

Stand and Deliver Media Analysis

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Stand and Deliver is a 1988 film based on a true story of a teacher who leaves his steady job to teach math to a group of Hispanic students in a failing East Los Angeles school. The teacher, Jaime Escalante, taught them so well that all 18 of his students passed the AP calculus exam. Although the movie is a dramatization and not completely accurate, it has been an inspiration for teachers and students all over the United States. It provides some evidence that regardless of social factors, schooling, and current ideologies any student can learn and have a promising future as long as they have “ganas.” Even though the students overcame these factors, it was not easy for they are represented as large hindrances in the film.

#### **Social Factors**

Race, gender, and social class are three different social factors that are represented in the movie as handicaps for the students. In regards to race, Jaime Escalante tells the students that they already have two strikes against them: their skin color and their last name. Mr. Escalante mentions that many people will assume that they know less than they do because of these two strikes. This seemed to have lit a fire in his students. Although it is unfair, they knew in order to succeed they were going to have to work twice as hard. They listened and did so all because they knew it was possible. Mr. Escalante was a successful Hispanic male that showed proof that it was possible to succeed even with those two strikes against them. He became a positive role model for his students. Not only was Mr. Escalante a successful Hispanic professional, but he also was a proud Hispanic male. He embraced his culture. He was not ashamed to speak Spanish or pronounce his name

with the correct Spanish accent. He proved to his students that they did not need to “act white” to be successful. They can be proud of their race and still be successful. In addition, Mr. Escalante embraced the culture of the students and taught using their slang. He referred to himself as “El Cyclone from Bolivia” and occasionally used words like “ganas”, “órale”, and “burros” while teaching. He even represented their culture within their unit of study. In the film, Mr. Escalante mentioned that their Mayan ancestors were the ones who first contemplated the idea of the zero. In doing so he helped validate students’ culture, which is also a huge part of their identity. By validating a student’s identity, Mr. Escalante helped increase self-esteem. Although Mr. Escalante made huge strides with his techniques to overcome the social factor of race, he still had to consider others present as well.

Women of the Hispanic race are portrayed to have an additional impediment because of their gender. In the film, a student named Anita was being forced to drop out of school because of her father’s expectations. Traditional Hispanic men, like Anita’s father, believe that Hispanic women are expected to stay home, be housewives, and produce children. Although she was an extremely bright student, her father had low expectations of her and expected her to dropout of school, get pregnant, and work at the family restaurant like her sisters did. Hispanic women are expected to be less competent than, compliant to, and dependent on a man, which is not what Anita wanted for herself. Claudia, another student in the film, faced the same struggle. While asking her mother if she could sign up for additional classes with Mr. Escalante, her mother questioned her motives. Claudia’s mother stated that men didn’t like women that were too smart reinforcing the idea that

women are supposed to be less competent than a man. However, once Claudia mentioned that she wanted to be independent, her mom signed the waiver. These female students were able to persevere because Mr. Escalante gave them the confidence that they could do it. He motivated the women by jokingly stating that if they don't try hard, they will end up "barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen." He showed these students that he looked out for their best interest regardless of race or gender.

Unfortunately their race and gender weren't the only social factors that were impeding their success. Jaime Escalante's students were of all from low socio-economic homes who all subsequently went to a low-achieving school in East Los Angeles. In the beginning of the film, the math department talks about the possible loss of accreditation the school is facing if students continue to fail. Students are said to be coming to Garfield High School "with barely a seventh grade education." There is no arguing that the previous schools attended have obviously failed these students miserably. However, why did most teachers at Garfield High School choose to give up on these students too? Teachers claimed "you can't teach logarithms to illiterates," and that the, "kids can't handle calculus." These teachers also failed the students by not believing in their full potential. Mr. Escalante said in the film, "students will rise to the level of expectation." Yet teachers still complained stating that resources were unavailable and teachers were not skilled or trained to teach to an AP exam. Many teachers in the math department weren't even qualified to teach math. The quality of the school and teacher has a direct effect on students' performance.

However, even with a skilled teacher like Mr. Escalante, students still had more issues to overcome because of their class. One female student named Lupe was shown taking care of her siblings until late at night until her mother got home from work in the film. Another student named Angel portrays a young student associated with a gang who wants to learn in the film shows another obstacle. Gangs can be extremely detrimental to a student's success in school and are disproportionately located in low socio-economic neighborhoods. Many students are pressured to join gangs for protection in these dangerous neighborhoods. Students soon see that school is not seen as a priority within the gang community. Angel wanted to learn but was afraid what his friends would say if they saw him carrying books around. Mr. Escalante was understanding and even offered to give him three books: one for his locker, class, and house. Through Mr. Escalante's class, Angel eventually gained enough confidence and courage to leave his gang friends to focus on his studies.

Sadly, even when the students are finally qualified to be part of the system, they still may not be accepted because of their class. When low-achieving schools such as Garfield High School have a suspicious amount of high-test scores, the reliability and dependability are questioned. Although it was possible for all 18 students to pass the AP calculus exam like on the film, the odds were stacked against them. By questioning the integrity of their exam, they trampled on the student's self esteem and made them lose faith in the very system they tried so hard to be a part of. Although the school may not have been supportive, these students were lucky to

have Mr. Escalante as a teacher for he helped them persevere and pass the AP calculus exam a second time.

### **Schooling**

Although some successful schooling can be seen in Mr. Escalante's classroom, the majority present in Garfield High School was detrimental. This film represents the idea of schooling in many ways. It can be viewed through the actual school itself, the classroom, the teacher, and the students. The school as a whole is portrayed as a place where students do not want to be or care about. Several times in the film students are shown disrespecting school property and officials. The campus is rundown and covered in graffiti. Students are shown participating in inappropriate behavior, such as fighting, smoking, and public display of affection. It seems as if the school is a place the students are forced to attend. The basic mission of the school seems to be to keep the students under enough control to make through each day and then the students leave to not be thought about again until the next school day. The students definitely do not respect the idea of school or learning. The staff members do not care about the students and have the opinion that none of them can exceed more the minimal expectations. Some teachers feel that if the students are challenged they will fail and what little self-esteem the students have will be shattered.

The classroom is first portrayed as a wild environment with no authority figure. Students are yelling across the room, throwing paper, fighting, and do not show any respect for authority. When Mr. Escalante enters the room for the first time, the students show him little respect. The students have the attitude that no

other teacher has ever cared about them or respected them so why would this teacher be any different.

Mr. Escalante quickly shows the students that he is different. He shows a personal interest in each of the students and uses real life applications to explain math in terms the students can understand. He uses teaching methods that get the students involved in their own learning and make learning fun. He explains to the students the benefit of having an education and is very frank about what their futures will be like without one. Even though Mr. Escalante is very caring and concerned about the students' well being, he does not accept any excuses for not being in class or not completing work. He is extremely strict with students because these are the same expectations students must face in the real world and he makes the students aware of this.

The students quickly change their attitude towards Mr. Escalante alone. Then the classroom morphs into a place of respect where learning is valued. The students begin to work together and support each other. They also learn the importance of education and what it can do for their future, so they value learning and are willing to do whatever it takes to be successful. The students even attend class during the summer, on weekends, and after hours. They are willing to sign contracts agreeing to meet extremely high expectations. The students persevere through the extremely challenging math program developed by Mr. Escalante even when they are faced with difficult circumstances in their home life.

Certain characters lives are looked at more closely so the viewer can understand the types of circumstances these students face on a daily basis. For

example, the character Ana is being forced to quit school to work at her father's restaurant as a waitress. The character Pancho is thinking of quitting school to work for his uncle's car garage because he can make hourly wages and earn overtime for working weekends. Another character Lupe is responsible for caring for her several younger siblings while her mother works the day shift and her father works the night shift. The character Angel, cares for his sick grandmother and is pressured by gang members to not care about school. Through all the various conflict, each student adheres to the strict math program and has a vision of success. Most noticeably, all students are portrayed as individuals who will rise to any expectations no matter the challenge or difficulty.

### **Dominant Ideologies of the Film**

The portrayal of schooling previously discussed tells much about how the creator of the film and our society feels about mainstream public education in our country. One ideology about schooling is that students coming from poor and minority backgrounds will never amount to anything more than their parents so why bother. This idea is shown throughout the movie. Staff members believe that students should not be taught anything more than the basics because they could not handle any type of challenge. Teachers do not feel there is any way to enable students to pass testing measures that will keep the school from losing its accreditation. Parents think the best place for their students is in the workplace making a living not working towards an education to better their lives. Even the students at times make comments about how they will never be anything more than hourly employees so why even try to pursue a higher education.



Another ideology present in the film is that even when a poor or minority student does succeed they will be doubted. This is shown when all 18 of the students pass the AP Calculus exam with extremely high scores. The state accuses the students of cheating because they outperformed some of the best schools in the country. The officials investigating the testing make it clear that because the students are poor and minority there is no way that they could have outperformed their white, upper class peers from other schools; so they must have cheated.

Some of the other ideologies present in this film, however, are quite different than this bleak view of education. One positive ideology throughout the film is that if the teacher respects and cares for the students then the students will in turn respect and care for the teacher. Mr. Escalante shows his students that he believes in them and that he wants to better their futures. Because he has this attitude with them they go out of their way to please him. They beg him to allow them come into class when they are late. They come to him with their problems and think of him as someone they can trust. They even fix up his car with a new paint job to show their appreciation for everything he has done for them. They are willing to go extremes to show him that they will succeed.

The most important ideology present in this film is that no matter what the expectations, high or low, the students will meet them. All of the teachers in the school expect very little from the students in academics or responsibility. So that is what the students give them, low achievement and inappropriate behavior. Mr. Escalante does the opposite. He sets the bar extremely high and expects the students to meet it. He expects that the students are never late and never miss class.

He expects that they will learn what every high achieving student across the country learns. He expects that they will pass the AP Calculus exam for college credit. Each student meets every one of his expectations.

Stand and Deliver shows proof that it takes only one teacher to make a big impact on a student's life. In order to be such a great teacher one must really understand the students they are teaching to. By being aware of who they are, what hindrances they have, and how they learn, the teacher can find specific ways to push them to their full potential. This film also says much about our beliefs of the poor, minority, and the public education system. But the lesson to be learned by watching this film is that with high expectations and respect, even the most challenged individuals can achieve great things.