

# Young Adult Sports Literature and Identity Construction in the ELA Classroom

**S**ports were an active part of David's life in high school. When he made the school's baseball team, he felt that he had an identity within the school; playing a high school sport increased his confidence and enabled him to feel accepted both inside and outside of the classroom. This was especially empowering as an outsider who had recently moved across the country. When he was not playing sports, he wanted to consume as much sports as he could, watching both live and televised games. Unfortunately, his sports literacy did not extend beyond reading the sports section in the local newspaper. Neither he nor his teachers had considered the secondary classroom as a space to explore young adult (YA) sports literature and to engage in academic discussions that examine sports as a vehicle for learning. It simply did not fall within the culture of literacy at his high school.

Sports were also an integral part of Johnny's life—not as an athlete, but as an active consumer of anything sports-related: newspaper articles, weekly issues of *Sports Illustrated*, nonfiction books in the school library, or just daily conversations with friends about his favorite teams and players. His interest in sports was fueled independently of teachers or librarians, and he never considered how it related to school or to literacy.

Lauren was continuously involved in athletics as a high school student, playing for the school's softball, basketball, and tennis teams. She also participated in multiple summer travel teams. However, like David and Johnny, Lauren's sports experience did not extend

into the classroom for deeper learning and development.

To that end, the three of us came together as former and future English Language Arts (ELA) teachers to design impactful activities focused on YA sports literature that have the potential to build the literacy and reading identities of all students.

## Theoretical Foundations

### Reading Identity

We define *reading identity* as an understanding of who one is as a reader, including a recognition of how one engages with a text and of the practices and interventions one performs while reading (Hall, Johnson, Juzwik, Wortham, & Mosley, 2010). Reading identity emerges and is continually shaped by lived experiences and relations with others (Sumara, 1998). Further, the formation and development of a reading identity requires consistent nurturing (Hall, 2012; Hall et al., 2010). We argue that having a strong reading identity is important because such an identity can expand both in-school and out-of-school literacy practices (Skerrett, 2012) and can further facilitate an ability to note biases in a text, break down complicated passages, and determine an author's meaning (Beers, 2003).

Beyond that, we believe that a strong reading identity is foundational to students' literary development, enhancing their ability to make sense of the world around them. We further argue that *knowing* one's reading identity is beneficial for today's students. For instance, Hall (2007) contends that teachers can implement specific, meaningful interven-

tions when they know the reading identities of their students. Beyond that, we argue that students who are aware of their reading identities are more prepared to implement appropriate strategies for improvement. For instance, good readers who want to become stronger readers may know that they should take additional risks, tell a friend about their discoveries, and check for understanding (Hall et al., 2010).

### Identity Construction Theory

Identity construction does not happen in a single moment; rather, it develops over time, is influenced by different experiences, and is expressed in various ways (Skerrett, 2012). We draw on Moje and Luke's (2009) metaphor of *identity as difference* to underscore our theoretical lens, echoing their words that scholars must "clarify what it means to write about and study people's identities in relation to their literate practices" (p. 432).

*Identity as difference* illustrates the importance of membership to identity construction. Moje and Luke (2009) explain multiple points about this metaphor: a) individuals can belong to multiple memberships, even favoring some over others; b) memberships can be both assigned or chosen; c) individuals position themselves to act in ways that build their identities; and d) students' conceptions of identity are most heavily influenced by their level of comfort within the membership. To put this last item into context, one student may enter an ELA classroom and feel out of place. The academic conversation may be overwhelming, and the student may subsequently withdraw from discussion and activities. In contrast, that same student may arrive at an athletic practice later that day and be a leader on the team. He or she may mentor younger players and encourage others as they take part in team exercises.

We use this lens to underscore the importance of including students' memberships and nurturing a sense of belonging in the ELA classroom. By doing so, we ensure that students' school and home reading identities overlap (Skerrett, 2012). Specifically, we argue that acknowledging student membership in a variety of athletics and extracurricular activities should be a part of the curriculum and that using YA sports literature in the ELA classroom is one way to accomplish that. The *identity as difference* metaphor can help students feel comfortable in the classroom

by inviting them to bring their knowledge of sports literacies into academic contexts. Considering the interrelatedness of identity and literacy (Moje & Luke, 2009), teachers stand more prepared to build students' literacy skills as they negotiate and examine texts that merge the two together.

### YA Sports Literature

Defining YA sports literature is more complex than one might expect. Foremost, Crowe (2004) argues that, typically, YA sports literature must include athletic competition that is primarily dependent on physical skills and must be directed toward a teenage audience and involve teenage characters. Adding to Crowe's ideas, we suggest that strong YA sports texts must also use athletics as a vehicle to examine and critique significant social issues, such as race, gender, coming of age, or social justice.

Thus, YA sports literature includes athletes or sport enthusiast protagonists (e.g., *Running Loose* [Crutcher, 2003]), but it also includes texts that extend far beyond the playing field and into social issues that affect all students, regardless of interest in or affinity for playing sports. For example, some may identify *Patina* (Reynolds, 2017) as a book about running on a track team, but its real message centers around racism and the social dynamics of high school. Similarly, *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014) is discussed as a book about basketball, but it explores issues integral to young people's lives, such as family relationships, teenage romance, and coping with loss. In these books, the characters have some connection to the world of athletics, but they also learn about their identity and how that influences their perceptions of the world. Similarly, YA sports literature can be a way for readers of diverse ages and backgrounds to explore their identities and how they fit into the world in which they live. We consid-

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ered these aspects when we set out to respond to this question: How can YA sports literature enhance the development of reading identity for all students?

## **The Case for Sports Literature in the ELA Classroom**

Recent research and anecdotal teaching experiences suggest that sports literature deserves the same consideration as other texts in the secondary ELA classroom. Brown and Crowe (2013) contend that YA sports literature has the capacity to satisfy purposes similar to traditional types of literature. And for certain reluctant readers, sports can be the access point to reading when all else fails (Crowe, 2016). We argue that YA sports literature should not only be included, but indeed encouraged among the reading choices we offer students, both independently and in large groups.

We echo Brown and Crowe (2013) and Crowe (2016) in suggesting that the inclusion of YA sports literature in the ELA curriculum can help facilitate strong reading identities for students, especially for those who do not identify as readers. Further, we build on this work and posit that such inclusion intentionally blends out-of-school memberships with academic memberships, creating a greater sense of belonging in the classroom for all students. We construct this argument by a) contextualizing our inquiry, b) consolidating prominent scholars' perceptions for including YA sports literature in ELA classrooms, and c) providing examples from three YA sports texts that could be highlighted in the ELA classroom.

### **Contextualizing the Inquiry**

In 2017, nearly 8 million high school student-athletes participated in an officially sanctioned school sport, including a record breaking 3.5 million female athletes (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2017). In addition to these numbers, there are

many students like Johnny who may not be part of an officially sanctioned high school athletic team but who regularly read about and discuss sports. Further, the line separating sports and national politics is becoming increasingly blurry. For instance, in May of 2018, the National Football League (NFL) announced that players must stand during the national anthem or remain in the locker room (Rosenberg, 2018). This act called into question the privilege of First Amendment rights and prompted heated debate and discussion among national news outlets. Shortly after this news broke, President Trump rescinded an invitation for members of the 2018 Super Bowl champion team, the Philadelphia Eagles, to visit the White House because team representatives did not guarantee that the players would recognize the flag and the national anthem in a traditional manner (Romo, 2018). These recent events underscore how sports culture is increasingly political and racialized and thus becoming a part of the national conversation that reaches beyond the game itself. Yet even with the volume of media coverage for both sports and sports culture and the vast number of students interested in sports, some educators still feel that using sports literature as a teaching tool is taboo (Brown & Crowe, 2013).

For that reason, we highlight notable scholars who have advocated for YA sports literature in the ELA classroom. For instance, Carter (1998) asserts that YA sports literature can teach important life lessons for teens who struggle in traditional high school academic settings, even helping to reverse negative attitudes toward reading. Parsons (2014) argues that teachers should include sports in their curricula to make learning more authentic. Crowe (2004) provides poignant examples of how sports can unite a divided society and how reading about sports can provide refuge from an often unpleasant reality.

As a resource for educators willing to do this work, Brown (2009) created a sports literacy blog, replete with adolescent and young adult literature that covers a full range of sports. Brown (2016b) also utilizes sports literacy to connect readers of varying abilities by creating a space where students can read and discuss literature in an afterschool program. Brown explains that students in this program engage in and develop literacy while reading and discussing topics that pertain to their personal interests. By drawing on students' interests, Brown's program invites students

to gain access to issues beyond that of sports (de la Peña, 2013). Similarly, Gallagher (2017) compiled a list of more than 100 sports books that are appropriate for the junior high and high school classroom, echoing Crowe's (2016) sentiment that teachers can tap into students' afterschool athletic interests to reach reluctant readers.

Furthermore, a number of teachers and teacher educators across the country have advocated for the inclusion of sports-related activities and lessons to build literacy (Brown & Rodesiler, 2016). Many of these educators use sports literature to teach a variety of concepts and issues, including multicultural education (Gonzalez, 2016), critical literacy (Brown, 2016a), poetry (Dinkins, 2016), and social justice (Sieben, 2016), among others.

### Stating Our Case

With combined experience teaching secondary ELA in the Intermountain West and the greater Washington D.C. area, we recognized that many students—across genders—respond positively to suggestions to read YA sports literature. We believe deeply that YA sports literature not only has a place in the classroom, but that a deliberate emphasis on and advocacy of YA sports literature can enhance students' reading identities by drawing on their relevant literacies and memberships out of the classroom. However, we do not suggest that just any book about sports should be thrust into a young reader's hands. Robert Lipsyte, sportswriter and YA author, warns that good YA sports books—the kind that help to mold student identity—are challenging and should be carefully selected for specific audiences (Goering, 2007).

As teachers thoughtfully integrate YA sports novels into their curricula, they invite students' outside interests into the classroom and help students develop and nurture their reading identities. When we set out to respond to the question, *How can YA sports literature enhance the reading identity for all students?*, we were influenced by personal interests and our perception of underrepresentation in the literature. In addition to helping students create stronger reading identities, we wanted to explore how students' interest in sports is reflected in YA literature. In other words, we wanted sports-minded students to know their interests are valued in academia. To that end, David, Johnny, and Lauren mutually agreed upon three books that

they believe are high-interest texts portraying a diversity of interests, cultures, and genders: *The Running Dream* (Van Draanen, 2011), *Mexican Whiteboy* (de la Peña, 2008), and *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015).

Relative to our text selection criteria, we were drawn to the characters in the texts for multiple reasons. Foremost, they identified with their respective sport in a way that reflected how many of today's students identify with sports. For example, their athletic concerns and triumphs followed them throughout the school day, and many of their closest friends were created through countless hours of practice and games. We also recognized that the characters moved beyond common stereotypes found within the media. For instance, a female protagonist in one text presented herself as a determined athlete whose relationships on and off the field were genuine. Finally, we admired the way the characters interacted within their communities. For example, we were impressed with their sacrifice for others, their determination to do what is right, and their willingness to have an open mind. Ultimately, we felt that these texts would resonate with all types of readers independent of their interest in athletic competition. We also believe these novels echo Crowe's (2016) and de la Peña's (2013) suggestion that YA sports novels can serve as an entry point to reading.

The final considerations in the selection and teaching of these titles centered on our aims to a) expose students to challenging social issues, b) invite them to examine their beliefs, and c) encourage them to interact and learn with others in ways that develop individual reading identities within YA sports literature. These experiences were facilitated through multiple classroom activities associated with the YA

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sports texts we selected. We describe such activities in the following sections and include a table of our pedagogical suggestions (see Fig. 1). We argue that secondary students reading and engaging in the activities with these specific YA sports texts will build a stronger reading identity by exploring and nurturing unique dimensions of literacy through sports. We also recognize additional YA sports texts as appropriate for a similar set of goals and have compiled a list of high-interest texts in Figure 2.

## Featured YA Sports Texts and Classroom Activities

The following sections illustrate ways in which ELA teachers can help build the reading identities of all students and engage all types of readers with interests in athletics using three specific YA sports titles. Though we believe that students with interest in athletics may have a strong appreciation for these texts, we also believe that students who have other interests will find value in them.

<i>The Running Dream</i>	<i>Mexican Whiteboy</i>	<i>All-American Boys</i>
Students reflect and write about their identities.	Students incorporate and respond to Gahan’s (2014) framework on archetypes and the hero’s journey.	Students watch and respond to an interview with Robin Roberts.
Students read and respond to “One More, For Me” (Nichols, 2017).	Students create a “media profile” of Danny as it might appear on select sports networks.	Students watch and respond to ESPN’s <i>Get Up!</i> segment.
Students compose an experience as it might appear in <i>The Players Tribune</i> .	Students create a “media profile” and a “reading profile” of themselves.	Students read and respond to <i>Red Sox, Racism, and Adam Jones</i> (Glanville, 2017).
		Students compose letters to local police department.

Figure 1. List of suggested book activities

Book	Author	Publication Year	Publisher
<i>Booked</i>	Kwame Alexander	2016	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
<i>The Crossover</i>	Kwame Alexander	2014	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
<i>Curveball: The Year I Lost My Grip</i>	Jordan Sonnenblick	2012	Scholastic
<i>Dairy Queen</i>	Katherine Gilbert Murdock	2006	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
<i>The Final Four</i>	Paul Volponi	2012	Viking
<i>Gold Medal Winter</i>	Donna Freitas	2014	Scholastic
<i>Knights of the Hill Country</i>	Tim Tharp	2006	Knopf
<i>Patina</i>	Jason Reynolds	2017	Atheneum
<i>Payback Time</i>	Carl Deuker	2010	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
<i>Peak</i>	Roland Smith	2007	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
<i>Running Loose</i>	Chris Crutcher	1983	Greenwillow
<i>Slam!</i>	Walter Dean Myers	1996	Scholastic
<i>Stupid Fast</i>	Geoff Herbach	2011	Sourcebooks
<i>Taking Sides</i>	Gary Soto	1991	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
<i>Tangerine</i>	Edward Bloor	1997	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Figure 2. High-interest YA sports texts

## Female Representation: *The Running Dream*

“So maybe it’s something you’re born with. Or maybe it’s something you adopt. I just know that for me, running was like eating and breathing—it was something I had always done, and without it I felt miserable.” (Van Draanen, 2011, p. 157)

*The Running Dream* may resonate with many readers because of its strong female protagonist and her determination as a runner and friend. This text is especially relevant and necessary due to an underwhelming number of athletically inclined female characters found in YA sports literature (Hussack & Schmidt, 2014). The protagonist, Jessica, literally and symbolically loses the leg upon which she stands during a tragic accident on the team bus. Her story is one of inspiration and gratitude as she relearns how to walk and run on a prosthetic leg. Jessica’s determination leads her to reconstruct her running identity and to befriend an unlikely student who teaches her even more about her character.

One pedagogical approach that teachers can employ prior to reading *The Running Dream* is to invite students to reflect on and write about their identities as students, as members of a family, as members of a larger community, and as members of any groups or clubs in which they take part. Because engaging in identity discourse must be complex (Alsup, 2006), students may need an example from the teacher to model this initial writing activity. Students can then spend time reflecting on their own identities. This can be followed by a classroom discussion about the importance and relevance of student identities.

To extend this activity and to better prepare for the reading of *The Running Dream*, the teacher can conclude with a class discussion that invites the students to reflect on how they might respond if one of their salient identifying characteristics was suddenly removed. This simple, albeit foundational, exercise enables students to think about their identities, thereby preparing them to reflect upon and respond to Jessica’s physical and emotional loss.

During the reading of *The Running Dream*, teachers can pair the novel with an article titled “One More, For Me” (Nichols, 2017). In this article, Nichols, a Paralympian who lost the use of her legs in a snowboarding accident, shares the story of how she rediscovered her athletic identity without the use of her lower body. Students can respond to questions re-

lated to *The Running Dream* and their own identities. Sample questions might include: a) What challenges beyond physical injury do Jessica and Nichols face? b) What new opportunities do both Jessica and Nichols have? c) How do you handle adversity? What experiences from your life lead you to think this? d) What have you learned from your adversities? e) What about your setbacks help you nurture relationships with others?

Teachers wishing to add variety to their pedagogy can include an “around the world” activity (Sieben, 2016) in which students move about the classroom and respond to the questions printed on large pieces of paper taped on the walls. This can lead to a discussion that encourages students to wrestle with how they perceive their own identity and how they might respond to injuries like those in the readings. An invitation to respond to these questions in whole-classroom discussion can evolve into a powerful learning moment as students share their own responses and listen to the responses of their peers.

Teachers might introduce students to *The Players’ Tribune*, a blog in which current and former athletes share their thoughts and experiences in athletics. Once familiar with the format, students can compose a first-person account of a personal athletic experience, using Nichols’ “One More, for Me” (2017) as a template. Students who do not participate in athletics can write in Jessica’s voice, describing her story as it might appear in *The Players’ Tribune*. To extend this activity, teachers can also create a class blog or website that mirrors the format of *The Players’ Tribune* and include student writing. Students can then share their work with family members and friends in an authentic platform as they see fit. This serves to encourage students to demonstrate their knowledge of and facilitation with athletics, and as teachers, we need to encourage them to do so in writing (Parsons, 2014).

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Moje and Luke (2009) posit that students' identity construction is influenced by how comfortable they feel in specific contexts. Given that more than 600,000 high school students participate in track and field,

including an increase of more than 8,000 girls from 2016 to 2017 (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2017), *The Running Dream* has the potential to nurture a sense of belonging for secondary students in the ELA classroom. This can be especially powerful for female students who might not realize the existence of realistic portrayals of females in YA sports literature and in the media (Hussack & Schmidt, 2014).

In these activities, we draw on the volume of students who participate in track and field to merge academic and non-academic group memberships. This merging further stands to enhance the reading identities of students of all abilities as they negotiate the text and the activities with which it is paired. As students explore identity and perhaps see themselves in the characters they read, they will be prepared to seek more characters that reflect their lives either within or outside of YA sports literature.

**Personal Identity vs. Classroom Identity: *Mexican WhiteBoy***

"When I'm in the classroom at school I'm just a regular kid. I got a certain score on a certain test just like all twenty-five of the other scholarship kids. We blend together like sheep. When I step on this mound, though, Dad, I'm special. I stand above the rest of the players in the state. I pitch down to them. Something I've learned—when you're a great pitcher, a mound is your throne. A baseball cap is your crown. You give orders. Make laws. Rule people." (de la Peña, 2013, p. 154–155)

Danny, an underclass high school student, discovers his identity as a pitcher with an average velocity fastball comparable to baseball pitchers in Major

League Baseball (MLB). Yet for all of his talent on the diamond, he struggles with confidence when he is off of it. As the title of the novel suggests, Danny's cultural identity is a combination of his father, who is Mexican, and his mother, who is white. Amidst this confusion, he embraces baseball as an integral part of his identity during adolescence.

Danny is like many students for whom sports provides a comfortable context and a sense of empowerment. Unfortunately for some students, however, the academic context of an ELA classroom does not always serve as a site for positive identity construction, especially for those who do not see themselves as having strong reading identities. Quinlan and Curtin (2017) found that some adolescents believed their in-school literacy practices were inconsistent with their lives beyond school. As a result, these students felt a strong dissonance between their in-school and out-of-school identities. As identity is constantly being built and rebuilt, especially among adolescents, teachers have the opportunity to bridge the extracurricular and scholastic identities of their students through YA sports literature. *Mexican WhiteBoy* offers a text that can resonate with most students, especially those who are biracial or multiracial. It further enables students of all ethnicities to see themselves in the text if they are like Danny—excelling athletically but struggling to build confidence elsewhere.

Using *Mexican WhiteBoy*, teachers can help students engage in identity construction through Gahan's (2014) framework of archetypes and the hero's journey. This framework is designed to push students beyond simply identifying an argument and move them into deeper evaluations of *how* and *why* sports myths are created. It also encourages students to wrestle with context-dependent identities. As students evaluate the way iconic athletes are portrayed, they can gain a better understanding of Danny's identity as an athlete and his identity off the field. Gahan (2014) suggests using current, real-life sports stories to teach archetypes and the hero's journey, as the media is wont to build athletes to mythic proportions. In a world rife with fake news and over-exaggerations, the students' challenge is to determine the fact from the fake (Marchi, 2012).

Students can employ Gahan's (2014) framework while studying how iconic athletes are depicted in the media today by responding to two questions:

a) How much does the media portrayal, as opposed to the on-field performance, contribute to an athlete's popularity? and b) If the media appears to fabricate a story, who (writer, athlete, fans, parents, agents, or a combination) is responsible for the athlete's fame? One athlete that teachers might use to model such an analysis is Bryce Harper, a professional baseball player who is regularly touted as one of the game's best players. With the help of the teacher, students can conduct research and analyze Harper's yearly statistics and overall value to his team, identifying his individual success on the field and his influence on his team's success. Students can then determine and then write about whether or not his work on the field is consistent with the public praise he receives. Students can then select an athlete of their choosing for independent inquiry.

Once students have experience with evaluating athletes' media profiles, they can turn Gahan's (2014) framework toward *Mexican WhiteBoy*. In this activity, students create a media profile of Danny as a baseball player, similar to that of the professional athletes they researched. For example, students can write a newspaper article about Danny, film a video clip similar to those they might watch on ESPN's SportsCenter, or create a Twitter feed modeling that of professional sports analysts and writers. The goal is for students to engage in acts of building literacy by depicting Danny as an athlete. Teachers can further extend this activity by inviting students to create a blog that outlines Danny's profile and media depiction. Then, students can use digital platforms with which they may already be familiar (e.g., Twitter and Instagram) to link extended writing, images, and video of Danny like those they might find from professional sports writers. As an additional extension of this activity, students can create a media profile for themselves as student-athletes (or another extracurricular activity of their choosing). Once they have completed this, they can then create a profile of themselves as readers and compare that to their perception of themselves as readers.

Moje and Luke (2009) contend that literacy and identity are inherently connected. Thus, as students negotiate the text and reflect on these activities, they also merge their academic and non-academic memberships. Students stand prepared to flesh out and examine their extracurricular identities and their reading identities, even examining ways to enhance them

both. For instance, students can conference with their teacher and together identify and develop strategies that will help them become stronger readers. They can also identify areas in which they hope to improve within their extracurricular activities. This work in and of itself not only builds literacy, but further enhances students' reading identities as they engage in a variety of activities during the reading of the text.

### **Social Justice: *All American Boys***

"Part of my brain recognized how stupid it was to believe Rashad's name wasn't on all our minds—how interconnected all these things were in our lives, how we couldn't just separate basketball from the rest of our life . . . ."

(Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 256)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) created a position statement focused on social injustice that advocated for instructors to "teach about social injustice and discrimination in all its forms" (2010). In support of that statement, Scherff (2016) argues that students need to read texts that focus on real-world issues of social injustice, including that which happens in sports culture. One text that fits the description outlined by both NCTE (2010) and Scherff (2016) is *All American Boys*. In addition to providing students access to a title that dives into current racialized injustices, this text offers a new lens for identity construction and access to the discussion and membership of a new identity group.

One of the protagonists, Quinn Collins, wrestles with his moral obligation to respond to an act of racialized police brutality against a teenager, Rashad Butler. To complicate matters, the police officer involved, Paul Galluzzo, is the older brother of Quinn's best friend. Part of Quinn's confliction is founded on his strong relationship with Paul and the rest of the Galluzzo family. Paul, in particular, spent countless hours acting as an older brother to Quinn, even

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informally mentoring and coaching him in basketball. In the midst of trying to construct his moral identity among family and friends, Quinn is also caught in the crossfire of his school and his basketball team and their emotional responses to this act of social injustice.

*All American Boys* raises awareness and underscores multiple instances of social injustice throughout the United States. One example comes from recent headlines in sports culture; in May of 2018, the Milwaukee Police Department released a video of

police officers unnecessarily using a taser and then tackling Sterling Brown of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Milwaukee Bucks simply because of a parking infringement (Andrews, 2018). Brown's situation is uncannily similar to Rashad's, as both are victims of racialized police brutality.

One activity that teachers could employ to help underscore the prevalence of social injustice in the United States

and to highlight identity development is to watch an interview in which American Broadcasting Company's Robin Roberts interviewed Brown about his incident with the Milwaukee police (Elgas, 2018). After the reading of *All American Boys*, students can watch this video and respond to these prompts, comparing Rashad's experience to that of Brown: a) How do the ideas in both texts connect to each other? b) How should I respond to these texts? (Luke, 2000). What does that reveal about my identity? c) Which acts of power imbalance are demonstrated in both Rashad's experience and Brown's experience? How are they similar and how are they different? d) Do you believe the police officers' identity or the victims' identity is most influenced by these actions?

These questions stand to elicit student thought and reflection about current social problems we face, affording students spaces to reflect on what they can do to promote change. Students who are exposed to such thoughts are more prepared to act when opportunities to stand for social justice arise (Alsup, 2015).

After all, readers construct their identities as they negotiate texts (Schachter & Galili-Schachter, 2012), and in this instance, readers are invited to take part in new group memberships against social injustice. These activities also stand to enhance students' reading identities.

Teachers can further build on this example by watching a segment from ESPN's *Get Up!*, a sports talk show in which the hosts, Mike Greenberg, Michelle Beadle, and Jalen Rose, weigh in on Brown's altercation with the Milwaukee police officers (ESPN, 2018). This video brings to light new perspectives and statements from Brown that were not present in the previous interview with Roberts, including additional clarity on Brown's response to social injustice. This video further connects the recent injustice faced by Brown to the NFL's new policy requiring players to stand during the playing of the national anthem if they come out of the locker room.

After watching Brown's interview and the *Get Up!* analysis of Brown and the NFL's new policy, teachers can invite students to respond in writing to three questions: a) "What's worth talking about?" (Gallagher, 2015, p. 155), b) What connections can you make from this video to that of *All American Boys* beyond police brutality?, and c) What impact might these traumatic experiences have on the identities of the people involved? After students have enough time to compose their thoughts, the teacher can facilitate a discussion by asking for volunteers to share their responses. As students respond, the teacher or a designated class member might take brief notes, outlining the main idea of each student's thoughts on the whiteboard or classroom projector. After students have responded in the whole-class discussion, the teacher might pose a question to the class by asking students to respond to their peers' insights. For instance, students can agree or disagree with their peers' analyses and either add to or challenge them (Langer, 2013). Finally, teachers can invite students to respond to Beadle's statement from *Get Up!* in which she suggests that society has not made any progress on issues of social justice.

In light of Beadles's response, teachers can invite students to research similar injustices that have occurred in sports culture. As an example, teachers can point students to an incident in 2017 in which fans of MLB's Boston Red Sox chanted racial epithets at a member of MLB's Baltimore Orioles. Teachers can

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invite students to read the text, *Red Sox, Racism, and Adam Jones* (Glanville, 2017). After reading the text in small groups of three or four, students can discuss Glanville's additional comments suggesting that social injustice exists beyond those headlined in digital, video, or print news agencies.

Although a heightened awareness of social injustice is a step in the right direction, teachers must also consider the ways in which students can take action to promote social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Given the nature of the injustice experienced by both Rashad and Brown, teachers can encourage students to explore ways that they can make a difference in their own community. For example, students can collaborate on writing letters to their local police department expressing their feelings over the rising number of police brutality incidents in recent years. Citing both *All American Boys* and Brown's experience in Milwaukee, students can then suggest interventions that the police department could implement in order to eliminate police brutality. To add additional merit to their correspondence, teachers can invite students to research how police officers are trained and have students suggest interventions that could take place either during their preparation or during their continued learning as officers. These writing opportunities add authenticity to classroom activities, showing students that these issues matter in their communities and that their voices deserve to be heard. Beyond this, writing to the police department affords students opportunities to participate in problem-based learning, a pedagogical approach in which students work together and "encounter diverse ideas and opinions that will require discussion, cooperation, and negotiation" (Alsup, 2015, p. 61).

Although Skerrett (2012) argues that identity construction takes time, the work of introducing social justice to students' membership is worthy of our consideration. As students read and engage in *All American Boys*, teachers invite students to either join new memberships or enhance existing memberships by responding to issues of social injustice. The merging of these two memberships not only helps to create stronger reading identities for all students, but ultimately influences students to become agents of change to create a more just world. And as teachers, we must encourage that.

## Conclusion

The texts and activities that we have outlined barely tap the potential for YA sports literature in the classroom. Many students, in their respective sports or extracurricular activities, can identify with Jessica's sentiment: "I am a runner. That's what I do. That's who I am. Running is all I know, or want, or care about" (Van Draanen, 2011, p. 6). Teachers can leverage students' strong athletic identities as catalysts for classroom learning, for literacy, and for reading identity development. To that end, deliberate work with identity construction offers an opportunity for secondary students

to examine their reading identities and reflect both on the memberships they currently value (e.g., sports) and new memberships that will strengthen their identities (e.g., social justice). But this work need not end here. After establishing the role that identity plays in students' lives, teachers can return to identity construction theory in future texts that students read—YA sports literature or not—and invite them to

consider which new memberships the texts offer and the implications of such identities. In this way, students can continually enhance their reading identities while they consider new memberships that encourage them to be more effective democratic citizens.

Although we advocate for the work of identity construction and its connection to YA sports literature, we recognize that this work has its limitations. Though we highlight track and field, baseball, and basketball, YA sports literature that emphasizes American football might reinforce a hypermasculine stereotype or perhaps even an exclusionary mindset that such student-athletes should not associate with non-student-athletes. We also recognize that such literature may reinforce or suggest that a single identity or membership as "athlete" is desirable (T. Johnson, personal communication, August 9, 2018). Although these concerns are real, we argue that the literature

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**These writing opportunities add authenticity to classroom activities, showing students that these issues matter in their communities and that their voices deserve to be heard.**

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and activities we provide encourage students to be more compassionate, learn more about themselves, and discover and understand new perspectives (Beers & Probst, 2017). We envision that students understand how literacy and athletics work together and that the two need not be in competition with each other.

Notable athletes provide strong illustrations of pairing athletics and literacy. For instance, LeBron James of the NBA and his foundation recently opened a public school for at-risk students in his hometown of Akron, Ohio (Zahn, 2018). Alex Morgan, a gold medal winner from the women's national soccer team, has published multiple picturebooks (Morgan, 2017; Morgan, 2018). And Andrew Luck, the quarterback for the NFL's Indianapolis Colts, maintains an active book club and invites diverse people to participate (Andrew Luck Book Club, 2018). Such examples serve as powerful models for engaging students in YA sports literature and building literacy. And for many who struggle to find motivation in the classroom while experiencing deep, intrinsic motivation in athletics, YA sports literature can help create a positive and comfortable framework for literacy upon which teachers and students can build together.

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