Alan **Brown,** Wendell **Dunn,** Corrie A. **Knapp,** Sunday **Okeke,** and Elijah **Shalaway**

# Writing the Unwritten Rules of High School Sports with Young Adult Literature

*[Boobie Miles] felt good as he walked into the locker room of the Permian field house that morning and pulled on his jersey with the number 35 on it. He felt good at the pep rally as he and his teammates sat at the front of the gym in little metal chairs that were adorned with dozens of black and white balloons, the decorations making them look like little boys attending a gigantic birthday party. The wild cheering of the entire student body, two thousand strong, above him in the bleachers, the sweet hiss of the pom-poms from the cheerleaders, the sexy preening of the majorettes in their glittery black costumes with hair as intricately laced as frozen drizzles of ice and their tender Marilyn Monroe smiles, the way the lights dimmed during the playing of the alma mater, the little gifts of cookies and candy and cakes from the Pepettes . . . .* (Bissinger, 1990, pp. 3–4)

Ask your students how realistic they find this scene from H. G. Bissinger's nonfiction text, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream* (1990). Acknowledging that the scene takes place *during* the academic school day—on a Friday morning before an evening football game at Permian High School in Odessa, Texas—ask them to consider these follow-up questions: If you walked into Permian High School that same morning, would you believe the school cared more about academics or athletics? What might your responses suggest about the power dynamics at play within secondary schools across America?

Each fall semester, I (Alan Brown) teach a course called EDU 101: Issues and Trends in Education. My section of this thematic course invites Wake Forest University students to examine various intersections of sport, education, and society and the impact of sports culture on K–12 schools. Through the lens of critical sports literacy (Brown & Rodesiler, 2016)—a framework that encourages students and teachers to consider sports as an avenue for examining "the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations" (Morrell, 2005, p. 313)—I teach my students to examine the pros and cons of our country's societal emphasis on sports, as well as to deconstruct and redesign the meanings, values, and purposes of sports and sports culture in both education and community settings.

The three Cs of critical literacy (Wood & Jocius, 2013) guide this semester-long examination as students read and discuss *culturally* relevant texts in *collaboration* with one another and engage in *critical* conversations. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy shape the way we examine how language is constructed in print, in schools, and in society, encouraging us to 1) disrupt the commonplace, 2) interrogate multiple viewpoints, 3) focus on sociopolitical issues, and 4) take action and promote social justice.

EDU 101 incorporates both fiction and nonfiction texts, including young adult literature, as students examine understandings, generalizations, stereotypes, and misconceptions about the culture of sports in American schools in contrast to other educational settings around the world. Nonfiction and informational texts discussed during the semester include: Coakley's "Sports in High School and College: Do Competitive

Sports Contribute to Education?" (2015); Ripley's "The Case against High-School Sports" (2013); Bowen and Hitt's "High-School Sports Aren't Killing Academics" (2013); and Marx, James, Gilbert, and Kanopy's legendary film *Hoop Dreams* (1994).

Throughout the semester, students also read articles that explore the power relations intertwined in sports and education associated with topics such as student athletes taking a knee during the US national anthem to protest police violence against people of color (e.g., Safronova & Nikas, 2017; St. George, 2018), the dangers of brain trauma associated with school athletics (e.g., Bretzin, Covassin, & Fox, 2018; Flanagan, 2017b; Valovich McLeod, Wagner, & Bacon, 2017), concerns over specialization in youth sports (e.g., Farrey, 2017; Matz, 2014), the challenges faced by female and LGBTQ athletes and coaches (e.g., Andrews, 2017; Brown, 2012; Flanagan, 2017a), and the positive and negative impacts of academic teachers who work as athletic coaches in secondary schools (e.g., Brown & Wilson, in press).

Each semester, students also read at least two young adult novels selected by the instructor to help them examine and articulate how representations of sports culture are similar to or different from their own experiences as students and athletes. During this particular year, my students read Quick's *Boy21* (2012) and Crutcher's *Whale Talk* (2001). What follows is an overview of one of my most popular class projects, an inquiry that encourages students to explore their own lived experiences with academics and athletics in K–12 schools while using young adult literature as context upon which to view these experiences through a critical lens.

## Understanding the Nature and Impact of Unwritten Rules

### Defining Unwritten Rules

This project, entitled "The Unwritten Rules of High School Sports," was the culmination of a semester-long exploration into what award-winning author and journalist Robert Lipsyte (2011) has referred to as *jock culture* and its subsequent impact on K–12 schools. Lipsyte's view of jock culture is not about the essence of sports, but instead what he suggests is a distortion of sports, which he believes is overwhelmed by masculinity and power, fueled by greed and desperate competition, and pressurized by ambitious parents and coaches with a commitment to enforcing a win-at-all costs attitude. As my students come to learn through various course readings, the values of jock culture—regardless of its presence in urban, suburban, or rural settings—may permeate K–12 schools across the country despite the best intentions of adolescents and adults.

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The initial idea for considering the unwritten rules of high school sports comes from Kelly Gallagher's *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing through Modeling and Mentor Texts* (2011). In chapter three, which focuses on writing to inform and explain, Gallagher provides an activity called "Unwritten Rules" that begins with an excerpt from Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007). In this young adult novel, "the narrator, Junior, a [N]ative American relocated to an all-white school, shares the following unofficial and unwritten rules of fighting" (Gallagher, 2011, p. 75). Junior's rules for fighting begin like this:

> The Unofficial and Unwritten (but you better follow them or you're going to get beaten twice as hard) Spokane Indian Rules of Fisticuffs
> Rule 1: "If somebody insults you, then you have to fight him."
> Rule 2: "If you think someone is going to insult you, then you have to fight him."
> Rule 3: "If you think someone is thinking about insulting you, then you have to fight him." (Alexie, 2007, p. 61)

Eight more rules follow, and Gallagher (2011) invites students and teachers to consider Junior's list as a starting point for the unwritten rules of their own lives. For anyone not familiar with the idea of a sport's unwritten rules, Gallagher provides an example using the sport of baseball—his "unofficial and unwritten (but you better follow them if you want to be a baseball player) Rules of Baseball" (p. 76).

**With the work of Gallagher (2011) and Coleman (1961) as cornerstones, this class inquiry assignment begins something like this: "Imagine you met a stranger from another country who knows nothing about American high school sports. That person is interested in the emphasis schools place on sports and the culture it creates. This stranger is not interested in written, formal rules about sports, but instead wants to understand the unwritten rules related to sports culture. To help this stranger, create a list of unwritten rules that describe the social culture of school sports based on your own experiences and/or previous readings."**

Baseball itself is likely the sport with the most so-called unwritten rules, many of them confirmed as important by the history of the game, yet regularly embroiled in controversy as new generations of players take the field and push against them. A recent article from Miller (2018) takes a critical look at the history of unwritten rules in baseball and comes to a fascinating conclusion: unwritten rules are not really about "enforcing a rational code of play that exists for the good of the sport" but instead "are a scam that players run on each other to trick their opponents into acting against their own self-interests" (para. 3–4).

If you are not familiar with the unwritten rules of baseball, Gallagher's (2011) list is a good place to start. Miller's (2018) breakdown, however, is probably most helpful for fully understanding how these unwritten rules represent the power dynamics at play within sports culture:

> Run down the unwritten rules that are most enforced [in baseball,] and almost all of them hit these themes: "Don't bunt to break up a no-hitter because we want to throw a no-hitter." Brilliant! "Don't yell 'Ha!' right when we're about to catch a popup because that would startle us and we might drop it." I'm sure it would! . . . "Don't pimp home runs, because it makes us feel lousy (and you feel pumped up). Don't quick pitch—I'm not ready! Don't throw changeups in hitters' counts during a blowout because I'm trying to have a high batting average." (Miller, 2018, para. 10)

### Introducing the Unwritten Rules of High School Sports

Before introducing the unwritten rules, I introduce students to sociologist James Coleman, who penned an article in 1961 called "Athletics in High School" in which he wrote the following:

> The amount of attention devoted to athletics would be most striking to an innocent visitor to a high school. A visitor entering a school would likely be confronted, first of all, with a trophy case. His examination of the trophies would reveal a curious fact: The gold and silver cups, with rare exception, symbolize victory in athletic contests, not scholastic ones. . . . Altogether, the trophy case would suggest to the innocent visitor that he was entering an athletic club, not an educational institution. . . . As an impressionable stranger, this visitor might well suppose that more attention is paid to athletics by teen-agers, both as athletes and as spectators, than to scholastic matters. He might even conclude, with good reason, that the school was essentially organized around athletic contests and that scholastic matters were of lesser importance to all involved. (Coleman, 1961, p. 34)

With the work of Gallagher (2011) and Coleman (1961) as cornerstones, this class inquiry assignment begins something like this: "Imagine you met a stranger from another country who knows nothing about American high school sports. That person is interested in the emphasis schools place on sports and the culture it creates. This stranger is not interested in written, formal rules about sports, but instead wants to understand the unwritten rules related to sports culture. To help this stranger, create a list of unwritten rules that describe the social culture of school sports based on your own experiences and/or previous readings."

To begin the project, I introduce students to the concept of the unwritten rules of high school sports by asking them to read an excerpt from *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher (pp. 16–18). The excerpt introduces protagonist The Tao (T. J.) Jones, his English teacher, and future swim coach, Mr. Simet. T. J. has been described by Sieben and Brown (2017) this way:

> [T. J. is] an athletic six-foot-two senior who weighs in at a little under 200 pounds of pure muscle, [and] is a born

> athlete who excels at every sport he plays. T. J. has never been interested in organized athletics despite the best efforts of high school coaches across various sports, primarily because he has trouble with authority, and most athletic coaches at Cutter High School demand respect whether they have earned it or not. (p. 149)

T. J. only agrees to join the school's new swim team when he sees football player Mike Barbour bullying Chris Coughlin, a student with traumatic brain injury whose older brother was killed as a senior in high school. Mike is bullying him for wearing his dead brother's varsity letter jacket, an honor Mike does not believe Chris deserves. In that moment, T. J. stands up for Chris and ultimately decides to form a swim team in hopes that this group of misfits will do just well enough to earn each member a varsity letter jacket, a tactic assured to anger the protectors of jock culture at Cutter High School.

T. J. describes sports culture at Cutter High School as follows: "Cutter is *such* a jock school; they pray before games and cajole you to play out of obligation, and fans scream obscenities at one another from the stands, actually creating rivalries between *towns*, which has always seemed crazy to me" (Crutcher, 2001, p. 17). As students read the full-length excerpt, I ask them to consider the unwritten rules of high school sports based on T. J.'s perspective. After reading this excerpt, students' unwritten rules usually include: 1) Coaches will force you to pray before a game even if your religion does not match theirs or you are areligious; 2) If you are athletic, you are expected to play sports whether you like them or not; 3) Fans—short for fanatics—only care about you if you help their team win; 4) High school sports create bitter, divisive rivalries between schools and towns who may have no reason to dislike one another except through athletic competition.

### Brainstorming the Unwritten Rules of High School Sports

This year, I invited my EDU 101 students—including coauthors Wendell Dunn, Corrie Knapp, Sunday Okeke, and Elijah Shalaway—to complete the unwritten rules of high school sports assignment by writing at least ten unwritten rules each. The class contained a total of 20 students from across the United States, including 13 who identified as male and 7 who identified as female. Eleven students were in their first year of college, having graduated from high school the previous year, and 8 students were second-year college students. The remaining student, Wendell Dunn, was a fifth-year senior who enrolled in the class prior to beginning graduate school; he had helped me to organize a sports literacy program for eighth-grade boys at a nearby middle school. More than half of the students identified as university student athletes; their sports included men's football, women's volleyball, men's basketball, women's cheerleading, women's basketball, men's soccer, men's track and field, men's golf, and men's cross-country. Each of this article's coauthors were university student athletes during that semester—Wendell Dunn in football, Corrie Knapp in cheerleading, Sunday Okeke in basketball, and Elijah Shalaway in track and field.

**[W]hat these rules reflect is a critical perspective on aspects of the social culture of sports in K–12 schools, a perspective that deserves deliberation not only by students, but also by the adults who work in academic institutions that engage in school-based interscholastic athletics.**

After students submitted their more than 200 unwritten rules, I eliminated any that functioned as formal rules of sport or were not clearly articulated based on the purposes of the assignment. In the end, 132 unwritten rules were maintained, and I asked students to categorize them based on similarities in topics. After the semester ended, the coauthors and I took a closer look at these categories of unwritten rules, eventually finalizing a list of 17 categories within four major themes, including: 1) benefits of sports in K–12 schools, 2) increased social status of student athletes, 3) greater emphasis on men's sports over women's sports, and 4) greater emphasis on athletic achievement over academic achievement.

These themes and their relevant categories are described in the section below and include sample unwritten rules. It is important to note that these unwritten rules do not necessarily reflect the consensus beliefs of my students. In fact, some of our most intense conversations of the semester came during

discussions about students' perceptions of certain unwritten rules. Nevertheless, what these rules reflect is a critical perspective on aspects of the social culture of sports in K–12 schools, a perspective that deserves deliberation not only by students, but also by the adults who work in academic institutions that engage in school-based interscholastic athletics.

We acknowledge that these unwritten rules may not apply to all schools and settings, and the findings may look different depending on the demographic makeup of the students enrolled in the class, such as a class with a greater number of students who do not identify as student athletes. However, given the pedagogical focus of this article, we hope students and educators at all levels will consider the implications for these unwritten rules of high school sports and engage in critical conversations about how they reflect power dynamics in K–12 schools, just as we have done in EDU 101.

### Organizing the Unwritten Rules of High School Sports

The first theme is called "Benefits of Sports in K–12 Schools" and consists of four categories: 1) positive impact on students, 2) positive impact on schools, 3) positive impact on community, and 4) perks of being a student athlete. Findings and sample unwritten rules can be found in Table 1.

The second theme is called "Increased Social Status of Student-Athletes" and consists of six categories: 1) popularity of student athletes in schools and communities, 2) likelihood of student athletes, especially star athletes, to receive social recognition, 3) pride in being a student athlete, 4) relationship status of student athletes, 5) isolation of student athletes, and 6) expectations of non-athletes. Findings and sample unwritten rules can be found in Table 2.

The third theme is called "Greater Emphasis on Men's Sports over Women's Sports" and consists of three categories: 1) greater attention paid to men's sports in schools, 2) sexism and high school sports, and 3) greater attendance for men's athletic events. Findings and sample unwritten rules can be found in Table 3.

The fourth theme is called "Greater Emphasis on Athletic Achievement over Academic Achievement" and consists of four categories: 1) representations of athletic achievement, 2) the prioritizing of athletic achievement over academic achievement, 3) eligibility not excellence, and 4) preferential treatment from adults. Findings and sample unwritten rules can be found in Table 4.

## Exploring the Unwritten Rules of High School Sports through Young Adult Literature

Once students have compiled their individual lists, collected and categorized their unwritten rules, and discussed the implications as a class, we return to young adult literature to compare their findings with the unwritten rules located in fictional texts by some of the most popular young adult novelists. During this particular semester, my students and I focused on Crutcher's *Whale Talk,* although teachers may also choose to consider other young adult novels, or excerpts from them, such as Quick's *Boy21* (2012), Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), Lipsyte's *Raiders Night* (2006), Kiely's *Tradition* (2018), Konigsberg's *Out of the Pocket*

**Table 1.** Benefits of sports in K–12 schools

| Category | Sample Unwritten Rules from Students |
|---|---|
| Positive impact on students | • Athletics prevent students from dropping out of school.<br>• Participating in sports encourages students to attend classes on a regular basis. |
| Positive impact on schools | • Winning sports teams foster greater school spirit.<br>• Becoming a star athlete will draw sponsors to your school. |
| Positive impact on community | • Athletes are honorable and represent the spirit of the school.<br>• Athletic accomplishments bring recognition to school and community. |
| Perks of being a student athlete | • Star athletes get special treatment around their community.<br>• If you are a successful athlete in town, people will look out for you, and even give you free things. |

**Table 2.** Increased social status of student athletes

| Category | Sample Unwritten Rules from Students |
|---|---|
| Popularity of student athletes in schools and communities | • You are more popular if you play a sport.<br>• If you do not play sports, no one knows you. |
| Likelihood of student athletes, especially star athletes, to receive social recognition | • The sport you play defines your identity.<br>• Athletes are the face of the school.<br>• Prom King and Queen are usually star athletes. |
| Pride in being a student athlete | • Sports teams are the pride and joy of the school.<br>• Athletic accomplishments give alumni and boosters a sense of pride about their school. |
| Relationship status of student athletes | • Dating a star athlete boosts social status.<br>• Athletes date athletes. |
| Isolation of student athletes | • Athletes associate themselves primarily with teammates and other athletes.<br>• Band kids and athletes are not friends. |
| Expectations of non-athletes | • Students who are not on an athletic team are expected to attend the games and provide support to the players.<br>• Athletes get non-athletes to write their papers and do their homework for them. |

**Table 3.** Greater emphasis on men's sports over women's sports

| Category | Sample Unwritten Rules from Students |
|---|---|
| Greater attention paid to men's sports in schools | • Pep rallies are most often held for football teams.<br>• No matter how good a women's sports team is, it will always be overshadowed by men's sports. |
| Sexism and high school sports | • The football player's girlfriend wears the player's away jersey to the home games.<br>• Female athletes are not viewed as feminine. |
| Greater attendance for men's athletic events | • Women's sports do not get as big of a student section as men's sports.<br>• Women's basketball games are just a warm-up for the excitement of the men's game. |

**Table 4.** Greater emphasis on athletic achievement over academic achievement

| Category | Sample Unwritten Rules from Students |
|---|---|
| Representations of athletic achievement | • Banners and trophies for athletic achievement are displayed proudly in places they will be seen.<br>• Academic achievement is not represented through banners or trophies.<br>• Team captains on athletic teams are based on athletic performance instead of leadership.<br>• People use athletic facilities to judge the quality of the school.<br>• Jocks are perceived as dumb. |
| The prioritizing of athletic achievement over academic achievement | • On game day, school does not matter.<br>• Athletes are more embarrassed about losing a game than failing a test.<br>• A good football program is more important to a school than a good math program.<br>• Teachers who are coaches care more about the sport they coach than the classes they teach.<br>• Parents are your biggest fans but also put the most pressure on you.<br>• The media pay more attention to athletics than academics. |
| Eligibility not excellence | • Athletes do not try to get the highest score when taking an entrance exam; they only try to get a score high enough for NCAA eligibility.<br>• Athletes are held to a lower academic standard compared to everyone else. |
| Preferential treatment from adults | • Athletes are given special treatment by their teachers to get good grades.<br>• If you are an athlete, teachers will be more lenient with you.<br>• If athletes get in trouble, they are punished by coaches at practice rather than by administrators at the school.<br>• Rarely do school rules apply to athletes. |

(2008), or Klass and Klass's *Second Impact: Making the Hardest Call of All* (2013).

After reading *Whale Talk* in its entirety, students were encouraged to identify the categories of unwritten rules that were most prevalent in Crutcher's novel and explore how realistic they seem today. Ultimately, my students were intrigued by how many similarities they found relative to their own experiences in a book that was not only written almost 20 years ago, but took place in Spokane, Washington, a setting none of my students had ever visited. As students read, I asked them to make notes on which of their own unwritten rules connected directly to the novel. We called this list "*The Unwritten Rules of High School Sports:* Whale Talk *Edition*." Here are a few examples:

- Sports create a social hierarchy in high schools.
- Athletes are given special treatment by their teachers to get good grades.
- The quarterback on the football team is considered the king of the student population.
- Wearing a letterman's jacket boosts your social status.
- A large percentage of staff members at a high school have jobs that revolve around sports: head coaches, athletic directors, assistant coaches, trainers, and field maintenance workers.
- Booster clubs may raise thousands of dollars for the football program and none for the academic mission of the school.
- In the end, there are always winners and losers.

*Whale Talk* served as an important tool in helping students to take a closer look at how the power dynamics of school sports shape the experiences of all students. Ultimately, my students identified the power structures in *Whale Talk* in ways that were similar to their own unwritten rules of high school sports: a focus on social recognition through masculinity and men's sports (i.e., football, wrestling) as reflected through physical possessions (i.e., letterman jackets), school events (i.e., pep rallies), and personnel hierarchies (i.e., Letterman's Club, Athletic Council, school administration). Many of these power structures are similar to the ones Bissinger (1990) found in Permian High School during his writing of *Friday Night Lights*.

## Conclusion

> *After the pep rally, [Boobie Miles] went to class, but it was impossible to concentrate. He sat there in a daze, the messages of algebra and biology and English lost to him. Like most of his other teammates on game day, he couldn't be bothered with classes. They were irrelevant, a sidelight to the true purpose of going to Permian High School: to play football for the Panthers. Only one thought crossed his mind as he sat in those antiseptic, whitewashed classrooms until the middle of the afternoon, and it didn't have anything to do with schoolwork.* (Bissinger, 1990, pp. 4–5)

This examination of the social culture of sports in K–12 schools feels as relevant today as it did in 1961 when James Coleman wondered if an impressionable stranger might walk into a school and conclude that the "school was essentially organized around athletic contests and that scholastic matters were of lesser importance to all involved" (p. 34). Allowing students to read, write, and explore the unwritten rules of high school sports may be a useful approach for promoting critical conversations and social collaborations among diverse student groups—with or without an interest in sports—through the use of culturally relevant literature (Wood & Jocius, 2013), including fiction (e.g., Crutcher, 2001) and nonfiction (e.g., Bissinger, 1990) texts.

In returning to the four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & Sluys, 2002), we believe this assignment has the potential to encourage students to 1) disrupt the commonplace, 2) interrogate multiple viewpoints, 3) focus on sociopolitical issues, and 4) take action and promote social justice, all while exploring power dynamics that cause many American schools to place disproportionate emphasis on interscholastic athletics. My students ultimately accounted for the first three dimensions of critical literacy within this project, but not the fourth—taking action and promoting social justice.

With this limitation in mind, we strongly believe that the most powerful space for taking action and promoting social justice in the context of this type of assignment will not be found in a university classroom, but instead in a middle or high school setting; there, in classes filled with young people from all backgrounds and with diverse extracurricular interests, students can work alongside teachers and

coaches willing to engage in critical discussions about the mission of academic institutions. We imagine remarkable possibilities for students and teachers to create memorable and constructive conversations about many of the categories listed in the tables above. For instance, schools might reimagine pep rallies for academic excellence, create booster clubs intended to support academics or the arts, reorganize athletic schedules to feature women's athletics in prime time, or find ways to bridge the gap between student and student athlete populations. If nothing more, classes should be encouraged to take a hard look at the perspectives of all students within a school setting and decide for themselves whose voices are most commonly emphasized and whose voices are more often marginalized when it comes to school and sports.

At a moment when sports have become a barometer for many social justice issues in America, there is no better time to consider the impact of sports culture on middle and high school students. In reading young adult literature, students have an opportunity to consider the pros and cons of the emphasis so many schools place on athletic pursuits and consider how they may connect or disconnect with the intersection of academics and athletics in their own K–12 education experiences. If we take time to allow students to deconstruct and redesign the unwritten rules of high school sports, our schools might become safer and more enjoyable places for all students to learn, whether they identify as student athletes or not.

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