



Exploring the Lived Meaning of Literacy among Adult Women in Rural Community Education Programs: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Literacy plays a crucial role in shaping social participation, identity, and empowerment, particularly within rural communities where educational access remains limited. Within this context, understanding how adult women experience literacy becomes essential to revealing its deeper cultural and emotional significance. However, existing studies have primarily focused on quantitative outcomes of literacy programs, leaving a gap in understanding how women internalize and interpret literacy as a lived human experience. This study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of adult women participating in community-based literacy programs in rural areas. Through semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research reveals that literacy is experienced as a transformative process that fosters self-discovery, confidence, and social inclusion. Participants described literacy as both an individual journey toward self-worth and a collective act of empowerment that redefines their social roles within patriarchal structures. The analysis identified five central themes: rediscovering the self, social inclusion, cultural negotiation, collective empowerment, and integration of local wisdom in learning. These findings highlight that literacy extends beyond functional competence to encompass emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of literacy as a lived phenomenon, emphasizing the importance of contextual and experience-based approaches in adult education. The inclusion of explicit methodological details enhances transparency and provides clearer replicability for future phenomenological research in similar rural contexts. The implications suggest that future literacy initiatives should integrate phenomenological insights to promote sustainable, culturally responsive, and empowering learning experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

Literacy has long been recognized as a cornerstone of human development and social progress, serving as both a cognitive skill and a means of participation in cultural and civic life (Desrosiers, 2020). In many rural and marginalized communities, literacy extends beyond the ability to read and write it becomes a powerful medium through which individuals engage with their environment, assert agency, and reshape their social identities (Demeter et al., 2025). Within these contexts, literacy is deeply interwoven with gender, tradition, and power relations, influencing how individuals especially women perceive themselves and their place in society.

In numerous developing regions, women's literacy continues to represent both an educational challenge and a transformative opportunity (Stewart et al., 2023). Despite global initiatives promoting universal education, social structures rooted in patriarchy and traditional norms often restrict women's access to learning (Bhattacharjya et al., 2025). Consequently, literacy for adult women frequently emerges as an act of resistance and empowerment that facilitates emotional and social transformation

(Wibowo et al., 2023). Rather than functioning solely as a practical skill, literacy often becomes a personal and sociocultural experience embedded in women's everyday realities.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical and methodological approach, provides a pathway to uncover the lived meanings behind such experiences. Rather than viewing literacy as a measurable outcome or programmatic success, the phenomenological perspective seeks to reveal how women experience and understand literacy as part of their everyday existence (Zheng et al., 2025). This orientation shifts the focus from literacy as an external indicator of development to literacy as a lived and embodied reality (Rahmawati et al., 2024). Exploring how rural women construct, negotiate, and internalize the meaning of literacy allows a deeper appreciation of its transformative potential both personally and communally.

Hence, the study of literacy through a phenomenological lens is essential to illuminate the subjective and contextual dimensions that quantitative indicators often overlook (Little & Blau, 2020). Understanding the phenomenon of literacy as lived by women in rural communities reveals the nuanced interplay between culture, gender, and empowerment (Humaedi et al., 2025). Such exploration provides valuable insights into how education can foster not only knowledge but also identity, agency, and social inclusion.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals engaging in community-based literacy programs has become an increasingly significant field within educational and social sciences. Scholars have recognized that literacy, particularly among women in rural communities, is not solely a matter of academic achievement but a deeply personal and sociocultural process that reshapes identity, agency, and belonging (Leone et al., 2025). Studies such as those by (Zafeiroudi et al., 2025) have emphasized the transformative dimension of literacy, showing that learning to read and write often triggers shifts in self-perception, confidence, and participation within the community (Tran et al., 2025). However, these studies also highlight the profound complexity of capturing such experiences in their full emotional and cultural depth.

Despite growing awareness of the subjective nature of literacy, methodological challenges remain in exploring how individuals experience and interpret this process. Much of the existing research has relied on quantitative assessments or program evaluation metrics, which, while valuable, often fail to capture the meaning of literacy as lived by participants (Aunchistha, 2025). These approaches tend to focus on literacy outcomes such as reading proficiency or attendance rates rather than the emotional, spiritual, and existential meanings embedded in participants' experiences. As Bhattacharya (2022) and Nyambe (2023) suggest, such reliance on measurable indicators risks overlooking the internal transformations and contextual nuances that define the literacy journey of marginalized groups.

This methodological limitation has created a persistent gap in understanding the essence of literacy as an experiential and interpretive phenomenon (Khan & Eversole, 2025). Traditional approaches provide descriptive or statistical accounts but rarely address how literacy is felt, internalized, and embodied within specific cultural contexts (Rwelengera, 2025). The phenomenological approach, with its focus on lived experience and interpretive understanding, offers a necessary corrective to these limitations by illuminating the intricate layers of meaning that emerge from participants' narratives (Komarzynska-Swiesciak & Wancel, 2025). Through this lens, the study seeks to explore the phenomenon of literacy among adult women in rural communities not as an external event but as a lived, contextualized experience that shapes their sense of identity and empowerment.

Although numerous literacy initiatives have been implemented across rural communities worldwide, most have relied on practical and outcome-oriented approaches that prioritize measurable progress such as literacy rates, participation levels, or program completion statistics over the exploration of individual experience (Idrus et al., 2025). These methods, while useful for policy and program evaluation, tend to present literacy as a technical skill rather than a lived human phenomenon. As a result, they often overlook the personal, emotional, and cultural meanings that accompany the act of learning to read and write, particularly for women who navigate restrictive social and gendered environments.

Existing research frequently captures literacy through frameworks of empowerment and development, yet it rarely delves into how empowerment is experienced and internalized by learners themselves (Zhang et al., 2023). The dominant evaluative approaches lack the depth required to understand the subtle processes through which literacy transforms women's sense of identity, belonging, and self-worth. Consequently, current studies provide a fragmented view one that measures progress without fully grasping its existential and interpretive dimensions (Thaher et al., 2020). Bhattacharya (2022) and Nyambe (2023) emphasize that this methodological imbalance leads to a limited comprehension of literacy's essence as lived and narrated by participants in their cultural contexts.

This gap underscores the need for a phenomenological exploration of literacy as an embodied and interpretive experience (Ghaderi et al., 2022). Unlike conventional programmatic assessments, the phenomenological approach seeks to reveal how women experience literacy as part of their lived world, how they construct meaning through it, and how it reshapes their social and personal realities. By focusing on lived experience rather than measurable outcomes, such inquiry offers a more holistic and authentic understanding of literacy as a process of self-discovery, empowerment, and cultural negotiation.

Previous research has explored literacy as a social and educational phenomenon, often emphasizing its relationship to empowerment, identity formation, and community participation. Studies by Barton (2020), Prins (2021), and Bhattacharya (2022) have demonstrated that literacy extends beyond basic reading and writing skills to include social and emotional transformations. However, much of this research remains descriptive, failing to reveal the underlying meanings of how individuals live through and interpret literacy within their daily realities. Theoretical perspectives from hermeneutic phenomenology suggest that meaning emerges through human interaction with the world, where learning becomes a lived and embodied experience. This foundation highlights the importance of exploring literacy not as an outcome, but as a subjective journey embedded in social and cultural contexts.

This study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore how adult women in rural communities experience literacy as a transformative process. The method was chosen for its capacity to uncover the essence of participants' lived experiences by interpreting their narratives in light of cultural and social meanings. Through in-depth interviews and interpretative analysis, the study addresses the knowledge gap by illustrating how literacy fosters empowerment, identity reconstruction, and social inclusion. By focusing on lived meaning rather than performance metrics, this approach provides a more holistic understanding of literacy as a deeply personal and communal phenomenon. The findings are intended to contribute to both theoretical insight and practical reflection on community-based education and gender empowerment.

The article is structured as follows. The Introduction presents the context, background, and rationale for investigating literacy as a lived phenomenon. The Method section explains the phenomenological design, participant selection, and procedures for data collection and interpretation. The Results section presents emergent themes that capture the essence of participants' experiences, supported by direct quotations. The Discussion interprets these themes in light of existing literature and phenomenological theory, highlighting their broader implications. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the findings and suggests directions for future research in education and literacy development.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, to explore the lived experiences of adult women participating in community-based literacy programs in rural settings (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological approach was selected for its focus on understanding the subjective meaning of human experiences and its capacity to uncover the essence of a phenomenon as perceived by individuals within their

social and cultural contexts. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which emphasizes the pure description of experience, the hermeneutic approach integrates interpretation as an essential part of the inquiry, acknowledging that meaning is co-constructed through participants' narratives and the interpretive lens of understanding. This design allowed the researcher to conduct multiple rounds of interpretive engagement with participant narratives, including follow-up interviews when clarification was needed.

Participants

Participants consisted of adult women residing in remote community areas who were actively engaged in local literacy programs organized by non-formal educational institutions (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The inclusion criteria required participants to (1) be adult women aged between 25 and 60 years, (2) have participated in a community literacy class for at least six months, and (3) be willing to share their personal learning experiences in an open-ended interview. Individuals who had professional teaching experience or formal education beyond secondary school were excluded to maintain focus on non-formal literacy learners.

A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure that each participant represented a rich, meaningful case aligned with the research objectives. A total of 12 participants took part in the study, with diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds reflecting variations in rural literacy engagement. The participants' profiles ranged from homemakers and small-scale entrepreneurs to community volunteers, providing a multidimensional understanding of how literacy interacts with gender, culture, and identity in localized contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while enabling flexibility for probing deeper meanings (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Interviews were conducted in participants' local community centers or homes to ensure comfort and familiarity. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and all conversations were audio-recorded with informed consent. The interview guide focused on key aspects such as personal motivation, emotional experiences, social interactions, and perceived transformations resulting from literacy participation.

To enhance the authenticity of responses, an empathetic and conversational tone was maintained throughout the process. Supplementary field notes were used to capture nonverbal cues, contextual details, and the atmosphere during interactions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participant identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, following a stepwise procedure to uncover the essential meanings within the participants' narratives (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve immersion and familiarity. Significant statements and meaning units were then identified and coded, followed by the clustering of related codes into emergent themes.

Themes were further refined through iterative reflection to reveal the underlying structures of meaning that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences. The use of NVivo software supported the systematic organization and retrieval of data but did not determine the interpretive process. Instead, interpretation was guided by hermeneutic principles, wherein understanding was achieved through the fusion of horizons the interaction between participants' accounts and the contextual framework of interpretation. This process ensured that findings represented both individual and collective meanings, leading to the identification of core experiential themes that structured the Results section.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Participants were informed of the study's purpose,

procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality, all identifiable information was anonymized, and data were securely stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to authorized personnel. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with national regulations on human subject research, ensuring respect, privacy, and protection of participants' dignity throughout the process.

RESULTS

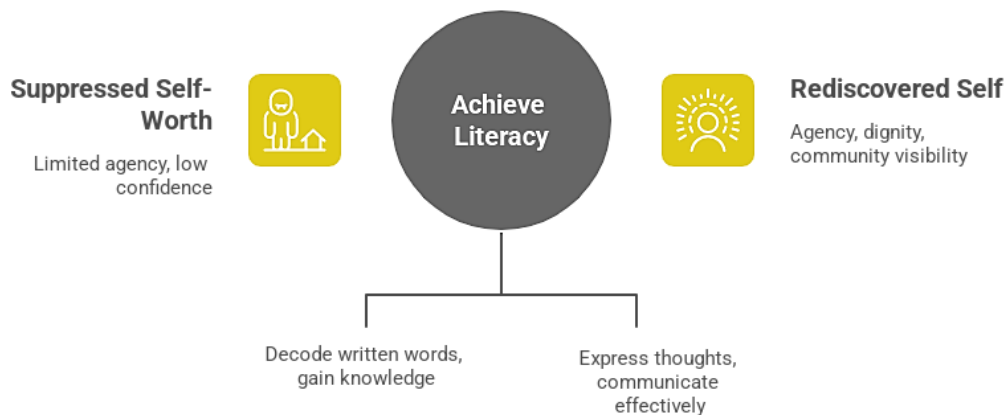
Rediscovering the Self through Literacy

Participants described their journey of learning to read and write as a process of self-discovery and personal awakening. For many, literacy was not merely a technical skill but a deeply emotional and transformative experience that redefined their sense of self-worth. One participant reflected:

“When I finally could read my own name on the paper, it felt like I was born again. I was no longer just someone’s wife or mother I became me.”

This theme reveals literacy as a pathway toward self-recognition and self-respect. The ability to read and write provided participants with a sense of agency that had long been suppressed by traditional gender norms. They associated literacy with dignity, confidence, and visibility within their community.

Literacy Unlocks Self-Discovery



Literacy as a Tool for Social Inclusion and Voice

Participants consistently emphasized that literacy empowered them to participate more actively in community life. Before joining literacy programs, many women expressed feelings of exclusion and silence in decision-making processes. Learning to read allowed them to communicate their opinions and challenge societal expectations.

“Before, I was afraid to speak in meetings because I couldn’t understand the papers or signs. Now, I can read, and I can speak. People listen.”

Through literacy, women moved from the periphery to the center of social dialogue, gaining recognition as contributors rather than passive members. This transformation reshaped community dynamics, as literacy became intertwined with empowerment and gender equity.

Negotiating Cultural Boundaries and Gender Expectations

While participants celebrated their new abilities, they also navigated cultural tensions and gender-based barriers. Several women encountered resistance from family members who viewed their education as unnecessary or even disruptive.

“My husband said reading is for children, not for women like me. But I kept going to the literacy class because I wanted to understand what was written in the clinic forms.”

This theme captures the complex negotiation between traditional roles and the pursuit of knowledge. Participants described their persistence as an act of quiet resistance and cultural adaptation balancing respect for customs with the desire for personal growth.

Literacy as Collective Empowerment

Beyond individual transformation, participants highlighted the communal dimension of literacy. Group learning sessions created spaces for mutual encouragement and shared storytelling, strengthening social bonds among women.

“We learn together, laugh together, and share our stories. Now we support each other even outside the class.”

Literacy thus functioned not only as an educational process but also as a social movement that fostered solidarity and cooperation. These interactions cultivated a collective identity centered on empowerment and belonging.

Integrating Local Wisdom into Literacy Practices

Participants and facilitators integrated cultural symbols, local folklore, and traditional proverbs into the learning process. This localization of literacy made the lessons more relatable and meaningful.

“When the teacher used our village stories to teach reading, I understood faster because those stories were part of my life.”

This theme underscores the importance of contextual learning, where literacy is embedded within local cultural frameworks. The blending of traditional knowledge with modern education nurtured a culturally sustainable model of literacy that honored local identity while promoting progress.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal that literacy, as experienced by adult women in rural communities, transcends its technical definition and becomes a process of self-discovery, social inclusion, and cultural negotiation. Through hermeneutic interpretation, the essence of this experience emerges as one of transformation where literacy serves as both a personal awakening and a communal force for empowerment. These results directly address the central research question concerning how women experience and interpret literacy as part of their lived reality.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The results illuminate that literacy operates simultaneously as an individual journey and a collective practice. On a personal level, it allows women to reclaim agency and redefine their identities beyond traditional social boundaries (Santana, 2025). The act of learning to read and write becomes symbolic of autonomy, giving participants the courage to voice their opinions and challenge societal expectations. On a communal level, literacy fosters social participation and solidarity, enabling women to engage more fully in community discussions and decision-making. This dual dynamic provides a nuanced response to the research question by showing that literacy is not merely a skill acquisition process but an existential experience that reconstructs one's relationship with the self and others (Pieroni et al., 2025). Such insights contribute uniquely to the literature by presenting literacy as a transformative social phenomenon deeply rooted in local cultural values and gendered realities.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The findings align with and expand upon prior scholarship that frames literacy as a socially situated practice (Katsman, 2020). Consistent with Barton's notion of "literacy as social practice," participants in this study constructed meaning through interaction and reflection within their communities. However, this research advances the field by demonstrating that literacy also embodies hermeneutic dimensions where understanding evolves through interpretation and lived experience. In line with Heideggerian thought, the act of becoming literate reflects a process of being-in-the-world, where language and understanding co-create identity. Moreover, the findings complement (Mailu et al., 2020), who observed that literacy among women leads to empowerment; yet, this study goes further by uncovering the inner phenomenological layers of that empowerment the emotional struggle, cultural tension, and rediscovery of self-worth embedded within it. Thus, this study enriches the theoretical landscape by positioning literacy as both a socially embedded and phenomenologically grounded experience, emphasizing meaning over measurement.

Implications of the Findings

The findings carry significant social, cultural, and educational implications that extend beyond the local literacy programs examined in this study (de Oliveira Roque e Lima et al., 2023). At a social level, literacy emerges as a catalyst for transformation, reshaping how women perceive themselves and participate in community life. By enabling women to express opinions, read official documents, and engage in dialogue, literacy fosters a sense of social inclusion and visibility in contexts traditionally dominated by patriarchal norms (Teruel Rodríguez et al., 2025). Culturally, the results demonstrate that literacy becomes meaningful when integrated with local traditions and communal learning, reinforcing the idea that effective educational interventions must respect and adapt to indigenous knowledge systems. From a professional standpoint, these findings underscore the importance of designing literacy initiatives that prioritize experiential understanding and emotional engagement rather than standardized performance outcomes. The insights are therefore valuable for educators, policymakers, and community leaders seeking to promote literacy as both a human right and a transformative social process.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides rich interpretative insights into the lived experience of literacy among rural women, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the phenomenological approach emphasizes depth over breadth, meaning that the results are context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization. The participants were drawn from a limited geographic and cultural setting, which may not reflect the full diversity of experiences in other regions or populations. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives may introduce interpretive bias, as meanings are co-constructed between participant and researcher through language (Dall'Agnola, 2025). Although rigorous strategies such as member checking and triangulation were employed to enhance credibility, the findings remain rooted in subjective interpretation (Wylegała, 2023). These limitations, however, do not diminish the study's contribution but rather highlight the necessity of contextual sensitivity in phenomenological inquiry.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could expand upon these findings by exploring comparative contexts across different cultural or linguistic communities to understand how literacy experiences vary within diverse social frameworks (Zibima & Boroh, 2025). Longitudinal phenomenological research may also reveal how the meaning of literacy evolves over time as women continue to integrate it into their daily lives and community roles. Further, combining phenomenology with participatory or narrative methodologies could deepen understanding of how collective storytelling shapes empowerment and identity formation (Setyawati, 2021). Scholars might also examine the role of digital literacy in extending traditional learning spaces and reshaping gendered access to information in rural contexts. Ultimately, continued exploration of literacy as a lived experience will enrich theoretical and practical perspectives on education, empowerment, and human development.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of adult women participating in community-based literacy programs in rural areas through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The findings revealed that literacy functions not merely as an academic skill but as a profound process of self-discovery, empowerment, and social transformation. Women experienced literacy as a means to reconstruct identity, challenge traditional norms, and strengthen community participation. By emphasizing lived meaning rather than measurable outcomes, this research filled a critical gap left by prior studies that overlooked the emotional and cultural dimensions of literacy. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of literacy as an experiential and interpretive phenomenon that reshapes personal and collective realities. Future research could build on these insights by examining cross-cultural contexts or integrating digital literacy to expand the transformative potential of community education.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The funding organization, National Education and Community Development Fund (NECDF), had no involvement in the study design, data collection, data interpretation, or writing of the manuscript. All authors maintain full academic independence in conducting the research and reporting the findings.

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