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Another Person's World: Ed Reform Through True Understanding

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Another Person's World: Ed Reform Through True Understanding

edu www.edutopia.org/blog/ed-reform-through-true-understanding-lori-desautels

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Anthropologist and humanist [Ashley Montagu](#) stated: "Love is profound involvement in the well-being of others." Several weeks ago, I experienced this kind of **love** in [West Humboldt Park](#), an impoverished, gang-and-violence-infested inner city Chicago neighborhood.



That Saturday, I left Indianapolis in a 12-person van; revved up, iPad packed, social neuroscience texts placed neatly in my briefcase with a box full of notecards and pens. I was ready to make a difference in the lives of these children and adolescents

who were not as socioeconomically privileged or savvy as I was in the emotional and social skills, but I knew that if I found the missing link, all would improve.

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I was accompanying seven undergraduate students and another advisor from Marian University on an alternative Spring Break trip to work with children and adolescents at [Galapagos Charter School](#) and an after school care program supported by the Holy Angels Catholic Church. We lived in a convent and worked closely with the Sisters and Father Bob. Our mornings were spent helping the Sisters clean, sort and prepare for the hundreds of families that rely on the convent for food, clothing and other household items provided by many Chicago-area charities, foundations and corporations. In the afternoons, the students worked with the neighborhood after school care program at the Kelly YMCA, where they served the volunteers, children and educators.

Feeling and Serving

The aforementioned description is not really the experience; it is difficult to find the words that truly capture our feelings as we teach, mentor and provide the best possible of environments. These are the environments that will generate hope, activate a personal passion, and provide options for children and families who live in chronically stressed states of mind, surviving yet circling in a whirlpool of deep despair.

But this is just my perspective. Do I misunderstand these cultures? Do I truly embrace the darkness that sometimes penetrates my own life, and is that darkness in direct alignment with the shadows of violence, anger and raw emotion I observed during my week in Chicago?

As I shared these experiences with my mentor and friend upon my return, he shared the words of [Henry David Thoreau](#): "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" Thoreau also states, "It is a form of a miracle of sorts, the moment when we really get that felt sense of another person's world." It is also not pleasant when we feel the world that many of our most vulnerable children must navigate in

their lives. We sometimes want to flee, partition or feel sorry for these conditions and experiences that seem so very different from our own. But something had shifted inside me as I observed not only the loving hearts and strong minds of these undergraduate students, but also my own reactions and questions to these impoverished and troubling circumstances. I came to serve, but I was served! I was shown the landscape from which 20% of our nation's students enter and exit -- every day.

I felt the transformational magic of "making a connection." I didn't need to fully understand these children and families. I didn't need to fix anything. I didn't need to have the right answer or solution to a complex problem to which education reform movements and policy makers around the country are regurgitating solutions every second I turn on the news or open a newspaper or computer screen! What I discovered was that we all desire to "feel felt," to feel that we matter, to feel connected to another in a way that begins with a willingness to step inside another person's world -- another person who shares more humanness with us than we care to discuss or acknowledge.

As I stood before my graduate class, first and second year teachers in the inner city Indianapolis schools, and reflected on my own experience in West Humboldt, I suggested that the change in education reform begins with the questions that churn in their minds and hearts, the relationships they cultivate, and their awakened presence each and every day. It is only through a *felt joining* that academics, purpose and responsibility move to the forefront of one's thoughts and feelings to explore and discuss.

Where the Dialogue Begins

In the late afternoon of my final day in West Humboldt, Tashona, a young woman in the seventh grade, hugged me goodbye in the YMCA teen lounge as we exchanged cell numbers, promised to message on Facebook and stay in touch. After I hugged her and three other beautiful young women, tears stung my eyes as I walked back to the convent to meet the taxi that would drive me back into my own private world. But it was no longer the private world I'd left behind, because I was coming back to it as a changed person.

I wasn't returning with a list of strategies and "fixes" for the poverty-afflicted West Humboldt area of Chicago. I'd found a little magic that can transform classrooms, schools and communities. I call it a little magic, but it's actually something much bigger, broader and beyond definition. It eludes policies, government, charter, public and higher education institutions. It lodged in my throat as I waved goodbye to the Sisters at the convent, my undergraduates, and the neighborhood; finally moving to the center of my chest where I found the sting of our shared commonalities and the dark and light aspects of my own life mirroring those who I came to serve.

The irony in this adventure was that the people who I came to serve ended up serving me. And with all of the teacher training, conferences, dissertations, field experiences, research and countless meetings to perfect student growth and learning outcomes, it boils down to a *connection* where the dialogue begins, where dream seeds are planted, where intentions and hearts are set on fire! If we can feel the world of another, together we can take the steps that create change and endure all circumstances.

How do you feel the world of another? You step inside it as you observe the pain from the words spoken, the diminishing light in one's eyes, and you embrace as it as your own . . . for after all, it truly is!