Stand and Deliver

Jaime Escalante is a well-known name within the world of mathematics teaching. Though some considered his methods controversial, others felt he changed the way people think about the learning capability of students. Escalante felt that teaching wasn’t just about a singular subject, but rather a community of support. He has said of himself, "I do not teach only math. I also teach discipline and responsibility and morality." [5]

Escalante had been teaching at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles since 1974, at which point the school was in danger of losing accreditation because of the consistently low performance of their students. Did he start in 1974, or is that when loss of accreditation was threatened? He rose in public awareness primarily because of his work as an advanced placement calculus teacher. (Much of this awareness was due to the 1988 biopic Stand and Deliver. footnote—even movies have a correct reference) This movie was dramatized for Hollywood, usually one says that a book or a person’s life was dramatized for Hollywood; the movie is Hollywood but was inspired by his achievements with children from low-income backgrounds. (Critics of the movie felt that “By showing students moving from fractions to calculus in a single year, it gave the false impression that students can neglect their studies for several years and then be redeemed by a few months of hard work.” [6] Others praised it as a source of inspiration.)

Those in the neighboring communities, which were mostly poor and uneducated Mexican-Americans, attended Garfield High. Known for its high dropout
rate and low-test scores, the students enrolled at this school were not expected to achieve and fulfilled this lowered expectation generation after generation.

At the time, and still true today, AP calculus was and is an advanced college prep class only taken by the “best” students. Escalante stated the following regarding his recruitment process and how this defied the expected make-up of his classroom, “I do not recruit these students by reviewing test scores or grades, nor are they necessarily among the “gifted” or on some kind of “high IQ track,” because I believe that tracking is unworkable and unproven as a guarantee that students will be channeled into the program of classes best suited to them. My sole criterion for acceptance in this program is that the student wants to be a part of it and sincerely wants to learn math.” [1] The success achieved in these classes allowed students to build the sense of self-worth needed to achieve in similar classes, paving the way for future opportunities and access to educational success.

Escalante wasn’t aiming to have the underachieving students at Garfield high take standard mathematics classes; he wanted them to pass the AP calculus class. “His simple formula for student success was a good teacher committed to working hard to teach and students committed to working hard to learn-and he demonstrated that student commitment and ability could be developed through the encouragement and reinforcement students received from the hardworking and committed teacher.” [2]

Much of Escalante’s success is a direct result of his teaching methods. He strongly believed in the power of group work and peer interaction and viewed himself as a coach, whereas his students were the team. In relation to Jaime
Escalante’s team method, one writer muses over the standard success of sports versus that of academics: “Considering the power of the athletic agenda to shape meaning and culture in schools, can ways be found to recreate the scholarly agenda within schools so that it may develop into the same kind of social force?” [8] His expectations for students were high. He gave unconditional support when it wasn’t available at home by offering tutoring on weekends and evenings and became an expert on fundraising in order to make this happen. There were no lesson plans, textbooks, or computers in his classroom. No textbooks? He taught math “tricks” along with rotating lessons in an effort to keep kids interested.

Escalante’s students at Garfield pushed on and passed the AP exams in 1982; half with a perfect score. This shocked many to the point of disbelief and consequently 14 of the 18 students were accused of cheating by the Educational Testing Service. [4] Some refused to retake the test on principle, but those that did passed again. Escalante held tight to the tenet that “...impoverished children can achieve as much as affluent kids if they are given enough extra study time and encouragement to learn.” [3] Once Escalante left for a different teaching position, the math program he had built at Garfield sharply declined and was quickly criticized. “In any field but education, the combination of such a dramatic rise and such a precipitous fall would have invited analysis. If a team begins losing after a coach is replaced, sports fans are outraged. The decline of Garfield’s math program, however, went largely unnoticed.” [6]

In 1991, Escalante began teaching at Hiram Johnson High School in Sacramento, California. Like Garfield, Hiram Johnson was considered an inner city
school. It was rumored that his reason for leaving Garfield was because he didn’t get along with other teachers and disagreed with their teaching philosophies. His teaching methods were controversial to some. Teachers at Johnson felt angry that “…the district created a special classification of "demonstration teacher” so that he could qualify for a starting salary of $42,983 a year, more than he would have earned under the regular pay schedule.” [5] At Johnson, he also dealt with a different demographic. “What Escalante pines for is the cultural leverage he had at Garfield, where virtually all the students and their parents were Latino. At Hiram Johnson, the student body is an amalgam of working-class white, Asian, black and Latino.” [7] Before his career in Sacramento, only six students at Hiram Johnson took the A.P. calculus exam, all of whom passed. Three years into teaching at this school, 18 students passed. Those who applaud his career, also applaud this achievement. Those who find fault with his legacy, call this a marginal success.

Regardless of controversy, Jaime Escalante’s work proved successful for many students and more importantly should call the nation to focus on the larger problem of educational equity in the United States. His passion to give students an opportunity to thrive was and continues to be a revolutionary act. The current importance placed on standardized testing is forcing teachers to teach in a one-method-for-all approach and stifles creativity for both teacher and student alike.

This last sentence seems weak and out-of-place. It raises a plethora of issues not explored in your paper. Isn’t the AP exam a standardized test?
References


