

"Advocate for Change":

A Critique of *Coach Carter*

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Advocate for Change

When considering culture and diverse learners, many think of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or Kathryn Au's *Literacy Achievement and Diversity*. These texts are strong examples of how to affect change among a system that repeatedly fails to meet the needs of many of our diverse learners in the United States. With public schools facing great pressure to meet the demands of State mandated testing and minorities consistently performing below their white peers, many are calling for change. Of course, with education being a hot topic Hollywood is producing movies that portray educators in both positive and negative manners as advocates of change. One such movie released in 2005 is *Coach Carter*. In this movie, the general public would perceive the main character, Coach Carter, as an advocate for change. Although the general public might contend Coach Carter acted in a way that advocated change, this critique will compare his actions to the theories and research to determine if his actions did in fact promote change in an unjust system.

Richmond High School

Coach Carter is based on a true story that occurred in 1999 at Richmond High School in Richmond, California. Ken Carter was a small business owner in Richmond and was asked to coach the boy's basketball team at his alma mater, Richmond High School. He agreed to take the position on the condition that he would be able to run the program his way. He begins by having his players sign a contract. The contract stated that all players had to maintain a 2.3 grade point average, attend all classes, sit in the front row of each class, complete 10 hours of community service, and wear a tie and jacket on game days. Several students refused to sign the contract and left the team. There is additional resistance to the contract from both parents as well as the school

administration. Parents don't understand the need for the requirements and fear that the expectations might prevent their children from being able to participate. Administration felt the contract was being used as a scare tactic and would create more work for classroom teachers. Despite the conflict many students signed the contract and were soon exposed to demanding workouts that include running suicides for over an hour. Consequences for being late involved the entire team running suicides and the late individual completing push-ups. Needless to say, this put the team in top physical condition by the time the season began and allowed them to win their first four basketball games.

During this time the viewer is introduced to the team members and their individual plot lines. Each additional plot line is used to help provide insight into the community of Richmond, specifically the hardships and diversity. Kenyon, who is Black, is a star on the basketball team and an above average student with a pregnant girlfriend. Cruz, who is Latino, is a character that chooses not to sign the contract and walks away from the team. Viewers discover that he is selling drugs for his cousin and later asks to come back to the team after some unfortunate events. Junior, who is Black, is another star on the football team, but struggles academically. Junior's brother was killed two years prior which viewers are lead to believe might have been gang related. Lyle, who is White, is being raised by his uncle because his farther is in prison. Despite all the personal turmoil each player is experiencing, they begin to have a successful basketball season.

Coach is soon faced with an obstacle when teachers are reluctant to provide progress reports and this puts him at odds with the teachers. When Coach eventually receives the progress reports for his players, several members failed to maintain a 2.3 grade point average. Coach locks the gym and sends all the players to the library. In the library, Coach explains that they are a team

and if one is failing, they are all failing. Until all players meet the terms of the contract, Coach cancels all practices and games. This creates a national media buzz as well as some violent responses from the community. Eventually, he is taken before the school board with a group of angry parents in the audience. The parents motion to fire the coach, but since it wasn't in the prevue of the board they vote to end the lock out. Coach protests the decision by quitting, but when he goes into to pack his office the boys have set up tutoring sessions in the gym which convinces him to stay. Soon all the players meet the terms of the contract and the boys resume practice. They eventually make it to the State playoffs. Although there are additional elements to the storyline, this paper will look at the actions of Coach Carter to determine if they were effective in advocating change.

The Contract

As explained, players were expected to sign a contract to meet certain requirements in order to become a team member. In the first parent meetings, Coach explains his stance behind the contract by stating these young men were student athletes. He further claims that student comes first and that basketball is a privilege to be earned. Although many might consider a contract to be a form of oppression, it might also be considered as an instrument to help these young men recognize their "relation to the world" (Friere, 2012, p. 81). Use of the contract allowed students to see themselves as part of a bigger community instilling a sense of responsibility. Additionally, the contract also introduces the players to "the discourse of the culture or power" (Au, 2011, p. 83). Even though Coach is placed as an enforcer of the contract he is establishing the young men as members of a community and exposing them to the culture of power. As Freire states so well, "If it is true that thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world, the subordination of

students to teachers becomes impossible” (p77). Coach creatively places expectations on the team that forces them into action, which in turn allows his players to take responsibility for their own actions. Additionally, the contract is used as a form of discourse which students were most likely not familiar with which is that of power. Coach is further preparing team members to become their own advocates of change by forcing them into action and exposing them to the language of the culture of power. By merely incorporating a contract, Coach is forcing his students to change.

Statistics

During the movie, viewers are given statistics for Richmond’s academic performance and expectation for the students through various conversations. The first conversation is between Coach Carter and the principal, Ms. Garrison. During this conversation viewers discover that Richmond has scored a 1 (the absolute worst rating) on the Academic Performance Index for the past 7 years. In a later conversation viewers discover that Richmond only graduates about 50% of their students with the majority being girls. Ms. Garrison further tells Coach Carter that he will be lucky to have 5 players of a 15 member team graduate from high school. During this discussion Ms. Garrison tells Coach Carter that his job is to win basketball games and she advised him to start doing his job. To this, Coach replies, “Your job is to educate these kids, and I suggest you start doing your job.” Although there is some discord between Ms. Garrison and Coach, it clearly shows that Coach is not willing to accept the status quo and is trying to be an advocate for change. With this conversation Coach Carter is facing Au’s first key to success—“understanding that the challenge is complexly determined and multifaceted, and therefore the response to the challenge must be multifaceted as well” (2011, p. 1), which of course, leads to the lock-out. During the lockout, Coach conveys these statistics to his players, but adds even more detail. He lets his players know that only 6% of the

graduates from Richmond High School attend college. He also informed them that growing up in Richmond meant they were 80% more likely to go to prison than to college. Coach claims that he believes the system is designed for the students to fail. This statement and the statistics are supported by Freire's theory regarding the pedagogy of the oppressed. Freire states, "Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression" (Freire, 2012). Clearly the system is hindering students in their pursuit to become responsible persons. Coach Carter's actions in sharing the flaws in the system would have most likely been appreciated by Delpit as well. Delpit (1988) states, "When I speak, therefore, of the culture of power, I don't speak of how I wish things to be but of how they are" (1988, p. 292). Describing the reality of the world, in a way, is explaining the culture of power that exists in the public school system and allows students to become participants in establishing a change. According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy must do three things—"produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (1995, p. 474). Through sharing statistics and actually locking students out for not performing academically, Coach Carter is attempting to produce students who can achieve academically and understand the existing social order. So in trying to advocate change he is being somewhat culturally relevant, but is not incorporating all the elements to ensure that the change will remain permanent.

A Message

When the school board meets to determine whether the lock-out should be ended, parents and teachers speak out. The first to speak is a teacher that expresses concern over the media

attention. According to the teacher the additional work of preparing progress reports was offensive and the negative media attention questioned the staff's ability to educate students. Parents express concern in that without basketball students might engage in destructive behavior. Lyle's uncle points out that Lyle loves basketball and comes to school every day just so he can play. Another parent was concerned that her child was missing an opportunity to be scouted by colleges. Additionally, parents express their support for the team and the need to end the lock-out because Coach Carter shouldn't be able to take basketball away from the players. The parents then ask for the lock-out to be ended. At this, Coach Carter addresses the board and asks them to consider the message that would be sent by ending the lock-out. He makes the following statement:

“It is the same message that we as a culture send to our pro athletes, which is that they are above the law. Now, I am trying to teach these boys a discipline that will inform their lives and give them choices. If you endorse the fact that fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen years do not have to honor the rules of a basketball contract, how long do you think it will be before they are out there breaking laws?”

This statement reflects Coach's intention to instill in his players a conviction to act on their own behalf (Au, 2011, p. 15). Even though Coach hoped to bring about change by working with his players, he failed to support their parents in this change which created much of the discord. It appears that the parents were suffering from what Freire termed as the “duality in their innermost being” (Freire, 2012, p. 48). Parents fear being oppressed, but equally fear being released from their oppression. Therefore, the actions they chose provide the “illusion” to enact change, but in reality they are condemning their children to repeat the same conditions that have kept them oppressed. This is one area that Coach Carter's actions were ineffective. Change according to

Freire “must be forged with, not for, the oppressed” (Freire, 2012, p. 48). Although parents also signed the contract, Coach Carter failed to bring parents on board to create an authentic change.

Community

Another important aspect that Coach failed to meet in trying to effect change was the need to build community. Coach Carter was able to create a community within his team of players, but was unable to expand that community out further. Ladson-Billings states, “one person’s success was the success of all and one person’s failure was the failure of all” (1995, p. 481). Coach created such an environment among his team. When Cruz wished to return to the team, Coach required him to complete several physical tasks by the end of the week. However, at the end of the week Cruz was short of completing the required tasks, and the other team members volunteered to finish the tasks for him. Coach reinforced this sense of community when some of the team members were unable to meet the requirements of the contract. All members were expected to tutor each other because “basketball is a team sport and we support each other on and off the court.” However, despite the community that Coach was able to build within his players, he did not expand the community much beyond the team. Although the movie briefly addresses the need for community service, the community service appears to be completed as a team which again builds a narrow sense of community.

Another example that the sense of community did not extend beyond the team was in Kenyon’s story. At the beginning of the story Kenyon, although reserved, was willing to accept his girlfriend’s pregnancy. However, as the team became successful he started to question his girlfriend about how they would be able to meet the demands of having a child. This leads to an

argument where his girlfriend accuses him of “trying to escape” by playing ball at college. Although Kenyon had a feeling of responsibility to his team, he did not have a commitment to making a change within the community in which he lived. According to Ladson-Billings, “teachers with culturally relevant practices help students make connections between their community, national, and global identities” (2009, p. 52). Without a wide reaching sense of community, change can only be temporary. If community members are changed, but leave the community, no one will be left to expand the change within the community. Without this consistency change will always be temporary and the system will remain unjust.

Conclusion

Overall, Coach Carter was able to effect change in some of his players, but was not able to change the system that creates the inequality. Coach Carter’s actions should be commended, because he effectively changed the lives of some people. Although his actions had a positive effect on some, additional components need to be added to ensure that as we teach we are not just changing individuals, but the system that is unjust. During the movie, Cruz addresses Coach Carter with a poem that summarizes what Coach hoped to accomplish, but failed to fully develop.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you. We were all meant to shine as children do. It’s not just in some of us. It’s in everyone, and as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give

others permission to do the same as we are liberated from our own fear. Our presence automatically liberates others.”

Coach Carter, although a quality educator, failed to effect a sustainable change in the system. Much can be learned from his practice, but additional elements must be added to ensure that a change occurs to balance an imperfect system. In this case, the change of a few, even though noble, is not enough! The actions of educators must liberate everyone of fear and allow everyone’s light to shine unconsciously.

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