

Brandon Nguyen

A Brother's Literacy

Literacy is more than just reading and writing. Literacy is a journey that is defined by our emotions, cultures, and identities. For many, like my brother Ethan, struggling to read is a very common event in the early stages of someone's literacy experience. Ethan had to face a challenging moment when our parents were told that he was struggling with his literacy skills. His teacher once told our parents: "Your child, Ethan, is currently struggling with his literacy skills. To ensure he can advance to the next grade along with his friend, he will need to learn how to read and write." Although this comment may not have fully registered with Ethan at the time, he could definitely sense the embarrassment on our parents' faces.

However, experiences like the one Ethan had aren't always negative. Often, they can become the catalyst to a transformative journey filled with growth and development. Deborah Brandt, a professor emerita of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explored concepts of early childhood literacy in her work, *Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading*. Her research shows how literacy experiences can be both positive and negative, and how it can affect how people feel about reading and writing later in life. Similarly, Ethan's experience shows a pattern where early struggles led to joy in reading, only for literacy to later shift into a nuisance.

Ethan's early experiences with reading, though started off challenging, evolved into a love for reading that left an enduring impact on his life. While I share a personal connection with Ethan, I chose to interview him because of our shared elementary school experience and our parent's role in literacy. What initially began a conversation of early challenges with reading quickly turned into a story of how he discovered happiness through reading books.

Ethan's experience with early literacy started off challenging. When he was in elementary school, his teacher informed our parents that he was struggling with his reading and writing skills. However, this moment became a turning point for Ethan, as our parents encouraged him to start reading more books. "You were lucky though, Brandon. You didn't even have to read until a couple years later," Ethan said. "Well, I was in the first grade," I chuckled in response. Like many families, our parents shaped Ethan's early literacy experience. Through her research, Deborah Brandt observed that many people remembered being strongly encouraged to read books in their household (Brandt 462). Brandt's research seemed to echo Ethan's literacy experiences, as his parents' reading also encouraged him to read.

Brandon: What is the first book you remember reading?

Ethan: It was *Bridge To Terabithia*, the first chapter book mom and dad made me read. I remember waking up the next morning eager to finish it.

Ethan's love for reading began when he read *Bridge To Terabithia*. I remember when he finished reading the book. It was like a switch had flipped inside him, and became a different person— in a good way though. You know the feeling when you finally finish a book, movie or TV show and it's like you are still living in the world of what you just watched or read? That is exactly how Ethan felt, filled with glee and imagination. This joyful moment aligns with Brandt's observation that people remember their first reading experience often being pleasurable and organized by adults (Brandt 461). Ever since reading *Bridge To Terabithia*, Ethan became an avid reader. On family trips to our grandparents' place, which was a long two-hour drive, he would be reading on his Kindle while I just slept the whole car-ride. Ethan's early joy in reading has shaped his appreciation for books.

Ethan's relationship with literacy has changed over time, now that he is almost finished with college. With so much on his mind, I wanted to see how his feelings about reading and writing have changed over the years. "At first, there were some challenges with keeping up with everything, but finding a good way to manage my time and balancing school with my hobbies has kept me in good shape," Ethan said. "What's been the hardest part about classes?" I asked. "Probably the sheer amount of reports I have to write. I wish I had practiced writing as much as I did reading. It would have made things a lot easier growing up," he said. After our conversation, I started thinking of more questions to ask him about literacy now, so I began asking:

Brandon: How would you describe literacy in your daily life now?

Ethan: Well, obviously studying, reading and writing has become more of a necessity than an option for me. I spend so much time reading textbooks, and writing research papers, and reports.

Brandon: Do you still get the chance to read for enjoyment?

Ethan: Nah, it is too much for my brain to handle both academic and non-academic stuff. Anyways, I feel like literacy now is more about writing reports than reading.

Brandon: Do you see yourself ever picking up a book again to read for fun again in the future?

Ethan: I hope I do. I just need a break from textbooks. Reading just feels like work to me right now.

In my interview with Ethan, it seemed like he no longer enjoys reading as much as he did when he was younger. When I asked Ethan about his early literacy experience, he said, "reading and writing has become more of a necessity," and also "reading just feels like work." Unlike before, where Ethan read for fun, he now only reads when studying for classes. This shift from Ethan's

early literacy experience aligns Brandt's observation that literacy in adulthood became associated with work and responsibilities (Brandt 470). What was once a source of enjoyment for Ethan, has gradually become something Ethan now views as a "necessity" and "work" as he's grown older.

Ethan's experience with literacy is similar to what Deborah Brandt describes in her article, *Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading*. While she describes people having positive memories of early reading, Ethan also recalled having a similar experience from his childhood. However, after I continued interviewing him, it became clear that, similar to Brandt's interviewees, Ethan also views writing as a necessary skill in adulthood. Despite his feelings being changed, Ethan's early struggles and successes with literacy paved the way for his success in reading and writing now. His journey demonstrates that despite having setbacks, the process of learning to read and write can open the door to many opportunities.