

# Literacy

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Changing Lives Through Adult Literacy Tutoring

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# Introduction



This book was created to tell the story of the California State Library's efforts to help low literacy adults acquire literacy skills for themselves and their children and join the community of literate citizens. This is a report about a multi-year research project that studied families in the Adult Literacy Services component of the California Library Literacy Services who were also participating in the Families for Literacy component of that service. This is not a program evaluation, but rather a research study of adult change due to participation in the literacy program. This study explored the ways the family literacy component, designed specifically to change reading and writing levels for low-literate adults, also changed the lives of the learners and tutors, helped the learners help their children develop literacy skills, and created new users to support the library as a center of the community, accessible to diverse life-long learners.

During this research study, 132 learners and 127 tutors were interviewed once a year for three consecutive years in an attempt to

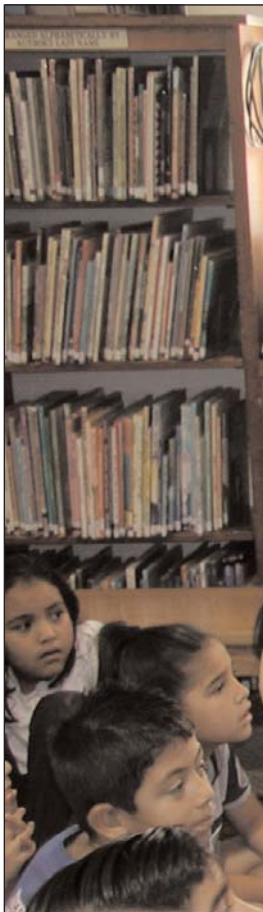
understand their experiences. All libraries that had an FFL component, 63 at the time of the first interviews, were included in the study and ten percent of their learners and their tutors were chosen to be in the study. The interviews were conducted by telephone in order to provide a state-wide study. All telephone calls were tape-recorded and transcribed so that the information could be analyzed. These interviews were structured, yet allowed for extensive open-ended answers. Interviewers were carefully trained to listen critically to their interviewees and probe gently for more information, if appropriate. The interviews proved to be even more interesting than anticipated. The learners and tutors were generous with their time and seemed happy to talk about themselves and their experiences. Many of the interviews lasted longer than an hour, which was the typical length.

All of the questions asked in the interview were designed to provide data about the key themes of the study. We asked about the learners' children; we asked about the tutoring sessions; we asked about the social networks of both learners and tutors; we asked about literacy practices, jobs, and hopes for the future. In this report, analyses of the learners and tutors will be shared as well as information about other very important topics in adult literacy education such as techniques used to help learners practice reading and writing, retention in the program and positive changes for the learners' children.

Throughout the study we, as researchers, were pulled by opposing forces. We went back and forth between the individual stories told by each person and the big picture of adult literacy education, searching for patterns in the data. On the one hand we wanted to adequately represent the individuals we interviewed. All of them, learners and tutors, shared their unique personal stories, hopes and ideas with us. We were profoundly touched by their experiences and we hope to honor them. We would like to present our participants as they presented themselves. On the other hand, as scientists, we understand that conclusions cannot be based only on anecdotes and stories. The patterns in data found by analyzing the larger group can provide valuable insight into how adult literacy learning changes people. We have tried to express the patterns in systematic ways, to show how "most people" respond.

This report will attempt to introduce you to the individuals as well as show you the patterns in the data. We will begin each section by telling you a story about one of our interviewees. To a large part these are based on the story of one individual, but some facts and their names are changed to protect their confidentiality. Then we will give you some numerical data describing the entire group of learners and/or tutors.

Adults can and do change; that is one big lesson our findings reveal. Literacy is the sort of activity that is engrossing, motivating and meaningful. Developing literacy skills, even as adults, opens many doors to change and increases feelings of self-worth. We hope to add to a growing body of literature about adult education, notable among these reports being those by Sticht (2005), Drago-Severson (2004), Askov, Johnston, Petty and Young (2003), Strawn (2003), Reder and Strawn (2001), Comings, Reder and Sum (2001), and Kegan, Broderick, Drago-Severson, Helsing, Popp & Portnow (2001). Our study shows what a one-on-one





volunteer tutoring program can do. We also want to add to information about what literacy changes look like over time since this was a longitudinal study.

Sincere thanks go to our study participants, the California State Library, and especially the local and state library literacy staff who so willingly gave of their time to make this study possible. The thoughts and findings shared in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of the California State Library or San Diego State University. This study was funded, in part, by a federal Library Services and Technology grant administered in California by the California State Librarian. It was also supported by San Diego State University.

