By Mary Amanda Stewart

We Can Do It Because They Did It:
Three Generations of Texas Literacy Educators

The unique challenges (and promises) we encounter today can be informed by the past. What literacy and language education means for me is a product of what it has meant for educators like my grandmother and mother. Their stories may provide relevant answers for our present and future. They inspire me to face challenges in the classroom by being passionate and being a learner.

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For Sparky on her 90th birthday

Today, cultural and language diversity are the norm (Migration Policy Institute, 2015), particularly as multilingual and multicultural students who might also be considered English learners constitute the new mainstream (Enright, 2011). Literacy educators are also language educators (García, 2008), and I would argue even bilingual educators as they teach bilingual students. Furthermore, literacy educators might be anthropologists, seeking to understand diverse students' cultural practices, or linguists, recognizing the interplay of all of one's languages during literacy development (García & Wei, 2014; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Teaching diverse students can bring joy and transformation to one's practice (Stewart, 2015, 2016), yet can also be difficult in light of increased standardization and accountability (Menken, 2008). It might seem that literacy education is in a paradox as student populations grow more wonderfully diverse while curriculum and instruction are sometimes stifled and mainstreamed (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2014).

The unique challenges (and promises) we encounter today can be informed by the past. What literacy and language education means for me is a product of what it has meant for educators like my grandmother and mother. Their stories may provide relevant answers for our present and future. They inspire me to face challenges in the classroom by being passionate and being a learner. I invite you to pull up a seat at our family table to hear three generations' stories of teaching English in Texas.

Sparky's Story:
Being a Literacy Educator in the 1940s Through the 1980s

Sparky, the name I've always called my grandmother, was born in 1926 and remembers learning how to read by memorizing and learning from her older brother. She recalls a public library in her hometown where her mother would take her as a child and particularly remembers Jane Austen books fondly: "I would check out the book and read cover to cover. I could bring it home and I would sit on the front porch outside and that was just a delight!"

After graduating from a North Texas high school, she went on to a local university during World War II when "all the boys were gone." She graduated with a degree in English and was asked by the superintendent of a nearby school district if she wanted to teach. After "supper on his porch," he told her: "You're little and you're young. I can put you in an elementary school." Apparently, due to her petite frame and age, he thought she would be most suited for children rather than adolescents. She taught fourth grade for four years, having had little preparation from her university courses.

In addition to lack of training, classes were large and resources were scarce. She remembers her classroom of 34 students one year when all the classes were especially crowded. The school was attempting to garner more community support, and Sparky received a memo asking her to "take all the children to the front of the building and [get them to] hang their heads out the window." The school was next to a grocery store and that seemed a good way to demonstrate how many children were packed in there.

Although we do not know the success of that nontraditional initiative, a lady who worked in the grocery store once told my grandmother: "It's just so nice to see somebody like you teach children. I never hear you yell like the other teachers do." Sparky felt really good about that comment, which might speak to a common method of teaching back in the 1940s, particularly when the student-teacher ratio was 34:1, and even more so when the "1" had little training or resources.

Sparky ran her classroom in a caring fashion. She encouraged students to "learn as much as you can to go as far as you can go." When I asked about struggling readers in her fourth grade class, she brought up the differences of that time. She explained that all children came to her already reading, because if they couldn't read by then, they would have dropped out to work and help support their families. She laments that they "probably lost a lot of students."

Naively, I also asked her about diversity—how she was trained to teach students from different races, cultures, and home languages. I was struck when she reminded me that at that time, schools were segregated. Of course there was not a diversity course in her teacher preparation or special training on her campus. This was virtually a moot point during segregation. Then, as young students dropped out of school because they could not keep up with the others in the class, diversity further winnowed.

Eventually, an opportunity arose for her to teach eighth and tenth grade English language arts—her true passion. When the superintendent provided her this job, she thought "the heavens have opened!" She continued her English literature education as she earned a Master's degree and completed post-graduate work at two Texas universities. At the beginning of one of the post-graduate classes, the professor asked: "Why are you married women here instead of being at home with your husbands?" Sparky says about half the class did not continue, but not all of her professors shared his sentiments. She relates memories of one of her professors "who was wonderful!" She had her two young children with her, my mother and uncle, while registering for a summer class. As this professor came by "he looked at them and said, 'I hope you'll be as smart as your mother!'"

In the 1960s, she began teaching English at the college level all the way to 1990 when she retired as the Dean of Humanities. Integration happened during this time and she remembers the novel *Roots* by Alex Haley (1976), an African American author, being "the big deal." Mr. Haley came to speak at her college and she made sure her grandchildren, my brother and I, received an autographed copy of his presentation bulletin. (This is on display in my office today.) I asked her if there was any controversy in teaching a more diverse student population post-integration and it did not seem to faze her. She explains: "I very boldly went through *Huckleberry Finn,* explaining that this is not the way things are supposed to be. You have to understand!"

I think her true character shines as she recounts one experience from the 1970s. The faculty members in her college were supposed to inspect their classes for boys with hair that was too long and tell them they could not attend class that way. "If it was below the earlobe, we were supposed to tell them they couldn't go to class, but I considered that what I was interested in was inside, so I kind of closed my eyes." She kept on teaching—teaching every student in her classroom with passion and excellence regardless of hair length, race, or culture.

Sparky was there to teach literature—to share her passion and teach more than just the novels that were dear to her. The literature was a vehicle for her to do so much more. She reminds us: "You teach ideas through literature!"

Mama's Story:
Literacy Education in the 1970s Through the 2000s

Mama, born in 1953, remembers learning how to read with *Dick and Jane*. Most children in her classes probably did look somewhat like these characters because her schooling occurred during segregation in East Texas. She explains how the teacher used picture cards to help the class read: "If we were reading a Dick and Jane story about a wagon, our teacher would have a card and it would have the same picture that was in the book. That picture was our new word of the day." From her home, she also remembers the *Little Golden Books* and the coveted *Encyclopedia Britannica*: "It was a big deal if your family had an encyclopedia!"

Although we all know that English learners are in most of our language arts classes and obtaining an ESL certification is usually required, what is our purpose in getting that certification? Do we do it out of compliance? To get a job? Or do we do it to better teach the diverse students in our classroom?

However, as she got older, she most liked to read *Nancy Drew* and the *Bobbsey Twins*, the young adult fiction of her day.

After studying speech and hearing pathology along with special education in college, she became a special education teacher in an elementary school. Shortly after, she returned to the university for a graduate degree in reading and then became a third grade teacher—a grade she would teach for nearly the next three decades! She became interested in infusing children's literature throughout the content areas and began writing her own literature-based curriculum. "I wrote curriculum to use reading with math and to use books instead of textbooks to teach all the core subjects. I loved that!"

Because her graduate program focused more on theory rather than "experiencing literature," she continued her inquiry into this topic on her own. She was excited when she learned "there's other books out there!" beyond the canon of traditional children's literature and outside the basal readers. Mama understood that the state approved curriculum did not always connect to every child so she chose books that "would fit the whole classroom." As she took the time to learn more about her students' home lives, she searched for diverse children's literature that might engage her students of different races, cultures, and backgrounds. Then, she used these books to create thematic units and teach across content areas. She remembers discoveries that transformed her teaching: "Oh, I could teach fractions by reading them this book!"

Then, in the early 1990s, Mama taught her first students who were learning English as a second language. Today we would call them English learners. They had just moved from Mexico and were sent to her third grade class even though they were middle school age. The school district officials thought that the boys needed to learn to read in English and she was the teacher to do it. Both of these adolescents learned to read in English in her class and went on to age-appropriate grades, eventually graduating from high school. Decades later, she still keeps in touch with them.

Although she loved teaching these boys, she did not like the discontinuity when they had to leave her classroom to work with an ESL pull-out teacher. She felt they missed important instruction and learning activities when they had to leave. To remedy the situation, she studied and passed the ESL certification test on her own accord—not because it was a requirement for her job. Although the terms might not have existed yet, she began pioneering sheltered instruction using her own version of the SIOP model (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2000), teaching both language and content simultaneously.

Soon thereafter, many more students began arriving in her district who were learning English as their second language, making her ESL certification highly valuable. She credits her background in special education as helping her be successful in teaching English learners. "My background in special ed helped more with the ESL kids because you would accommodate for them and you needed to accommodate for ESL learners too." Even today, some teachers are reticent to acquire certain certifications because than they might have to teach "those kids." However, Mama thrived teaching any child lucky enough to be in her third grade classroom regardless of age, race, socio-economic status, parental involvement, or even language. Best of all, she did it with an array of diverse children's literature used across all content areas and sometimes even in her homemade space bubble (during the outer space unit).

Lessons From the Past

Certainly, many of the obstacles Sparky and Mama faced are not as common today since we have more cross-cultural training and resources, and ESL certification is the norm. Yet, their stories merit consideration as we encounter *less* funding and curricular autonomy coupled with *greater* accountability and diversity. I have learned two distinct lessons from Sparky's and Mama's careers as literacy educators in the same state I practice in today. These lessons have guided me through teaching conundrums and difficult classroom decisions, and I believe they are highly valuable for us today, and even tomorrow.

Be Passionate

My grandmother was and is passionate about English literature. She loved studying literature in graduate school and taking post-graduate classes as a young mother, even when a professor suggested she leave. The same teenage girl who thought reading Jane Austen novels on the porch was "a delight" thought being able to teach literature to middle and high school students was a dream: "The heavens had opened!" This ardent passion surely bled into her teaching, inspiring her students as they entered other worlds through literature.

As long as I can remember, my mother has been passionate about children's literature of all genres. She was so excited in her career to discover books beyond the known, beyond the text: "I was like, Oh! There're other books out there!" That led her to discover authentic children's literature to teach everything (e.g., space, climates, geometry, and character traits). The literature-based thematic units she created even influenced her wardrobe.

I remember many penguin sweaters and earrings that always came around during that unit every winter! Her passion surely led to student engagement.

From them, I learned that whether I am teaching from *Huckleberry Finn* like Sparky or *Goldilocks and the Three Squares* like Mama, be passionate about it and that will affect the students. Perhaps such a passion can help us overcome our own difficulties in teaching like Sparky's and Mama's passion facilitated their success and joy in the classroom in the midst of obstacles.

Be a Learner

I also believe that being learners contributed to my grandmother's and mother's outstanding careers in literacy education. Instead of blaming their teacher education or professional development programs for not preparing them for the classroom or teaching them about a new topic, they went out and learned it themselves. They made continual discoveries that transformed their classroom.

Mama might not have planned in her career to teach English learners. When she received her certification, the ESL supplemental was not an option. Yet, she chose to be an effective teacher of *all* students—not just those who were like her own children. On her own accord, she studied for and took the ESL test so she could be a better literacy and language teacher for the students in her classroom.

Although we all know that English learners are in most of our language arts classes and obtaining an ESL certification is usually required, what is our purpose in getting that certification? Do we do it out of compliance? To get a job? Or do we do it to better teach the diverse students in our classroom?

Similarly, Sparky never complained about her self-taught teaching experiences. In fact, she recently told me what she thinks might be responsible for the many leadership opportunities she has had in her career and community: "Mandy, you just need to listen to people. That makes all the difference." Just listen. That's perhaps the first step in learning—listen to others.

My Story: Literacy Education Today in Texas

Obviously, I stand on the shoulders of giants! Sparky's and Mama's passion and learning have greatly influenced me as an educator and a reader. I never had any shortage of interesting books to read growing up and at the age of 10, I read a book that changed my life, *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989). After that, I became interested in the Holocaust and Mama made sure I had age-appropriate literature to fill my curiosity. I also had the opportunity to learn another language through high school and college and even then, was supplied with children's literature by Mama in abundance—this time, in Spanish.

Through my teacher education and graduate programs, I was continually challenged to consider culturally relevant teaching and multiculturalism. My first teaching job was in a middle school for students completely new to the country, many of whose languages I did not speak, and needed to teach them language and content to pass high-stakes assessments. Following the examples of Sparky and Mama, I remembered my passion—languages, literature, and cultures—and I let that drive my instruction instead of focusing on rote skills or test preparation. When I encountered uncertainty in how to most effectively teach my students, which was often, I learned. Through graduate courses, conferences, and journals, I learned how to meet curricular standards in ways that further excited my passion for teaching, rather than extinguish it through standardization. Now, I prepare preservice and inservice teachers to meet the literacy and language needs of diverse students. As a product of my upbringing, I require my university students to develop multilingual literature-based thematic units. In my classes we have a "no excuses" attitude to finding literature in multiple languages that reflects various culture groups. It is hard, but we do it.

My research involves literacy instruction for adolescent English learners. When I enter high school classrooms hauling bags of books, the students call me "the crazy book lady" or even more lovingly, "the biblioburro," the library donkey, coming from a book I read them, *Biblioburro: A True Story From Colombia* (Winter, 2010). My passion for authentic literacy and my learning of best practices silences common yet non-research-based ideas that we do read aloud to teenagers, or students learning English need more test preparation instruction (Giouroukakis & Honigsfeld, 2010; Layne, 2015). Every classroom I enter, I am committed to finding books students want to read in both English and their home language(s). My newest challenge is to locate manga in Spanish!

Applications for Our Greatest Challenges

Although we celebrate progress in literacy education as a result of the pioneering and brave work of educators like my grandmother and mother, challenges remain. Whereas classroom diversity is certainly a sign of progress, it also means we need to be adept at teaching an increasingly diverse student population (Enright, 2011). Additionally, standardization and high-stakes accountability pose threats to our passion and learning (Gilbert, 2014). We teach in a time period where it is easy to complain or find another profession. Alternatively, we can choose to be passionate and be learners. This requires that we act with courage in the face of policies that we determine are not in the best interest of the learners entrusted to us (Patterson, Holladay, & Eoyang, 2013).

For example, students come into our classrooms from war-torn countries or from drug trafficking war zones. These children have faced trauma and violence their entire lives. They've had limited opportunities to learn. What could our reaction be?

Be passionate. Be passionate about their education. Be passionate about literature that will relate to their lives, celebrate their cultures, help them heal, or make them laugh. Be passionate about learning from them as they share their lived experiences with you.

Be a learner. Learn as much as you can about their past. Learn how they can develop literacy skills in their first language. Learn to greet them in their first language and pronounce their names correctly. Learn how you can modify your teaching practices, your curriculum, and maybe even your demeanor to honor them and help them learn.

We also have long-term English learners who have struggled with academic English for many years. These students are often unengaged after years of linguistically and culturally subtractive schooling (Menken & Kleyn, 2009). What could our reaction be?

Be passionate. Be passionate about literacy learning that will engage them. Be passionate about finding literature that will convey their stories are worth being in print. Be passionate about finding that book they will want to read from beginning to end.

Be a learner. Learn how to best help them acquire the academic language they need for success. Learn about their abilities to read or write in their first language and help them further develop those skills. Learn about their lived experiences and incorporate them into your curriculum.

These are just two examples from today, but what will our students look like in the future? What will literacy and language encompass as we move toward the 22nd century? I do not have those answers and often wonder if we will be adequately prepared for the challenges to come. Nevertheless, I know my grandmother and mother did it. Sparky's and Mama's stories suggest secrets of their success: Be passionate. Be a learner.

Following their examples, we can do it too.

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