

THE BALL'S IN YOUR COURT:
THE EFFECT OF SPORTS IN RURAL ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

by

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DEDICATION

To Julie and John who first shared their love of place with me and showed me what community could mean.

To Philip and Madelyn for their love and support through this whole process, without you both this would all be for naught.

To Kate, James, and Jerry for providing the much needed motivation and competition on and off the court.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. THE EFFECT OF SPORTS IN RURAL ENGLISH CLASSROOMS	1
How I Was Constructed by Place	1
Teaching Place	3
Where Communities Place Sports	6
Methodology	9
Sports Affect Teaching	10
Rosemary of Wadley (The Sports Enthusiast)	12
Tami of Dodge City (The Incredibly Involved Educator).....	13
Jenny of Plains County (The Homegrown Educator)	14
Rhonda of Roswell (The Sports Antithesis).....	15
Placing Interviews Together.....	16
Sports as Benefits to the English Classroom	16
The Cost of Athletics	17
Absences.....	18
Further Considerations for Sports and Place.....	23
Placing Sports in the English Classroom	26
Conclusion.....	31
REFERENCES CITED	32

ABSTRACT

Education in rural areas is affected by the place in which the education takes place. This affects how students interact with the community as well as the classroom. The most visible way in which the community interacts with the school is through spectating at high school games. The author interviews four English teachers in rural eastern Montana to explore the ways in which community, school, English classrooms and sports interact. Educators noted that while sports had many benefits, there was no sports literature being explicitly taught or being directly incorporated into the classroom. Furthermore, absences caused by school athletics create a tension between academic needs and extracurricular expectations. These absences are directly affecting the ways in which English teachers create their curriculum. The author offers next steps for teachers looking to create a connection between classroom and community through athletics.

CHAPTER ONE

THE EFFECT OF SPORTS IN RURAL ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

How I Was Constructed by Place

74 Pumpkin Creek Rd. When I picture where I'm from, I think not just of the cattle ranch that sits on the edge of a dry creek on the fringe of the Custer National Forest, or even the smell of sagebrush in the spring or the sound of the meadowlark calling in summer. I think of the release of the weight, that I never realize I am carrying, when it lifts as soon as I crest the ridge overlooking my parents' house. My home has constructed my understanding of the world and my place in it. Every year, when my students and I begin to write our "Where I'm From" poems, I tell them that I'm writing about 74 Pumpkin Creek Rd.

It was through my parents' love of their place that I came to love where I am from. My mother is one of the local extension agents who provides research and services from Montana State University-Bozeman to rural communities. Part of my mom's job is to connect resources to the community and to help strengthen the community through various programs. Such programs include implementing an after-school reading program, reworking the school-to-community work program, and teaching Strong Women classes to community members. With a mother like Julie, it is absolutely impossible to not realize that community is a complex concept that keeps all of its members completely and intricately connected.

My mother's focus on community and connecting community members stands in contrast to the isolation inherent in my father's profession. My father is a cattle rancher and has great pride in living and working where he does. He is a part of the country that works the land to prepare a large part of the resources consumed by urban counterparts. For my father, the ranch is not just about his legacy, but about his father's legacy and the legacy he will pass on to my brother. My father, carries more than ranching in his blood; he carries sports as a part of everything he does. In some ways, he is a local legend. His ability to project his voice onto the floor over the noise of the crowd, combined with his sports expertise, makes him an often sought after companion during half-time. He looks at sports fondly because it is what made him a part of our community.

I once asked my dad about his childhood. I wanted to know if it was hard coming from a one-room schoolhouse to a "big" school with 76 kids in the graduating class. Dad said it wasn't too bad for him because he was good at sports. When he recalled starting school in Broadus, he talked about how being good at sports gave him an "in" to the community, and how that made it easier for him to adjust. Dad said things weren't so easy for his cousin, Ed, who also came from the one-room schoolhouse but wasn't as athletic. They would always be friends, but the unspoken text is that they ran in different crowds, at least for a while, *because* my father was better at sports. My dad's voice as he related his experiences told me something that research continues to echo: sports, specifically male-dominated sports like basketball and football, are a focal point for communities, particularly rural ones (Tieken). Individuals who participate in sports in

rural communities are recognizable and the community supports them because they feel invested in their accomplishments (Tieken; Carr and Kefelas).

As an educator, I sometimes feel frustrated that there is so much community connection to sports and not to education; I have seen more parents attend sporting events than ever attend parent-teacher conferences. I wonder about why and how my rural community seems to be more concerned with scoreboards than report cards. And yet, as a rural community member, it is not enough for me to just sit on the sidelines and wonder; I need to engage in this conversation and research because it is my students, my community, and myself that are being affected by sports. By remaining on the sidelines, we allow others to tell our stories without the full understanding of the nuances of our community. I, a rural person, know that I am one of the people that need to investigate what my community (and others like us) is doing with regard to sports and school with the full understanding of what rural means for us.

For me, and the purpose of this paper, rural indicates not only a low population, but also a remote location. There also exists an inherent connection to the land itself. Those of us with this definition of rural, recognize that we measure distance in time rather than miles. We spend much of our time commuting across the land, spending long hours in the car, never seeing another person, and are rarely in cell-service where we can talk with another soul. There exists this space while we are traveling where it is only ourselves and the embrace of the land that connects all of us who think of rural in this way. However, no matter where our journey takes us, we forever are returning to the place that shapes us— our own version of 74 Pumpkin Creek Rd.

Teaching Place

In recognizing that place intricately connects rural peoples, I offer key tenets of place-based pedagogy which highlight the opportunities to connect teachers and students through academics and community.

As today's educational system has become more focused on high stakes testing, classrooms are increasingly being positioned as vacuous spaces that can (and should) prepare students to be career and college ready (Gruenewald; "The Best..."). Thus, connecting to local communities and accessing student knowledge has faded into the background (Gruenewald, "Foundations..."; Azano; Brooke). When systems focus just on testing, what students bring to the classroom is not recognized (Gruenewald, "Foundations..."; Azano; Brooke) and teachers and schools ignore vital parts of student knowledge and education.

Alternatively, when teachers build curriculum that values place (Brooke; Azano; Bishop) and recognizes the uniqueness of each geographical, social, and spatial construct of individual learning environments (Comber), they provide a space that values student knowledge and the community in which they learn (Azano; Brooke). By recognizing that students are shaped by, and are participants in, their place, place-conscious education utilizes the complexities of student understanding in a way that values student knowledge and seeks to explore the ways in which students navigate the changes in their own landscapes (Comber 7). This provides a space for meaningful engagement and varied discussions because the students' voices and experiences are valued. Just as students are shaped by and are participants in their place, so are teachers.

Depending on where the classroom exists, in an urban or a rural area, students' understanding of the world around them is affected by the community outside of the classroom (Azano): their place. For rural areas, place-based education comes in the form of not only recognizing that student knowledge is grown in a particular location, but also that the place and education are symbiotic (Brooke), and that the walls of the classroom must be permeable to allow student ideas to come into the classroom as well as to exit back into the community for real world applicability (Brooke). In this way place-based education is able “to create connections between teachers, students, and the cultural life of the communities that schools serve” (Gruenewald, “Foundations...” 638).

In recognizing that the community and the school are interdependent on one another, we must acknowledge a key player in the current link between communities and schools: sports. For rural communities, sports represent the most visible and tangible connection to the school. Through sports, community members are connected to the physical building, as well as fellow community members who attend the competitions. In contract, sports can also create division; they are a continued presence and interruption for teaching and learning in rural schools. As such, teachers have a choice to make: they can sit on the sidelines and wait for sports to choose how they will participate, or they can seize the ball and get in the game.

Rural areas, like the one I grew up in, have an agricultural foundation connecting individuals to the land. Students, too, are surrounded by open spaces which give them an appreciation for their place because it affects many of their hobbies, passions, and pastimes. When students are connected to their place in the classroom, they have an

opportunity for a deeper understanding of both content and community (Azano; Brooke). What is not being taken up in research conversations is how sports, and their relationships in rural communities, interact with the teaching and learning in rural schools, particularly in English classrooms. Most of the research conducted addresses sports and community (*Sports As a Tool....*), but not rurality. Or rurality and English (Brooke), but not sports. Or sports and English (Rodesiler), but not community.

Where Communities Place Sports

As a rural educator and community member, I experience the interactions and effects of sports on teaching and learning in rural English classrooms. Mine could be considered a unique position outside of the trends in current research, and because I could not find research specific to my teaching situation, I built this project as a way to consider the place of sports in rural, English, teaching experiences. More specifically, I wondered if the intersections are affecting English teachers like me in other rural areas and how I might learn from them.

I wondered: Is my school just highly sports-oriented, or is my experience indicative of the impact of high school athletics in rural communities? Was anyone teaching a sports text as a way to bring sports' energy into the classroom? What about my students who didn't play or even like sports? What about those students for whom athletics and large teams are not safe spaces? With so many questions, I realized I needed to connect with colleagues in and out of my district.

I also foreground my own positioning as an athlete. I grew up in sports, and loved sports; I still love sports. I was a golf coach, enjoy volleyball, cheer at football games,

and *live* for basketball season. I love watching high school and college games. I'd rather sit and watch a high school game while I'm correcting papers than just sit in my classroom and try and complete them (which is partially why I am so at war over my frustrations with my students being gone because of sports). As an athlete and a teacher of athletes, I'm torn. I had many good experiences with sports and gained life-long lessons as a young athlete. I have great memories sharing my connection to community and sports with my parents, but in my professional life it is killing me that my students are gone from the classroom. I also know that sports could be a motivator to get work done.

Studies by Sitowski and Straub illustrate the benefits for students' involvement in sport, with distinct variations between them. In both studies, researchers discovered that students' grades tend to be higher during the sports season. When comparing students' overall GPA, Straub found that individuals with a higher GPA tended to be a part of a sport. Adding to this notion, Sitowski discovered that it was male students involved in sports who did better during the season. Girls' academic achievements tended to remain steady regardless of the season being off or on. Straub's findings also suggested that academic achievement did not necessarily apply to advanced students or advanced courses. Rather, students who were in advanced courses were performing well regardless of participation in athletics. The research suggests, then, that student-athletes are motivated by grades in the season, but that advanced students have other factors influencing their success in the classroom. Though there is potential for great

improvement in academics with athletics, there remain those who are wary of the use of athletics in high school in the United States (Ripley).

Communities across the United States are facing a similar pushback when it comes to looking at the purpose and drive of a school district: athletics or academics. In her article “A Case Against Sports in Schools” Amanda Ripley notes that while there can be many benefits of having athletics in schools, when athletics become the emphasis of a school’s identity in the community, students start falling behind academically. She cited a school in Texas, Premont Independent School District, as an example of this academic mismanagement. The school was spending \$1,300 per football player and \$618 per Math student, respectively (Ripley). Ripley notes that the implementation of a new superintendent at the school caused a drastic change: the superintendent cut out sports from the school. Athletic pep rallies disappeared and instead became Academic pep assemblies, celebrating student growth and achievement. Teachers noted that behavior issues disappeared and student performance in the classroom increased dramatically, all because the money, time, and effort that had once been invested in sports was now refocused on how students could achieve through their learning. As a result of the cut, any sports that students participated in were created, funded, and supported by the community.

However, very rarely is removing sports a path taken by schools. In removing sports from the schools, the distraction is removed that keeps students on edge and not focused academically (Ripley). Unfortunately, in doing so this also removes any benefits

in the way of motivation academically that athletics once had. This difficulty in balancing sports benefits and detriments is also faced in communities as well.

Sports are also a contradiction in communities. While sports often bring communities together, sports can also tear them apart. For example, the majority of rural community members love their sports: attendance at high school games and competitions, as well as the consistent talk around town illustrates this— but, sometimes this investment in sports becomes the only focus and students are encouraged to transfer between communities.

Though not openly talked about, some student athletes in rural communities are “recruited” by more competitive schools. For example, when an athlete’s home team isn’t good enough, students can transfer into a district with higher winning records. Typically, there is a different motivation stated to the public, but the community understanding is that if your team loses, it loses more than just a few games. The decision of the student to transfer results in a player lost to the original team, and since state funding follows each individual student, the home district loses money. It can be difficult for the community and students left behind when star players leave to go and play for another community. The narrative left to them is one of an inferior people and a lacking community. Often, there is anger and resentment, especially if the recruiting team ends up with a winning season. Montana High School Association has tried to put into place legalese to keep students from transferring out of the district (“Transfer Rules”); however, this does not stop people from finding ways around it.

These recruiting strategies leave teachers with a sense of frustration as well. For me, it means students enrolling mid-year, or knowing that they are living away from their family so that they can participate in sports “due to extenuating circumstances.” It feels like students’ health, education, and mental well-being are being set aside in the hopes of some temporary glory. I need to know what other teachers are experiencing in relation to sports in their classrooms.

Methodology

In order to systematically connect with colleagues, I emailed fourteen teachers from rural Montana communities with diverse demographics in ethnicity, class size, and history of athletics. All currently teach at the high school level and most have had experience teaching multiple subject areas. I chose these characteristics because they reflected my experience, and I felt I could better empathize with their situation and learn from them. I also selected English teachers who were within half a day’s driving distance, in case I had an opportunity to speak to them in person.

Nine of the teachers responded to my query: three requested a questionnaire and six were open to scheduling an interview. I interviewed two educators in person and completed four phone interviews; each took between 25-50 minutes and I recorded them all. I asked a series of questions about athletics and community; however, I did not hold firm to these questions if I felt they were not relevant to a teacher’s situation, once they shared their background information.

My interviews with these educators led me to two questions:

1. How are sports affecting English teachers in rural areas?

2. Are English teachers using athletics in their classroom to help teach content?

For the remainder of this paper, I share experiences from four teachers' who offer different insight into the benefits and difficulties of teaching English in rural Montana. Using their insights, I offer ways to navigate topics most relevant to their experiences.

Sports Affect Teaching

My research comes with the hope that teachers can navigate difficulties between sports and community in a way that benefits students' learning in rural English classrooms. I also hope to help alleviate some teacher frustrations in navigating these difficulties. As a way to do this, I explain key findings from my four focal teachers who are helping me think about teaching English with sports in rural Montana: Rosemary, Tami, Jenny, and Rhonda. Then, I share ways in which educators might navigate these difficulties in a way that is beneficial for them, their students, and their community.

Rosemary, Tami, Jenny, and Rhonda each have more than fifteen years of teaching experience. Three of the four teach at class C schools (enrollment ranging from 20-60 students in the high school) and one teaches at a class A school (enrollment of 500 students). Class C schools typically have fewer students, and fewer athletic options, but a higher percentage of the students participate in athletics. Class A schools, alternatively, have more sports teams that students can join, but a smaller portion participates. All of the educators took on extra responsibilities, ranging from coaching to library skills. In our interviews, each teacher spoke with vigor and at length about the benefits of teaching where they are, advocating for the rural education that they live. They all, too, had their

share of frustrations and ways that they can see that their school, classroom, and community can be improved, and do so with a deep understanding of their place. And now, to respect those places, I offer four brief vignettes to introduce readers to these teachers and their communities, with an emphasis on the role of sports in each. It is necessary that I give you a solid understanding of who these educators are and their role in the community because it shows the ways in which they are uniquely navigating their sports infested waters.

Rosemary of Wadley (The Sports Enthusiast)

If this paper were a person, it would be Rosemary. She loves all things about sports—the connection, competition, drive, and support— but that doesn’t mean she is completely blind to the difficulties sports present to teachers. She shows how sports hold potential to be a teacher’s greatest ally and adversary. Rosemary teaches in Wadley, a community of about 600 people known throughout the state for being strong in athletics. The community can be incredibly supportive of sports to the point where they are willing to overlook underage drinking if it keeps their roster filled. Interest in athletics also keeps the community incredibly critical of their coaches, knowing that a good coach ensures wins.

She’s fiercely proud of Wadley and their legacy in Class C Sports. Within the first few minutes of talking with her, I felt a kindred spirit. Rosemary didn’t end up teaching in Wadley because it was a last resort; rather, she chose Wadley because she loves rural communities and is from one herself. Rosemary is also a coach, not because she felt like she was so great she needed to share her knowledge, but because her community needed

her and she loved the game—she has been coaching almost as long as she has been teaching.

Tami of Dodge City (The Incredibly Involved Educator)

The daughter of a rancher, raised in one of the most athletically driven communities on the Hi-line, Tami dove into teaching at the age of 23 and has been changing lives ever since. I'm fortunate enough to have Tami as a co-worker in Dodge City, population 8,300. She does a full-time teaching job, she ranches and upkeeps records, she helps out with Youth Group, and she coaches a traveling basketball team. Tami doesn't have time for new things; yet, every time I turn around she has taken on something else: organizing the School to Work Program, returning to get her Master's in administration, signing up to teach Trauma-Informed Learning, meeting with parents, and hosting team meals. It doesn't matter what difficulties she is facing, she comes to work every day engaged, enthusiastic, and laughing. In a world full of frustrations, Tami is our department's bright spot. If she sees an issue, she never sits back, she always engages—this engagement in the school and community makes her a role model for students and teachers alike.

In addition, Tami's work in the English classroom highlights that when students are encouraged to write about something they are passionate about, and that passion is recognized as valid and important, students have the capacity to channel that passion into their English content. The challenge comes for educators to recognize that for some students, sports really are passion-worthy.

Jenny of Plains County (The Homegrown Educator)

I appreciate Jenny in the way only a fellow educator living in the community they grew up in can. Jenny is incredibly connected to her community, and yet as a teacher she is always an outsider. Jenny grew up in Plains County (population 500), did her student teaching there and began working for the school district right out of college. She loves the community in the same way I do; the community is our family. The community has pushed us and supported us through difficult times, but at the same time we are outsiders because we navigate the world between being a native community member and an authoritative voice as an educator. She is a carrier of her community's stories as well as her students'.

For Jenny sports is an act of love; throughout her life the community has supported her through sports—as a student, collegiate-athlete, and coach. She returns this support and love back to her community through her English classroom where she creates an environment where students feel comfortable sharing personal parts of themselves. This is displayed particularly during her Speech unit in which students are encouraged to select their own topics to share with their class. The shared experiences of sports and growing up in Plains County she is able to express with her students give her the ability to connect to texts like *To Kill A Mockingbird* by referencing local knowledge. She can make specific connections between the lives in Maycomb County and those in Plains County that make the material relatable and engaging to the students. Her relationships with her students allow them to gain knowledge, security, and support in their community and English classroom.

Rhonda of Roswell (The Sports Antithesis)

Rhonda's community is different from most rural communities; it doesn't have any sports. It is also, by far, the smallest community in my study with only 50 people in Roswell's city limits. Rhonda lives and breathes all of the "non-sport" activities; she's like the antithesis of a jock. She coaches Speech and Drama, her husband is a Band and Choir director, and she is involved every year, twice a year, in the Dodge City community plays. Rhonda sees what people are missing out on when they do nothing but focus on sports. She sees all the absences and the cost. She also wants to pull her hair out because THERE ARE OTHER OPTIONS, but those options are not "traditional" avenues and are always seen as somehow less-than when compared to traditional sports.

As a member of a rural community, she knows how much these communities revere athletics because they are a shared experience for many and a form of entertainment for even more. However, just because Rhonda understands that the community loves sports and wants the programs to return, it doesn't mean that she has to like it. From her perspective, sports take away from other ways in which students might gain the benefits of teamwork and camaraderie. Sports can mean great things, but they do not have to be *everything*.

Placing Interviews Together

Though the teachers represent varied backgrounds and varied interactions with sports, their interviews still have a way of playing together to demonstrate the effect sports has in rural English classrooms. Below I offer commonalities between the teachers and what they saw in each of their unique communities.

Sports as Benefits to the English Classroom

Each educator noted that there are benefits of having students participate in athletics. For Rosemary, our Sports Enthusiast in Wadley, athletics are a motivating factor to get students to remain eligible for their chosen sport. Students need to be eligible to play sports, and this requirement provides incentive to do their work and turn it in. This motivation provided a way for English and athletics to work together, as one way to help push the students in academics through sports.

Sports in the classroom look different depending on who the teacher is. For Jenny, the Homegrown English teacher, the English classroom is a space in which students can share their experiences; “They want to talk about [sports] ... they want to be able to discuss it, they want to be able to talk about it. That’s probably the biggest outlet...a verbal outlet.” For Tami, the Incredibly Involved teacher in Dodge City, using athletics as a prompt has been a catalyst for some of her students’ best writing:

He [a sophomore student in Tami’s class] explained what it was like to be a Dodge City football player and what it was like to walk into the gym and into the locker room and what the chant of the guys sounded like. It was so good that I used it[the student’s description of sports] and read it to the class because it gave you goosebumps. So for some reason it really brings up a kind of pride and maybe it’s the fun that [athletes] have.

For many students in rural areas, sports are a source of passion and engagement. When students are allowed to engage in this passion, their writing benefits. Through Tami’s testament, we note that a personal connection to sports sparked some extreme success for students in the English classroom and allowed her to access student passion to push English content. By engaging student passion in sports, Tami created a space in which students could showcase their best writing.

The Cost of Athletics

When sports are offered by the district, the cost falls on the school to provide. This does not simply include the equipment necessary to compete, but also all the trimmings that come with it. These costs include jerseys that need to be replaced every few years due to wear and tear, the cost of transporting kids to out of town games, the cost of feeding kids (especially during tournament time), and the cost of the gym floor that needs to be resurfaced every year. These costs build up over time, and many communities feel that the benefits of having students participate outweigh the high financial burden they carry.

When a school district has an established athletics program that requires the usual yearly upkeep, costs feel justifies. However, when a school is looking to completely restart their sports program the financial cost can be daunting. Roswell, the school without any athletics, hopes to re-establish a sports program because it brings the community together and provides an opportunity for fundraising through the concession stand. Too, with fewer and fewer students in the district, the hope is that sports will draw a few more kids to the school to keep the doors open. One path that has a lot of community and student interest is through football. Rhonda, the Sports Antithesis, estimates that the cost to re-implement the football program, which is popular with both students and community members, would be around \$30,000. This is because in addition to paying the coaches a stipend for the season, the school would be required to buy helmets, pads, and equipment that meets the state's high standards for safety, and that is just for *one* high school sport. This is a cost that the school and community can ill afford,

but without it, there is no football, even if there is interest. Furthermore, there is pushback from teachers on spending this kind of money on extracurriculars when that money could be invested into the school building and into education. The frustration comes when individuals feel that there is more importance placed on athletics than on academics.

Tami, our Involved Educator, spends some of her time coaching a traveling basketball team for junior high girls. She sees how the emphasis on athletics in her community pushes kids to be a part of traveling teams earlier and earlier. Though the junior high has school-sponsored volleyball and basketball teams the season is short. Involved parents who love the game and want to see their kids succeed at the high school level encourage their children to enroll in traveling teams to hone their skills in the off season. These traveling teams start young, often as young as fifth grade, and continue through middle school, so by the time the kids are in high school they often have extensive experience in the off-season working on their skills in their sport. The benefits of teamwork, camaraderie, and skill refining still exist, but Tami notes that because these are community based and not done by the schools the cost is put on parents. She's concerned about what this means for low-income families. There is a kind of discrimination against those of lower economic status because they cannot fit the bill that comes with extensive travel and entrance fees that take place over multiple weekends. Though these traveling teams are well intended, Tami sees the discrepancies they create.

Absences

It seems to be a universal struggle of teachers to make sure that our kids are in the classrooms to learn. However, this can be especially frustrating when students are absent due to school sanctioned events, meaning they are expected and, indeed, encouraged to be gone by community members and administration. Before I started my research, I could feel my blood boiling at the beginning of every school year as my students continue to miss some of the most critical lessons of the year due to sports related absences. We would use these first lessons as the foundation for the rest of the school year, and my student athletes would be absent at *school sanctioned* events. Good luck learning Spanish if you never picked up the alphabet. Good luck learning warrants if you missed two of the three days during the week that we practiced the concept in class. If students wanted to learn these skills, it was going to require sacrifice and effort on both our parts to master the material. In order to accomplish this, I saw my lunch hour disappear, and I stayed after school. I worked during our schoolwide advisory program to help out the students who came, but overwhelmingly, my students didn't show up. They stayed away from the classroom and hoped that they would be able to pick up the skill set somewhere down the road. There are students who can learn this way, who against all odds make the connection and succeed in the classroom, but in my experience those students are a minority. The majority of my students simply do not master the material when they are absent from class.

Sports-related absences are a huge part of my frustration: I know my students are capable, smart, and able to multitask, but they need to be in the classroom. Every teacher

that I spoke with for my research shared my same frustrations with student absences: there are too many, and it is affecting how we are teaching and the information our students are able to retain. For Jenny, the Homegrown Educator, her frustrations came in the form of the school's late work policy and the sheer number of absences due to extracurriculars in the spring:

In the freshman class, I have 18 students and on game days I have five left...one of the biggest things in our handbook now is...if they're gone for school excused, they're still to pick their work up before they get back or [they'd] pick it up beforehand and have it, it should be turned in when everyone else's is, but that's not the interpretation by parents ... they think they should have one extra day to do it.

These absences are affecting the ways in which teachers like Jenny are teaching because it is affecting how many students are in her classroom. It is not simply a matter of a few kids not being there, but rather so many students are absent that it affects her overall lesson planning week-by-week and unit-by-unit. Because teachers cannot progress on a topic or skill due to absences, it leaves them in limbo and creates lost days. These missing days from the curriculum are not taken into account during end of the year assessments and the expectation remains that the students still learn everything expected of them, even on a condensed timeline.

This frustration is echoed by our Sports Enthusiast Rosemary in Wadley. One of the major points of emphasis for her is writing, and she has been trying to utilize the workshop method to teach her students. The workshop model has proven to be quite effective as it makes students authors and editors of their own work as a class. They write what they want and they give feedback to their peers. Multiple absent students pose a

problem for Rosemary's classroom. When a student is gone, it is incredibly difficult for them to get caught up from being absent from the classroom:

To be honest, what's really hard with [the] classes that I have now... you feel like you're really at a grinding halt because they're not there. We're supposed to take time and everybody's gonna read everybody else's work. We've got half the people gone. So that cuts down half the amount of time in the class and then to repeat it three times...those absences add up.

Rosemary knows that the workshop model can work. She is doing everything that she can to make this content accessible to her students, but she cannot do it if the students are not there. The absences, many of which are from athletics, make the workshop model ineffective. She is a master teacher. She doesn't need more Professional Development to learn how to teach her kids writing. She just needs them to be in class.

For Tami, our Involved Educator, sports-related absences come with the difficulty of teaching in a larger school. Her school size means there are smaller numbers of students gone from her classes, but there is always *someone* gone. It is difficult to find ways to keep all the kids on the same page because someone is always gone. These difficulties are compounded if the athletic director, the one who schedules all student extracurriculars, is not sensitive to the effect of student absences on student learning. All of these obstacles become insurmountable when the goal is student growth in the English classroom. Student growth is often tied to student interaction with one another, particularly through the curriculum.

In Roswell, Rhonda, our Sports Antithesis, remembers what it was like when their teams did go to tournaments: the entire school would leave. Between the band members, players, a few cheerleaders, and managers, there was no one left in the school. The school

would send a bus to the tournaments with all of the students on it, supporting the idea that this level of absenteeism was acceptable because it was school-related. It also cemented the notion that sports are more important than academics.

Though sports-related absences can be incredibly frustrating, Jenny, the Homegrown Educator, also finds a benefit to them. While the athletes are gone, Jenny uses this time to work with her students who often do not receive as much attention:

I think they sometimes like it, they get more one-on-one. I think they are less overshadowed on those days. I think for the most part, a lot of times your athletes are the most outgoing, I don't want to call them attention hogs cause that's not really what they are. They tend to be more spoken out and willing to talk versus those who are not. They [the non-student athletes] have a tendency to not be in front of people or want to be in front of crowds and I think they benefit from more one-on-one, getting more time to get stuff done.

The benefit of having one-on-one time with any student is huge, but for students who are often more reticent to share their thoughts in class, attending class while many of their peers are absent provides an opportunity for the teachers to really work and get to know them and assist them in their learning of English.

Further Considerations for Sports and Place

As Tami, Rosemary, Rhonda and Jenny have noted, sports can be, and are, a powerful tool in their rural communities. Sports serve as a way to bring people together, and provide motivation to help students make it to graduation. Furthermore, it allows community members to feel connected to the school. Considering the ways in which rural schools work as the source of life for many communities, this connection is incredibly important. Connecting the community to the classroom creates investment across

generations which provides the opportunity for all parties to thrive, and this is best done through the discipline of English.

All of these pieces (schools, students, teachers, community) are symbiotic— if one is not sustained the entire system collapses. English is communication and English is what rural communities need to strengthen bonds, solve problems, and keep one another working effectively. When community members feel connected to the school, they feel connected to the younger generation learning within its walls. By utilizing this connection, there is an opportunity to sustain rural communities because without the school, the community will cease to exist, and without rural communities we lose the stewards to the land that contain our nation's resources. By refusing to acknowledge both the strengths and the weaknesses of these communities, there remains little hope of a better future. Unfortunately, issues of economic impact are not the only ones faced in rural areas.

And yet, there are problems with sports that my four colleagues and I did not discuss. In particular, there are issues with how sports affect marginalized demographics like Indigenous Peoples and the LGBTQ+ community. These two communities, in particular, need further research in relation to sports in rural areas. Though there is research on LGBTQ+ communities and their connection and difficulties in athletics, particularly Transpersons (“Transgender Inclusion in High School Athletics”), no research seems to have been done on LGBTQ+ Youth in *rural* communities, specifically how sports includes or excludes them.

In my initial research, I was not looking to question issues related to LGBTQ+ and Indigenous Peoples, not because I do not find them valuable, but rather because I am aware of my ignorance and have had very little experience with LGBTQ+ work in regards to sports. My understanding is limited to my experiences as an educator. When I first began teaching, I had two female students who were in a relationship and on the basketball team together. The relationship was well known to students, parents, and community members. The girls' relationship did not affect their playing time, though parents of their teammates were distrustful and very much disliked the relationship. The inherent distrust for things community members found "unnatural" is the tip of the iceberg for what LGBTQ+ community members face in rural communities. Transgender students are often barred from competition because community members feel threatened by their presence in the sport and do not recognize them as having a "true" gender ("Transgender Inclusion in High School Athletics"). In pushing transgender students from athletics, communities are creating spaces that are hostile and unwelcoming. This is distressing further because rural youth are plagued with the fact that there are very few resources in rural communities for them to utilize (Movement Advancement Project). Unfortunately, the LGBTQ+ community is not the only one who faces discrimination in rural areas.

Current issues of racism towards Indigenous Peoples are as strong as they have ever been. In recent years there have been many controversies across the United States addressing the racism in indigenous inspired mascots (Graziano). Schools and communities fight over whether a mascot is a symbol of pride from generations past or if it inspires racism across current generations (Graziano). Another issue specific to

athletics is the way in which communities talk about rival indigenous teams. Talk of “rez-ball” and the concerns over an indigenous referee’s ability to officiate a game point to the fact that racism is alive and well in many communities (Mills). The Montana High School Association, which regulates athletics across the state, does not allow tribal flags to be represented on the floor of competition at the same time as the state flag and American flag (Mills). This refusal to recognize the sovereignty of these nations points to a lack of respect for the tribal nation and is an effort to silence not only their culture, but their legitimacy as rural community members.

It must be acknowledged that all of the educators I interviewed, as well as myself, are white, cis-gendered, hetero-women, living in conservative rural communities. The places that have shaped us have not set us up to be consistently aware of the myriad of difficulties faced by all members of our community— and that is our privilege and our detriment. As such, my focus on the role of sports in rural communities, as well as the relationship (or lack thereof), with the English curriculum is a starting point and a limitation to the research I conducted.

Examining the experiences of the LGBTQ+ and Indigenous Peoples through research provides the opportunity to give a more complete picture of what rural sports mean for more people. If ever there is hope to change these issues of racism and the exclusion of LGBTQ+ in rural communities, this research must first be done to acknowledge it. Research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in rural communities, as related to athletics, will provide more information for educators in English classrooms to construct discussions and curriculum to explore these ideas. Additionally, when we have

research that examines how athletics can both be a celebration for Indigenous Peoples as well as fodder for the racism fire, teachers can help foster dialogue within their classrooms. This dialogue will be critical of place, examining how our understanding of the world has led us to be complacent in our understanding of bigotry, racism, and exclusion. Through these discussions, there is potential for the youth of the community to help change the narrative of rural communities to be more inclusive and welcoming.

Placing Sports in the English Classroom

The use of athletics in the curriculum should be about finding ways for students to become actively engaged in both their community and their education. In doing so, teachers have the opportunity to provide students with incredible skills—like communication and analysis, that connect them to their community and life beyond the walls of the classroom. In communicating and expressing their passion through writing, whether it is research or narrative, students are able to bridge a generational gap that divides so many rural communities. Through commonalities, relationships are forged which create opportunities for communication in other realms of life. Analysis of critical issues in sports transcends into what that looks like in rural communities and how to change the narrative in a way that is innovative and hopeful for a better future.

In order for an educator in a rural community to incorporate sports into their classroom, they first must look at their community and see in what ways sports are functioning, particularly for their students. One of the most important discussions teachers can have with their students in a rural classroom is the value of their experiences and how their experiences are founded in place. By initiating this conversation, students

bring more of themselves and their community into the classroom. The next step is to engage them in finding their community's strengths and deficits through the context of place and sports. When creating a space for this discussion, there must be a sense of welcoming both praise and criticism of place (Reiersen qtd in Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen). This duality makes it possible for students to create a complete picture with which to discuss and learn about their community.

Second, I suggest teachers look to their community resources and see what is available to help them on their journey. Extension Agents like my mother are in every state in the union. They have resources to help with community interaction and may have ideas that can help further community place-based education goals. Extension Agents have access to research and programs from the state's Land-Grant University and provide a strong and reliable outreach for building ideas in the classroom. Some options may include connecting students with research from the Health and Human Performance department which could allow students very specific research into sports that connects to their place. Another option might be having the Extension Agent work to connect teachers to local community members as resources who could come in and listen to what the students are discovering, perhaps participating on a panel for improving the ways in which sports function in their community.

Third, there are curricular resources for English teachers who want to integrate sports into their curriculum. Connect sports to Campbell's Monomyth as Gahan did in his article "The Highlight with a 1000 Faces." Design research projects around sports controversies so that students apply digital media skills to their writing (Beckelheimer).

While doing your poetry unit, examine how Sherman Alexie and Walt Whitman speak to basketball in their works (Dinkins). Talk to your school's athletic director and show how implementing an activity journal for all practices allows students to bring meta-moments into their sport (Kent). All of these units are easily integrated into current classwork and create a framework to engage students' passion while speaking to community connections.

Another set of curricular resources are three novels set in Montana: *Full Court Quest*, *Counting Coup*, and *Blind Your Ponies*. The former two are non-fiction works while the latter is fiction, but has some historical fact upon which it is based. All of these texts examine the ways in which community, team, family dynamics, and basketball intersect. Whether studied alone or together, these novels allow teachers to have explicit conversations with students about sports, academics, and community, while using their Montana place and rurality as a framework for their discussions.

A study of *Full Court Quest* offers teachers and students insights into the difficulties faced by indigenous peoples while also examining how white systemic constraints are problematic between communities. Examination of *Counting Coup* offers up discussion on who has the power and right of narrative within a community. What does it mean if an “outsider” tells your story? In contrast, *Blind Your Ponies* allows for discussion on how sports can unify a community, but divide it as well. It helps readers question: At what point is winning more important than relationships? These books and their discussion of sports in varying contexts assist in creating a space for place-based knowledge and discussion. However, each text holds its own set of difficulties, many of

which center on the idolatry of indigenous experiences, without true understanding of the culture and hardships faced.

The non-fiction works look, in particular, at the Native American communities in which the stories take place, and *Blind Your Ponies*, though it takes place in a white community, takes its name from Crow legends. Each text has distinct advantages for discussing the intersection of community and sports while leaving bits and pieces that are problematic. These problems are various and range from issues of representation of indigenous cultures and rural communities to the length of text.

Finally, English teachers must be conscious of bridging the gap back to the community. This allows students' voices to be heard and for the community to feel connected to the classroom. Utilizing pre-existing constructs helps ease the way for this transition. One avenue that occurs in most rural communities is basketball games. Basketball games can be a place in which students showcase their skills by creating student-run podcasts for the games or conducting community research projects by interviewing community members who attend the games. Furthermore, these games might be the perfect opportunity to bridge the gap of student to community communication, such as students sharing their projects during halftime of the event. Communication between students and community members allows the community to be engaged in the school and students in more ways than simply through athletics.

Overall, using athletics in the rural English classroom in a meaningful way requires an established relationship between educators and students as well as a thorough understanding of the community in which they teach. Knowing the community and its

impact on the daily lives of the students allows educators to adjust and utilize sports in a way that is meaningful for school, community, student, and English educators.

I suggest that if an educator is interested in using sports in their classroom they consider the following questions:

- How are my students affected by athletics?
- What ways are my students *already* incorporating their knowledge of athletics into the classroom, and how can I make this visible in my curriculum?
- How does my community respond to athletics?
- What can I do to engage students in mastering the skills I want in a way that engages pathways (like athletics) that are already in place?
- How can my students' existing connection with the community foster their critical skills learned in the English classroom?
- What resources are available in my community that can help foster connections?
- Who is not visible because of athletics? What is that invisibility doing?

I believe that in examining the uniqueness of each community, educators will be able to see the existing avenues as a way for students to strengthen their skills in the English classroom.

Conclusion

As eastern Montana looks to shake-off the hold of winter, I return to 74 Pumpkin Creek Rd. My three siblings and I return to the pounded-out piece of ground with the basketball hoop that leans forward. A game of H.O.R.S.E. ensues as we try our best to outshoot one another, all while laughing at each other's antics. My mother holds my

daughter as she cheers us all on, just as she did through all of our high school games. My father offers advice and teasing barbs from the sidelines—showing off his vast knowledge of the game. As the sunsets and we return to the house, I am reminded of all the wonderful possibilities of place, and of the possibilities in sports.

Being an English teacher in a rural community can be a daunting task. While sports in these communities can bring students and community members together, they can also tear them apart. Communities come together to cheer for their teams—traveling long distances to do so. However, sports are a source of contention because they create student absences that affect student learning. Sports create such passion in community members that discussions of teams, coaches, and players can create conflicts between members with different viewpoints. As rural teachers, we are often asked to bridge these gaps while still teaching English content in a meaningful way.

My initial questions of how sports affect English teachers and how English teachers use athletics in their classrooms provided an insight into the first steps of what sports looks like in these rural communities. Sports are affecting English teachers in rural areas by creating more absences and causing teachers to modify what and how they teach. Though none of the teachers I interviewed taught a specific sports-centered English unit, when sports were used in the classroom there were powerful results for both teachers and students. The answers to my two questions only scratch the surface of what can be studied regarding sports in the English classroom and leave much hope for how other educators might use sports to work *for* them rather than against. In an effort to share the ball, I pass it.

The unspoken assertion to teachers by administration seems to be: the ball's in your court, what will you (the teacher) do with it? How will you construct "plays" in your classroom that utilize the abilities of all the contestants? How will you utilize practice to make sure your players are ready for the "big game?" There are so many possibilities of how we the teachers can approach these tasks and these questions, but for rural communities our possibilities exist within our understanding of place and how we can help our students grow within their communities.

By re-engaging students in their community, the community has the possibility of growth (Miller and Hahn; Brooke; Tieken). If English teachers like me find a way to use the high energy and community attention of sports in our classrooms, we can engage students both in the learning of content and engagement in their community's well-being. By finding ways to teach through sports we can involve students in problem-solving issues that arise in sports, creating a common team bond that works for the betterment of all.

Above all else, know that if you enter into this profession, in a rural place like mine, it will be one of the most fruitful learning experiences you will ever have. The experiences you have in this place will challenge you in ways you never knew possible and those students will forever be in your heart. Perhaps the place in which you teach will become *your* place, the one that will forever construct you.

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