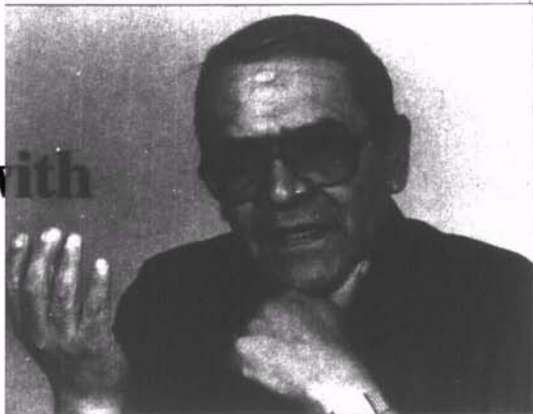


On Creating *Ganas*: A Conversation with Jaime Escalante



Photograph by Bob Ribba

The determined teacher-hero of the movie *Stand and Deliver*, Jaime Escalante has won the Special Recognition Award for Teaching Excellence from the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, the Presidential Medal for Excellence in Education, and the Andres Bello Prize from the Organization of American States, in recognition of his impressive successes with at-risk students in East Los Angeles. Here he shares his views on teaching as a combination of love and knowledge.

How did you, a teacher at Garfield High School, become the subject of a movie?

I don't know really. I just helped my students reach the highest possible degree of personal development. I have knowledge, and I have a deep love for my students. When I came to this school in 1973-74, the students were not interested in education. The parents were not interested in education.

It wasn't what you expected?

No, and my first day was not really enjoyable. I noticed the language these kids used, and I noticed the kids without any supplies. I was disappointed. I decided to go back to my job—I had a good job, I was working with computers.

Going back home, I changed my mind. I said, "First, I'm going to teach them responsibility, and I'm going to

teach them respect, and *then* I'm going to quit." I started trying to attract some of the students. My intention was to capture the minds of these kids to build an image, a college image, a school image, a university image—that you can educate yourselves to be Somebody.

So it was discouraging at first, but you were determined.

I took it as a challenge. I said, "We're going to see, kids."

Where did you get your determination?

I started teaching when I was only 22 years old. I taught mathematics back home in Bolivia for 11 years. However, when I came to the U.S., none of my credentials would count. That's why I had to go back and start from scratch. I always had in mind to go back to my first love, which was teaching. And I did that; finally, when I

got my teaching credentials, I picked Garfield. But I didn't know Garfield was in bad shape. There were too many gang kids, too many fights inside the school. It was never unusual to see the police car every five minutes at school. That was the beginning. But now the school is different.

You have a thorough knowledge of mathematics.

Yes, and also I have a strong background in skills—in other words, how to communicate and how to teach these kids. Really, it's not just the knowledge of math. Because to have the knowledge is one thing, and to use that knowledge is another, and to know how to teach or how to motivate these kids is the combination of both. My skills are really to motivate these kids, to make them learn, to give them *ganas*—the desire to do something—to make them believe they can learn.

How do you convey this belief, this self-confidence, to them?

I use the team approach. I make them believe that we have a team which is going to prepare for the Olympics. And our Olympics is the advanced placement calculus exam. I always talk to them and tell them, "Look, we prepared two years for this competition, and you have to play strong defense. Don't let the test put you down. You're the best." And every time the kids go to take the advanced placement calculus exam, they wear the jacket with a bulldog, which is the school mascot, and the kids go to the testing room yelling "Defense! Defense! Defense! Defense!"

Why does this work with your students?

Because in 1982 we had the controversial year in which ETS believed these kids could not pass the advanced placement calculus exam, and they showed they could do it. ETS thought two of my students had cheated, and all of them had to retake the exam, and then their scores were even higher.

On top of that, every year we double the number of students interested in advanced calculus. We double the number of students interested in mathematics. This school has so many students in chemistry, biology, and physics—it's because they believe they can do it. One of the things the kids always repeat in front of me is "You said, 'I believe in what you're doing.'" And the kids sense that they are going to be Somebody someday.

And then the teamwork reinforces their confidence.

Right. Suppose I have a student who does not feel confident with math or doesn't like it too much. In order to motivate her or him, I say, "Look, you're going to be the class leader. So they're going to be asking questions, and you should be able to answer questions, and I'm going to help. Come over here, and I'm going to be explaining to you. The only thing you have to do is pay attention and repeat everything I'm going to say."

And the kids start producing. Then I

give my assignment. I say, "I want you to teach this tomorrow. We're going to surprise the whole class, nobody knows, so we need to understand what I'm going to teach. So I'm going to call you early, and you're going to explain on the board. But play it cool."

They keep ready, and then I call on that kid, and he or she does the work on the board. The next day the kid comes to me and asks "How did I do?"

I say, "You did extremely well, but you can do better. So next time I'll let you know what you're going to be doing." That way they start building up confidence.

Once they build that confidence, it's easy going. It's not difficult, I just start pushing and keep working more and more. Once there's a team, we have no problem. So I take the kid for the summer; and the next year, especially when he or she is a senior, that kid will be my teaching assistant. They make money. That's when I prove this is easy—you know a little, enough to make a little money; if you go to college, you're going to make more money.

And how does this work out? Are these children now going on to college?

Yes, that's one of the requirements. The first day when these kids walk into my room, I have a bunch of names of schools and colleges on the chalkboard. I ask each student to memorize one. The next day I pick one kid and ask, "What school did you pick?" He says USC or UCLA or Stanford, MIT, Colgate, and so on. So I say, "Okay, keep that in mind. I'm going to bring in somebody who'll be talking about the schools." So in fact I talk to the college adviser, and he comes and talks, and I ask him to choose the school they want. The only thing I have to supply, which I call *ganas*, is the desire to do it. The money is going to come if the kids are working.

They have been able to finance their college careers?

Yes, they do, we do. We have a foundation, the Foundation for Advancement in Science and Education,

which collects money to help these kids. We use the money to pay the teaching assistants and to help kids go to college. We find scholarships for them, too.

What is Garfield High School like now?

We've become one of the best schools. At Garfield we're so proud of our students. I feel great when I see our kids going to the best colleges now. It looks like a private school; everybody wants to come to this school. But we don't have enough desks, we don't have enough teachers to be able to continue with our program in the way we'd like.

What made you so sure that these kids could learn like this?

I don't think kids cannot learn. That's my own philosophy. Anybody, any kid can learn if he or she has the desire to do it. That's what *ganas* is about. The teacher plays an important role in education—we all remember the first teacher who really touched our lives, or gave us some encouragement, or at least appreciated our best. The teacher gives us the desire to learn, the desire to be Somebody.

What would you say to teachers who find themselves teaching students like yours?

The teacher has to have the energy of the hottest volcano, the memory of an elephant, and the diplomacy of an ambassador. . . . Really, a teacher has to possess love and knowledge and then has to use this combined passion to be able to accomplish something. Don't teach from the desk, no. Don't teach for the money.

When we talk about education, we're talking about the future of our country—the teacher plays an important role in that. The owner of the future will be the person who is the owner of his or her own human resources, and human resources are the product of high quality in education. □

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