



LESSON PLAN

The Value of Sports: Unifying a Community



RELATED FILM

I am Yup'ik

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Key Idea

Young Native Alaskans in rural villages face unique challenges due to physical isolation and the loss of traditional cultural support. Unifying projects or activities—such as basketball—can provide a lifeline for youth and communities.

Background

The Yup'ik Eskimo people are a Native Alaskan community living in western, southwestern, and south-central Alaska. Traditionally, the Yup'ik people hunted seal and walrus in kayaks for subsistence, and today most still live off the land. The word *Yup'ik* means “real person” or “real people.”

Russian explorers and fur traders invaded Alaska in the 1700s and brought with them diseases like tuberculosis that nearly decimated the Yup'ik people. In the mid-1800s, the U.S. purchased Alaska from Russia and imposed restrictions on Native activities. Yup'ik children were forced to attend boarding schools where they were prohibited from practicing traditional spirituality or speaking traditional languages.

This loss of tradition and community has had lasting impacts on Native Alaskans and Native Americans in general. According to *The New York Times*, Native American suicide rates across the U.S. have had the largest increase since 1999, with an 89 percent rise for women and a 38 percent rise for men.* American Indian and Alaska Native Youth, ages 15-24, have been committing suicide at a rate more than three times the national average for that same age group.** According to the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, alcoholism mortality rates are 514 percent higher than the general population.***

The film, *I am Yup'ik*, follows Byron Nicholai, a 16-year-old basketball player from the tiny village of Toksook Bay. He and his team, the Islanders, are highlighted in the film as they compete in a recent basketball season. *I am Yup'ik* explores the power of basketball, which unites the Toksook Bay community and creates hope and pride throughout the young team, family members, and the community-at-large.



Film: 18 minutes

Class: 60 minutes

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- English Language Arts
- Geography
- Modern World Studies
- Sociology

COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Geography
- History
- Sociology

THEMES

- Resilience
- Connection to home
- Identity
- Youth awareness and empowerment

MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing the film

PREPARATION

- None



The Value of Sports: Unifying a Community

*Sabrina Tavernise, "[U.S. Suicide Rate Surges to a 30-Year High.](#)" *The New York Times*, April 22, 2016.

**Evelyn Nieves, "[Indian Reservation Reeling in Wave of Youth Suicides and Attempts.](#)" *The New York Times*, June 9, 2007.

***"[Fast Facts on Native American Youth and Indian Country.](#)" Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Psy.2.9-12. Investigate human behavior from biological, cognitive, behavioral, and sociocultural perspectives.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-8. Evaluate the evidence for the role of group behavior on individual and species' chances to survive and reproduce.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Explain for students that life in the remote village of Toksook Bay, Alaska, is challenging due to its isolation, the community's reliance on subsistence hunting and fishing, and extreme Alaska weather. Additionally, tell students that Alaska Natives have lost a foundation of cultural identity due to previous U.S. government policies that were focused on assimilating Native Americans into the dominant white culture.* Even as this loss continues to burden the Yup'ik community, the team sport of basketball has unified this particular community, as well as other communities across the region, giving young people a feeling of pride and belonging and community members a reason to gather together.



The Value of Sports: Unifying a Community

Ask students if they have ever experienced a sense of unity or a larger sense of self while participating in a group sport, music group, or team project. If so, ask them to describe this experience. Brainstorm with students and make a list of the causes and effects that led to this experience. What do you think can be gained from working closely with others in a group?

*For more information about Indian Boarding Schools and their use in assimilation policies, please see: "[American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many](#)," NPR Morning Edition, May 12, 2008

*For more information about the impacts of cumulative or historical trauma on Native Americans, from the perspective of Native Americans, please visit: "[Transcending Historical Trauma](#)." Wisdom of the Elders.

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Explain to students that the short film they will view is about a 16-year-old named Byron Nicholai, a basketball player who lives in a tiny village in western Alaska. Show students a map of Alaska, pointing out the village of Toksook Bay, where Byron, the main character in *I am Yup'ik* lives. Tell students that the population of this small town is 617, and can only be accessed by boat or a small plane.

Describe to students that life for many Alaska Natives is not easy. Alcoholism and suicide rates are high, in part because Alaska Natives—like other Native Americans—have suffered from historical U.S. government policies that sought to destroy Native American culture and assimilate Native peoples into mainstream society. Without a strong connection to traditional spiritual and cultural identity, many Native Americans and Alaska Natives remain at a high risk for social and psychological difficulties. The isolation of this small town also contributes to the challenges they face.

Ask students to observe Byron, the main character, while watching the film. What are some of the challenges that he and his family face in Toksook Bay? How has the game of basketball positively influenced his life, his family's life, and the community-at-large?



The Value of Sports: Unifying a Community

Delving Deeper

After watching the film, lead a discussion around the following questions:

- Ask students to share what they observed about life in Toksook Bay, Alaska. What are their first impressions of the people and the place in this Alaskan village? List some of the qualities/characteristics of the town and its residents.
- What is the name and age of the main character in the film? Make a list of his struggles and challenges. (Byron Nicholai is 16, his father left when he was 14, and he cares for his younger siblings.)
- How long has basketball been played in Toksook Bay? How did it arrive in this remote community? (A Jesuit priest brought basketball to the area about 70 years ago, around the year 1945.)
- According to the film, Yup'ik culture and tradition have been compromised. Using the film as evidence, what contributed to the loss of traditional Yup'ik culture? What are some consequences of the loss of culture, as described in the film? (Churches and government schools told Yup'ik Natives not to participate in traditional dancing and not to speak the language. Kids expressed that they were “missing something.”)
- Most Alaska Native communities value a subsistence lifestyle as a foundation of their cultural identity. A *subsistence lifestyle* means living off the land through hunting, gathering, and fishing. Alaska Natives have specific rights when it comes to subsistence; for example, only Alaska Natives can harvest marine animals like whale, seal, and walrus, which are otherwise protected from hunting. What subsistence activities of the Yup'ik people are depicted in the film? What animals do the Yup'ik people require for survival, as evidenced in the film? (Fish, seal.)
- The basketball coach of Byron's team, The Islanders, said in the film, “Byron is special. He's the heartbeat of the team.” What do you think he means by this? In what ways might Byron be the heartbeat of the team? Use the film as evidence for your answer.
- The radio announcer in the film said, “Nothing unites the Yup'ik people like basketball.” What evidence in the film supports this



The Value of Sports: Unifying a Community

point of view? Why do you think basketball unites the Yup'ik people? (Traditionally people came together to “dance and share stories,” and basketball serves the same purpose of bringing people together. Also, the coach explains that a basketball player “brings pride to the village,” just like the hunter.)

- Byron explains why he plays basketball: “One of the main reasons to play basketball is either because you love it or you want to forget about something - something that’s hurting you inside.” Do you think sports or other team/group activities can support an individual and/or a community when they are going through difficult times? If so, how? Use the film and your own experience as evidence.

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. At the beginning of *I am Yupik*, Byron Nicholai says, “Basketball is life in this village.” Many communities—whether they are individual schools, towns, or regions—have a specific kind of identity or culture. Choose a community that you are part of—it could be your family, town, cultural or racial/ethnic community, etc. What makes your community unique? Fill in the blank with the following statement about your own community: “_____ is life in my community.” Write a paragraph and explain what you mean by this statement. In what ways is your chosen activity or experience like basketball for Byron? In what ways is it different? (CCSS.SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1)
2. One reason this story is so inspiring is that the filmmakers chose a convincing and compelling character. The filmmakers explain their decision in choosing to highlight Byron in an interview: “There is just a wisdom about him that was really appealing.” Think about a person in your life that you think exhibits wisdom. The person could be a friend, teacher, parent, etc. Write a paragraph describing this person in detail. Include your own definition of wisdom and explain how this person has wisdom. Where do you think the wisdom comes from? How does this person inspire you? (C3.D2.Psy.2.9-12)



The Value of Sports: Unifying a Community

3. Byron says, “If you forget what your ancestors taught you, you’re not going to survive.” Write an essay, 2-3 paragraphs, and answer the following questions. Describe what you think Byron means by this statement. In what ways did Byron communicate that he needs support from his ancestors? Now, reflect on your own life. How have you learned from your elders to survive or succeed in your own life? Elders can include your grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents, or mentors, such as your teachers. Do your elders provide emotional support and give you courage or perseverance? Do they provide practical resources, such as a skill or trade? (NGSS.HS-LS2-8)
4. This film’s title, *I am Yup’ik*, illustrates the strength of Byron’s identification with his Native Yup’ik culture and with his community. Think about your own culture, place, and community and fill in the following: “I am _____.” In a couple of paragraphs, describe the decision behind your word choice. How does this word illustrate your identity, culture, or place? Is your own identity tied to a community or place? If so, how? (C3. D2.Psy.2.9-12)

Resources

Matt Gilbert, “[The impacts of Suicide in Native Alaska.](#)” Cultural Survival, April 18, 2016.

Sabrina Tavernise, “[U.S. Suicide Rate Surges to a 30-Year High.](#)” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2016.

Evelyn Nieves, “[Indian Reservation Reeling in Wave of Youth Suicides and Attempts.](#)” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2007.

“[Fast Facts on Native American Youth and Indian Country.](#)” Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute.

“[American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many.](#)” NPR Morning Edition, May 12, 2008.

“[Transcending Historical Trauma.](#)” Wisdom of the Elders.