



## RIGHT TO READ

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# Censored Young Adult Sports Novels:

Entry Points for Understanding Issues of Identities and Equity

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In early 2018, first-year high school student Ny'Shira Lundy challenged the banning of Angie Thomas's (2017) young adult novel *The Hate U Give*, which for reasons of vulgarity, was temporarily removed from shelves in Katy, Texas. In February 2018, the more public and privileged National Basketball Association (NBA) players, LeBron James and Kevin Durant, were also challenged, this time by political talk show host Laura Ingraham, who reacted to the players' unfavorable public comments about the President of the United States. "Must they run their mouths like that?" Ingraham (ingrahamangle, 2018) asked. "Unfortunately, a lot of kids—and some adults—take these ignorant comments seriously. And it's always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid a hundred million dollars a year to bounce a ball" (Bonesteel & Bieler, 2018). On social media, the hashtag #ShutUpAndDribble exploded.

In response to their situations, Lundy and James turned to social media to preserve their perspectives in the public conversation. James said, "Me having this platform. I'm just trying to shed a positive light on what I feel is right. Am I always right? Can I have everybody follow me? I don't think so. But I feel what's right. I'm looking at my boys right here, teaching them what's right and what's wrong, and we'll

see what happens next" (Bontemps & Pell, 2018).

As an athlete, a father, a public figure, and a citizen, James leveraged his platform to share his experiences and to forward his sense of what is right and wrong. Meanwhile, in Texas, Lundy's rallying of forces for free speech through social media eventually led to the book returning to library shelves (Hutchful, 2018).

In these two cases, we see a struggle over whose stories can be shared in public spaces: we see the practices of inclusion and exclusion at play. We argue in this column that issues of identity and equity are at stake when stories are excluded from communities. That is, how people see and understand themselves in relation to others (identity) and whose needs are shared and met (equity) are limited when certain stories are not circulated in a community. To illustrate, we examine the stories of athletes in two challenged or censored young adult novels.

We turn our attention to stories of athletes for two reasons. First, these stories are familiar to young people; over 21.5 million American youth ages 6–17—roughly 4 out of every 5 American children—will participate in some level of organized youth or high school sport during their lifetime (Kelley & Carchia, 2013). Second, these stories inherently involve different identities and affiliations because athletes perform both on and off the field of play. These clear boundaries of "on the field" and "off the field" mean that the characters' processes of moving between spaces (childhood/adulthood; work/play; family/friends; local community/global marketplace, etc.) are explicit parts of the story, and these processes are ones that

every person, including youth readers, experiences (Dyson, 2018). Because stories of athletes can raise issues of identity, inclusion, and equity in ways that are both familiar and explicit, they offer educators and readers an entry point for more sustained inquiries into these issues, especially as these issues become less clear or more distant from the lived experiences of students.

## Stories of Athletes Are Stories of Dynamic and Contextual Identities

Stories of athletes can serve as entry points for understanding how identities are dynamic rather than stable (Galindo, 2007), how they depend upon a given time and place (Gee, 2000), and how they can contradict themselves and influence behaviors within social interactions (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; McCarthey & Moje, 2002). To be sure, athletes are not the only group of people whose stories reveal the dynamic, contextual, and sometimes contradictory nature of identities, but their stories can be accessible and explicit in showing how people navigate the ways identities are “situated in relationships” and how “power plays a role in how identities get enacted and how people get positioned on the basis of those identities” (McCarthey & Moje, 2002, p. 231).

Two young adult novels that feature the stories of athletes and that have been challenged or censored in recent years include Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* and Matt de la Peña’s (2008) *Mexican Whiteboy*. *The Hate U Give* shares the story of Starr Carter, a 16-year-old African American female basketball player who witnesses a police officer shoot and kill her friend Khalil. Starr’s response to this tragedy underscores a personal understanding of who she is and who she wants to become in her communities, namely in her neighborhood and at her private school. Her response also reveals the way Starr identifies herself within her family, her friendships, and her romantic relationship. She understands and accepts the risks of speaking out publicly to make sure Khalil’s story is shared, and she does so as the niece of a police officer and the daughter of a store owner and man who was once incarcerated. People in each of these communities react to Starr in myriad ways, and she navigates acts of inclusion and exclusion, all of which lead her to understand herself, others, and the various visible

and invisible institutions and systems that create both opportunities and limitations in her life.

Similarly, *Mexican Whiteboy* focuses on baseball athlete Danny Lopez, who navigates a number of acts of inclusion and exclusion in his various communities—as a mixed-race person, as an English speaker around family members who speak Spanish, as a son raised by his mother but loyal to his father, as a pitcher who can throw 95 miles-per-hour fastballs but who cannot control where the ball goes, and as a quiet person surrounded by boisterous family and friends.

Danny’s story is the story of a young person trying to make sense of himself and others over the course of a pivotal summer—a summer with his father’s family and with unexpected friendships and life lessons.

Both books have made national headlines for what seem to be circuitous objections to perceived racial bias and offenses in the United States as told through the voices of protagonist athletes, though in these cases, the bias is atypical, since the objectors claim that the authors unfairly critique white police officers for their treatment of people of color. In the summer of 2018, *The Hate U Give* was challenged by a local police union when it was offered as a summer reading selection at Wando High School in the Charleston County School District. The book was one of eight possible reading choices for ninth grade and was not a mandated reading. The police union objected to the portrayal of police brutality (Diaz, 2018). Subsequently, a committee was formed to inquire further into the challenge. *The Hate U Give* was #8 on the list of Top Ten Most Challenged Books of 2017 (Banned and Challenged Books, 2018), according to the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom;

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reasons cited were vulgarity, drug use, profanity, and offensive language—reasons that seem to dance around the inequitable treatment of African Americans, inducing the need for such language and despair to describe such realities. According to the same

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website, however, *The Hate U Give* was also the most searched for book on the popular book review website Goodreads.

In January of 2012, the State of Arizona initiated steps to ban a Mexican American Studies program from Tucson high schools. This program was the result of a student-led lawsuit in the 1970s that aimed to ameliorate the effects of past discriminations against people of color. However, Arizona's Superintendent of Public Instruction encouraged the

state government to withhold funding to the school district of Tucson in accordance with his belief that the Mexican American Studies program was engineered to “promote resentment toward a race or a class of people” (Strauss, 2017). After numerous attempts, the curriculum was terminated. Fallout from this decision attached *Mexican Whiteboy* to a list of books that could no longer be taught—in a school district that is 60 percent Latino. Five years later, the law was struck down by a federal judge who found the legislation unconstitutional, ruling that its attempted enforcement fulfilled an “invidious discriminatory racial purpose” (Strauss, 2017). In this case, the book was also banned on racial grounds—yet another attempt to silence an athlete of color's story.

### **Inclusion Is a Practice with Different Dimensions**

To understand how inclusion is practiced in the stories of Starr and Danny, we draw upon the work of Maria del Carmen Salazar and colleagues (del Carmen Salazar, Norton, & Tuitt, 2009), who use the metaphor of dimensions to explain how teachers can practice

inclusive excellence. They share five dimensions that work together: intrapersonal awareness, interpersonal awareness, curricular transformation, inclusive pedagogy, and inclusive learning environments. We focus on the first two dimensions, intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness, because they offer means of understanding how young people interact with others within their own contexts and communities. Understanding how intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness are practiced in these fictional stories can help us understand how we and our students might practice such awareness in our own lives.

### **Intrapersonal Awareness: Being Aware of One's Own Values and Assumptions**

Starr and Danny are characters who engage in a process of becoming more self-aware, a critical component in understanding differences (Banks, 2004). This process has at least two key steps: 1) examining where and how one's worldview (ideas, assumptions, values) has developed and how it shapes one's choices (Elenes, 2006) and 2) identifying similarities and differences between one's culture and the cultures of others (del Carmen Salazar et al., 2009).

One way in which Starr and Danny begin to identify the roots of their worldviews is in how they each pay attention in their various communities. Often their observations begin with references to their respective sports of basketball and baseball; Starr mentions objects like basketball shoes and posters, and Danny notices the way people play baseball. They pay attention to what they see in objects and actions, and then they widen their sense making by paying attention to situations and relationships through the lens of their sports. One example surfaces when Starr talks about the ease with which she and her two friends play basketball together, while acknowledging how their off-the-court decisions are not as in sync with one another. Starr says, “. . . for some reason Hailey makes decisions and Maya and I follow along. It's not like we planned to be this way. Sometimes the shit just happens, and one day you realize there's a leader among you and your friends and it's not you” (p. 108). A few paragraphs later, Starr describes the way the three friends play basketball together: “No matter what's going on, when Hailey, Maya, and I play together, it's rhythm, chemistry, and skill rolled into a ball of amazingness” (p. 109).

Starr is acutely aware of the differences between her neighborhood community, Garden Heights, and her private school community of Williamson Prep. This awareness plays out in a particular moment with Chris, her white boyfriend. She explains, “God. Being two different people is so exhausting. I’ve taught myself to speak with two different voices and only say certain things around certain people. I’ve mastered it. As much as I say I don’t have to choose which Starr I am with Chris, maybe without realizing it, I have to an extent. Part of me feels like I can’t exist around people like him” (p. 301). Starr engages in a process of becoming more self-aware. It is a process that begins with basketball as an entry point, but it expands to other areas of her life. We see Starr become aware of the ways that her thoughts and actions lead back to her family and her relationships with others—as a sister, daughter, basketball player, female, African American, Garden Heights resident, Williamson student athlete, neighbor, and witness to a police officer shooting and killing her friend. Starr makes observations from these multiple roles and identities, and her story is one in which she navigates what it means when some of them overlap, change, or contradict one another.

Danny’s developing self-awareness is on full display, too. His story begins when he visits his father’s family, a setting in which he has felt connected in some ways and distant in others. Early on, he sees a group of boys playing stickball, and he wants nothing more than to be playing rather than watching. Eventually, he plays, which leads to opportunities for him to be accepted into the group. As the story progresses, readers come to understand how Danny’s interest in baseball has its roots in his relationship with his father and how that relationship shapes the way he makes sense of himself and his relationship in the world. For example, when Danny writes a letter to his father, who he has not seen in years, he writes about baseball, and then he “holds the pencil above the paper, thinking: I’m a white boy among Mexicans, and a Mexican among white boys” (p. 90). Danny’s focus on baseball is the entry point in the process of becoming self-aware. He begins by paying attention to baseball—how he plays and its effect on how others identify him and how he self-identifies—and that leads him to ask questions about his other relationships, including those with his parents, extended family, new

friends, romantic interest, and baseball team at his private school.

Self-awareness guides the behavior of Starr and Danny. They ask themselves questions about why they do what they do and, importantly, why they think their actions might be wise ones. The father of Danny’s friend Uno explains, “A wise man don’t just consider the shit he sees, Uno, he considers what’s *behind* the shit he sees” (p. 31). As Starr and Danny become more self-aware, they begin to look behind their actions, and they come to understand that their values and assumptions come from relationships with a wide range of communities—sports, families, friendships, romance, neighborhoods—and from their various roles and identities, such as race, class, age, and gender.

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### **Interpersonal Awareness: Being Open to Change through Dialogue with Others**

Starr and Danny also become aware of how other people make sense of their worlds. This kind of interpersonal awareness includes at least three key components: 1) recognizing multiple perspectives, 2) understanding and revisiting relational norms, and 3) recognizing overt and covert forms of conflict (del Carmen Salazar et al., 2009). As Starr and Danny develop their interpersonal awareness, they respond in ways that cut across these three traits. When faced with a range of perspectives that do not make sense to them, both characters turn inward, toward silence. Only over time do they allow themselves to become vulnerable by engaging in dialogue with others. This turn toward silence contrasts with the clear-cut actions they know and expect when they play their

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respective sports. Indeed, Danny barely speaks and is known for his silence, and when Starr is faced with experiencing injustices and traumas, she grapples with

the decision of whether or not to speak up. Silence is a place in which to identify the way people position themselves, and Starr's and Danny's respective silences reveal that they position themselves as outsiders looking in and that power does not always circulate within a community.

Danny's use of silence mirrors what San Pedro (2015) calls "silence as shields." In his study of how Native American secondary students experienced an ethnic studies course titled, "Native American Literature," San Pedro found that when the

students' knowledge countered the dominant settler knowledge taught in schools, the students used their silence critically to "shield their identities from dominant paradigms" (p. 134). Silence used as a shield means that silence is not biological, inherent, and/or cultural, but is instead "agentive, resilient, and transformative because it reflects [students'] overt attempt[s] to have their multiple truths, perspectives, and realities included within schooling spaces" (pp. 134–135).

Danny uses silence as a shield, too, as exemplified in this excerpt from *Mexican Whiteboy*:

Ever since his father left, Danny has drifted apart from his mother. He hardly even acknowledges her presence these days. She's the reason he went quiet in the first place. The reason his father's gone, the reason he's whitewashed and an outsider even with his own family. But whenever his mom got stuck it's another story. It's hard to stay mad.

And here he is stuck himself now, meaning he's depressed. Because all he's felt like doing for the past five days is hiding out in Sofia's bedroom, on his cot, digging into the inside of his nails to remind him he's a real person.

He has to keep away from people so he can think things over. (p. 41)

As San Pedro argues, silence can be an act of

resistance, and at times, inquiring into silence can help people see where there might be an inequitable system, an inherent unfairness, or a lack of control or agency, all of which make it hard to change that system. Danny sees that in his mother and father's relationship, he had no control. However, inclusiveness is a practice of not only having one's voice invited and included, but also of having the potential to change others. Danny does not see how his ideas could change his mother or father or their relationship, so he uses silence and feels excluded. As his story progresses, Danny turns toward these troubles, sharing his thoughts and creating space for change, rather than trying to control his parents or their relationship.

Early in Starr's story, we learn that she and her teammates avoid the conversation about Starr's neighborhood. Starr explains, "It's weird talking to them about Garden Heights. We never do. I'm always afraid one of them will call it 'the ghetto' . . . I can call Garden Heights the ghetto all I want. Nobody else can" (p. 13). Starr wants to avoid these "uncomfortable truths," and her silence is used as a shield and as a way to keep her communities separate. When her communities begin to intersect after her classmates organize a protest for Khalil's death, Starr is unsettled and angry:

"You know what?" I say, one second from really going off. "Leave me alone. Have fun in your little protest."

I wanna fight every person I pass, Floyd Mayweather style. They're so damn excited about getting a day off. Khalil's in a grave. He can't get a day off from that shit. I live it every single day too . . . I think I'm done following Hailey. (pp. 182–184)

Later, after Starr speaks up publicly, she exchanges text messages with Hailey, shutting down her silence and speaking and acting upon her truth:

You see, it's like my mom said—if the good outweighs the bad, I should keep Hailey as a friend. There's a shit ton of bad now, an *overload* of bad. I hate to admit that a teeny-tiny part of me hoped Hailey would see how wrong she was, but she hasn't. She may not ever see that.

And you know what, that's fine. Okay, maybe not *fine*, because that makes her a shitty-ass person, but I don't have to wait around for her to change. I can let go. I reply:

*Things will never be the way they used to be.*

I hit send, wait for the text to go through, and delete the conversation. I delete Hailey's number from my phone too. (pp. 432–433)

Starr is willing to engage in dialogue with a teammate,

but she enforces boundaries on the relationship. Starr is self-aware, willing to break her silence, and open to learning, but she also chooses not to try to change someone else. Instead, she lets go of the friendship. We see Starr turning toward uncomfortable truths; while these truths create opportunities for others to change, Starr does not take responsibility for the choices other people make.

When Starr and Danny each open themselves up to dialogue with others, they also open themselves to being changed by the experience. Their willingness to be vulnerable allows others into their spheres, and it changes their own actions and thoughts. From their intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness stems a sense of self that allows them to abandon trying to control other people and situations and to determine how they will think and act as they navigate their shifting roles and communities.

## **Inclusion Is a Practice with Equity as the Goal**

Starr's and Danny's stories are the stories of athletes. They are the stories of young people who grow in their self-awareness and in their abilities to open up to others in their lives. They are stories of characters whose identities change through relationships and contexts. And they are stories like the ones we see young people—and older people, too—experience in our schools and communities.

When these stories are excluded from the conversations in our schools and communities, we see at play a type of censorship that Boyd and Bailey (2009) call “censorship as patina.” This is a form of censorship that serves “to cover, hide, or obscure the ideas for deepening concepts, seeing from different perspectives, and understanding universal qualities of human events” (p. 656). In response to her school district removing *The Hate U Give* from its library shelves, Ny'Shira Lundy led a petition drive, wrote a letter to the superintendent, spoke at a school board meeting, and eventually began and led an online book club. Lundy responded as a literacy advocate, in part because she saw herself in the novel—a young African American woman enrolled in a predominantly white school. Like LeBron James, Lundy used her own platforms to expose that patina and reveal what she believed to be right. She became inspired by Angie

Thomas' decision to write novels that “speak on issues in overlooked communities” (Lundy, 2018).

As educators, we want to create the conditions that help us understand the needs of all of our students. That is, we see equity as a goal. To work toward this goal, we need to engage in inclusive practices, which means not only inviting a range of stories into our classrooms, but also being open to being changed by these stories. While we know that at times we might be walking on a tightrope, “teetering between what [we] know is good pedagogical practice, what [our] students need and want, what their parents demand, and what school administrators ask [us] to do” (Boyd & Baily, 2009, p. 658), we also know that it is critical to offer our students multiple opportunities to see fictional characters navigating the multiple identities and affiliations that shape the stories they tell about themselves and the stories that others make available to them. We believe the stories of athletes offer one such entry point. When we exclude such stories, the young people we lead miss out on the ways people respond to their multiple and changing relationships, identities, and affiliations, which in turn means that we miss out on understanding one another's needs and experiences.

What we learn from Starr's and Danny's stories is that athletes' lives, like everyone's lives, are layered and complicated, informed by their pasts, and always evolving. We come to understand that we are connected to others and shaped by inner thoughts as well as outer constraints and opportunities. When we include such stories and when we are open to learning from them, we practice being inclusive, thus creating the opportunity for more perspectives to be understood and more of our community members' needs to be met.

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