

Sports Literacy, Community Dialogue, and Critical Reflection

By Donovan Livingston and Alan Brown, Wake Forest University

In 2016, I (Alan), at the time a new professor in the Department of Education at Wake Forest University, began co-sponsoring an after-school literacy program for eighth-grade boys with an interest in sports. I (Donovan) learned about the sports literacy program in 2019 upon starting my new role in the Office of University Collaborations at Wake Forest and joined the program after having spent much of my career in college-access roles. Together, we have had loyal and unwavering support from Wake Forest student-athletes – including Wendell Dunn, Mike Allen, Kyle McKenzie, Gerald Davis, Tony Jones, and Evan Simmons – as well as an energetic and creative collaborative teacher and club sponsor, Bailey Allman.

When we started the program, we focused on supporting Black boys in the eighth grade because school data pointed to academic and social disparities that reflected a pattern of our country's education debt, which Ladson-Billings (2006) tells us is the result of a history of racial segregation and school funding inequities that plague Black and Latinx students and is often measured by the likes of standardized test scores and school dropout rates. In our case, we found that many students who were struggling academically were Black boys with a substantial interest in sports whose extra-curricular interests often felt disconnected from the literacy practices necessary for future academic success.

The primary goals of the sports literacy program have been (1) to support youth through academic, social, and community engagement, (2) to empower students who are interested in sports to read and write for enjoyment, (3) to explore social issues that affect the lives of adolescents and young adults through culturally-relevant literature, and (4) to improve literacy skills and practices that support learning across content areas and promote college and career readiness.

Alan's work on sports and literacy (Brown & Crowe, 2014; Brown et al., 2019; Brown & Rodesiler, 2016) helped to guide these efforts, but so too did other influential scholarship from the field of English language arts, including Morrell's (2004) work on linking literacy and popular culture; Tatum's (2004) work on teaching reading to Black boys; Kirkland's (2013) work on understanding the social worlds of young Black men; and Smith and Wilhelm's (2014) work on fostering literacy in the lives of young men.

Over the past five years we have engaged more than 50 youth with an average of 12 students per cohort. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, students in the program generally spent the first hour and a half on collaborative reading of sports-related young adult literature (see Appendix A for our reading list). During-reading activities focused primarily on students telling stories; roasting one another; discussing sports, music and gaming; and engaging in what we call accountable talk. The last 45 minutes of each session were spent in physical activity, often on the basketball court, providing opportunities for exercise, stress relief, and friendly competition.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, after-school programs were cut as the state began to shut down public schools. As the 2020-2021 school year began remotely in the surrounding urban school district, we attempted to transition the sports literacy program to Zoom meetings with current eighth graders. Attendance was and remains spotty and, in many ways, mirrors the racial disparities impacting students and families of color trying to navigate online learning during the pandemic (Smith & Reeves, 2020).

Yet, after a few weeks, something unexpected happened. One phone call or social media message at a time, we started inviting our former students to attend, and they showed up in mass. To date, 22 alumni from eight different high schools within the school district and every one of our former college mentors, now young professionals spread out across the United States, have joined these virtual meetings.

Our original hope was that returning students and mentors would help us to attract and retain eighth grade participants in the midst of the pandemic. Instead, our virtual family has morphed into a social gathering for middle and high school students where we discuss all types of current, relevant issues while working to establish interpersonal relationships grounded in trust, responsibility, and mutual respect. Specific topics we

have discussed this fall include those germane to the lives of our students, including education experiences, sporting events, music production, financial literacy, community-police relations, voting, and college-readiness more broadly.

Those discussions taught us some important lessons about the power of critical reflection which, according to Godfrey et al. (2019), encompasses youths' ability to "analyze current social realities and recognize how social, economic, and political conditions limit opportunity and perpetuate systemic injustices" (p. 525). Scholars insist that students' liberation (Inoue, 2015) and critical consciousness requires such labor. For us, creating moments for our alumni to reflect on their middle school experiences serves as antecedents to meaning making, mentorship, and collective maturation. These critical reflections, in many ways, *inform* student behavior and commitment to their goals within and beyond the classroom.

Perhaps the most powerful among these critical reflections were those aimed at identifying barriers to student success in curricular and co-curricular spaces. Recently, we asked students to reflect on difficult experiences and encounters they have had with teachers throughout their time in school. We asked them to name specific qualities, habits, and dispositions of those teachers that were particularly stringent or unyielding.

Based on students' comments, we were able to create a composite character, representing many of the qualities that students identified in their harshest teachers. Composite characters are often used as a form of narrative analysis in qualitative research. In their exploration of Black teachers' experiences in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Cook and Dixson (2013) used individual counterstories to create composite characters by taking elements of intersecting stories from participant interviews to create the foundation for a character. With roots in Critical Race Theory, composite counterstories – like ours, derived from Black boys – are able to vocalize perspectives from the margins; reveal struggles for equitable treatment and opportunity; build community among those who suffer similarly; expose barriers that inhibit success and derail social consciousness; creatively position daily experiences as critical cultural commentary; teach those unfamiliar about marginalization; and challenge and transform the imposition of domination (Griffin et al., 2014).

Positioning composite counterstorytelling in this way “is not the same as creative writing” (Griffin et al., 2014, p. 1355), but instead, “grounded in real-life experiences...and contextualized in social situations” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36). Thus, the character we have constructed, using gender-neutral (they/them) pronouns, is carefully designed based on the comments, feedback, and reflections expressed by the current students and alumni of our program. That said, we introduce Dr. Taylor – a white teacher in their mid-50s, with more than 25 years of experience teaching in middle and high school.

Dr. Taylor is often regarded as unrelatable and unsympathetic; somewhat disconnected from the realities of their students’ lived experiences. Over the years, Dr. Taylor has developed a notorious reputation for assigning excessive amounts of work and units aimed at preparing students for a high stakes, standardized exam known as the End-Of-Grade (EOG) test. Although Dr. Taylor makes themselves available for tutoring and co-curricular enrichment, Dr. Taylor gives little leeway for late or incomplete assignments. Dr. Taylor is known for calling students out when they did not do their work, often resorting to public shaming as a means of holding students accountable to their expectations. Dr. Taylor would embarrass students who did not comply with their demands, removing students from the classroom; or as one student recounted, punish people for sleeping in class, by spending the duration of the period standing at the podium in the front of the classroom. Many of our students indicated that they, at times, have felt like Dr. Taylor targets Black and Brown students, or treats them more harshly than their white peers. Although these claims are inconsistent among the students in our program, it is worth noting this experience, so as not to invalidate the racialized experiences of students of color in Dr. Taylor’s classroom. Over the years, Dr. Taylor developed a reputation as a disciplinarian with a commanding, often intimidating presence in the classroom. Dr. Taylor’s tone is often aggressive, and as our students remarked, often made them feel *some type of way*. In short, Dr. Taylor is the sort of teacher older siblings would warn students about, offering cautionary tales that transcend generations of students across the school district.

Allowing our oldest program alumni – who are now juniors and seniors in high school – to reflect on their experience with Dr. Taylor revealed some surprising findings. Rather than regard Dr. Taylor as an impediment to their curricular and extra-curricular engagement, our alumni overwhelmingly regarded Dr. Taylor as the catalyst to their academic success and social awareness. Given our interest in the intersections of sports and literacy, we – as program facilitators – were assured that students’ performance in Dr. Taylor’s classes would deter students from having the academic profile necessary to participate in athletics.

On the contrary, our alumni remarked that Dr. Taylor would often insist that competing in a sport is moot if students were incapable of competing in the classroom. Many alumni regarded this as a source of intrinsic motivation; interpreting Dr. Taylor’s behavior as “tough love” rather than racialized contempt. Alumni surmised that Dr. Taylor treated students fairly; which was contrary to what they believed when they were in Dr. Taylor’s classes as eighth graders. Perhaps more important than Dr. Taylor’s high expectations was the trust they had in their students to rise to the occasion. When that trust was violated (e.g., incomplete assignments, disengagement with course material), Dr. Taylor, as one alumnus commented, can make your time in school “feel like hell.”

Our alumni who built trust with Dr. Taylor did so by attending after-school tutoring sessions. It was in that space, where students recognized another side of their cantankerous teacher. In these co-curricular moments, Dr. Taylor not only provided academic enrichment but also seemed more relatable. Dr. Taylor would share stories from their childhood, about growing up in poverty, struggling academically, and becoming a first-generation college student. Ultimately, Dr. Taylor’s vulnerability illustrated for our alumni just how alike they really were. There was a consensus among the alumni that Dr. Taylor prepared them for challenges that awaited them in the next grade – both within and beyond the classroom. One alumnus commented, “if [Dr. Taylor] wasn’t strict, I wouldn’t be who I am today.” Another went as far as to say, “I’m not gon’ lie: [Dr. Taylor] is one of my role models [...] the teacher everybody needs.”

Given time, students were able to make sense of their relationship with some of their most difficult teachers. The way students rationalized

these interactions with teachers over the years represents their ability to reflect, make meaning, and alter behavior in service to their curricular and extra-curricular goals. While the results of this conversation are promising, our students' voices yielded four main points of consideration:

First, although we admit to harboring assumptions about the likes of Dr. Taylor, those assumptions are not unfounded. Based on their use of public shaming and unwillingness to connect with students in standard curricular spaces, Dr. Taylor – intentionally or inadvertently – created what seemed to be an icy, almost antagonistic teacher-student dyad. In some ways, students may be motivated to perform well in Dr. Taylor's class out of fear rather than good rapport.

Second, as antiracist educators, we invite others to think critically about the ways in which they discipline, relate to, and ultimately engage with marginalized students – which is, in our case, Black boys. While Dr. Taylor's *eventual* impact on our students was overwhelmingly positive, we wondered if there were other methods teachers might enact to instill a sense of discipline within their students, while building meaningful relationships with them in real time. Essentially, how might teachers command respect from students without dehumanizing them?

Third, and in response to that question, we recognize that teachers wield considerable power and influence over students, and we believe their pedagogical and disciplinary methods may have unintended, yet disproportional implications on students' ability to fully engage with their school environment. Because our program primarily serves Black boys, it is incumbent upon us to implore educators to think about the consequences of embodying authoritarian, undemocratic stances in the classroom. Within the context of our program, we have noticed that teachers who wield power as a means of mediating student behavior, often reify systemic forms of oppression and symbolic violence against BIPOC youth. When this happens, our students, who already feel targeted within society, may enter the classroom only to have their skepticism of authority figures reaffirmed.

Fourth, and finally, there is power in creating safe spaces for critical reflection. Posing this simple question about their most difficult teachers revealed much about our sports literacy program alumni's initial perceptions, maturation, and meaning-making processes. This community dialogue invites vulnerability, perspective taking, and collective affirmation.

While it can be said that we have spent years building this safe space, there is no denying that reflection is an antecedent to action. In this case, the act of reflecting in community, promotes another kind of critical literacy; that is, a literacy allowing students, and their mentors, to *read* and *share* the world.



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Appendix A

Young Adult Literature Read in the Sports Literacy Program

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- Draper, S. (1996). *Tears of a tiger*. Simon Pulse.
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