

Power and Ownership through Language: Students in LAUSD and *Stand and Deliver*

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Los Angeles is home to over a hundred different languages and cultures whose inhabitants are always learning and adopting customs from each other. Many Angelenos pride themselves on the city's diversity but may not consciously realize that, unfortunately, diversity may also engender a cultural and linguistic hierarchy that puts certain groups at an advantage over others. In order to confront this hierarchy, the members of marginalized groups have implemented different strategies: some may choose to assimilate into the dominant group, others may adopt tactics of linguistic and cultural resistance, or others may learn to maneuver the intricacies of a hybrid culture. According to some scholars, adhering to standards of a certain language will bring access to opportunities and success in a world where languages are placed on a hierarchal scale. Others argue that groups should resist a linguistic hegemony and demand space for other languages.

Postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon recognized what a powerful tool language truly is—it has both oppressive and transformative possibilities. Fanon observes, “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (25). If speakers of a minority language and members of a minority culture learn the language of the dominant group—those with power—then, according to Jose Medina, “speakers become disproportionately empowered and disempowered”—for some gain “linguistic capital,” while others are further marginalized (343-44). This has been a long point of debate with teachers and scholars of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), who have attempted to implement programs to serve minorities in the dominant discourse. In his work *Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains how a minority subject can learn the dominant language and make it his own precisely, but at the same time he can re-signify the dominant language, subverting its meaning. An intentional and “profound

disruption at the level of the signifier” (Gates 47) occurs where the speaker is playing with the language to challenge its native speakers, gaining power and control. Rafael Perez-Torres, a Chicano Studies scholar, argues that as a result of history, Chicano people have a hybrid identity and a hybrid discourse:

The body of the mestizo is one created and dissolved, one that changes function and significance as it moves through different systems of exchange. The voice of the mestizo speaks another language, a language in creation, a language suspended—yes—between English and Spanish. But the voice of the mestizo also sounds the depths of cultural transformation, tests the limits of social configurations, articulates the formation of culture in transition. It changes register and pitch depending on where and why it speaks, to whom and which systems of power it addresses. The voice of the mestizo sounds that which, finally, speaks an agency otherwise ever silenced. (182)

The hybrid individual gains power through his hybridity—a combination of different cultures and languages. In the LAUSD, those of any culture, the Chicano culture included, who may not be proficient in Standard Academic English (SAE) are considered to be “English learners” by governmental and educational systems. While some scholars argue that adoption of the dominant language by the English learner will bring empowerment, others are concerned that enforcing this adoption will inevitably reinforce the hierarchy.

In examining Ramon Menendez’s iconic film, *Stand and Deliver*, I am exploring the power of hybrid and dominant discourses. The film, with its plot based on the true story of Jaime Escalante, reflects the student population of many public schools all throughout Los Angeles whose members are native or primary speakers of Spanish attempting to break into the dominant world of Standard Academic English. The film depicts the struggles the students endure while adopting the standard language. Although some have argued that the film reinforces stereotypes of the Chicano culture, others have argued that the story of Escalante and his students provides helpful insights into the uses of alternative pedagogies and that the film offers one reality of Los

Angeles's students and their relationship to language. In the film, the students of Garfield High School are considered disadvantaged English Learners, like the ones in the LAUSD, and they are portrayed as individuals who know the system and have learned to rhetorically work their way through, claiming ownership as a result. Drawing from Gates's idea of signifyin(g) and Perez-Torres's idea of the mestizo hybrid language, I argue that the film illuminates the way students rhetorically move through the language hierarchy to disrupt the social constructions that have negatively impacted them. English learners have both the ability and the drive to gain power through the adoption and application of the dominant language; being double voiced may even give them an advantage over individuals who were already speakers of the dominant language. In the process of adopting the dominant language, students realize that it is not a better language than their heritage language, but one that, in Medina's words, has "linguistic capital." The combination of their dominant language and heritage language, with the hybridity of their language skills, empowers them to maneuver through the hierarchal system of languages. *Stand and Deliver* is an accessible lens to view the rhetoric mestizo students, who are simultaneously English learners, use to empower themselves and adopt the skills they need to prosper.

The Debate Concerning the English Learner Program

The former superintendent of the LAUSD, John Deasy, speaks for the district in the English Learner Master Plan: "In LAUSD we value and promote 21st-century College and career ready knowledge and skills, as well as multilingual and multicultural proficiencies that bestow real advantages in today's complex, interconnected world." According to officials, the district's students need to adopt the dominant language to ensure an advantageous future, rather than falling into a disadvantaged one. The LAUSD reports serving more than 640,000 students of 93 different languages, 80% of which come from families whose socioeconomic status is low enough to qualify for free or reduced lunch prices. The makeup of this underprivileged student population is predominantly Latino, as Latino students are the largest ethnic minority group in the district. Al Ramirez and Dick Carpenter report in their article, "Challenging Assumptions

About the Achievement Gap,” that “on average, Latino students tend to be poorer, attend more segregated schools, and live in urban areas” while they simultaneously “account for the largest number of students served in programs of English-language acquisition” (600). Thus, being the second largest public school district in the United States, LAUSD has attempted to close the achievement gap and support students whose native language is not Standard English.

The English Learner program was created to assist students who need to develop the academic language and skills necessary to have access to the same opportunities as their counterparts. This student population is approximately 30% of LAUSD’s overall student population, students who are more likely to drop out of school due to struggles their English Only speaking counterparts do not have. Monica Garcia, the president of this district-wide initiative to aid all students, monolingual or bilingual, is not a newcomer to public schools; she argues for the need of such a program because of her firsthand experiences. In the program’s master plan, she believes “all students can master the language of school, the language of college and career readiness, and ultimately the language of power” (i). And while these students may need the extra support to succeed past high school, many of Garcia’s opponents argue that the program, an extension of the English as a Second Language classroom or a remedial classroom, hinders the students’ capabilities because not only are the EL students placed in separate classrooms, but they often feel stigmatized because they equate the “English learner” label with inability and ignorance. Although this is not the program’s intention, it is an inevitable result, which discourages the students from being active and committed students. It is important to highlight that both sides care about their students, who perhaps just need a chance to prove their potential.

Before analyzing *Stand and Deliver*, let us look at the eligibility requirements for LAUSD’s English Learner program, the enrollment process, several critics of the program, and obstacles that are inevitable and inherent in the program’s structure. The English Learner program, revised in 2010, is an intricate and evidence-based plan to ensure success among this specific student population. Generally, students fall into one of two categories: the first are second language learners of English and the second are

native speakers of English. The first group encompasses students who are newer to the country than others and are posed with the dual task of learning an entire new language and learning content specific to disciplines in that new language. The other group lacks academic language skills that form the new Common Core State Standards. Students at the various levels all enter the program in one of two ways. When joining LAUSD, all parents must fill out a Home Language Survey (HLS) answering four questions:

1. What language did the student learn when he or she first began to talk?
2. What language does this student most frequently use at home?
3. What language do you use most frequently to speak to this student?
4. Which language is most often used by the adults at home?

The answers parents provide to these questions then elicit a label of either “English Only” or “Possible English Learner.” The program’s master plan does admit to placing the most value on the fourth question, raising even more objections from numerous parents and critics. If the student falls into the latter category, then he must take the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to test his level of English proficiency (“English Learner Master Plan” 5-6). If the student passes the test, then he/she is now reclassified. But if he/she does not pass with a score specific to the current grade level, then the student is immersed in a program that could, according to opponents of the plan, be more detrimental than helpful.

Annie Gilbertson calls attention to the harm the English Learner program can inflict on students in her article, “LA schools: California ‘English learner’ tests incorrectly label bilingual kids.” She follows the story of a bilingual 9-year old whose father is Hawaiian and mother is Mexican-American; neither she nor her parents view her as an English learner but she was indoctrinated into the program without the parents’ full knowledge. The student was reportedly taken out of class to be given individual lessons, missing crucial instruction time in disciplines such as science, without showing any productive results. Gilbertson calls the program’s intentions into question, stating that “new California funding laws give more money to districts with more English learners and other high needs students,” and then following that assertion with statements such as “L.A. Unified tested twice as many kindergartners as the year before and more than

four times as many as were tested in 2010.” In a logical way, she rhetorically presents the information to sway readers to see the negative aspects of the program, thus, reducing support in the overall community. Moreover, she provides a set of sample CELDT questions for her readers to perform, further critiquing the program in favor of abolishing the program, or at least changing the program’s requirement into more clear and defined ones.

Gilbertson is not the only one to question the program; Ramirez and Carpenter also examine and call into question the practices of the program. After a student is labeled an English learner, the student is then enrolled in the correlating class he needs as extra support. From their studies, Ramirez and Carpenter “have found that the ‘achievement gap’ between Latino and white students may be a ‘phantom gap’ derived from the practice of lumping all non-white students into a single comparison group” (600). There are many issues with generalizing so widely; some students do need the extra sheltered support, while others do not. Many of the students in the EL program are not just “lumped” or “thrown” together but paired or grouped with others who also need an environment focusing on only language skills. To complete the program, each student must meet all the requirements to reclassify into mainstream English classes. There are three requirements the student must pass simultaneously, which makes reclassification difficult and even impossible for some students—especially those who have given up, frustrated by the program’s negative labels. Furthermore, Gilbertson cites several studies showing that “the longer these studies stay in the program, the wider the achievement gap grows between them and their mainstreamed peers.”

Even though many people are not in favor of the English Learner program, it is important to note that the District is attempting to address an issue commonly found in the educational realm as a whole. Peter Elbow, renowned professor, teacher, writer, and pedagogical theorist, believes in empowering students of non-privileged Englishes by teaching them the privileged, Standard English present in colleges and high-paying careers. His essay, “Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond ‘Mistakes,’ ‘Bad English,’ and ‘Wrong Language,’” tackles the idea of separate classroom, stereotypes, and pedagogical practices for English Learners all while addressing the harmful and

beneficial effects of being labeled an English Learner. While he does recognize a need for adopting Standard English, he does not believe it is “inherently better than other dialects.” He also argues that students “can’t have success in most college courses and most job situations without writing that conforms to the conventions of the SWE [Standard Written English]” (651). The reality of such a class, one that physically removes an English Learner from mainstream classrooms, can, as Elbow notes, be problematic: “segregation on the basis of surface features of language can result in segregation on the basis of race and class” (648-649), thus creating doubt among the general population about English Learners and among students themselves about their own capabilities. Ramirez and Carpenter’s research resulted in information validating this doubt; when “turning to school-based variables, some researchers conclude that school segregation significantly affects the academic achievement of minority students” (601), leading them to call for the desegregation of students with various language skills.

The LAUSD has recognized and responded to issues with the English Learner program, and with time allowing for trial and error, the program might be able to work out its flaws. It is an intricate plan that seemingly caters to the different types of English Learners ranging from those completely new to the language, to those who only need to master academic English. If we momentarily put the theoretical ideas aside and look at the plan’s implementation in schools district wide, we can see how difficult the plan is to monitor. While, the LAUSD recognizes that English learners are capable of great success, the stereotype of English Learners unfairly suggests that this is a population of students who are either willfully ignorant or incapable of success. According to LAUSD’s Spring 2015 Language Census Report, 94% of English Learners are Spanish speakers while 82 other languages account for the remainder 6%. Because of the large number of Spanish speakers within the program, the students are often treated as a group rather than as individuals. Ramirez and Carpenter believe “it would be a mistake to assume that all Latino students have similar needs or require the same type of education” (600) and they could not be more correct. In one Long-Term English Learner (LTEL) classroom, whether it is the “lower level” or the more “advanced curriculum” being

taught, there are different types of English learners present in the same physical space accompanied by the same single teacher. Every person, regardless of the content or skill that is the aim of study, learns in different ways. The multitude of teaching techniques, if appealing, can empower students to learn how to find a voice aside from their academic English voice, but this will only be successful for students who have developed the knowledge needed to move through languages. In his essay, “Composition Studies and ESL Writing: A Disciplinary Division of Labor,” Paul Kei Matsuda emphasizes the “need for writing instructors to become more sensitive to the unique needs of ESL writers” (674). And while he, too, is correct, how can one teacher cater to the multiple and sensitive needs of students who have lost hope in their own abilities in a seemingly never ending program? Each student comes with a metaphorical backpack—conventionally viewed as baggage, which connotes a negative effect—consisting of factors that shape the student such as age, gender, cultural background, family history, education, and personal experiences.

Jane Echevarria raises one possible solution to the consistent issue educators have of wanting to help each student. She pushes for teachers to display fidelity to the curriculum the district creates in “Did They Get It? The Role of Fidelity in Teaching English Learners.” She and her colleagues note that there is a direct relationship between teacher implementation of strategies and student achievement advocating for teachers to faithfully follow the program. The research they reviewed includes pre-made lesson plans, critical thinking questions, vocabulary and exercises, and even “fidelity checklists” that are to be passed down from the district to local individual classrooms. And while some practices are universal for all students, all practices are not universal methods, especially for English learners. A group of students might positively respond to one strategy while another group of students become more confused and vice versa. Moreover, even in a mainstream class where language diversities are not as apparent, teachers alter their lessons and the difficulty level of assignments to each student population. Therefore, how is one general plan, realistically speaking, supposed to be “unique” to each English learner when, individually, the students’ problem areas lie in different areas?

The Empowerment of Students in *Stand and Deliver*

Although *Stand and Deliver* has been critiqued as unfairly depicting the educational system, others have praised Escalante in isolation from the film. Ilene S. Goldman informs us that some film reviewers described the film as a “fairy tale” because the events in the film did not reflect the representations of the current student population as represented in the news coverage of the time (84). This visual text, which is based on a true story, allows us to analyze the film to explore the way teachers and students employ hybrid discourses. Although the film version of Jaime Escalante, his teaching, and his students is not true to every detail of the real life version, the storyline and the film’s message are close enough for theorists, teachers, administrators, students, and others to consider the film, *Stand and Deliver*, as a source for examining the desire, drive, and determination that exists among English Learners. The film recognizes true potential held by Latino English Learners while addressing and dispelling stereotypes of these students’ abilities.

Echevarria argues that in order for students to soar past those limitations that hold them back, they need teachers who follow the curriculum set by the district or program creators. Jaime Escalante, a Bolivian, who, like many of his students, was bilingual, takes a different approach than the one suggested by the school system. Instead of showing fidelity toward the curriculum or plan the school has set, he follows a different path. Quitting his second job, he devotes himself to teaching math at Garfield High School where he encounters students who have been passed along in the system and those who have become resistant to education as a whole. Escalante is able to reach his students and help them succeed because “he is comfortable both in the barrio and in the system” (Goldman 85). He recognizes that his specific student population is not one that can be catered to by a standard curriculum that has been created; Escalante’s students need to understand that more is rightfully expected of them. Although the school judges his Chicano students in terms of their lower socioeconomic status and academic achievement levels, Escalante, challenging the system’s limiting vision for the students, decides to quiz the students on a daily basis, fights to teach an

Advanced Placement Calculus class at the school, and prepares his students during summer school to ensure their success.

Escalante understands that underperforming students may challenge the system's homogenizing view of them. According to Paul Matsuda in his article, "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition," many classrooms at the university level are created with the image of an ideal student in mind—a middle class Caucasian student who holds the language skills of academic English. Arguing that such a view is a common flaw found in freshmen university courses, Matsuda believes that we should not homogenize students. Although he understands that universities often have an image of a hypothetical student in mind, such an approach can be detrimental "when [the image] inaccurately represents the actual student population in the classroom to the extent that it inhibits the teacher's ability to recognize and address the presence of differences" (639). Student populations are different based on geography, but more often than not, they are linguistically diverse and contain students who are not native English speakers. Escalante knows his population in terms of culture and language skills while also recognizing what his students need in order to move up the ladder of success: education. Labeling math as "the great equalizer" in a society of hierarchies, Escalante puts in all of his effort, going above and beyond his job description as well as the traditional idea people have of teachers, to give his students access to educational resources. Matsuda warns that "the myth of linguistic homogeneity—the tacit and widespread acceptance of the dominant image of composition students as native speakers of a privileged variety of English" poses problems for English learners who have not been adequately prepared for a curriculum that does not provide extra support to those in need (638). Even though Escalante was not an English or composition teacher, his students were English learners who, if not for enrolling in his class, would have been destined to fail to continue with higher education. He teaches them to navigate through the system with the universal language of math, hence his belief of the discipline being "the great equalizer."

The students in the film enact a sort of "rags to riches" fantasy, but they gain educational capital rather than money. Each student finds a way to rhetorically move

through the social constructions placed onto him, finally breaking free of stereotypes. The students in Garfield High are part of a Title I school meaning that the population as a whole is at an economic disadvantage, with Physical Education teachers teaching Algebra, and students coming from homes that lack the ideal support one needs and wishes for to achieve a higher education. Factors such as “family income, the number of parents in the home, the number of algebra units taken, the level of parent involvement, and the level of English-language skills are significant predictors of academic achievement for Latino students” (Ramirez and Carpenter 602). The students of Garfield High reflect the multiple functions of language by representing the diversity of English Learners in the LAUSD; some are native English speakers but lack the academic language skills necessary for success at different levels, while others are immigrants who have become fully immersed in a new language and culture. Breaking free from these “home-based” and “school-based” barriers, the students—Guadalupe Escobar, Ana Delgado, Rafaela Fuentes, Frank “Pancho” Garcia, and Angel “Nethead” Guzman—prove, that together and individually, they can challenge the stereotypes attached to being an English learner and achieve great success.

Elbow and Perez-Torres both stress the importance of appealing to a hybrid identity—one that has been repressed, marginalized, or suppressed in some way to engender the idea that language disruption is needed for individual and collective empowerment. Mr. Escalante decides to do this by relating himself and his studies to the dominant and academically prestigious “language” of mathematics. On the second day of school, Mr. Escalante entertains the class with his witty personality and engaging lesson. The culture of English Learners is quite different from that of the traditional student and Escalante, being an “outsider” himself, recognizes the separation. He finds multiple ways to relate to the students that day and helps them see connections and relevancy to real world usage. Embedding a rhetoric of communal humor into his pedagogy, Escalante helps his students to identify with him, creating a comfortable learning environment—one of the goals outlined in the EL Master Plan. Comparing positive and negative numbers to filling and emptying a hole at the beach, Escalante explains numbers in analogies that interest his students. Escalante points out to his

students that the conceptual zero was first conceived by their Mayan ancestors; this knowledge makes them feel empowered and motivated. Escalante uses these rhetorical strategies to enhance his students' learning. "There may indeed be deep links between language, thinking, culture, and identity, but links are not chains," but even so, "a culture does not consist of just one way of thinking" (Elbow 655). Appealing to his student's cultural history in the classroom, Escalante opens doors to new interests, thus allowing his students to better absorb new content. The "links" Elbow mentions allows each student to make the connections he/she needs for the desire, or "ganas," to surface.

Historical events, although not as obvious as one might think, do alter the way a person carries him/herself and the thought processes one has. The process of becoming a person of hybrid identity or mestizo is known as "mestizaje," which "embodies the struggle for power, place, and personhood arising from histories of violence and resistance" (Perez-Torres 166). After a staff meeting concerning the school's upcoming accreditation review, Escalante decides to make his students step up to the line with daily quizzes. He tells them that they already have "two strikes" against them—their names and complexion—which signify to some people that they have less knowledge and are capable of producing less than they actually can. Ramirez and Carpenter believe that the "overgeneralized policies and practices" of districts in general, speculate that "all students with Spanish surnames need English-language acquisition classes" (600). This type of belief perpetuates negative stereotypes concerning the intelligence and skill set of Latino students. Escalante then rhetorically appeals to them by giving them the solution to this problem: math. If we observe the behavior of the students in the class, we clearly see that they are surprised—they neither believe in the value of math nor believe they can master it. Escalante uses this moment to disrupt the cycle that math belongs to the elite and not to disadvantaged, underperforming students. Escalante understands that math is not just another subject to learn and master; math is signified as power, as something to adopt as his/her own as an enabler in the globalized world of hierarchies. Escalante supports his students by showing his students through words and actions that he believes in them, and he wants

to help them beat a system that does not have faith in them. The students are ready to be challenged to meet the high expectations he sets for them.

In any institution, including a school, a power structure exists among its staff as well as those who seek services from the institution. In the case of education and schooling, administrators, teachers, and students often find themselves in a hierarchal relationship to each other, with students too often at the bottom. Escalante is soon introduced to Raquel Ortega, the Mathematics Department Chair, who throughout the film doubts the students' abilities several times. At a meeting about accreditation issues, Ortega stereotypes the students by labeling them as "illiterates." Mike Rose, a well-known teacher and writer, discusses disadvantaged writers and their origins in "Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism." When Ortega compares the students to illiterates, she is ideologically determining the destiny of each student, even if she does not realize the consequences of her words. Rose points out that "literacy is too intertwined with schooling and urbanization, with economics, politics, and religion to be able to isolate it" (351); thus, when Ortega refers to the students as "illiterates" she is also projecting the potential downward spiral of their futures. When Escalante wants to teach his students calculus and believes they can dedicate themselves to Summer school, Ortega, noting the low self esteem common to many English Learners, insults them by questioning their characters: "These aren't the types to, uh, bounce back." Her tone and hesitation before muttering the last two words speak to her lack of belief in the students as she feels they cannot handle failure and are not resilient. She does not believe in them here and again later in the film, when she boldly implies that the students are guilty of cheating on their exams because they were too upset to let Mr. Escalante down. When administrators or teachers doubt their own student population, especially a segment of that population that is a minority—in this case the EL population—then they not only acknowledge the widespread nature of these stereotypes, but also perpetuate them. These are students who haven't succeeded academically; therefore, it is easy for others to believe they would cheat in order to be what they wish to be. Rose notes that some believe that this type of thinking creates a division between the staff who "are literate, left-hemisphere, field-independent,

etc., and underprepared students [who] are oral, right-hemispheric, and field dependent,” further demonstrating “the conceptual limits of such labeling” (356-57). Here Rose is highlighting the underlying belief that administrators and students have different thought processes, and while I would agree that labeling is detrimental, I would challenge even this form of categorization.

Certain moments can be discouraging for students who are marginalized by the privileged culture or language. However, as Gates suggests, these moments can also be empowering moments, in which the individual can disrupt the system. After devoting their time and effort to working with Escalante, the 18 AP Calculus students all pass the test but are then accused of cheating on the AP Calculus test by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Each student receives a letter by mail stating the suspicious circumstances surrounding the exam. While sitting on the field bleachers discussing the letter, some of the students do not understand the real import of this official letter written in Standard Academic English, “the written language of power and prestige” (Elbow 641). A student asks Escalante to translate what the letter says into vernacular English. Another student, rightfully frustrated and upset, remarks that the testing service thinks that they are too stupid to even cheat correctly, bringing the stereotypes of English learners to light. This scene only confirms how Ortega, and other teachers and administrators with her mindset, views English learners: these are students who look for the easy way out instead of working hard and are so obtuse they cannot even succeed. In doubting the students’ intelligence, the administrators are perpetuating negative stereotypes. Even when the students have surpassed all odds, barriers, and challenges, they are questioned and must find the desire in themselves to keep fighting past the traditional hierarchal structure that bars them from truly advancing. One type of person is not better than another type of person, similarly one language is not better than another, and one ethnicity is not better than another. They are merely different from each other. According to Elbow, Academic Standard English just “happened to be the dialect of the region that became economically and politically dominant” (Elbow 663).

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) decides to investigate into the ordeal, and the ETS representatives clearly share Ortega’s attitude. During an interrogation-like

scene, one of the ETS men tries to convince the group of students to admit they cheated. To appeal to the group, he decides to relate to them, a rhetorical strategy we have seen Escalante employ as well: “I come from this neighborhood. I know that sometimes we’re tempted to take shortcuts.” He generalizes and assumes that students from an economically struggling area will resort to negative behavior. Made out to be a criminal, Angel responds by making the accusers look like fools. Playing upon their false assumptions, he tells them that he got the test in advance from the mailman, murdered him, and left his body to decompose in his locker. Then, he raises his arms in the position a person would offer to be handcuffed, as if serious about the “crime” he says he committed. Angel understands what the stance signifies here by way of signifyin(g), where the “most important defining features of Signifyin(g) are ‘indirect intent’ and metaphorical reference” (Gates 85). In addition to this act of linguistic defiance, Angel points his fists directly at the ETS representative, who reads the words “fuck you” across Angel’s knuckles. This type of signifyin(g) “connotes the play of language—both spoken and body language—drawn upon to name something figuratively” (Gates 69). Angel is fed up with the accusations of being viewed as a cheat and a failure after he had mastered the system that had repressed him for so long and thus “the voice of the mestizo emerge[d] as the articulation of an empowered and empowering ethnic identity” (Perez-Torres 166). This English learner, someone who in the beginning of the film would be considered a gangster or “cholo” by other Latinos, has learned the system and can manipulate it to adhere to his specific rhetoric—not the dominant rhetoric and conventional meaning attached to his actions. Employing these tactics, Angel is engaged in the double voiced discourse that empowers him; he responds with subversive humor as a coping mechanism, signifyin(g) by “engag[ing] in certain rhetorical games” (Gates 48). He disrupts the ETS personnel’s notion of what his actions traditionally mean in this act of frustrated resistance. In the end, Escalante’s students are vindicated as they retake the exam and all pass the AP Calculus exam once more.

Escalante empowers the students by teaching them to access the system while simultaneously accepting who they are and being proud of their characters as well. Peter Elbow labels a student’s first language or heritage language—if it is not English—

as his/her “mother tongue” and weighs it with the same value as Standard English (643). An important question arises from his work: how does a teacher give students access to a hegemonic language without forcing them to abandon their mother tongue? Gates could provide some insight how to do so through signification, which “has been aptly described by Mikhail Bakhtin as [being] double-voiced” (Gates 50). To be successful in a world of multiple languages that are placed on a hierarchal scale, students should have access to different voices and dialects, affirming and owning the rich possibilities of a multilingual environment. The students of Garfield High learn to do just this: they learn how to take the signification of a word or act and re-signify it to make it their own.

If we communicate the trust and belief we have in our students to our students, then we will help empower them. Elbow brings to light the fact that “there is extensive research about how people in different cultures argue and persuade and present ideas differently,” revealing that “culture is linked with language, rhetoric, thinking, and even modes of identity” (653). The students in *Stand and Deliver* are able to transform what was once unattainable and alien to them into something that is familiar and empowering. Allowing English learners the space they need to develop their identities and find alternative ways to master the system instead of constructing a system to master them will prove to be beneficial. The English learner program, or any educational program or initiative put into place, is not a one-size-fits all plan; each individual student is unique and responds to things differently in any given circumstance. It is virtually impossible to create a plan or lesson that will teach everyone. English learners must continue to battle limiting labels but with guidance, acceptance, and understanding, they will prove these stereotypical labels wrong and soar past the expectations set for them.

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