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Film Analysis

The film *Stand and Deliver* centers around a math teacher, Mr. Escalante, in a Los Angeles high school. He begins by teaching them algebra, but soon decides to teach Calculus to the highest-performing students. The 18 students take the AP Calculus test and all pass, but their scores are questioned and they are forced to retake the exam. They pass once again, and their original scores are reinstated. This movie shows clear examples of culturally-relevant learning, a college-going culture, and critical thinking.

Throughout the film, Mr. Escalante constantly pushes his students to do the best they can do, giving them high expectations and the reassurance that they can succeed. When he is first teaching the students things like fractions he tells them “this is basic math but basic math is too easy for you, so I’m going to teach you algebra...and if the only thing you know how to do is add and subtract, you’ll only be prepared to do one thing: pump gas” (*Stand and Deliver*). This is an excellent example of telling students that they can do great things and warning them what will happen if they don’t. Mr. Escalante constantly tells his students that “it was your ancestors that first came up with the concept of 0, you have math in your blood” (*Stand and Deliver*). This is a different example of what I still think is culturally relevant teaching. Ladson-Billings writes that teachers who are culturally relevant “assume that an asymmetrical (even antagonistic) relationship exists between poor students of color and society. Thus, their vision of their work is

one of preparing students to combat inequity..." (Ladson-Billings, "Yes, But How" 164). Mr. Escalante does both of these things, but goes further. He knows that the students are thought of as less intelligent, he tells them as much when he says "there are some people who will assume you are not smart because of your name and your complexion" (Stand and Deliver). He knows that the students know that they will have to work harder to prove themselves. He acknowledges this to the students and then works with them to combat this issue. Mr. Escalante constantly reminds the students that their culture was extremely important to the development of math, and this helps the students to be more comfortable with learning math.

Mr. Escalante works very hard to show the students that he knows that they can do anything. He teaches with the same passion that Ladson-Billings writes of in "I ain't writin' nuttin,'" describing a teacher who "believed that the students had the capacity to learn whatever he taught them. His major obstacle was not the students' ability, it was pedagogical limitation" (118). Mr. Escalante begins teaching them with apples, showing them how much of the apple is left to teach them fractions in an understandable way. It is easy to see fractions in an apple, an object that students have worked with in their everyday lives countless times before. Strolin-Smith writes of excellent teaching as "movement from the cultural known to the unknown" (77). That is what Mr. Escalante does when he teaches the students, all the way from basic math to algebra to calculus.

Mr. Escalante is also very important as a teacher in that he comes from the same culture as the students in the school. The students in his class are latino/a, and so is Mr. Escalante. He speaks Spanish, which is very important as there are students in his math class that do not speak English. When Mr. Escalante learns this, he has the students who don't speak English move from

the back of the class to the front, because he knows that the front of the class is where it is going to be easiest to learn, and he wants all the students to be able to learn.

My favorite scene in the movie occurs when Mr. Escalante just begins teaching them algebra and has them memorize something, saying over and over “a negative times a negative equals a positive.” After they repeat it six times Mr. Escalante quiets suddenly and asks “why?” (Stand and Deliver). This is a clear distancing from the usual expectation of teaching urban students, where they are expected to memorize and regurgitate facts. Instead, he teaches them to think critically, to understand each concept so that they will be able to use them in different ways than just the way they are taught to use them. He later tells them that “calculus was not made to be easy, it already is” (Stand and Deliver). He wants them to know that they are able to do this, that math is not inherently difficult, and that they are smart students who will be able to think critically about problems that they face.

Mr. Escalante has cultivated a college-going culture in his school, defined as when “students find encouragement and help from multiple sources to prepare them with knowledge needed for college success” (McKillip et al. 530). Mr. Escalante starts this by using a different method than what we have seen in our readings. He says that “if you want to turn the school around you have to start from the top” (Stand and Deliver). He decides that the best way to promote a college-going culture is to start sending a few kids to college immediately to show that it is possible for others who are considering applying to college. Another way that his class promotes this culture is that passing the AP test gets students college credit before they have ever taken one class in college. This proves to those students that they will be able to succeed in college, which is important for any student who wants to apply to college.

Throughout the film, the students constantly discuss their lives and how that affects their math work. One girl was pulled out of school by her dad so that she could work in his restaurant. Mr. Escalante went in to the restaurant and talked to the father about how his daughter should stay in school. The dad said that “she’d probably get pregnant, drop out of school.” Mr. Escalante responded that “she’s a top kid, she talks about going to med school” (Stand and Deliver). Again, Mr. Escalante creates a college-going culture by convincing the father that his daughter should stay in school, take calculus, and go to college. The same student has to stop taking her AP Calculus test early because she has a meeting with a college regarding a scholarship; showing that she will be going to college the next year. When students are being taught math at the beginning of the year, they tell him that he can’t just give them examples, he has “to show [them] how this works in the real world!” (Stand and Deliver). The students don’t just want to be told *how* to solve problems, they want to know *why* it is important for them to know how to solve the problems.

The students originally start out disliking math, but soon begin to enjoy it once they understand it. Mr. Escalante teaches them algebra during the school year, and then tells them that he wants to teach them trig and math analysis over the summer so that they will be able to take calculus the next school year. Eighteen of the students agree, and the next year they are able to take calculus. One of the students has trouble with one of the math problems, and Mr. Escalante asks if the student wants Mr. Escalante to do the problem for him. The student responds yes and Mr. Escalante exclaims “you’re supposed to say no!” (Stand and Deliver). This is an example of how Mr. Escalante wants his students to want to work on their own. He is teaching them life

lessons too, here. He is teaching them that they need to learn to solve their own problems, and not have someone do their work for them.

Mr. Escalante reminds me a lot of my placement teacher. Ms. Williams is a black woman who teaches in a predominantly black school. Mr. Escalante decided that the best way to create a college-going culture was to get students to take AP classes and get college credit, so that they realize that they will be able to succeed in college. Ms. Williams believes that one of the best ways to create a college-going culture is to get the students out into the community, getting jobs and internships. Many of her students are taking an internship working with someone running for mayor. She consistently reminds them that this internship will be very useful when they apply to college.

Stand and Deliver is a classic story about a teacher who manages to enter an urban school and turn it around with a bit of grit and gumption. However, this film is different from the usual story in a few ways. First, and most important, there is no white savior complex going on in this movie. The teacher, Mr. Escalante, is latino, speaks Spanish, and understands his students' culture. He is able to communicate effectively because of this. He truly believes in his students and is able to show this by creating a college-going culture and is able to use culturally-relevant teaching. Mr. Escalante is an exemplary teacher, one that exists not only in film, but also in today's teachers like Ms. Williams.

Works Cited

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