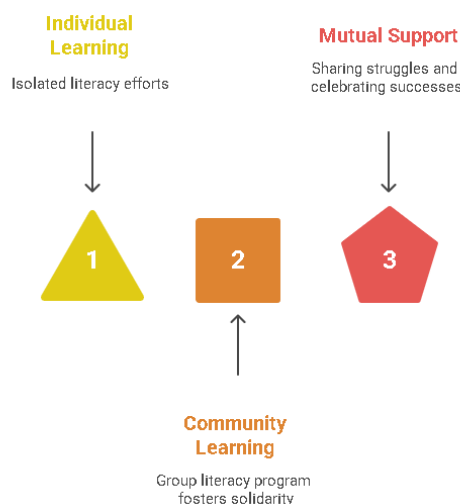
This newfound confidence translated into a broader sense of empowerment, shaping not only how participants viewed themselves but also how they engaged with others.

Literacy as a Bridge to Social Transformation

Beyond individual experiences, literacy programs fostered collective transformation. Participants highlighted how learning together in community settings created solidarity and mutual support. The process was not only educational but also deeply social:

“We learn together, we laugh together, and we share our struggles. Literacy brought us closer as neighbors, and together we are stronger.”

Literacy's Collective Transformation



This collective voice reveals how literacy extended beyond personal advancement to become a shared practice of resilience and mutual recognition. The co-learning environment facilitated a sense of belonging that restructured community dynamics, transforming literacy into a mechanism of social cohesion. The findings thus position literacy as both an individual and collective process of empowerment, where learning redefines not only skills but social relationships and collective identity.

Such collective experiences reinforced the idea of literacy as more than an educational achievement; it was a cultural and social phenomenon that reshaped communal bonds and social structures.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that literacy in community-based programs was experienced not only as a functional skill but also as a transformative process shaping participants' sense of self, social recognition, and agency (Chidyausiku, 2025). These findings directly address the central research question, highlighting literacy as a lived phenomenon with deep personal and social implications beyond measurable educational outcomes.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The results demonstrate that community-based literacy programs significantly contributed to the reconstruction of participants' social identities (Megersa, 2025). By rediscovering self-worth, gaining recognition in community spaces, and building confidence to act as parents or community members, participants experienced literacy as a form of empowerment (Mohamed & David Raja Bose, 2025). These contributions provide a meaningful response to the research question: How do marginalized individuals experience social identity transformation through literacy? The findings underscore that literacy cannot be reduced to a technical acquisition but must be understood as an existential phenomenon embedded in participants' everyday lives (Neville et al., 2025). This contribution enriches the field by expanding the conceptualization of literacy as both educational practice and social transformation.

Connection with Previous Literature and Theory

The findings align with prior studies that emphasize the social and cultural dimensions of literacy (Parthasarathy et al., 2025), while advancing these insights by centering on participants' subjective voices. Whereas earlier research often highlighted community participation or empowerment in general terms, this study provides a deeper understanding of how literacy reshapes self-identity and social status. The results support (Azubuike et al., 2025) argument on literacy fostering belonging, but extend it by showing how such belonging is personally felt and narrated by participants. Furthermore, the findings resonate with phenomenological theories that view human experience as contextually situated and meaning-laden, reinforcing Heidegger's notion that identity is formed through lived engagement with the world (Ameridyani et al., 2025). By interpreting participants' narratives within this framework, the study complements existing scholarship and offers a richer, phenomenologically grounded understanding of literacy transformation.

Implications of the Findings

The findings carry significant implications for both theory and practice. From a social perspective, the study demonstrates that literacy serves as a vehicle for identity reconstruction, enabling marginalized individuals to reposition themselves within their communities (Mokhele & Mvanyashe, 2025). This has broader implications for literacy initiatives, suggesting that programs should not be evaluated solely by measurable outcomes such as literacy rates but also by their capacity to foster empowerment and belonging (Kenis & Devos, 2025). Culturally, the results highlight the need to view literacy as a relational process embedded in collective experience rather than as an isolated skill. Professionally, the findings suggest that educators, policymakers, and practitioners must integrate a more holistic understanding of literacy, one that acknowledges its role in shaping confidence, agency, and recognition in everyday life.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the focus on a specific group of participants within a defined community limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations (Pinto et al., 2025). Second, the interpretative phenomenological approach relies heavily on participants' narratives, which, while rich in meaning, may not capture the full diversity of experiences present in other contexts (Gentile et al., 2025). Third, the absence of longitudinal data restricts the ability to assess long-term transformations in identity and social participation. These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather indicate that the interpretations should be understood within the context of the study's scope and design.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend these insights by examining how literacy-driven identity transformation unfolds over time and across different cultural contexts (Nipa et al., 2025). Comparative studies across diverse community-based literacy programs could help determine the extent to which findings are consistent or context-dependent (Sibrian, 2025). Furthermore, integrating phenomenological insights with other qualitative or mixed methods approaches may deepen understanding by capturing both the experiential and structural dimensions of literacy. By advancing such inquiries, future work has the potential to enrich theoretical perspectives on literacy as a lived phenomenon and inform the development of more inclusive and transformative literacy practices.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how marginalized individuals experience social identity transformation through participation in community-based literacy programs. The findings revealed that literacy was not only acquired as a functional skill but also served as a catalyst for rediscovering self-worth, gaining community recognition, and building confidence to act with greater agency. These results extend prior research by demonstrating that literacy embodies a deeper social and cultural meaning that cannot be captured through quantitative measures alone. By applying an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study addressed existing gaps in understanding the subjective dimensions of literacy and provided insights into its role as a transformative phenomenon. The conclusions highlight the importance of designing literacy initiatives that emphasize empowerment, belonging, and identity formation alongside technical skill development. In terms of policy and practice, the findings suggest that literacy programs should move beyond standardized curricula to include participatory, community-driven models that reflect learners' lived experiences. Policymakers and practitioners should prioritize inclusive spaces that integrate literacy learning with social dialogue, cultural expression, and collective problem-solving. Additionally, program evaluation frameworks should incorporate qualitative indicators—such as changes in self-perception, community participation, and social recognition—to better capture the transformative outcomes of literacy. Future research could further develop these insights by conducting longitudinal studies or cross-cultural comparisons to examine how literacy-driven transformations evolve across diverse contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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