

Lizzie, Mamie, & Mo'ne: Exploring Issues of Racism, Classism, and Sexism in Baseball

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*This paper considers intersectional social identities of race, class, and gender through an examination of women in baseball from the late 1800s to today. At its core, the article revolves around a fictional character named Lizzie Bright Griffin from Gary Schmidt's (2004) adolescent novel *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* while interweaving dynamic historic and contemporary baseball figures, including Mamie "Peanut" Johnson and Mo'ne Davis, ultimately inviting readers to consider what it would mean for a new generation of young women to overcome racial prejudice, class differences, and gender discrimination to find opportunity and success in the game of baseball.*

He tossed her his glove. She caught it and held it like a dream that had dropped right out of the bright blue sky into her outstretched hand. She tossed the ball back to him and then, slowly, as if it were a ceremony, she put the glove over her hand. She flexed it, held it up over her face and smelled it, then held it out again. She punched her right hand into it. 'Throw me the ball,' she said. (Schmidt, 2004, p. 56)

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, I (Alan Brown) was invited to present an insight session at the 37th annual Youngstown State University English Festival. The keynote speaker that year was Dr. Gary Schmidt, professor of English at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and author of best-selling young adult novels such as *Okay for Now* (Schmidt, 2011), *Wednesday Wars* (Schmidt, 2007), and *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (Schmidt, 2004). Insight sessions are described as short presentations in which scholars and subject matter experts lead a discussion on a topic specific to one of the festival books.

At the request of festival co-chair Dr. Gary Salvner, I focused my session on *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, a middle-grades novel that includes a focus on sports as a means of belonging. During the festival, I had the privilege of working with some remarkable seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students who shared my interest in learning about sports and history, and I left Youngstown State University overwhelmed by my festival experience and enthralled by the story of *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*.

As months turned into years, Lizzie Bright Griffin became a character who stuck with me. Recently, I found a review in *English Journal* where Allen Pace Nilsen described the many tumultuous twists and turns in the book's closing chapters and acknowledged, "I will confess that I shed real tears as I finished the book, and I know it is one that I won't soon forget" (Nilsen, Blasingame, & Donelson, 2005, p. 108). Like Nilsen, I feel that same sensation today. For me, this article represents five years of wonderment that I have been thankful to share with my colleague and co-author, Dani Parker Moore. This inquiry process is what we want for our own students in hopes that they will become so inspired by a book that it motivates them to learn more, to dig deeper, and to ask critical questions about important social, cultural, and political issues, connecting past and present while looking toward a future that requires careful reflection and moral perspective.

In the classroom setting, Glenn (2016) encourages students and teachers "to evaluate sports literature through questioning the assumptions it holds, [so teachers] can help students generate, analyze, consider, and critique multiple interpretations and come to a more reasoned understanding of their own assumptions" (p. 2). Similarly, Brown & Rodesiler (2016) have called on English educators to consider inserting sports into the framework of critical literacy in order to foster shared conversations where students have a chance to deconstruct and redesign "the meanings, values, and purposes of sports and sports culture" (p. xxiii). Challenging students to read through the lens of critical sports literacy invites them to explore power dynamics in their reading of sports and society. Norris, Lucas, and Prudhoe (2012) suggest that "critical literacy views text meaning-making as a process of social construction with a particularly critical eye towards elements of the various historical, social, and political contexts involved" (p. 59). Meanwhile, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) provide a useful framework to encourage educators to consider four interrelated dimensions of critical literacy: (1) "disrupting the commonplace," (2) "interrogating multiple viewpoints," (3) "focusing on sociopolitical issues," and (4) "taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382).

Lewis et al.'s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy will direct our pedagogical approach to this article, but we also build on the tenets of historical literacy, which Donnelly (2018) defines as moving “beyond the memorisation [*sic*] of names, events and dates and...[is] commonly used for higher-order capacities related to historical thinking, understanding and research” (p. 115). Donnelly goes on to suggest that “students’ lifeworlds are populated with representations of the past and they need to be skilled in critical historical literacy to evaluate their validity and trustworthiness” (p. 115). Downey and Long (2016) provide a framework to help educators get learning underway, build historical knowledge, and apply learning in the context of historical literacy. Aspects of their framework will also guide our approach to historical and textual analysis.

We begin, however, with *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (Schmidt, 2004), a novel that has the potential to engage students in critical conversations about timely aspects of American history while making connections to sports and sports culture, including the history of women in baseball. It is, in fact, through baseball that the book’s characters first begin to interact and learn valuable lessons about racial, social, and political inequities and discrimination, which seems fitting since baseball is considered a sport that has historically and purposefully enforced race, class, and gender hierarchies (Ring, 2009). Through this article, we invite the reader to explore issues of racism, classism, and sexism in baseball by learning more about the intersectional experiences of Lizzie Bright Griffin, Mamie Johnson, and Mo’ne Davis.

OVERVIEW OF *LIZZIE BRIGHT AND THE BUCKMINSTER BOY*

Gary Schmidt’s (2004) adolescent novel, *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, a Newbery and Printz honor book, is a work of historical fiction that takes place in 1912 on Malaga Island, a poor, interracial community founded by former slaves in the late nineteenth century on the Atlantic coast near Phippsburg, Maine. First settled in the early 1860s on land considered undesirable at the time, people from multiple races married and lived peacefully on Malaga Island until the State of Maine evicted its residents in July of 1912 (McBrien, 2019), largely due to the racial prejudices and financial greed of Phippsburg residents. Newspapers of the time “painted the islanders primarily as a lawless, criminal community who were an affront to the picturesque (white) Maine coast in the early twentieth century” (McMahon, 2019, p. 6). When the Malaga Island community was eradicated by the town of Phippsburg, approximately forty residents were forced to desert their homes, and at least eight

citizens were inhumanely committed to the Maine School for the Feeble Minded (Field, 2019; see also *Learn: Explore Malaga Island*, n.d.), which was described in Schmidt's (2004) novel as "an insane asylum...a place where people live in long wards, tied to white iron beds...where there are strong nurses to tell them exactly what to do" (p. 117).

Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy (Schmidt, 2004) tells the story of Lizzie Bright Griffin, a Black preacher's 13-year old daughter from Malaga Island, and Turner Buckminster, a White minister's 14-year old son who has just moved from Boston to Phippsburg. The novel focuses on the blossoming relationship between Lizzie and Turner, during which time the audience bears witness to Lizzie's struggle for acceptance in a world that sees her as different and inferior. One day, as Turner was throwing rocks in the air attempting to hit them with a piece of driftwood, Lizzie happens by and remarks, "Are you some kind of idiot?" (Schmidt, 2004, p. 44). In that moment, surprised by Lizzie's appearance as well as her comment, the heavy stone that Turner had tossed into the air hit him square on his nose, causing blood to gush everywhere. As he collected himself,

[Turner] stood up, his head held carefully, and looked fully at her for the first time. He was surprised to find that he immediately liked her. In fact, he was almost shocked that he immediately liked her. He'd never even spoken to a Negro before. (Schmidt, 2004, p. 46)

This first interaction between the story's two protagonists and a baseball-like game would set the stage for a lasting albeit unconventional friendship.

Together, Turner and Lizzie begin to play baseball despite the objections of Turner's father and the local townspeople, who protest Turner's friendship with a young Black girl. Lizzie teaches Turner the town of Phippsburg's version of baseball despite the fact that Lizzie has never played an organized sport, a result of her being Black, poor, and female. Music, clamming, and boating eventually become the core of Lizzie and Turner's relationship. While baseball is never the central focus of the novel, it did serve as the inspiration for their friendship, and it was within these memorable moments together that Turner first found himself in awe of Lizzie's intellect, courage, and passion. Turner was also taken by Lizzie's athletic and baseball capabilities, which the author references on numerous occasions.

- "Nothing alive could run across Malaga Island faster than Lizzie Bright Griffin" (Schmidt, 2004, p. 31).
- "Every time Turner pitched her a stone within shouting distance, she hit it dead center—no matter how high the arch, no matter how straight the descent" (Schmidt, 2004, p. 47);

- “All Lizzie wanted to do was to catch the ball, for him to throw it harder, or higher, or off to her left, or off to her right, and she would snatch it out of the air, sometimes even leaning out over the water, she would look as happy as the yellow-robed day, and she’d toss the ball back and flex the glove” (Schmidt, 2004, pp. 56-57).

What makes this story relevant, and particularly powerful, is that during the early 1900s, it was not unheard of to find girls playing baseball; it was, however, unusual to find baseball being played as it was by Lizzie and Turner, across divisions of race, class, and gender identity.

AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY OF WOMEN IN BASEBALL

To understand the history of women in baseball, and activating students’ prior knowledge and checking for any misconceptions (Downey & Long, 2016), you must first understand how women were viewed in nineteenth-century America. As Gregorich (1993) describes:

Women did not have the right to vote; could not own property after marriage; could not divorce; and could not receive an education. They were not permitted to dress in functional clothing or engage in competitive games. An axiom of the times was that a woman’s name should appear in print but twice in a lifetime: when she married and when she died. Certainly not when she graduated from college—and positively not when she drove in a game-winning run. (p. 3)

Young adult, White women in the United States first began organizing baseball games at Vassar College as early as 1866, just after the Civil War, which led other college women, and later wealthy country club women, to organize games of their own, although these games were regularly viewed more as social events and exercise than competitions (Berlage, 1994). The first professional women’s team is often considered to be the Dolly Vardens, a team of nine Black women in Philadelphia, formed in 1867 (Maddox, 2020). The first known series of women’s exhibition baseball games took place in 1875 in Springfield, Illinois, between the “Blondes” and the “Brunettes” (Topics in Chronicling America, n.d.). In what was more of an entertainment spectacle than a competitive baseball game, this group of White women dressed to display their femininity and wholesome appearance while making money for their male promoters and owners until the mid-1880s (Berlage, 1994).

Years later, from the 1890s to the 1930s, women began playing baseball throughout the United States despite objections from some of the most powerful men of the era, including Albert G. Spalding, a professional baseball organizer and founder of a prominent sporting goods company, who is credited with establishing the myth that Abner Doubleday invented baseball to “save the sport from the ignominy of being associated with anything English” (Ring, 2009, p. 375). Spalding felt baseball was too strenuous for women but welcomed them as fans, something he considered “a passive activity that didn’t threaten the sexual order” (Berlage, 1994, p. 5), despite the fact that the earliest accounts of English immigrants playing baseball did not involve segregation by sex (Ring, 2009). The first traveling baseball teams to include women became known as barnstorming Bloomer Girls (Gregorich, 1993). These club teams did actually tour the country, sometimes playing men’s teams, often with up to three men on their own teams dressed as women (A Highlighted History, n.d.). These teams included legendary, highly skilled athletes such as Maud Nelson and Lizzie Stride Arlington, who would pave the way for other talented baseball players, including Lizzie “Spike” Murphy, who was known as the Queen of Baseball (Gregorich, 1993, Hanlon, 1965), Babe Didrikson (Berlage, 1994), and Jackie Mitchell (Gregorich, 1993; Posnanski, 2020).

By the mid-1930s, corporations and community groups began promoting softball—a game that was considered “significantly less expensive and less difficult to play” (Gregorich, 1993, p. 41)—to women across the country. Bloomer Girl baseball gave way to softball to the dismay of many women with aspirations of someday playing baseball at the highest level. In 1942, with young men in the United States being drafted into the army to fight in World War II, Phillip Wrigley, owner of the Chicago Cubs, set up a committee tasked with finding a solution for keeping Major League Baseball alive. A year later, in 1943, the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) was established and would employ approximately six hundred women during its time. Female baseball players were made to “attend charm school and learn how to apply and wear makeup, how to sit, how to walk, how to stand, how to say ‘Ohhh’ with rounded lips” (Gregorich, 1993, p. 87). Worse, the players were required to wear skirts so short that “when a player slid into base...she bruised or abraded her skin on the hard ground” (p. 87). At no point in history have male baseball players ever been saddled with similar expectations or playing conditions. The league, which survived until 1954, was made up entirely of White women except for a small handful of Cuban players due in part to a spring training site in Havana, Cuba (Gregorich, 1993). Black women were not permitted to participate in the AAGPBL.

THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN IN BASEBALL

Two important components of fostering historical literacy are building factual knowledge and analyzing perspectives (Downey & Long, 2016), which is what students begin to do when they learn more about the experiences of Black women in baseball. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black women began organizing themselves to play baseball. The earliest cited baseball clubs include an 1883 team in Philadelphia (Heaphy, 2016) and a 1908 team from Springfield, Ohio, that attempted to start the Colored American League for Girls (Ardell, 2001). Individual Black women also attempted to play on various men's teams over the years, including Pearl Barrett for the Havana (Cuba) Red Sox in 1917 and Isabelle Baxter for the Cleveland Giants in 1933 (Ardell, 2001; Heaphy, 2016). However, it was Toni Stone, Connie Morgan, and Mamie "Peanut" Johnson who first earned extended playing time in the Negro Leagues, an organized league for Black players that was formed in 1920. Like previous iterations of women in baseball, "the incentive [of signing female baseball players] was to get fans," said Ray Doswell, curator of the Negro Leagues Museum in Kansas City. "But it's not like they could get just anyone off the street" (Silverman, n.d.).

Toni Stone was the first Black woman to join a Negro League Baseball team in the late 1940s when she replaced legendary former second baseman Henry "Hank" Aaron on the Indianapolis Clowns. Stone spent a single year in the Negro Leagues, playing a total of fifty games and batting a respectable .243. After Stone left the Clowns, she would be replaced briefly by Connie Morgan, who had previously played for five seasons as a teenager on an all-girls' baseball team in Philadelphia (Ardell, 2001). Yet, it was Mamie "Peanut" Johnson, a 5'4" starting pitcher who, at the age of 19, would become the best-known female player of her generation after previously being refused an opportunity to try out for the AAGPBL two years earlier based on the color of her skin (Green, 2002). Johnson played from 1953 to 1955 with the Clowns (Silverman, n.d.), a team with a highly entertaining yet sometimes unpopular history of gimmicks (Overmyer, 2020), including spectacles that some referred to as "Gags, Gals, and Clowns" (Weatherford, 2005, p. 31). According to Davis (2016), "pictures and profiles of each woman appeared regularly in *The Laff Book*...that would associate them with the other 'sideshows' or entertainment acts" (p. 83, emphasis in original).

Despite criticism of the team's antics, the Clowns were an important team in the history of the Negro Leagues, signing highly skilled players, including Mamie Johnson. Initially inspired by

Jackie Robinson, who broke the Major League Baseball (MLB) color barrier and began his career with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, Johnson had dreams of playing in the Major Leagues as she compiled a 33-8 record as a pitcher and a .270 batting average as a hitter with the Clowns before stepping away from the game to care for her young son (Katz, 2017). While all three women were viewed to some as stars in the league, men did not always recognize them as athletes (Davis, 2016). Male players primarily kept quiet if they disapproved of their female counterparts, mostly because they recognized the women were an important attraction at a time when the Negro Leagues were struggling for revenue. Johnson, Stone, and Morgan's time in the league was not always pleasant, as they were physically and verbally harassed by their male teammates, mocked and ridiculed by the baseball media, and sensationalized and capitalized on by their owners and managers (Davis, 2016). Today, their collective experience underscores "the ways in which individuals and institutions have used Black women's athletic bodies to advance their own financial and political interests [and] offers a fuller picture of Black women's physical and symbolic labor in the postwar era" (Davis, 2016, p. 91).

The Negro Leagues disbanded in the early 1960s, and few women of any racial group have played professional baseball since. For decades, the thought of women in baseball, and particularly Black women, was barely in the public consciousness. Then, in 2014, the intersection of race, gender identity, and baseball received renewed attention with the introduction of thirteen-year-old Mo'ne Davis. At the time, Davis was an eighth grader who played for Philadelphia's Taney Dragons. Her baseball jersey would later be displayed in baseball's Hall of Fame (Fordin, 2014), and she would boast accolades that include being the fourth American female to play in the Little League World Series; the first Black female to play in the Little League World Series; the first female to throw a shutout in the Little League World Series; and the first Little Leaguer, female or male, to appear on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* (Axson, 2014). In many ways, Davis's intellect, courage, skill, and athleticism are reminiscent of a modern-day Lizzie Bright Griffin and invite readers to conceptualize what it has taken for generations of women to overcome the racial, social, and political strife of modern-day America, including issues of racism, classism, and sexism in baseball.

DISRUPTING THE COMMONPLACE: INTERSECTIONALITY

As a first dimension of critical literacy, Lewison et al. (2002) invite teachers to support students in disrupting the commonplace by seeing the world through new lenses and interrogating texts in new ways. With the previous historical knowledge (Downey & Long, 2016) as background and in order to further understand the plight of Lizzie Bright Griffin as a poor, Black girl growing up on Malaga Island, teachers may choose to frame an examination of Lizzie's experience through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality demonstrates the importance that Black women's and girls' lives are not simply defined by gender identity; when met at the intersection of multiple social identities such as race, class, and gender, those identities cannot be separated. Crenshaw (1991) conceptualized intersectionality as a framework, a tool of analysis and resistance, to address the inequality women of color face around identity politics and further named the failings of feminist work to hear the voices of Black women's experiences. Further, Crenshaw challenges the work of feminist and anti-racist scholars that leaves Black women voiceless and marginalized by missing the very experiences of discrimination only known to Black women. As Harris and Leonardo (2018) note, "no single label—female, Black, bisexual, poor—can ever exhaust what it means for an individual to travel in the world, and therefore that no analysis or label is ever complete" (p. 5).

In the field of literacy education, Blackburn and Smith (2010) suggest that texts depicting characters who fall into a variety of identities can provide entry points for discussing important intersectionalities because they allow readers to consider the complexities that exist simultaneously within those identities. In Schmidt's (2004) novel, Lizzie Bright Griffin is forced to recognize the complexities of her multiple identities at a young age, in part due to her interactions with townspeople from Phippsburg. Throughout the story, Lizzie's focus on the differences between Turner and herself tends toward race, such as when she exclaims late in the story:

Turner, you never can look at things straight. Look at me. No, look at me. Look at my skin. It's black, Turner. No one in Phippsburg is going to let someone with skin as black as mine live with them. (p. 167)

When the reader is asked to engage with Lizzie as a baseball player, however, they are forced to reckon with her collective identities as a poor, Black girl from Malaga Island. This is important to note because, as Erevelles and Minear (2010) point out, "differences [can] coalesce to create a more abject form of oppression" (p. 129). They place importance on "foregrounding the actual experiences of women of color at the intersection of multiple social categories" (Erevelles & Minear,

2010, p. 131), including the historical contexts and structural conditions within which these social categories intersect.

At every turn, Lizzie Bright Griffin is confronted with issues of racism, classism, and sexism that stem from the sense of superiority felt by the residents of Phippsburg over the residents of Malaga Island. These domains of power include what Hancock (2007) refers to as “the hegemonic (ideas, cultures, and ideologies), structural (social institutions), disciplinary (bureaucratic hierarchies and administrative practices), and interpersonal (routinized interactions among individuals) playing fields upon which race, gender, class, and other categories or traditions of difference interact to produce society” (p. 74). Encouraging students to contemplate how these domains of power play out in the novel may help them better understand Lizzie’s experiences throughout the novel.

INTERROGATING MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

Lewison et al. (2002) invite teachers to support students in interrogating multiple viewpoints as the second dimension of critical literacy. Similarly Downey and Long (2016) describe the importance of analyzing perspectives and making temporal and causal connections as part of historical literacy. As students are reading *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (Schmidt, 2004), teachers could ask them to explore Lizzie’s intersectionality alongside relevant historical and contemporary connections such as Mamie Johnson and Mo’ne Davis. Like Lizzie Bright Griffin, Mamie Johnson lived with her grandparents and grew up in a mixed-race community while encountering segregation and racism at every turn, especially when playing baseball in the segregated South of the Jim Crow era (Henderson & Doutsopoulos, 2020). In baseball, Mamie Johnson had opportunities never afforded to the fictional Lizzie Bright Griffin. For instance, Henderson and Doutsopoulos, (2020) recounted the occasion when a young Mamie Johnson happened across a group of boys from the Long Branch Police Athletic Club playing baseball around 1945 (see also Mamie ‘Peanut’ Johnson, n.d.). Unafraid of failure or rejection, the ten-year old went to the police department to ask for the chance to try out for an all-White, all-boys team. The team’s coach agreed, and Mamie soon helped them win two division championships thanks to her strong right arm (Henderson & Doutsopoulos, 2020).

While Johnson was a trailblazer in the Negro Leagues, Mo’ne Davis would become a trailblazer for Little League Baseball sixty years later at the age of thirteen, approximately the same

age as Lizzie Bright Griffin. In fact, Davis credits her recent decision to attend Hampton University, an HBCU in Virginia, on several factors, including an eye-opening 23-day bus trip through the South to visit landmarks of the Civil Rights Movement, including the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where four young Black girls were killed in a bombing by White supremacists (Longman, 2018). On that trip, Davis said she truly began to recognize that “being African-American, not everything is going to be the same as it is for my friend who is white” (Longman, 2018, para. 49). This is an important message for students to understand at a time when the influential Black Lives Matter Movement reflects the lived experience of Black Americans as victims of racism and is built on principles central to intersectionality as a framework for social justice activism and an affirmation of the humanity of Black communities (Harris & Leonardo, 2018).

Although Johnson and Davis’s experiences in different eras of baseball may be viewed by some as positive markers of their respective time periods, baseball was and continues to be “the great assimilator of the masses” (Berlage, 1994, p. 3) as women are rarely allowed to participate and the sport often provides greater access to the wealthy. As is noticed in the stories of Lizzie Bright Griffin, Mamie Johnson, and Mo’ne Davis, there remains a real concern that “the racialized and gendered operation of power in adolescent sports highlights the ways in which Black girls [are] rendered less than and unworthy of visibility and accolades” (Andrews, Brown, Castro, & Id-Deen, 2019, p. 2553).

As a classroom assignment, teachers might consider having students write through a contemporary perspective after reading *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (Schmidt, 2004), conceptualizing what it would take for a character to overcome the racial, social, and political strife of our contemporary society, including current issues related to racism, classism, and sexism in baseball (e.g., Apstein, 2020; Petri, 2020; Rosenthal & Glanville, 2020). For example, teachers could assign students to create a proposal for a children’s, adolescent, or young adult novel for a story that explores the intersectionalities of a modern-day Lizzie Bright Griffin, a young, Black woman living in poverty who has a dream of playing baseball at the highest level.

A children’s book proposal for this type of assignment might involve not only historical research but also a close reading of relevant texts, writing a fictional script, storyboarding textual scenes, and creating instructions for an artist to follow (Brown, 2018). Along with the necessary research to inform students’ writing, teachers might also consider literature circles (Daniels, 2002) using relevant children’s books, including:

- *Mamie on the Mound: A Woman in Baseball's Negro Leagues* (Henderson & Doutsopoulos, 2020)
- *Catching the Moon: The Story of a Young Girl's Baseball Dream* (Hubbard & Duburke, 2010)
- *Just Like Josh Gibson* (Johnson & Peck, 2004).

When creating a proposal for an adolescent or young adult novel, students would be charged with brainstorming and writing about the book's genre, plot, settings, characters, conflicts, and themes (Crandall, Windsor, Brown, & Crutcher, 2020). Relevant novels for adolescents and young adults include:

- *A Strong Right Arm: The Story of Mamie "Peanut" Johnson* (Green, 2002)
- *Mo'ne Davis: Remember My Name: My Story from First Pitch to Game Changer* (Davis & Beard, 2016)
- *Curveball: The Remarkable Story of Toni Stone, the First Woman to Play Professional Baseball in the Negro League* (Ackmann, 2017)
- *See No Color* (Gibney, 2015)

These texts are not only beneficial for considering a book proposal but also allow students to think deeply about the female experience within the sport of baseball.

FOCUSING ON SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUES: GIRLS AND LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

As the third dimension of critical literacy, Lewison et al. (2002) invite teachers to support students in interrogating "how sociopolitical systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions" (p. 383). One particular issue that might interest students is to use and analyze historical perspectives (Downey & Long, 2016) of girls in relation to Little League Baseball. Generations of young girls, both Black and White, have never had a chance to play organized baseball, in large part due to the politics of youth baseball. In 1939, Little League Baseball was established for eight- to twelve-year old boys to promote citizenship, sportsmanship, and manhood (Ring, 2009; Schultz, 2018). In a ruling known as The Tubby Rule, named after 13-year old Kay Johnston who played baseball under the male alias Tubby Johnston, Little League Baseball officially banned girls from participating in 1950. That decision was maintained until 1974 (Warren, Esty-Kendall, & Bowman,

2018) when the New Jersey Supreme Court upheld a Superior Court ruling that allowed girls to play baseball after a young girl named Maria Pepe was kicked off her local team (Lupinacci, 2018).

Undoubtedly there have been advances for women in baseball. However, despite the advent of Title IX in 1972, Albert Spalding's separatist beliefs from the early 1900s still ring true in baseball more than almost any other sport, including football, despite not being "a contact sport where size has a direct influence on playing ability" (Ring, 2009, p. 382). Almost half a century later, defenders of boys-only Little League Baseball still serve as gatekeepers through rhetoric about protecting young women from the so-called violent, physical contact of the sport (Ring, 2009). Today, more young women than ever are playing Little League Baseball, and some are even playing middle and high school baseball. Further, the United States has sent a national team to every Women's Baseball World Cup since 2004 (Maddox, 2020). Unfortunately, Maddox (2020) suggests that "girls and women are [still] largely ignored [in baseball] and siphoned off to softball" (p. 119), meaning girls are mostly deprived of the chance to participate in a game that is historically known as America's national pastime. From 1984 through 2019, only nineteen young women participated in the Little League World Series (*The 19 Girls*, 2019), approximately five more players than is found on the average Little League World Series roster.

Arguably the most celebrated women's baseball player of the twenty-first century, Mo'ne Davis has continued to pitch baseball in the summers after her remarkable experience in the Little League World Series, including in 2017 when her Philadelphia team won a national competition called the Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities World Series (Longman, 2018). Nevertheless, Davis, like Mamie Johnson and so many before her, has not found a home in baseball as she has grown older. Davis is currently playing college softball, not college baseball, at Hampton University (Williams, 2020) after an ankle injury derailed her long-time dream of playing Division I college basketball (Longman, 2018). While Davis is an excellent all-around athlete who has excelled at every level she has reached across multiple sports, her softball career has emerged, at least in part, because college baseball is rarely viewed as a viable option for young women.

Downey and Long (2016) suggest that for students to truly understand historical perspectives, they must use "the past to hold up a mirror that magnifies the present" (p. 174) by creating analogies based on similarities between then and now. An appropriate assignment for students could be to use the history they have learned about girls in baseball, tracing it back to the time period of the fictional Lizzie Bright Griffin to determine "the historical roots of contemporary problems and issues"

(Downey & Long, 2016, p. 174), in this case creating a timeline of challenges faced by young women who desired to play baseball in formal league settings. Students could then critically analyze what those historical barriers of discrimination and marginalization mean for girls who are interested in participating in Little League Baseball today and who becomes privileged as a result of their exclusion.

TAKING ACTION AND PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE: INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN SCHOOL SPORTS

Downey and Long (2016) encourage thinking about change and analyzing people's perspectives in the context of historical literacy. Lewison et al. (2002), on the other hand, push teachers a step further in the fourth dimension of critical literacy by asking them to support students in taking action and promoting social justice while acknowledging that students desperately need the understandings gained from the first three dimensions before they can take informed action against any form of systemic inequality or oppression. Behrman (2006) adds that students should have the opportunity to conduct their own student-choice research projects and thus "become engaged participants in a problem affecting them and be able to reflect upon the social and cultural forces that exacerbate or mitigate the problem" (p. 495). One idea could be for students to examine barriers to access in middle or high school sports. *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (Schmidt, 2004) could provide a useful starting point. Early in the novel, the author writes:

Somewhere there was a baseball diamond yellow with dust and green with summer grass. And there was a kid stepping up to the plate, swinging his bat low, the pine tar sticky on his palms. He was moving his back foot behind him and trying not to eye the gap down the right-field line big enough to run an eight-wheel locomotive through. (pp. 9-10)

An immediate question for students to consider now knowing the history of women in baseball is if it should be assumed that the young person stepping up to home plate must be a boy.

Such an inquiry would allow students not only to educate themselves on the social and political policies that govern secondary sports programs in their schools—e.g., through research methods such as examining policy documents, collecting participant data, and interviewing players, coaches, and school administrators—but also to have important conversations about gender identity beyond the gender binary of male and female. This question of gender identity may also lead

students to explore other intersectionalities, or lack thereof, in baseball and to consider how those intersectionalities are or are not represented at the college and professional levels (e.g., Gibson, 2019).

As part of their research, students might learn that in 2008 Major League Baseball honored former African American players who had been previously excluded from playing in the major leagues, and that among them was Mamie Johnson (Katz, 2017). While that honor was an important recognition for a worthy historical figure who was never able to fulfill her dreams of playing Major League Baseball, it also laid bare the fact that America still awaits its first female baseball player at the highest level of the game. Some believed that player would be Little League World Series hero Mo'ne Davis, but her transition to softball, like so many young women before her, makes a future in baseball questionable at best.

As National Public Radio recently noted, "Major League Baseball is staring down a gender problem" (Hunzinger, 2019, para 1). According to Ring (2009), "Equally troubling is the public invisibility of American girls of all races who must play beneath the radar, underground, until somebody really integrates the national pastime" (p. 388). Without a doubt, professional baseball must confront a history of powerful White men who have created "a culture of exclusion [that] must be enforced institutionally to ensure that the national game remains a man's game" (Ring, 2009, p. 383). This historical legacy has re-surfaced recently with the news of Kim Ng shattering a glass ceiling in Major League Baseball by becoming the first woman and first Asian American hired as general manager for a major-league baseball organization (Apstein, 2020; Wagner, 2020; Witherite, 2020). With this story as context for critical conversations about inequities in baseball, students have the opportunity to take action and promote social justice by actively exploring issues of hegemonic masculinity that seek to legitimize a culture of exclusion on baseball and other athletic teams within their own schools and communities.

CONCLUSION

Just like Mamie Johnson and Mo'ne Davis, Lizzie Bright Griffin's dreams went beyond playing baseball, which is accounted for in one of the book's most iconic moments:

'Lizzie Bright Griffin, do you ever wish the world would just go ahead and swallow you whole?' [asked Turner]. 'Sometimes I do,' she said, and then she smiled. 'But sometimes I

figure I should just go ahead and swallow it.' And she held her arms out wide, as if she would gather it all in. And for a moment, Turner had no doubt that she could. (Schmidt, 2004, p. 49)

To think that Lizzie Bright Griffin might have been able to “light out for the Territories” (p. 41) as Turner also dreamed of doing was simply not likely for a poor, Black girl from Malaga Island in the early 1900s. However, if Lizzie lived today in Phippsburg, Maine, it is worth considering which opportunities she would have and which barriers she might face in trying to play baseball alongside her friend, Turner. This is a topic worthy of deliberation in an English language arts, social studies, or humanities classroom because the next generation of young people deserves the chance to participate in baseball, or any other sport they choose, even if their names are Lizzie, Mamie, or Mo'ne.

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