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826 and the Future of Education

Posted: 02/25/2014 11:24 am EST | Updated: 04/27/2014 5:59 am EDT

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In the Echo Park and Mar Vista neighborhoods of Los Angeles, you'll find an establishment selling unexpected selection of mastodon meat, dodo bird chow and dinosaur eggs. These little unassuming storefronts, the Time Travel Marts, stock everything you need for a trip through the fourth dimension -- even time machine fuel.

The most interesting things about these vendors is not the variety of their wares, but the stream of schoolchildren disappearing in and out of mysterious doors in the back of the stores. These portals lead to local chapters of 826, a national network of after-school writing and tutoring centers. Fronted and financed by the enigmatic street-side shops, these establishments invite children imagine new worlds, writing stories that, under the volunteer-tutors' encouragement, are penned and published.

While on a film shoot at 826 Echo Park, I was struck by the wonderment and excitement among the children that was certainly fostered by the whimsical environs. At the same time, I was reminded that the most integral element of any educational program's success is not for sale on a shelf. It's the same magical stuff that powers spelling bee champions, straight-A students and confident new readers every single day. It's the foundation of every job well done and proud accomplishment in the

whose compassion and leadership usher young people into new heights of learning.

Today's educational landscape is overrun with exciting new ideas and proposed efficiencies, but let us not forget our own best learning experiences. I concede that incredible leaders and groundbreaking innovations such as Khan Academy and One Laptop Per Child are providing spectacular advances for education -- bringing tools to the farthest reaches of the globe and empowering new students of all ages to take initiative and explore the world around them. However, I'm willing to bet that most of us have experienced our strongest moments of learning alongside the watchful eye of a beloved educator. The role of teachers may be changing, but their importance and potential for massive impact is not. These educational innovations and strategies will influence the way we learn, but it always comes back to a person taking the time to tell a child something about the world.

Some of my greatest advocates and most beloved heroes I encountered in the classroom. Without Mr. Porter to inspire and encourage me about world history and books, I certainly wouldn't be as voracious a reader or as rigorous a thinker as I am today. And Mr. Porter was my math teacher.

It is very hard to teach children, even harder to inspire them. But sometimes, the Mr. Porters of the world realize their superhero status at the front of a classroom. They help their students time-travel, explore ancient civilizations, conquer equations and find their own voices.

Follow Jesse Dylan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/wondros

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