An East Oakland Odyssey:

Exploring the Love of Reading in a Small School

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Introduction: "Reading is Boring"

I am obsessed with teaching my middle school students to love reading. My obsession began when ASCEND, a New Small Autonomous school in Oakland, California, opened in fall 2001.[1] I was the only sixth grade language arts and history teacher with two classes of 23 students each. Although I had taught for five years, I had never taught middle school. As I assessed my students in the beginning of the year, their low skill level, on average at fourth grade, disturbed me. I had previously taught third grade and that experience gave me ideas for how to teach struggling middle-schoolers. However, my third graders had been enthusiastic about everything and delighted in learning. That experience did not prepare me for my ASCEND students' negative attitudes toward school.

Most disturbing to me were the students' attitudes about reading. On Mondays we regularly had a morning circle and checked in about the weekend. Everyone had to share. One after another, students repeated the same thing: "I didn't do anything. It was boring." Week after week, one after another complained of uneventful weekends. Although occasionally someone attended a birthday party or a family event, their perception of their weekend usually seemed to be that it was boring. Two months after school started, I decided to probe. "What do you mean, you didn't do anything?" I asked Billy, a shy Cambodian boy.

"I didn't do anything," he repeated.

"But what does that mean? Did you sleep? Did you watch TV? Did you eat? Did you take a shower?"

"I did nothing. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling," he said.

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[1] In the fall of 2001, ASCEND (A School Cultivating Excellence, Nurturing Diversity) opened with 170 students in grades K, 2, 4, and 6. We were one of five new small autonomous schools that opened that year in the Oakland Unified School District to alleviate the overcrowding at neighborhood schools and to address the inequities in the education system. ASCEND is located in Oakland's predominantly Latino Fruitvale neighborhood, although our student population is around 65% Latino, 20% Southeast Asian, and 15% African American. The majority of our students come from low-income families, and had attended local elementary schools where classes were large and test scores were low.

A core staff of around a dozen teachers averaging 10 years of experience, and a dynamic principal welcomed our students. At our side was a larger group of artists from Mocha (the Museum of Children's Art), musicians from the Oakland Youth Chorus, Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound coaches, coaches from the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), and parents who provided support, training, guidance, and instruction to teachers and students. Together, we had developed a vision for the school, which include supporting children's physical, emotional, social and educational needs and producing literate students. We worked hard at cultivating a school culture that demands that students take charge of their own learning, develop responsibility, reflect on their personal, social and academic progress, help each other, be kind and considerate, and persevere. From ASCEND's initial conception, inquiry had been a core component of a model for professional development, and by our third year, it was the central piece of our professional development.

I was stunned. I blurted out the first thing that came into my mind: "Why didn't you read something?"

"Reading is boring," he said without emotion, as numerous students around the room echoed his sentiments.

Again, I was stunned. I was flooded by memories of my own childhood, of long weekends and summers when I had nothing to do. I was never bored, however, because I read voraciously. Books helped me to understand my social and emotional world; they provided an escape from the chaos in my family; they helped me develop empathy for other people; and they always entertained me. I loved reading, and I still do.

I have had the rare fortune to teach this group of students for three years. I have been their language arts and history teacher for 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. [2] This allowed me to undertake a three-year study of my students' attitudes towards reading. This paper covers a small piece of my research, which looks at whole class change in attitude and also at four case study students. The whole class data, surveys and reflections, audio and videotapes, and my journal observations are not reported here. What I am discussing are my findings about Eduardo, Eddie for short, who is one of my case study students and who is representative of many others. I will approach this by looking at four critical incidents which illustrate the complicated issues Eddie has with reading and school, and which marked turning points in his attitude. Eddie's journey also parallels my own as I discovered the power that doing inquiry in the classroom can have in affecting my teaching practice and the success of my students.

Eddie: Background

In every class I've taught, I've had an Eddie. He's the kid in the baggy jeans who pierces his own ear and swaggers in late after lunch. He constantly challenges authority and is often seen as irreverent and disrespectful which gets him "in trouble" a lot. He's also the kid who always asks the "best questions" in class discussions, questions that spark lively debate. He's popular amongst his peers, but loses his temper easily and gets in fights. In other situations, my Eddie would be a gang-leader.

--Journal, 5/16/03

Several students captivated my attention from the first time I met them in September of 2001. Individually, they posed challenges to my teaching, but they also represented a great number of other students. Four students became my case studies in my inquiry. Tomas is a highly skilled Latino who is deeply invested in his studies, but struggles with his peer's perceptions of him as a "nerd." Billy, a Cambodian student who reads a year or two above grade level, is the afore-mentioned student who would rather stare at the ceiling than pick up a book. Catalina is a low-skilled, quiet Latina who works hard to please the teacher and whose attitudes, as a result, are challenging to decipher.

In this paper I will focus on Eddie, a socially self-confident Latino, whom I first assessed as having very low academic skills. The results of his SAT 9 (Stanford Achievement Test) reading scores for fifth grade placed 95% of students in the country above him. Eddie attended four different elementary schools because his family moved

[2] In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to the years I spent with my students by their grade level year. Those years correspond with the following: 6th grade: 2001—2002; 7th grade: 2002—2003; 8th grade: 2003—2004.

frequently. Although his primary language is Spanish, he was switched back and forth between English-only and Spanish bilingual classes, which most likely affected the development of his literacy skills. A small motor disability causes Eddie's handwriting to be indecipherable, making him ashamed of anything he writes. In the fourth grade Eddie was retained and is therefore a year older than his classmates. He is very aware of his skill level and has no confidence when it comes to doing schoolwork. As a result, he often loudly expresses his dislike for school and disinterest in studying, and for most of the time he's been at ASCEND, he has rarely done homework.

In social situations, with adults or with his peers, Eddie is very confident. He is charming, mature, and frequently takes leaderships roles such as speaking to the superintendent or organizing students to perform a play. He is well liked and is one of the few students with close friends who are not of his ethnicity. However, Eddie also has a temper and has been involved in several conflicts with students and adults since coming to ASCEND.

Eddie is very bright, has sharp analytical skills, and loves to engage in conversations about history and politics. He learns best orally and has an impressive memory for information that he hears. Once when I was noticing his extensive vocabulary, I asked him where he'd heard a certain word. "On TV," he said, making me wonder about the role of TV in his literacy development. Eddie is one of the few students who enjoys long lectures about history and who can maintain his attention in a class discussion way after most students have faded out. Yet when doing deskwork, Eddie often appears squirmy and wiggly. He could easily have been assessed as having attention deficit.

Eddie faces many challenges. His family lives in a one-bedroom apartment in a rough neighborhood, and Eddie sleeps on the couch in a crowded living room where, when he can, he stays up until 2:00 am watching movies. Eddie has been exposed to violence and alcoholism his whole life. When I first spoke with Eddie's 4th and 5th grade teacher, who is now an administrator at ASCEND, she said she felt that if Eddie had attended any other large middle school, he would have dropped out of school by 8th grade and become involved in gangs. She pushed for him to come to ASCEND where she felt he would be more likely to succeed. Because Eddie is representative of so many other students in the inner city, and because he is so "at risk," I have devoted substantial time to understanding him as a student and his attitudes about reading.

Critical Incident: Literature Circles Begin. Winter, 6th Grade

Today was one of my best days teaching ever! We started literature circles, finally. Carlos, Eddie and Ernesto were having a wonderful time. They laughed and laughed, kept flipping through The House on Mango Street, reading parts to each other, checking what the other had highlighted or underlined, reading parts aloud, laughing. Eddie made text-world connections, and lots of text-self connections.[3] Eddie: "See where she writes that men live on Venus—that's me!'" The way he engaged with the writing and analyzed it also struck me. He commented, "This part where she says she's like a 'red balloon with a string hanging from it' really made me think. What did she mean? And have I ever felt like that? I spent a long time thinking about that."

[3] Harvey and Goudvis, *Strategies That Work.*

When time was up today, Eddie was one of several kids who loudly begged for more time. After the meeting I surveyed the class and asked students to rate their excitement about starting literature circles. On a scale of 1-6, Eddie wrote in, "A 10!!!!!!!!" which was by far the highest in the class.

--Journal, 2/6/01

For our first experiment with literature circles, all students read *The House on Mango Street,* which was at or below the reading level of most students. I predicted that many students would connect with this lively, engaging book written from a child's perspective and addressing issues of family, identity, immigration, and gender. This first cycle was a great success and literature circles became the cornerstone of my reading program as I hoped they would be a key strategy to change feelings about reading, and subsequently, improve skills.

One of my initial theories about why my students detested reading had to do with their experience and perception of reading as a solitary activity. In an all-too familiar scenario in many classrooms, students read a novel and write a book report, then return the book to the shelf. That defines "reading" for them. Yet, I know that when I am excited by something, such as a novel, I want to share it with others. Furthermore, when I am confused by something, I seek the council of my peers. For these reasons, I felt that the social nature of literature circles would be effective for my chatty, pre-adolescent 6th graders.

For Eddie, literature circles have been essential in changing his attitude about reading and in developing his reading skills. Literature circles were new to all my students and I knew it was vital that Eddie's first experience be positive. That first day, as he discussed *The House on Mango Street,* Eddie discovered that reading could be fun when it is a social event. This was my primary objective in starting literature circles, and the data I collected was clear evidence that I had accomplished my goal. Furthermore, this first experience was positive for Eddie because he felt successful. This was crucial for him after years of failure in school. However, not only was Eddie able to understand *The House on Mango Street*, but the activity he was asked to do to demonstrate his understanding was something he was accomplished at. Had students been asked to complete a written response to the book, Eddie would not have felt as confident and would not have been as successful in showing his understanding of the book. But Eddie knew how to talk, was good at social interaction, and enjoyed sharing his connections to the text. From the first day of literature circles, Eddie knew that this structure was one in which he felt comfortable and confident, and in which he could be successful with his peers. I recognized that students with stronger social skills would be more successful in the structure I was choosing to teach reading.

Literature circles give me invaluable assessment data on a student's reading skills. In the beginning of sixth grade, I assessed Eddie at a 2nd or 3rd grade reading level. However, in the first literature circle meeting, I observed highly developed analytical skills that made me question my earlier assessment. Eddie was one of the only students to cite text and engage directly with it. The questions he posed to his group provoked much deeper conversations than those in other groups. I have observed this over and over in Eddie's participation in literature circles. After students read a novel, they complete a project that usually has a central written component. Although Eddie has the necessary skills, more often than not, he does not complete it or turns in low-quality

work. On in-class essays and quizzes about literature, Eddie usually scores in the middle range. Were I to use only this assessment data, I would conclude that Eddie's reading skills are low. However, when I observe Eddie discussing literature, I find his comprehension and analytical skills to be exceptionally high. I had assumed that he could do this only when he was reading texts that he chose. However, on the standardized test at the end of 7th grade, he scored in the 87th percentile in the reading analysis section, higher than any other student in his grade. My inquiry about Eddie has reinforced the critical need to collect various forms of assessments, and the need to provide opportunities for students with verbal strengths to demonstrate their knowledge.

For Eddie, literature circles are a safe place where he can improve his reading comprehension. Over the years, he has repeatedly stated in surveys that he likes reading in literature circles because he can get help from his classmates. In a survey at the end of 8th grade, he writes, "I think that literature circles help me more [than independent reading] because I have some people that I can talk to about a book if I did not understand anything or to share my feelings." My notes from observing Eddie in literature circle discussions confirm that he uses his group to further his learning. I have observed him asking for clarification of plot, for definitions and pronunciations of words, and for alternate analyses of a story. Repeatedly, I have noticed that Eddie is not shy in asking his peers for help and that he frequently does so. At the end of 8th grade, Eddie still completes very little homework. However, he *always* does the reading for literature circles and continues to engage his classmates in lively, text-based discussions of novels. He clearly enjoys reading and is motivated to do so when he will have a chance to discuss it with his peers.

Critical Incident: *That Was Then, This Is Now:* Eddie's Touchstone Book. 6th/7th Grade

"My all time favorite book is That Was Then, This Is Now *because that was the first book that I really got into. This book opened up new thoughts in my mind and made me think of new things."*

--Eddie's survey response. April, 8th grade

After *The House on Mango Street,* Eddie selected S.E. Hinton's *That Was Then, This Is Now* for the next literature circle. My notes from the first meeting read, "Antwan, Chai and LaShawn are retelling sections of the book. Eddie does not participate in this. Unlike him not to talk whenever possible. Did he understand it as well as they did?" (notes, 2/27/02) Eddie's reflections and my observations show that at first he was not particularly excited about *This Was Then, This Is Now*. In this first reading, I believe that Eddie did not understand the text that well and that he was still anxious about asking a group of students who he did not entirely trust for help. So how and why did this classic in young adult literature become Eddie's favorite novel?

In the fall of 7th grade, I selected *That Was Then, This Is Now* to use with the whole class to teach character development. I loved this book when I was in middle school and thought that my students would enjoy it. In addition, the small group of students who had read this novel in the 6th grade endorsed my decision and agreed that the class would like it. Although it takes place in the 1960s in an all-white neighborhood on the East Coast, I thought my students would relate to the book's themes and

characters. In this coming-of-age story, two friends confront violence, drugs, gangs, poverty and family dissolution, and are forced to make extremely difficult decisions. For many of my students, these issues are close to home, and in a survey in the fall of 8th grade, exactly half of my students listed *That Was Then, This Is Now* as one of their favorite novels. Although, Eddie is one of the only students who has read it numerous times, at the end of 8th grade, a number of students reflected on the impact this book had on their enjoyment of reading. Girls and boys cited it as a touchstone text that got them engaged with reading.

The second time Eddie read *That Was Then, This Is Now*, when I taught it as a whole-class book, two things happened. First, he began this reading exercise feeling confident because he had read the book before. In whole class and small group discussions of this book, I observed that Eddie had understood the novel better than I originally thought. But having a chance to read it again, to discuss it with the whole class, and to engage in various activities related to the book allowed Eddie to gain a deep understanding of the novel. My whole-class lessons on this book permitted him many opportunities to interact socially. In one activity students debated the main character's decision to inform the police that his best friend is selling drugs. This was a loud, passionate, lively argument which engaged even the quietest students. Again I found that when "reading" involves socializing, Eddie is successful and enjoys reading. This is true for many of my students, but for Eddie it was the impetus to read and not just slough off another homework assignment.

The data I gathered about Eddie's several readings of *That Was Then, This Is Now* demonstrates the value of multiple readings of a book, which I encourage my students to do. Eddie was lukewarm about *That Was Then, This Is Now* during the first literature circle meeting when it was too difficult. But when Eddie reread the book the second time, I asked him what it was like. He said, "Much better. I notice more things."
"Like what?" I asked.
"Like I just noticed that Bryon's mom [a minor character] changed too in the book and I hadn't noticed that before" (notes, 10/1/02).

Observing Eddie's development in attitude and skills as a result of reading this book was validation that students should be allowed, and even encouraged, to read the same novel two or three times. I ask students to articulate why they want to read a book again when they ask for permission. They usually have very good reasons including to understand it better or because they enjoyed it so much the first time. For Eddie, this is a text he always refers back to when discussing his feelings about reading. In the spring of 7th grade, he declared that he dislikes reading, "Except *That Was Then, This Is Now*, that was cool." He has now read the book three times. It has become a touchstone text for Eddie, evidence that he might like to read and be a good reader, a critical experience for a reluctant reader. I know that this would not have been the case had he not read it several times.

Eddie's experience with this book also affirmed another one of my theories about how I could change my student's reading attitudes. I suspected that if my students were exposed to enough books that they could relate to and that they liked, their attitudes would change. This was challenging at times because the content that interested my students was far more advanced than the novels written at their level. Over the three years, I gathered data on my students' reading tastes and eventually came to know each

one's personal likes and dislikes. I knew that many of my reluctant readers were awaiting the key book that would turn them onto reading, as *That Was Then, This Is Now* did for Eddie. In order to do this, I had to know my students, and know young adult literature, knowledge my students valued. In the middle of 8th grade, as I prepared to be out of the classroom on maternity leave for a few months, I asked students to write about what makes a good teacher. I was surprised by how many described a good teacher as one who knows what kind of books her students like. The trust that I actively pursued from my students came to include a trust in knowing them as learners and as readers. Although at times I made mistakes, I believe that Eddie (along with most of my students) really trusted that I would recommend books that he would like.[4]

Critical Incident: Act 3: Discovering Drama. 7th Grade

"I understand this stuff better if I have to act it out and I can show you that I understand it this way. I know I'll get a good grade this way."

--Eddie's response about his final project, 7th grade

In seventh grade, Eddie discovered that he learns best through drama. This was an invaluable lesson for him, and for me. It has allowed him to direct his own learning when he can, and to feel tremendous success. It has allowed him to see that to some extent, he is not a failure in school—rather, school fails to provide him with enough opportunities to learn in the way he learns best.

Although students had numerous opportunities to express their learning through visual art, it wasn't until seventh grade when I discovered what drama could do. The first confirmation came as students confronted Karen Cushman's *Matilda Bone,* a difficult historical fiction novel about the Middle Ages. I used this book to teach metacognitive strategies for a novel that students had little or no schema for. One method I used for the first time was Reader's Theatre, in which the entire novel is read aloud, with students dramatically reading the dialogue. I also taught the reading strategies of visualizing and asking questions to understand the book. Eddie reported that asking questions as he read was most helpful for him when he read alone, but Reader's Theatre really enhanced his comprehension. In a reflection upon completing the book, he wrote: "It was really confusing, but when I heard them reading in Reader's Theatre I got it. It was like the people in the book were here and I could talk to them and when they read the words their feelings were there and so I understood it."

At the end of the first semester, students put on a play about the Middle Ages. This was an educational, life-changing event for Eddie. He stunned students, parents, and staff with his performance as a 14th Century religious fanatic and felt very proud of himself. In his reflection about the semester, he wrote: "What I learned this semester was

[4] At ASCEND teachers select the materials to use in our classrooms. This autonomy, an enormous advantage of being at a small autonomous school, permitted me to chose hundreds of books for my classroom. I attribute a great deal of the success I have had with my students to this and I am aware that in many public schools, teachers spend their own money to stock their shelves or simply do not have the resources to feed their student's reading interests.

that I learn best by acting. When I act I get to be that person and I know how they felt and I understand history that way."

In the spring of 7th grade, Eddie chose to write and perform a play with three other students as a final project. When I asked him why he'd chosen this, he shrugged his shoulders and explained, as if I should know already, that he just learns best by acting. His play reveled something else I hadn't realized about him as a student: he is not only a natural actor, but he also has an intuitive sense for writing scripts. His story flowed well, it had a perfect tension, he developed characters through their dialogue and actions; in every way it was an impressive piece of writing. Furthermore, Eddie completed all his homework on time and was the most invested member of his group, which also made him feel very proud.

I believe Eddie's success in drama is one of the major factors that has led to his increased confidence and to his enjoyment of learning. He has received so much recognition from his peers for his ability to act, write, and direct a group of students. At the end of 8th grade, when I reflect on Eddie's experience in my class, I am aware that his participation and involvement, his submission of homework, and his enjoyment of school was clearly at its highest when some sort of acting was involved. What I may not have realized were it not for this inquiry, is that the same is true for several other low-performing students in my class. My research has made the need to teach to different learning modalities indisputable and I constantly reflect on the individual needs of students. Furthermore, it has made the social nature of learning irrefutable and the need for learning to be experienced in social situations absolute.

Critical Incident: "I don't like reading!" Spring, 7th Grade

Elena: Who has their permission form to go to Berkeley tomorrow?
Eddie: I'm not going.
Elena: Why?
Eddie: Because I don't like reading and I don't want to waste my money on a book that I'm not going to read. I don't like to read.
Kids look at me to see how I'm going to respond. Eddie is leaning back in his chair, a little grin on his face. I feel like he's waiting to see how I'm going to respond. He's goading me, challenging me. I turn to the whole class.
Elena: Ok, you guys, I need your help now. What would you do if you were a teacher. How would you respond to what Eddie just said?

--April 10, 2003

In the week before spring break of 7th grade, I organized a field trip to a bookstore so students could buy a book to read over the vacation. As I collected permission forms the day before, Eddie instigated a whole class conversation around reading. During the discussion I took notes, and as soon as the class left, I used them to transcribe the conversation. This incident merits close reflection as it illustrated many of the complex issues involved in Eddie's attitude towards reading. This discussion was also an inquiry strategy I intentionally used to engage students with me in this puzzle of how to change attitudes about reading.

Finally, it was on this day that I first divulged my research project. This critical incident allows me to discuss an issue central to Eddie's educational life: the tension between his need for peer and adult support, and how the two kinds of support motivate him.

The very setting that Eddie chose for this conversation illustrates this internal conflict. On the one hand, he thrives when he has an audience, particularly an audience of his peers. He clearly wanted to challenge me in front of his classmates for their entertainment. On the other hand, I believe that while Eddie was provoking me, he was also testing my affections for him, something he would feel awkward about doing in private. Along with my entire class, he was well aware of how important it is to me that my students love reading. In fact, the first to respond to my request for help illustrates this:

> Julia: I'd feel really disrespected because we all know that you love to read and that you want us to love to read so I'd feel like he was being disrespectful to me by saying that. We know that you buy a lot of books and you're always telling us about how much you like to read.

Knowing this, I believe the essence of Eddie's question was really: Will you still love me if I don't like to read?

There is ample research on the connection between a student's need to know that his teacher cares about him and his academic success. One of my challenges as a teacher is to discover how and when each student wants this affection demonstrated. From the first day I met Eddie, his need for affirmation was glaring, his lack of self-confidence reflected in his hunched shoulders. However, because of his obvious need for peer approval, I felt that he would resist my attention in front of his classmates. This was true. While there were many occasions on which I could have publicly recognized his accomplishments, I often refrained or moderated them. Eddie repeatedly stated that he did not want to be seen as a "nerd" or as a "teacher's pet," yet Eddie struggled with his needs. At times I praised him in front of the class and he relished it, basking in my attention. At other times, I recognized him publicly and he got embarrassed and annoyed. The only occasion when Eddie never rebuked my attention was in parent conferences with his mother. These were often tense meetings as I was usually delivering "bad news" about Eddie's study habits. However, from my first conversation with his mother, I always spoke at length of his exceptional abilities, specifically of his analytical and verbal skills. I spoke of my confidence in Eddie and of my belief that he could succeed in school. In parent conferences, Eddie wrung his hands anxiously, looked at his shoes, and glanced at his mother measuring her response to my praise. He clearly wanted and needed my praise in front of the person whose opinion he has said numerous times he cares most about.

What I sensed from the beginning of the 6th grade was that Eddie needed to hear me recognize his academic accomplishments and skills, and that he would need to hear affirmations for years. Outside of class, I spent many hours with him and Tomas, his best friend (another one of my case study students) in museums, performances, and restaurants. There were many occasions when he would seek me out to talk or for comforting. Although I was sure that he knew that I cared about him, I also made it a point to tell him directly. However, much to my dismay, my attention and affection was

not enough to motivate Eddie to do all his homework. In 7th grade, I promised food, outings, even a trip to the pyramids in Mexico, but Eddie did not do his homework or come to school early for the tutoring I offered.

By spring break in 7th grade, I was very frustrated with Eddie. I couldn't figure out how to motivate him. I believe he sensed my frustration, leading him to challenge me in front of his classmates. The discussion he prompted evolved into a discussion of the difference in attitudes in school between boys and girls; of whether it is necessary for one to like reading or just be good at it; and of experiences in elementary school with reading. It was also during this discussion that I told my students about my research, describing it as a way to improve my teaching methods. At times, the discussion revolved around Eddie and my students participated in analyzing him. Although I was apprehensive about doing this, and I observed him closely to gage his reactions, I felt it might be useful because of his need for his peer's approval and support. Later that day, I checked in with Eddie about how he had felt being put on the spot. He admitted to feeling uncomfortable and again, I was not sure that I had done the right thing. I reiterated how much I cared for him and how I just want to learn how to teach him better. Many issues central to learning were discussed on this day with the class and participation by all students was at its highest.

It was shortly after this discussion that the 7th grade math/science teacher and I discovered something interesting. Even though Eddie enjoys math a great deal more than reading and writing, and even though his skills are much higher in math, he often missed weeks and weeks of homework assignments. Then all of a sudden, in the spring of 7th grade, he started turning in his math homework, every single assignment. One day his math teacher noticed some negotiations going on between Ernesto and Eddie. When she investigated, she discovered that Ernesto was paying Eddie $1.00 for each day that he turned in homework. When we probed about what was happening, the boys brushed off our questions and didn't offer details or explanations. We didn't push it and the homework continued to be turned in on time every day.

I believe that Eddie needs peer approval and encouragement, as long as it permits him to be cool. It was easy for him to say that he was only doing homework because Ernesto was paying him, but on several occasions he boasted about being the only one in his group to have all his homework turned in. Many students at ASCEND are struggling with their identities as they are now immersed in a school culture that praises them for being academic. Eddie would never have done his homework if I'd paid him; his deal with Ernesto allowed him to fit into his social world ("I'm only doing it for the money"), but also to receive the recognition and approval from his teachers and parents that he longs for.

One of my most interesting and challenging findings is the recursive, non-linearity of learning. Eddie, alternately exhilarating and frustrating, is a prime example. He has gone through periods when he declares he "loves reading!" Then, in his 7th grade end of year survey, he rated his enjoyment of reading at a 2 (on a scale of 1-5). This was an all-time low for him but made sense as Eddie had just read a challenging book that he couldn't get into. His enjoyment of reading is very fragile and he is easily discouraged when he has negative experiences. However, in the classroom, I often assume that change will be steady and straight; drops in attitude and performance cause me great distress. But I have to remind myself that attitudes don't change in one year; they

fluctuate depending on many factors. Having the tremendous advantage of spending three years with Eddie, I can see clearly that as Eddie's skills have improved and his confidence has risen, his attitude has changed.

An Assessment at the End of 8th Grade

Eddie was one of ten students caught drinking on campus. When I asked him why he did this, he shrugged and said, "I don't know." He is failing all his classes, never turns in any homework, and seems less and less engaged with school all the time. He vacillates between wanting my attention and resenting it. I keep telling him that I won't give up on him, that I'm obsessed with seeing him succeed. I think he still needs to hear this even though he pretends otherwise. But I am so worried about him. He seems more "at risk" every day. I worry that there won't be a happy end to my inquiry.

--Journal, 3/17/04

As I assess Eddie at the end of 8th grade, I focus first on the glaring negatives. My attention is consumed by the Fs on his report cards and the months of missing homework. More often than not, he seems disengaged with school. In reflections, he writes that he has "stopped caring" and feels he can't change his study habits. When discussing the drinking incident, he alluded to this being a common activity for him outside of school. This year I have experienced bouts of hopelessness when I think about Eddie. I have felt discouraged and wondered if I have to accept that the academic and personal challenges that Eddie has experienced will surmount our attempts to help him succeed in school.

And yet, the data I have collected has shown substantial gains, even when Eddie does no homework and seems disengaged. To begin with, Eddie's attendance record is remarkable: he has missed two days of school this year. On standardized tests, Eddie has made significant improvement every year. In my own assessments of reading, writing, and history, he has also made tremendous progress. In literature circles, Eddie continues to take a leadership role and regularly demonstrates his ability to analyze literature, use literary vocabulary, and instigate thoughtful conversations. His low grades are more a result of his inability to turn in homework and projects than of his skill level. It is worth considering whether Eddie's "failures" are about his abilities or about the structures of school that create or construct "failing" students. Do these structures themselves turn kids into "underperforming" students?

Furthermore, when I evaluate my inquiry, I must remind myself that my research is about changing attitudes. While I believe that attitude and skill are inextricably linked, I have chosen to approach the development of skills from the improvement in attitude. Eddie's feelings about reading have changed profoundly, documented not only in his own reflections but also in other data. In the middle of 8th grade, when I had a baby and was out of the classroom for three months, Eddie did not do any homework. However, my substitute's notes on students' literature circle projects reported: "Eddie clearly read the book and is excited by it. He dominated the presentation to the class and went on and on about the book." This was a critical piece of evidence as it demonstrated Eddie's enthusiasm for reading in my absence.

Eddie's attitude has changed in many areas. His academic confidence with his peers is notably higher than when he came to ASCEND. He has become a leader in literature circles, drama, and classroom discussions. On a survey at the end of 8th grade,

when asked about the change in his confidence during his three years at ASCEND, Eddie responded that his confidence has "gone way up." He has publicly declared that he aspires "to be like Tomas," his best friend who would rather stay in at lunch and read than hang out with friends. This is something he would have *never* done in 6th grade when he was too concerned with appearing cool.

Again and again, I have to remind myself that change is slow and inconsistent. At times its subtleties are obscured or barely recognizable. Yet Eddie comes to school on time everyday. He participates enthusiastically in classroom activities. He regularly makes little efforts to change his habits and behaviors. I need to focus on these more often: the hour and half he spent after school cleaning and organizing his messy backpack; his choice to make a scrapbook of this three years at ASCEND, rather than write a play, because as he explained, "I've never done that before." I am frequently seeing Eddie taking such risks in school now. When students were assigned to do a skit about their literature circle books, he participated in his own group's skit, and then volunteered to be an extra in two other group's skits. At the end of 8th grade, students who were failing were faced with an ultimatum: Turn in all homework for the rest of the year or repeat the 8th grade. Eddie finally began to do all his homework. For the rest of the year, he proudly paraded around loudly announcing that he had done his homework and berating his friends who did not do theirs. At the end of 8th grade, my students are working on a lengthy reflection of their years at ASCEND. In one part, I instructed them to reflect on what they learned in or about language arts. The assignment was intentionally left vague and open. To my delight, a resounding 90% of my students are writing about the change in their feelings about reading. Eddie wrote about "how I learned to love books."

I must recognize that were it not for my inquiry on Eddie I would not have noticed or documented these subtle steps. In fact, when I begin to take stock of them, I see examples of change on a daily basis. The mistakes Eddie has made are serious and his struggle turn in homework and complete projects could prevent him from succeeding in high school. However, the numerous incidents of change that occur every day give me the hope and guidance to keep nudging him in the right direction.

When I reflect on why Eddie's attitude changed, I see a number of key factors: his increased confidence; opportunities to do what he is good at; positive experiences in literature circles; the improvement in his reading skills; the support from peers and adults; and a touchstone book that taught Eddie that reading can be wonderful.

To a great extent, I attribute Eddie's change in attitude to my inquiry process. It was this lens that pushed me to ask questions and collect data that informed and shaped my practice. It pushed me to analyze my data, reflect on it, and write about my findings, thus pushing my understanding of Eddie to a deeper level. Inquiry made me feel empowered in the classroom: I was never at the end of my rope (a familiar place for many teachers) for there were always more questions to ask. This was critical when dealing with an often-frustrating student like Eddie. Inquiry gave me hope and helped me see the daily successes. Perhaps more than anything it allowed me to love Eddie, and all of my students, even more as it exposed them as a complex product of our educational, social, economic and political system. It removed the blame from the individual but granted the individual powers to affect change. Eddie is not lazy or

unmotivated or to blame for his failure in school; it is not my fault that I couldn't turn him into an A student. And thus, for me inquiry became a process of empathy and hope.

What I recognize now, which I can only touch upon here, is how my inquiry about one student caused deep repercussions in the learning of all my students. In numerous ways, Eddie's struggles reflect those of many of my students. The measures I took to address his lack of confidence positively impacted Catalina and Billy and Sara and all my students whose confidence was low. Many in my classroom shared Eddie's positive experience in literature circles. The majority of my students attribute the improvement in their reading skills to the development of metacognitive reading strategies. Many of my reluctant readers can trace their change in attitude to their experience with one book. Although many of the changes I instituted in my classroom were a result of data I gathered about the whole class, those that were a response to Eddie's needs affected the whole class positively.

Next year Eddie will attend a new small high school in Oakland. My hopes for him are that he will be able to direct his own learning as a result of having learned about his interests and skills as a student. I hope that he can reference his years at ASCEND as a touchstone experience in his education that was positive and supportive. I hope he knows that he can succeed in academic endeavors. I hope he knows how much I care about him and will always care about him. And I hope that he continues to read for pleasure and have his mind opened up by literature. On several occasions I have told Eddie that I will "haunt him for years" as I will be keeping track of him in high school. Although I feel I have had a "happy end to my inquiry," I hope that in four years I will be cheering at Eddie's high school graduation and watching him go to college.

Reading and Equity

In the beginning of 6th grade when I asked students if they thought they were good readers, Eddie said "no" and wrote, "I read too slow." At the end of 7th grade when I asked the same question, Eddie responded, "I think maybe because I read slow but I understand everything I read and I know how to go back and understand things I didn't get."

The more I reflect on why I am obsessed with attitude toward reading, the more I realize that this is fundamentally an issue of equity. Attitude is the key: If particular students do not enjoy reading or engaging in academics, I have doubts that they will be successful as a student. If they do not see the purpose in reading, I doubt they will engage in it. The purpose has to become personal and must extend beyond reading to get good grades or pass an exam. Reading is the beginning. If you love to read, you will read. If you read, you will learn.

Reading can also alleviate pain, loneliness, and suffering, inevitable emotions that in my students' neighborhoods can also be remedied with a wide array of unhealthy substances and activities. Finally, and simply, if students enjoy reading, their skills will improve. For my students, who are already several years below grade level, the longer they stay below grade level, the more at risk they are of dropping out. For them to improve their skills, I am convinced they must enjoy reading, as it is hard to get middle school students to do anything that they don't really want to. Parents are no longer a threat or reward, peer pressure is overwhelming, and there is plenty to do that is a lot

more fun than studying. While many middle or upper class students who are on grade level may not enjoy reading, for them their attitude is not potentially life-determining. Most likely, given the academic and financial support provided by their parents and schools, they will make it through high school and perhaps discover in college or even after that, that they enjoy reading. My students must learn to love reading, and learn to love learning, now.