

LITERACY NARRATIVE: THE GARDEN OF MY MIND

ENG W131: HONORABLE MENTION

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Abstract

This personal narrative is an ode to the author's mother. Her unrelenting love of reading and writing influenced the author's life from the very beginning. The author is grateful to be recognized for her writing by IU East and notes that without her mother's passion and guidance as a literacy sponsor there wouldn't be an essay to read. The author's gratitude goes to IU East and to her mother.

If my literacy journey is a flower, then my mother is the sun, always giving me everything I need to grow and providing me with such a solid foundation in reading and writing that I may bloom on my own. From an early age, my mother set out to help me be successful. Her assistance is what has enabled me to become as adept in reading and writing as I am today. In our text, Brandt (2020) described literacy sponsors as "the forces that shape our literacy learning and practices" (p. 244). I believe my mother is exactly that. From setting the foundation of my literacy journey in elementary school to the more in-depth application of my knowledge in college, to the more pleasure-based aspect of literacy outside of college, my mother has been an unrelenting literacy force, without which I would have struggled to thrive.

Setting up a solid foundation is key in any endeavor. My mother has two master's degrees in English and has over 18 years of experience as a first-grade teacher. She knew what and how to teach

so I could be the best that I could be. At home, my mother would challenge me with more in-depth applications of what I was learning at school. She started out with the alphabet, then the alphabet song, then sight words. Sight words are the most frequently used words that kids need to know just by looking at them. All the while, I would be practicing how to write my letters and numbers.

Learning to read and write came easily to me. My mother used a teaching system called Fountas and Pinnell which allowed her to test and track my progress and compare it with the average expected outcomes of other kids in my grade. We started with BOB books, which were books that told stories, and all the words were only three letters or less. My mother would start reading, and I would follow along and eventually I was reading right alongside her.

Once I learned how to read, things began to change a bit. Every summer, my mother made my siblings and me do one hour of summer reading before we could go outside and play. I hated this idea at first, because this was supposed to be my time off from school. She took us to the public library and signed us up. We got our page-tracker booklet and then my mom told us to go pick out any three books we wanted. I had never been more excited, I had only ever been told to read what was required of me, and those books were usually very boring. I went to get three of the largest National Geographic books and summer reading began. It eventually got to the point where I had to play outside for an hour first and only then would I get to come in and read the rest of the day away. In this way, my local public library became a literacy sponsor alongside my mother. Literacy sponsors do not always have to be people. Brandt (2020) points out that they can be “people, ideas, or institutions that helped us become literate” (p. 243). My mother also used to read to my siblings and me every night out of a chapter book that was way above our Lexile levels. Lexile levels are used to measure how difficult a text is and can reflect a student’s reading ability level. Being able to understand such large sentences and words

put us all above most of the other children in our respective grades. This eventually led to my siblings and me being put into the Gifted and Talented programs in Pinkney Elementary School. This was a group of kids above average in their literacy journeys who needed more challenging content to be pushed to the next level.

When I reached fifth grade, I was reading at a high school level. Reading level implies comprehension, not just reading or sounding out the words. The transition from elementary to middle school to high school was easy for me because the foundation of reading and writing my mother had set up within me was so strong that everything else was a breeze. New challenges arose for me in college, however.

College takes reading, writing, and comprehension to another level. Still, my mother was there for me, but in a different capacity. Her role as a teacher took a backseat and she transformed into a compass of sorts. You must know what you are seeking for a compass to be useful. A compass cannot tell you where you want to go; it can only point you in the right direction. She would never tell me the answer but offer up scenarios to me for help or share a story about herself when she had to make a similar decision. This time, I was reading to my mother: papers, discussion-question responses, and everything in between. Because my mother is so educated and intelligent, she easily became the standard that I held myself to. If I wrote a paper and my mother approved of it, then I knew it was good. The standards she held for herself when she was in school, she held for me too. If she did not approve, she would help me get my writing to where it needed to be. She would show me papers that she had written or had read, or maybe talk me through why certain bits did not fit or make sense. This is not to say that she gave me the answers or wrote anything for me; my mother has more integrity than anyone I know. Rather, she would answer my questions with more questions. If I got a critique that my writing was not clear and I asked her how to make my writing clearer, she would ask me how I could make my 9-year-old sister understand.

These somehow made sense and set me off in the right direction. Having my mother as my personal peer reviewer molded my writing in a certain way that built up my confidence. With her high standards in mind, eventually writing this way became a habit and this habit soon became the norm for me. As I evolved in my literacy journey, my need for my mother as teacher or guide dwindled. It soon became that I sought her out to show her something I knew we both would be proud of, whether it be an intelligent response, or a paper I was sure to get an A on.

Outside of college, my literacy relationship with my mother was completely different. I had never really paid attention to what my mother did outside of her role as my mom. I was too young and too in my own world to see her as her own person. Luckily, I was able to open my eyes and I learned that outside of teaching, my mother loves reading. She always had a book in her hands at home, and it was usually either by Susan Elizabeth Phillips or Harlen Coben. I never understood what was so great about reading, as all my reading had been for school and required. I was about a junior in college when my mother first recommended a book to me that was not required for school or that I had chosen for summer reading. It was a book called *Love in the Time of Cholera* and it was different than anything else I had ever read. I suddenly understood what all the fuss was about. It was challenging and interesting. If I had tried to read it when I was younger, I am sure I would have given up. It sparked a love of reading that was not always there before, because I realized that my mind allowed these books to come alive. I started going to my mother for more recommendations and that led us to where we are now. My mother and I still get together and talk about the latest books we have read and recommend them to each other.

Through my mother, I have come to realize the escapism that reading can provide, and she has kindled a love of reading outside the academic. I am able to relate to her via these deep conversations about

the novels we read together. We learn about each other by discussing the various themes and ideals in each book, which in turn has brought us even closer together as mother and daughter, not just teacher and student. This would not have been possible if she had not been there to nourish my adolescent mind from the very beginning.

My literacy journey would not have been possible without my mother. I am sure I would have eventually learned how to read and write just like everyone else. Then I would have struggled just like everyone else. With my mother, my struggles were few and far between. Brandt (2020) mentioned that “literacy sponsors are not always altruistic” (p. 244). I believe this is partially true for my mother. She dedicated so much of her time to my siblings and me because when she is gone, she will not have to worry about us anymore. She does not want to take credit for our successes, but rather our success gives her peace of mind. From her teaching me in elementary school to her guiding me in college, to us bonding over fiction outside of school, my mother is a major pillar in the foundation of who I am as a person and as a scholar. If my literacy journey is a flower, then from seed to bloom, I have always grown towards the light. ■

REFERENCES

Brandt, D. (2020). Sponsors of literacy. In *Writing about writing for Indiana University East* (pp. 244-46). (4th ed.) Bedford / St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning. (Original work published 1998)

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