Becoming a Knowing Person: How Women in a Dominican Batey Understand Literacy

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This qualitative study explores how Haitian-heritage adult women in a rural batey in the Dominican Republic understand and experience literacy. Drawing on one-on-one and group interviews with eight women enrolled in an adult literacy program, the research centers the voices of learners often marginalized in wider society. Through an inductive thematic analysis, the study reveals that participants view literacy not only as the ability to read and write, but as a form of empowerment closely tied to multilingualism, personal agency, and social participation. This study contributes to broader conversations about literacy as a social practice and the transformative potential of adult literacy education in contexts shaped by historical, structural, and protracted inequities.

Keywords: adult literacy, belonging, education in emergencies, Freirian pedagogy, human capability approach

Introduction

The ability to read and write is an empowering skill: a tool of agency and freedom. Literacy enables a unique engagement with personhood, fostering critical thinking and self-determining choices (Freire, 2018/1970). As argued in Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, literacy significantly curtails or empowers what people can do or be, and thus their freedom to pursue a dignified livelihood according to their values (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 1993; Maddox, 2008).

International organizations reference these literacy-related benefits as grounds for their designation as a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2023). Despite such status, adult literacy learners are often overlooked in global education and development agendas (Robinson, 2005; Grotlüschen et al., 2025). The benefits of literacy for adults in particular are concrete and wide-reaching, such as increased personal confidence, communities' health outcomes, and their children's school attainment (DeWalt et al., 2004; Le Vine et al., 2011; Stromquist, 1997). These outcomes illustrate how the empirical evidence reflects the broader theoretical claims in the first paragraph: adult literacy strengthens individual agency and expands people's substantive capabilities in line with Freire and the capabilities approach. These outcomes demonstrate how the empirical evidence supports the broader theoretical claims discussed above: adult literacy can enhance individual agency and expand people's substantive capabilities. This is consistent with Freire's understanding of empowerment and with the capabilities approach.

Literacy's role as a tool for meaning-making and life-building becomes particularly salient in contexts where access to other foundational resources for well-being—such as stable legal status, economic opportunity, and public services—is severely restricted. Bateys in the Dominican Republic—former temporary settlements for

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seasonal sugarcane workers that have since become permanent communities—face precisely these kinds of constraints (Childers, 2021; Zecca & Castel, 2020). In addition to a widespread lack of economic opportunity, the Haitian heritage of many residents of bateys places them in a situation of liminal legality—a condition in which their legal status is uncertain or only partially recognized—in the Dominican Republic, which often hinders participation in public education initiatives and the wider formal society (Childers, 2021; Shipley, 2015). Previous analyses reported that illiteracy in bateyes was nearly three times higher than the national rate (Riveros, 2014); more recent national and field reports confirm persistent, high levels of educational exclusion in bateyes, though up-to-date, disaggregated batey-level literacy statistics are not publicly available (UNESCO, 2023; Making Cents/USAID, 2023; UNDP, 2022).

Academic literature engaging with Dominican bateys is largely medicalized, focusing on health-related crises and interventions, with limited work considering the experiences of Dominico-Haitian adults in regard to literacy and literacy learning (Kreniske, 2019; Madrid, 2014). On the scale of programming, limited research is available regarding effective adult literacy programs compared to those of early reading (Comings & Soricone, 2007). This dearth is concerning, considering the research affirming the far-reaching benefits of adult literacy for individuals and communities (DeWalt et al., 2004; Le Vine et al., 2011; Stromquist, 1997). This paper draws from interviews with eight women to show how women who do not know how to read understand the possibilities of multilingual literacy. Based on these conversations, the paper looks at how these understandings might inform planning effective adult literacy programming for the community. This study recognizes that literacy exists on a continuum rather than as a simple literate/illiterate binary and, therefore, avoids the term *illiterate*. Instead, it uses individuals' self-assessed confidence in independently reading a text as an indicator of where they fall along that continuum. In the context of one batey in the Dominican Republic, this paper asks: How do adults who do not feel confident reading understand literacy?

Bateys in Context

Batey communities in the Dominican Republic are populated mostly by Haitians or Dominicans of Haitian descent, due to their historical origins as temporary camps for *braceros*, or sugar cane workers in English (Jansen, 2013). Over time, these temporary dwellings for migrant workers have become established social communities home to men, women, and children, and their own informal economy (Zecca Castel, 2020). Socially, bateys are "dynamic bicultural and transnational constellation[s]," where a mix of recently arrived Haitians, Haitians with decades of residing in the DominicanRepublic, and fourth-generation Dominican-born people of Haitian descent often live together (Jansen, 2021, p.119). Estimates suggest there are around 500 bateys in the Dominican Republic, typically surrounded by sugar cane fields and severed from access to most basic services (Zecca Castel, 2020). Bateys represent reserves of a valuable and cheap workforce well-suited for the interests of the Dominican economy (Zecca Castel, 2020).

Depending on the recency of their Haitian heritage, most batey residents use a continuum of Haitian Creole and Spanish: from predominantly Haitian Creole, with basic Spanish comprehension, to primarily Spanish-speaking, with some Creole comprehension skills (Jansen, 2013). Haitian Creole knowledge is often stigmatized outside of the batey as a marker of otherness, and even within the batey amongst some Dominican-born adults (Jansen, 2013). In bateys, it is common to refer to fluency in the Spanish language as speaking "*dominicano*" and, similarly, fluency in Haitian Creole as speaking "*haitiano*" (Zecca Castel, 2020). A language serves as a social marker to delineate who fits in the tightly defined categories of "Dominican" or "Haitian."

The turbulent construction–and accompanying racialization– of dominicanidad since the country's beginnings has been buttressed by fearful, and at times hateful, aversion to Haiti. The antagonistic relationship between the two sides of the island began from the start of Hispaniola's colonization, with the Spanish fearing the military prowess and more numerous populations of the French colonizers in Haiti (Wigginton & Middleton, 2019). In 1822, President Boyer of Haiti invaded the eastern side of the island one year after its independence from Spain and established a 22-year occupation of the territory (Sanders Gómez, 2018; Duany, 2009; Wigginton & Middleton, 2019). The Dominican Republic celebrates its Independence Day on February 27 to mark the end of the Haitian occupation, not the end of Spanish colonial rule (Wigginton & Middleton, 2019). Capitalizing on these historical tensions, the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo from 1930-1961 proliferated nationalistic, often racialized conceptions of Dominican identity (Lara, 2017). Although Trujillo himself was a light-skinned mulatto (his maternal grandmother was reportedly Haitian), he aggressively used state power to re-frame Dominican identity as essentially white and European and to marginalize or eliminate African-derived and Haitian-associated identities and influences (Paulino, 2016). His legacy contributes to widespread, enduring anti-Haitianism present in the Dominican Republic, which can surface as distancing from blackness in the Dominican social imaginary (Moya Pons, 2010; San Miguel, 2005). Even within bateys, negative judgments of perceived Haitianess commonly shape social structures (Jansen, 2021).

Transnational, yet integrated communities, bateys serve as a frontier space in the Dominican Republic's forging of national identity. The Dominican Republic's struggle to forge a national identity—and particularly to incorporate blackness into this conception—is well researched, and deeply rooted in Hispaniola's political history, the island shared today by the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Anti-Haitianism is often confounded and consistently intertwined with Anti-Black attitudes in this context, demonized in juxtaposition to the white, Hispanic, dominicanidad emblematic of the country (Lara, 2017; San Miguel, 2005; Moya Pons, 2010).

Law and Belonging

Contemporarily, these sentiments continue to be embodied politically in institutional discrimination against individuals of Haitian descent. A Constitutional Amendment in 2010 and a subsequent Supreme Court ruling in 2013 retroactively confiscates and actively denies Dominican citizenship to thousands of Dominican-born individuals of Haitian descent (Shipley, 2015). This ruling was rationalized by deeming individuals recruited by agencies of the Dominican state from Haiti in the 20th century to work in the sugar cane industry as "in-transit," in the Dominican Republic, negating any rights their children would have to remain in the Dominican Republic (Petrozziello, 2014). In October of 2024, Dominican President Luis Abinader announced a plan to deport 10,000 undocumented Haitians weekly, which in practice has also resulted in the detention of Dominican-born people of Haitian descent (Adames Alcántara & Coto, 2024). This announcement was made on the 87th anniversary of the Parsley Massacre, a brutal state-organized killing of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent under dictator Rafael Trujillo (Movimiento Reconocido, 2024).

Literature on Adult Literacy

The multilingual, transnational composition of bateys in the Dominican Republic and their lack of access to the state as a guarantor of rights are relevant to understanding literacy for adults and effective adult literacy program design in this context. Because language practices in bateys span Haitian Creole and Spanish, research on multilingual adult literacy is also essential for understanding literacy acquisition and use in similarly multilingual environments. Studies on translanguaging and multilingual literacy among adult migrants demonstrate that adult learners often draw on full linguistic repertoires to make meaning, participate in learning, and exercise agency (García-Barroso, 2023; Wedin, 2024). Such research highlights that literacy development for multilingual adults is shaped not only by skill acquisition but also by navigating linguistic hierarchies, language stigma, and sociopolitical marginalization—dynamics that closely mirror those in the batey context.

The following empirical studies suggest that adult literacy programs provide more intrinsic than instrumental benefits to learners. Murphy-Graham traces the psychological, social, and economic benefits for Honduran women who completed the El Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT) literacy and numeracy program over a decade in four Garifuna villages through semi-structured interviews and observations (Murphy-Graham, 2008). While students felt personally empowered in social life, her longitudinal qualitative study revealed that structural inequalities in Honduran society still limited their socio-economic progress (Murphy-Graham, 2008). Similarly, Williamson and Boughton's qualitative study using in-depth interviews shows that Aboriginal adult participants in a literacy program in Brewarrina, Australia, developed increased self-control and confidence, with negligible impact on promoting community action as hypothesized (Williamson & Boughton, 2021). They argue that empowerment leading to increased capabilities does not come through literacy alone but requires examining and acting upon structural oppression (Williamson & Boughton, 2021).

Other case studies highlight numerous contextually relevant adult literacy curricula created and implemented throughout the Global South. Muhr examines cooperation between Global South countries in literacy program development through the ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! audio-visual methodology, originating in Cuba in the early 2000s and adopted by countries across Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the USA (Muhr, 2015). Similarly, Laksono et al. propose a functional literacy program incorporating local wisdom in Indonesia's Jember District to further learning objectives (Laksono et al., 2018). A recent ethnographic analysis adds a longitudinal perspective, finding that former participants in a rural Ugandan adult literacy program selectively apply literacy in daily life when relevant to livelihoods or religious practice (Odele, 2018). Odele argues that adult literacy programs must be concretely rooted in students' social realities to maximize benefits after completion (Odele, 2018).

In addition to relevant curriculum and materials, research highlights the pivotal role of implementation in effective literacy programming. Abbot et al.'s study of a Rwandan NGO adult literacy program reports that learners wanted to become literate to read the Bible, gain confidence, manage finances, navigate mobile phones, interpret road signs, learn foreign languages, help children with homework, and avoid deception (Abbot et al., 2020). However, participants had low attendance because classes were held far from home, scheduled during work hours, and required travel that competed with caregiving and household responsibilities (Abbot et al., 2020). By contrast, Cortina and Sánchez analyze the implementation of the Programa de Alfabetización y Educación Básica de Adultos (PAEBA), sponsored by the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional (AECI), in Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic in the late 1990s (Cortina & Sánchez, 2007). PAEBA programs were designed around learners' needs: classes were held nearby, scheduled around work, and taught by trained educators (Cortina & Sánchez, 2007). Despite its success, illiteracy rates remain high, as host countries have not addressed underlying systemic issues such as poverty and limited access to better jobs (Cortina & Sánchez, 2007).

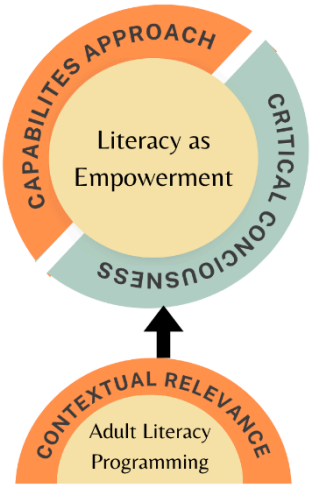
While Freirean pedagogy aims to address these structural inequalities, research suggests that its methodologies are difficult to operationalize. Bartlett, based on a twelve-month ethnographic study of Brazilian literacy NGOs (Bartlett, 2005), argues that what teachers understood as Freirean teaching was cultural relativism. Teachers placed too much emphasis on community knowledge and avoided challenging learners' ideas. They aimed to embody Freirean egalitarian dialogue as warm sociability, spending class time on small talk (Bartlett, 2005). Although this helped students overcome shame about illiteracy, surface-level conversation prevented deeper engagement with the social and political realities Freire intended literacy dialogue to address (Bartlett, 2005). Freire's pedagogy explicitly confronts structural inequalities by positioning learners as agents capable of analyzing and transforming oppressive conditions; however, as Bartlett's work shows, these aims can be undermined in practice when dialogue is simplified into affirmation rather than critical inquiry.

Research suggests the importance of contextually relevant curriculum, pedagogy, and implementation in empowering adult literacy programming (Abbot et al., 2020; Bartlett, 2005; Cortina & Sánchez, 2007; García-Barroso, 2023; Laksono et al., 2018; Muhr, 2015; Murphy-Graham, 2008; Odele, 2018; Wedin, 2024; Williamson & Boughton, 2021). Both theory-informed logic and empirical data indicate that such programming is more desired by students and more feasible for them to attend when classes are located within their communities, scheduled around work obligations, and accessible without significant travel or cost. However, as seen in the Rwandan and PAEBA examples, institutional limitations for sustainably delivering such programming remain a challenge. These theoretical underpinnings and empirical examples of adult literacy programming are relevant to understanding the experiences and attitudes toward literacy among adults in the batey.

Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework, illustrated below, helps illuminate how adult literacy may shape empowerment among women living in the batey context. Because this study examines how multilingual adult learners understand and experience literacy, it is important to situate these theories in relation to the structural constraints and limited capabilities that characterize batey life.

Figure 1. Conceptual Map



According to Sen and Nussbaum's Human Capabilities Approach (HCA), human flourishing entails enabling both positive and negative freedoms, allowing individuals to live fully dignified, meaningful lives (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 1993). HCA serves as an alternative to emphasize development as the expansion of what people is able to do and be (Maddox, 2008; Sen, 1999). Rather than relying on economic indicators, HCA centers development goals are based on human capabilities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2007). Nussbaum extends Sen's ideas into a more comprehensive theory of social justice, outlining ten central capabilities necessary for a life worthy of human dignity: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses,

imagination, and thought, emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2007).

HCA emphasizes literacy as a foundational capability that enables access to many others (Maddox, 2008). Nussbaum argues literacy is intrinsically valuable because it allows individuals "to use the sense, to imagine, think and reason… in a truly human way" (2006, p. 76). Sen highlights its instrumental value in expanding agency (Maddox, 2008). However, as shown in previous studies, structural inequalities often limit the empowering potential of literacy education, despite its connection to human capabilities. Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed offers an educational framework to address these limitations. Freire seeks to enhance students' positive freedoms, which can catalyze broader negative freedoms through revolutionary action (Freire, 2018/1970). This process occurs through conscientização (a Brazilian Portuguese term for the development of critical consciousness), which reorients learners' affiliations and harnesses their imagination, senses, and thought into critical reasoning. Freire sees literacy as deeply tied to this process and essential to critical thought.

In adult literacy, Freire views teaching not just as skill acquisition but as a problematization of worldview: "humanizing the world by transforming it" (1970, p. 206). He criticizes the "digestive" model of education that feeds learners predetermined worldviews (1970, p. 207). Instead, he advocates for materials that value adult learners' lived knowledge and enable them to create texts expressing and refining their understanding of reality. Materials should reflect learners' thematic universe while inciting critical engagement with their social context (Freire, 2018/1970). Aligned with Freire's emphasis on contextual relevance, Nussbaum also stresses that the empowering impact of literacy must be locally grounded. While literacy is a central capability, its meaning and utility are embedded in diverse contexts (Maddox, 2008; Nussbaum, 1993, 2006). Through HCA, literacy can be conceived as empowerment—both intrinsically and instrumentally contributing to human flourishing. Freirean critical consciousness complements this by offering a pedagogy that equips learners to question and resist the structural forces limiting their capabilities. Together, these frameworks conceptualize an empowering literacy education: one in which critical thinking allows learners to identify and challenge societal constraints on their capabilities. This combined framework is particularly relevant for understanding how women in the batey perceive literacy, and what forms of literacy education best serve their needs. In a context where access to many human capabilities is structurally constrained, the HCA and Freirean critical pedagogy together suggest that literacy can be especially empowering. The discussion section will examine how these theoretical perspectives intersect with the lived experiences and views of women in the batey.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative methodology, including interviews and observations, to develop a case study in one batey in the Dominican Republic. This site was chosen

due to my ongoing work and residency in the community, as well as strong ties to both residents and a local organization.

A qualitative approach is appropriate, as it seeks to understand the nature and processes of human experience, values, and decision-making (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). While quantitative data—such as the population or illiteracy rate of the batey—would be useful, such data is unavailable and beyond the means of the researcher to collect. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary tool for data collection, allowing for personal connection and warmth. Based on the pilot study, this tool is culturally appropriate: informal, in-depth conversations are common. Illiteracy can be a sensitive topic, and individuals may be reluctant to self-identify (Abbot et al., 2020; Bartlett, 2005). These conversational interviews were designed to create a welcoming space for participants to discuss literacy. Semi-structured interviews also provided enough structure to guide discussion toward relevant themes while allowing participants to shape the conversation. Participants could speak in Spanish, Haitian Creole, or both. When feasible, interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed; otherwise, a memo was written immediately after.

Participants

A non-random snowball sample of 23 adults was drawn from the batey's population. The pilot phase consisted of 15 interviews and informed the development of a participatory, adult literacy program. The program is a community-led initiative that meets twice weekly for 90-minute sessions in the local church. Instruction occurs primarily in Haitian Creole, with supplementary Spanish vocabulary practice, reflecting participants' linguistic needs. The volunteer facilitator—who also served as my community assistant during interviews—is a young adult from the batey fluent in both languages. The curriculum draws on functional literacy principles, incorporating key word reading, practical vocabulary, and syllable-based writing practice. Haitian Creole is the first language of all eight women. All but one demonstrate at least basic Spanish speaking and comprehension skills, though confidence in Spanish varies and does not always match their communicative competence. All participants migrated from Haiti to the Dominican Republic between 1980 and 2000 and are currently between 40 and 63 years old. All eight identified as Christians; seven attend a Creole-speaking church in the batey at least weekly, and three attend three times a week. A table of participant characteristics follows.

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Table 1.
Participants' Background

Church attendance	Age	Year of Arrival in the Dominican Republic	Spanish Proficiency (conversation)*	Spanish Proficiency (expressed confidence)**
Yes	52	1974	Moderate	Moderate
Yes	40	1990s	Low	Low
Yes	60	1980s	Moderate	Low
Yes	62	1980s	High	Low
No	43	1997	High	High
Yes	54	1980s	High	Low
Yes	47	2001	High	High
Yes	56	1980s	None	None

Note. Church attendance threshold is defined as one or more times per week. * Indicates proficiency assessed based on interactions; ** indicates proficiency assessed based on participants' expressed confidence during interviews.

Analysis is also informed by conversations with three of the interviewed men—two husbands of women enrolled in the literacy program and one pastor of the Haitian Creole-speaking church. These conversations, conducted informally during both data-collection phases, offered additional insight into community expectations, gender roles, and attitudes toward literacy. In addition, I reference conversations with two young adults from the batey, both children of women in the literacy class, to contextualize intergenerational perspectives on literacy and schooling. Follow-up data collection included eight interviews conducted seven months later during the program's first two weeks. This phase included individual and two group interviews. While the same guide was used, discussions during group interviews often centered around literacy program homework. Snowball sampling was chosen for feasibility and to leverage pre-established rapport. By the follow-up phase, interest in the study had grown, increasing opportunities for participation.

Although the sample was not limited by gender, all individuals who identified themselves as uncomfortable or unable to read in any language were women. This pattern reflects well-documented gender disparities in literacy in the Caribbean and across the Global South (e.g., UNESCO, 2022; Stromquist, 2015). This study focuses on conversations with the eight women I interviewed in both phases, as multiple engagements allowed for a more complete understanding of their perspectives. Six of these eight women have consistently attended the literacy program from its launch until the time of the second interview (approximately nine months later).

Analysis of emic themes—that is, themes grounded in participants' own meanings, cultural understandings, and lived experience (Yanto & Pandin, 2023)—was informed by conversations with several of the interviewed men in the following analysis, two of whom are the husbands of women in the adult literacy program, and one of whom is a pastor at a Haitian-Creole speaking church. To complement

perspectives on community actor involvement, I also reference conversations with young adults from the batey, two of whom are children of women enrolled in the literacy class.

Positionality

My engagement with the batey community of the study is multifaceted and shapes the nature of this research as much as it shapes my identity. I hold that positionality is an iterative process, and thus describing it in a fixed, single paragraph conveys a dim reflection of reality at best. Here, I will explain the ties that shape and continually reshape me and my work.

I have spent time in this batey about twice a year for the last ten years, teaching full-time at an elementary school in the community for two of those ten years. As a Western-educated white American, my origins position me as a clear outsider in the batey. This dynamic is continually complexified as my relationships in the batey shape me. Through such connections, I have solidified my Spanish and Haitian Creole fluency, made lifelong friends, and married a Haitian-Dominican. These tensions of my identity provide access points to potential participants, facilitate the discussion of potentially controversial topics, and generally encourage a relative openness in engaging with the research at hand.

Ethical Considerations

The risks associated with participating in this study are similar to those encountered in conversations in daily life, and there are no direct benefits to participating in the study. When the literacy program began, participants from the pilot were given priority in registration.

Participants' names were not recorded with the data to ensure their privacy, and pseudonyms are used in this paper. While there is evidence that some participants prefer to be identified by name when participating in qualitative studies (Moosa, 2013), I decided to use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the batey. A young adult resident of the batey with a positive reputation in the community accompanied me to most interviews. His presence in interviews and fluency in Haitian Creole and Spanish allowed me to avoid potential misinterpretations in interviews. He signed a confidentiality agreement to ensure the privacy of interview data, and eventually became the volunteer teacher for the adult literacy program resulting from this study.

Data Analysis

I used interim analysis, as data was collected over two trips to the batey over 9 months. Interim analysis allowed for themes present in the initial interviews to guide subsequent data collection, and thus foster more comprehensive findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). Additionally, I used inductive methods to code the interview transcripts and memos with emic codes arising from the data. This method was chosen as it furthers the study's purpose to "prioritize and honor the participant's voice" by allowing their own words to categorize analysis (Saldaña, 2013, p.91). The initial emic code list included: Haitian Dominican Identity, Authority, Code-switching, Attitudes Towards Reading, Reasons for Not Reading, Biblical

Knowledge, and Family. I analyzed the data under codes via Microsoft Excel software in their original languages. These codes were further refined and reorganized to create the resulting list of Desires for Literacy, Literacy as a Continuum of Skills, Reading and Church, and Reading and Powers.

Limitations

This study is limited in that generalizing the findings to the entire community in this batey. Thus, the results of the study can provide inferences regarding the dispositions of the entire community regarding the object of the research questions, but cannot be considered systematically representative of the batey.

Findings

The following findings highlight how learners frame literacy as tied to becoming a knowing person, as well as to identity, community participation, and collaboration. This perspective was evident from the very first interactions at the program. At the orientation meeting for the adult literacy program, Marie walked in with a beaming smile and energetic step. She buzzed from chair to chair, asking others if they knew how to read. She eagerly raised her hand and stood up to answer nearly every question posed by the facilitator.

Marie's enthusiasm was not unusual: all interviewees expressed a strong desire to learn to read. Even two interviewees who were literate in Spanish—and husbands to two of the women learners—explained that they wanted to "learn to read more," signaling their broader interest in adult education and their engagement with literacy as a pathway to personal growth and community participation.

Learners also took the program very seriously. Some informed facilitators of anticipated absences months in advance due to medical procedures or family weddings, even without being asked. One learner requested homework to complete between the orientation and the first class.

When describing the literacy they wished to acquire, participants often framed it as the ability to "know something." In contrast, they described illiteracy in Haitian Creole as *anyen nan tet mwen*— "nothing in my head." One participant, Carmela, shared in Haitian Creole, "I have nothing in my head, I don't read." At the same time, participants eloquently explained deep insights on religion, community affairs, and socio-political realities in the Dominican Republic, clearly recognizing that they did have "something in their heads" despite not being literate. What, then, does it mean for them to "know something"? The following sections explore the centrality of the "knowing person" concept: literacy is not merely skill acquisition but a pathway to fuller understanding and social engagement.

Literacy Means Becoming a Knowing Person

Learners valued literacy primarily as a pathway to becoming knowledgeable, which outweighed their affinities for either of the languages prevalent in the batey (Haitian Creole or Spanish). This prioritization suspends the negotiation of belonging in the

Haitian vs. Dominican binary in identity negotiations in pursuit of a more potent mechanism of agency-expressing in becoming literate. In seeking to express the fullness of their personhood in society, literacy learners chose to defy the imposition of nationality categories as a means to engage in society and pursue reading as the most efficient tactic to contribute to their meaning-making activities.

The Haitian Creole–Spanish binary as a tool for identity sorting proves overly simplistic to capture how participants view their linguistic resources. Learners expressed nuanced understandings of prestige across their languages, perceiving literacy in any language as a means of becoming a knowing person. Still, participants valued their linguistic repertoires differently. Carmela explained that she lived for years in the Dominican Republic without needing Spanish:

> They brought me [here] to the middle of a bunch of Haitians.

Although she doubted she would ever "speak Dominican," she now uses Spanish often and switches fluidly between Haitian Creole and Spanish in interviews. Four other participants described similar experiences: one reported never using or understanding Spanish, while two understood it orally but relied on Spanish-influenced Haitian Creole words (e.g., *cebolla* → *ceboy*) when speaking with Spanish-dominant speakers. Five of the eight women preferred to learn to write in Haitian Creole, although all expressed at least some desire to learn to read in both languages. Two participants who were fluent in Spanish rejected Haitian Creole literacy entirely, saying they "don't like" the language. One participant explained:

> Because, just figure, I left Haiti. I am not in Haiti.

Others preferred Haitian Creole because it felt like "theirs." This diversity in language preference complicates the relationship between fluency, nationality, and identity. Despite these differences, participants agreed that becoming a knowing person required learning to read in some language. Several who preferred Spanish literacy still enrolled in Haitian Creole classes, likely because no accessible Spanish-language programs existed.

Some learners, like Nuna and Carmen, had attempted Dominican state-run literacy programs in Spanish but found them ineffective or inaccessible. Nuna reported that her assigned teacher stopped coming after two sessions, but asked her to continue signing his attendance sheets. Carmen dropped out of an overcrowded class that involved only copying sentences from a blackboard. Unlike most batey residents, both had the necessary identity documents to enroll. Many others lacked documentation and thus had no access to such programs. Under these constraints, learners prioritized literacy itself over language preference, enrolling in Haitian Creole programs as the available pathway to becoming a knowing person. The desire to become a knowing person suspends the implications of language prestige in pursuit of literacy skills. Literacy in any language is the gateway to becoming a knowing person.

Literacy as a Continuum of Knowing

Participants viewed literacy as existing along a continuum of cross-linguistic skills that conferred increasing prestige. While literacy in any language made one a knowing person, speaking Spanish was often seen as completing knowing. Farah, who did not understand or speak Spanish, connected Haitian Creole literacy to her aspiration to learn Spanish:

> I would love to continue [learning to read in Haitian Creole], and I would love to know Spanish. Speak Spanish. If you say "i," you have to say it completely.

For Farah, Spanish fluency represented a marker of becoming a fully knowing person. Learners often connected Haitian Creole and Spanish, treating them as complementary parts of one system of knowing.

During the first several sessions of the Haitian Creole adult literacy program, learners focused on learning three new letters (p, t, a), which were introduced with the key word patat, meaning sweet potato. Once they had decoded the word, reading it aloud, one learner interjected that the word is just like batata (the Spanish equivalent for patat). Throughout other lessons, learners drew additional connections to Spanish without labeling them as such, highlighting their understanding of a unified system of Haitian Creole and Spanish linguistic resources. While literacy in either language is the first step to becoming a "knowing person," facility of oral Spanish is also perceived as a component of this identity. Becoming a knowing person includes at least spoken competency in Spanish.

When asked in what language she wanted to learn how to read, one participant, Masiela, responded that she wanted to learn to read in English. Masiela does not speak English, and the batey hosts an extremely limited arena to use and interact with the English language. Yet, English holds a high level of linguistic prestige due to its role in granting footing in the modern globalized economy. Thus, literacy is tied to becoming a knowing person, and while literacy in any language assigns this status, speaking and reading in more prestigious languages complete "knowing." Mastery of more prestigious languages reinforces the status of becoming a knowing person.

Literacy as a Set of Skills to Engage in Community

For many participants, becoming a knowing person was deeply intertwined with Christianity. Literacy and biblical knowledge were often described as part of the same continuum. Marie, for instance, recalled being tutored in reading Psalms. She proudly recited Psalm 1 from memory while following along with her finger, then reflected:

> In the Bible, you can send me to whatever verses, I will find every place for you. But to read it…I don't have anything in my head. I know all of the verses, I will go find them all…but to stand and read it, I…I can't understand.

Here, memorization of scripture was equated with reading, but Marie still viewed herself as not fully a knowing person because she could not independently read the text. Helene similarly explained:

> A word, you know it's a path, right? It's a path, you have to read, read, read, and then follow it. You don't have to wait for the director to take the Bible for you…When you know how to read you start to read, read, read: this is good, this is bad.

For Helene, literacy granted moral agency, freeing her from dependence on church authorities and allowing her to become a knowing person through her own interpretations. In this way, reading is perceived as a means for increased agency for learners, in which they can rely on their own judgments regarding moral interpretations and meaning-making in their lives.

Becoming a knowing person through literacy allows learners to become more engaged in their community, as understanding during church events allows learners to negotiate their identities in other-facing activities (e.g., Bible studies). While learners cite Christianity as the arena for using literacy, at the same time, participants express frustration at how literacy is used as a filtering mechanism for engagement in church activities. Masiela explained:

> Everybody who knows, they come with their notebooks, and they see what is written on the board and they write it. But you, if you don't know? You will never be able to know...They never do a separate study with you, with people who don't know.

Literacy thus conferred status and access in the church, while illiteracy resulted in exclusion. Some learners requested church leaders to organize literacy support groups, but these efforts rarely materialized. Despite these frustrations, participants overwhelmingly envisioned their literacy use within religious contexts, particularly Bible study. For them, becoming a knowing person was inseparable from their Christian faith.

Literacy as a Collaborative Path to Becoming a Knowing Person

Learners also understood literacy as inherently collaborative, requiring help from others in order to become a knowing person. Many linked their inability to learn as children to a lack of support. Several women described experiences as restavek—child servants in other households—where they were denied schooling and sometimes food. Helene recalled trying to copy lessons from neighboring children in rare free moments.

As adults, participants continued to associate literacy with access to help, whether from teachers, institutions, or family. Nairobi, a 48-year-old participant, explained that she has always wanted to learn to read, and as a mother of young children, heard of a class at a local church. She never attended because she couldn't find "help" with her family responsibilities. Others cited similar experiences, with a lack of help in young adulthood, with responsibilities such as caretaking, church events, or farming activities preventing them from accepting help to acquire literacy via a teacher.

Institutional help was scarce. Dominican state literacy programs excluded many batey residents for lack of documentation, while Haitian government and church institutions offered few resources outside Haiti. While Haitian government agencies have developed and distributed adult literacy materials and programming, the Haitian state does not extend the fullness of its resources to Haitians in the Dominican Republic. Haiti's state-run Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen has developed a free adult literacy curriculum in Haitian Creole, accessible free of charge to communities in Haiti. The Haitian Consulate near the research site in the Dominican Republic does not provide access to this book series. The Haitian-Creole-speaking churches of these learners similarly fail to provide literacy resources for women in the batey.

Yet learners sometimes received crucial support from family: Helene's ten-year-old son taught her to write her name, and Farah's son became the volunteer teacher for the literacy program piloted in this study. As they discuss their desires to learn to read in the future, the learner participants also cite help from God as an integral part of realizing their hopes. As one participant says:

> But, if I find help now, with God before me, I might be able to know.

For these learners, collaboration—whether from family, teachers, community, or God—was the hinge upon which literacy, and thus becoming a knowing person, depended.

Discussion

Capabilities are "the freedoms [people] enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value," and as seen in the understandings of literacy of the women in this study (Sen 1992, p. 81). Batey communities have limited access to both economic resources and social resources of the broader national society, hindering batey residents' exercise of these freedoms. The women from this study use the concept of becoming a knowing person to subvert these limitations and conceive one path to forging a livelihood according to their values through acquiring literacy. In this paradigm, the ability to read in the batey is conceived as a resource to exert agency to make meaningful choices, the freedom to forge a future meaningful to them.

One aspect of a future meaningful to the women of this study is becoming a knowing person. According to the participants, becoming a knowing person is first and foremost linguistic in nature: one must learn how to read. As learners navigate the path to literacy, they must prioritize which language to become literate in and thus define their positionality in relation to their languages. Rather than capitulate to stigmatization of Haitian Creole and the polar opposite categorizations of Dominican and Haitian identities, some women in this study use a multilingual conception of literacy to construct the idea of a knowing person. For them, literacy blurs the boundaries of the Haitian and Dominican binary. While the social and legal consequences of this binary disempower many batey residents, participants' conceptions of literacy seek to complexify this tension by "allowing [them] to manage and present their sense of self in complex and hyphenated ways, enabling

them to blur categories of 'insider' and 'outsider'" (Chopra et al, 2023, p.6; Alba, 2005).

The women of this study recognize the ability to think critically about social hierarchies and authority structures as a goal of literacy, particularly aiming to discern morality from biblical text as opposed to pastoral sermons. They also recognize the lack of opportunity–or "help"–which would enable them to pursue literacy as at least in part due to frustrating socio-systemic inequalities. In this way, these learners' "senses, imagination and thought" have resulted in critical judgments about the nature of their social worlds (Freire, 2018/1970). Freire (2018/1970) posits that literacy is the fundamental precursor to such critical reasoning, yet these women seem to have employed tools other than literacy to harness their critical thinking skills. However, they acknowledge their desire to critically reason in more contexts and recognize literacy as necessary to such a goal.

For an adult literacy intervention to be effective in this community, it must be adapted to three central elements of the thematic universe of the batey: multilingualism, the church, and community collaboration. The linguistic resources of adults in this batey in Haitian Creole and Spanish and their connotations play a part in constructing the goal of literacy, becoming a knowing person. The influence of the Christian church and the desire of participants to engage in its activities reflect the nature of some of the long-term uses of their literacy: critical reasoning regarding morality and establishing themselves as active members in the community. The understanding of acquiring literacy as a necessarily collaborative task affects the conception of pedagogy, class attendance, and teacher-student relationship dynamics, which must be considered in program design.

Relevance and Further Research

The findings from this study contribute to the academic literature on bateys in the Dominican Republic, which is limited in its exploration of the educational opportunities of women. By focusing specifically on women's literacy experiences, this study fills a critical gap in the literature, providing insight into how adult literacy programs can be designed to address both gender and structural inequities. In terms of programming, this study informs the development of contextually relevant adult literacy programming for bateys in the Dominican Republic, and lays a framework for understanding the perceived roles of literacy towards forging a meaningful future in other similarly marginalized communities. Specifically, this study also highlights the potential for literacy to act as a tool for empowerment, particularly for adults in conditions of extensive marginalization and insecurity, including socio-economic, legal, and systemic barriers to forging livelihoods. These findings suggest increased attention to issues of adult literacy is valuable for the field of Education in Emergencies (EiE), particularly for adults in settings of protracted crisis.

Additionally, this study contributes to the literature regarding understanding the role of literacy for adults from a learner-based perspective. Literacy is not only a skill, but in the case of the women in the batey of this study, it is an identity: a literate person is

a knowing person. While the participants could not read at the time of the interview, they shared critical conclusions regarding the nature of the authority structures of their churches, communities, and political environment. If literacy is conceived as an identity, to which "knowing" and critical thinking is connected, it can become an entangling barrier that underestimates and devalues the senses, imagination, and thought of the human spirit. While literacy enhances and refines such faculties, literacy as an identity could overemphasize literacy's potential to empower. Further research is needed regarding the implications of literacy as an identity in understanding agency, development, and adult literacy programming development, in order to understand the dangers and potential opportunities of this conception.

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