

# Learners



Laura was 31 years old when she joined the Families for Literacy program at the library near her home. She had been in it for three years when we first interviewed her and she was attending both reading and parenting classes on a weekly basis. She lived with her two young daughters and her husband and was working part-time as a census taker. This was a job that both she and her tutor were quite proud of. Occasionally she also babysat but because her youngest daughter was too young for preschool she didn't feel that she could have a full-time job.

When she immigrated from Mexico at the age of 26 she spoke no English. She worked as a live-in in people's homes, very long hours for very little money. She says the program taught her that, *"you can change your life, you can change the, maybe not the world, but your own world."* That is exactly what Laura was trying to do. She joined the program because she wanted *"to improve my life, my children's life, my family life. . . to get a better education and help my daughters with their school."*

In every way Laura is intensely involved in the life of her family, her daughters and husband. She mentioned several times how much her husband has supported her efforts in the program. At the end of each

interview we ask "Is there anything I should have asked you and didn't?" Each time she responded by talking about how wonderful her family was. For her, life was good because her family was living happily and harmoniously.

Although Laura's goal is to have a job where people speak English, she speaks Spanish to most of the people she interacts with. In spite of this she makes an effort to speak only English to her daughters and husband. She is determined that her children will not face the language barrier she faces. We asked her to tell us about her social network. Her daughters and husband were the only people she listed as being so important that *"she could not imagine life without them."* People whom she listed as also being important to her were her parents and siblings. Her parents and five of her seven siblings still live in Mexico and she has very limited contact with them. Beyond that, she included only two friends, both Spanish speaking, in her social network.

Even in her first interview, it was obvious that she had changed as a result of being in the program. She described herself as having more self-esteem and more able to reach her goals. Her goals, like many of the learners, were long-term goals without a complete understanding of the intermediate steps necessary to reach them. Laura wanted to be a teacher. She loved working with children and was highly motivated to read books about child psychology. She believed that if she started teaching kindergarten that she could progress to older children as she got more experience.

None of her tutors, she had four in the six year period we know



The "average" learner was very much like Laura. They were women, only 18 of the 132 were men, whose average age was 32. They averaged 2.6 children, mostly under the age of 10. Only 28% of them were native speakers of English. Most (65%) were Hispanic and 58.5% spoke Spanish as their first language. We offered the Spanish speakers the option of being interviewed in Spanish and over half of them chose that option. The 21 people who were native speakers of Russian, Chinese, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean, Armenian, Punjabi, Portuguese, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Hmong were all interviewed in English.

#### WHAT LANGUAGES DID THE LEARNERS SPEAK?

Primary language	Language of interview	
English	English	37
Spanish	English	33
Spanish	Spanish	44
Other languages	English	21

about, discouraged her from her ultimate goal. Instead they provided her with opportunities to learn more about children, suggesting books to read, encouraging her to volunteer in her daughter's school and helping her find other avenues to pursue her interest. During the second interview she told us that she was taking computer classes, also at the library.

By the third interview there were dramatic changes in her life. She continued to maintain contact with her tutor, but due to the tutor's illness Laura rarely saw her. She also continued to take her children to the library to use the computers and check out books, and for "music and culture." She had gone to the local community college to take child development classes and worked briefly in day care. Now she was working full-time in an electronics factory at night. That allowed her to spend time with her daughters, help with homework and continue going to school. She felt that this was a very good job indeed. The extra income allowed the family to move into a bigger and nicer house.

Laura describes herself as a *"person who is always working to reach my goals."* Clearly she works very hard at them. We were interested in what got her started on this path and what kept her working so hard. She told us that about seeing a woman who didn't know the words to order an ice cream cone for her son. As a result the little boy cried because he got a flavor he didn't like. She was determined not to be like that woman. Being in the program taught her that *"you can do everything that you really want to."*

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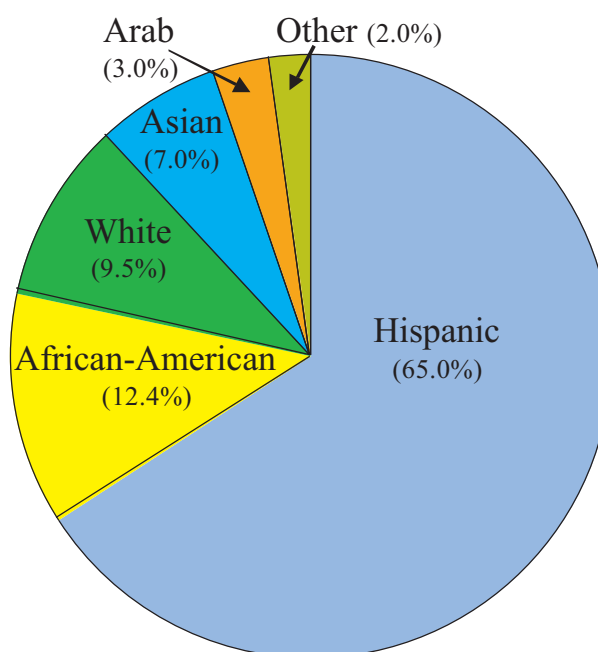
This mimics the situation throughout California: Spanish speakers most often have the option of communicating in either English or Spanish but native speakers of other languages do not have that luxury.

The learners we spoke with had learned about library literacy programs in many ways. Once at the library, they were encouraged to join the Families for Literacy Program because they were parents of preschoolers. Perhaps it is not surprising then that the motivation to join, for most of them, was to help their children. Like Laura, they were very family oriented and had hopes for improving their family. A learner said, *"I would love for my children to be somebody in this world. I want to show them it can be done."*

At the same time, they recognized the importance of English literacy to economic success in this country. One learner told us, *"I can say that I wanted to become a nurse. That was a dream I had since I was a little girl. And because I could read I fulfilled my dream."* We found that the learners were committed to changing their lives, for themselves and for their children. Frequently there was an economic basis for the motivation. Good jobs required those skills.

**Figure 1**

Learners Demographic  
Background



When we interviewed our participants, we asked them to describe themselves, their children and their literacy experiences in deep and personal detail. Their comments were profound, fascinating and revealed important connections between their literacy experiences and their self-concepts. One learner was clearly aware of the difficulty of summing up such an important aspect of the self. As she said "*that is a hard question. You have to be on the outside looking in.*"

## IDENTITY

There are many ways to find out how people view themselves. The major advantage to using questionnaires is that everyone picks from the same options which makes it easy to make comparisons. The disadvantage is that participants don't get to speak for themselves and the things that they think are most important can be over looked. We asked the learners to describe themselves, with the idea that they would pick characteristics most salient to them. Each learner made several statements and the interviewers encouraged them to talk about themselves.

There were many kinds of responses, but some kinds of statements we heard often. People described themselves as hardworking and persistent (19.72%), as being a "*people person*" or as "*friendly*" (17.61%), as "*outgoing*" (14.08%), and as being "*a good person*" (13.38%). They also described themselves as "*family-centered*" (9.86%), as being a "*student*" (9.15%) and as being helpful (7.08%).

We found this consistency striking because these were not people who were asked if they were hardworking but rather people who chose that as their defining characteristic.

Because there were so many different kinds of responses, we used the work of Mansfield and McAdams (1996) to find a way to look at the data.



These personality theorists maintain that identity is composed of a narrative story we tell about ourselves and to ourselves, as well, to help guide our behaviors and explain our actions. We divided the statements our participants made into three kinds: trait descriptions (e.g. "I am nice person."), agency statements (e.g. "I work hard for my goals.") and relationship statements (e.g. "My family is important to me."). We wondered if the self-descriptions would reflect literacy levels or if being tutored would impact the learners' senses of self. We found this might be true. We compared the learners' self-descriptions with those of the tutors' and found some interesting differences. This suggested that something different between the two groups made them describe themselves differently.

The learners and tutors used about the same number of overall descriptive statements in describing themselves ( $M = 4.94$  and  $M = 5.49$ , respectively) but said different kinds of things. The tutors had over twice as many descriptive statements of themselves, averaging 3.65 to the learners' 1.36. In addition they elaborated on those descriptions more than learners. Learners and tutors averaged about the same number of relationship statements (1.26 and 1.19, respectively) and mentioned "helping" most frequently.

Overall the learners averaged more agency statements than the tutors (2.33 and .71, respectively). In fact most of the learners' statements were mastery statements. Learners talked about being hard working and how they had accomplished things. There were also a large number of empowerment statements. Often their self-descriptions revealed a strong desire to master the environment. One said *"I am timid but when it comes to my children, I overcome my personality. If I need to make a question, I make one."* One woman expressed her experience that attending literacy tutoring had made her more confident and focused. She said she realized she was an intelligent woman, but *"I just have not been able to discover that until now - or use it to my advantage because I have a family I need to attend to. I think that if I would have studied when I was younger I would have made something out of my self better than I have now. I think learning comes easy for me now. Before there was no possibility of getting an education because of money and family."*

One striking change that we found over the three year period is that the learners' self descriptions became more descriptive. Their responses became more like those of the tutors. They made more trait statements and they elaborated upon them more. In some ways we are sure that their identities were indeed changing. When we asked how they had changed they talked about gains in confidence and self-esteem. But it also appears that they have acquired new language skills that allow them to describe themselves in ways similar to those the tutors would use.

The personal change that most learners described as being most important for themselves was improved self images. They attributed this to improving their literacy skills. One woman said, *"I am learning a lot. Now when I look at TV I can read the names of the movies. I feel better about myself."*

Another learner contrasted her newfound sense of self with how she previously felt, *"It takes a lot to discourage me. You know you could have*



*crushed me with a word but not anymore."* Some learners revealed how their new self-confidence allowed them to enter into new situations. *"I am not as shy as I used to be. I have more confidence in myself. I speak out more when before I would not say too much, now I feel more strong about myself and I have a better outlook on life."*

Overall, the participants' comments demonstrated their journey on the path to better skills and a better life. One person commented, *"Well, I would say I am a lot stronger when it comes down to accomplishing my goals."* Part of the descriptions our participants gave concerned their relationship with others, especially with their children and to some extent, with their tutors. In these comments we can see how much the self concept is anchored in our roles and responsibilities for others. One learner put it this way, *"I am always trying to do better for myself and my family."* In fact, some of the learners were very explicit on their hopes for their children, *"I would love for my children to get a profession. I want to show my children that it can be done. Like with driving, they see that I am trying and I tell them, Just watch - it can be done."*

## SOCIAL NETWORK

Although the learners discussed their children with us, we did not know how connected they were within their communities and in the broader social contexts. We were interested in how the learners were socially situated in their worlds. Sometimes low literacy is associated with social isolation. We wanted to know whether that was true. Antonucci (1986) suggested that one way of looking at a person's social relationships was to think in terms of how close each person is. She saw them as concentric circles around each of us with those who are closest in an inner circle and others in outer circles. We asked learners to put the people "they could not imagine life without" in the inner circle, "those who are important but not quite as close" in the middle circle, and "everyone else in your social network" in the outer circle.

For the 112 participants who described their circles the first year, the average size was 10.07 persons. The inner circle was largest, averaging 5.02, followed by the middle, averaging 4.02, and the outer, averaging 2.55. This was striking for a number of reasons. Previous studies have shown that for women in this age group the average size is about 26 with the outer circles being larger than the inner one (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1997). Moreover it was often the case that the only people in the learners' inner circles were family. They included their children and sometimes a spouse and often extended family who lived hundreds of miles away and with whom they had little contact. Often the only people who lived close by were their children, most of whom were very young. In terms of social support this is a less than optimal situation, because we typically rely on those people in the inner circle for emotional support and advice. For favors and help doing things we often rely on friends and neighbors, those in the outer circles. Such small circles thus run the risk of providing inadequate support.

Social circles in the second and third years were bigger. Just over two-thirds of them (68.00%) had larger social networks the second year. The

**HOW DO SOCIAL NETWORKS  
CHANGE BETWEEN THE FIRST AND SECOND YEAR?**

Primary Language	English	Spanish	Other	Spanish	Overall Average
<b>Interview Language</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	
Years in area	16.47	10.20	6.10	5.25	9.88
Network Year 1	10.06	10.56	7.79	10.80	10.07
Network Year 2	14.19	17.15	33.54	26.55	21.73

average size of the network was 21.7 persons, with about 7.48 in the inner circle, 9.86 in the middle circle, and 9.46 in the outer circle. The third year was similar. Where did these new people come from? The largest changes were among those subgroups who had lived in their areas the shortest lengths of time. Some of that was probably the normal "settling in" process. However this can't account for most of the change because even the most recent arrivals have been living in the same area for an average of over five years. (See Table above.)

It looks like most of the social network additions were people the learner met as she began to interact more outside her home. *"I am more out to venture out to go meet new people around the neighborhood and at functions. Where I was not before, I was kind of shy and reclusive because I did not know how to read and explain myself and stuff like that."* Often the new members of the social network were neighbors who had not been approached before. Sometimes they were new friends from the library, but most often they were people who had previously seemed inaccessible. The gains in confidence and self-esteem have allowed the learners to interact more widely in their communities. They are making friends in the neighborhood and at their children's school. In Laura's case, her new job provided her with a chance to make new friends and her outer circle became larger as a result.

Over the three year period we were able to document changes in how they described themselves, their social networks, how their goals changed and sometimes how their families changed. However there was one pervasive change that many of the learners and tutors commented about. The personal change that most learners described as being most important for themselves was improved self esteem and confidence. One woman said she used her changes to help motivate her daughter *"I focused my mind and I am not going to let anything hold me down. I want to reach my goal. I want to prove to my daughter that I can do this."* Another learner stated unequivocally, *"when I want something I work hard to make it happen."* This was amplified by another woman who said *"I am always trying to learn something else and get better and I am a person who is always working to reach my goals."*

## PERSONAL CHANGE

*"When I want something I work hard to make it happen."*

In fact, a learner wanted us to understand her strong motivation for self-improvement when she said *"I am a very hard worker that is true. I want to do it even if it is the hard way, not the easy way. Even if it is hard, if I put my mind to it, I prefer it this way"* Some learners found even bigger changes than improved literacy and self-confidence. One person said *"I became more stronger, I learned a lot, I can read better than a year ago. I got a divorce and now living by myself with my two children and I just bought a home."* No matter what the situation, another woman said *"I am a mom and a wife with a lot of responsibilities but I am improving I do a lot of things I trust myself to do better."*