



# There's Always That One Teacher

*Finding one trustworthy adult at school can help turn things around for an adolescent at risk.*

## Michael Sadowski

**W**ith all due respect to the world's established experts on youth development, by far the most valuable things I've learned about the resilience of adolescents have come from simply listening to them. At times, teenagers can seem like frustratingly private people to parents, teachers, and others who try to reach out to them. Given the right

conditions where trust and confidentiality are ensured, however, most adolescents also have an intense desire to be heard by adults—and to be seen not just as test takers or data points along a grade distribution but as the complex people they are, with real-world problems, concerns, and hopes for the future.

My in-depth interviews with adolescents in recent years have taught me that young people themselves can teach us much of what we need to know about resilience—about the

relationships that make them feel heard, cared for, and valued, as well as those that silence them. Here are short profiles of several high school students, all of whom faced considerable challenges that placed them at risk.

### Ibrahim's Story

Seventeen-year-old Ibrahim had been in the United States for fewer than three years when I interviewed him during his senior year at a New York City public high school. Having emigrated from the West African



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country of Togo, Ibrahim recalled what it felt like to be thrust into a U.S. school setting where everything was new: teacher expectations, discipline practices, youth culture, the nature of male–female interactions, and—perhaps most important—the language. Ibrahim knew no English when he came to the United States, and, like many new immigrant students, he described his first days in an American school as confusing, disorienting, and “terrible.” The feeling Ibrahim remembered most from those initial weeks was an overwhelming sense of

homesickness: “When I first came, I was calling [Togo] every day—every minute, I was calling.”

Although Ibrahim believed the United States offered myriad opportunities that were unavailable to him in Togo, he felt unsafe on the streets of New York and had a number of experiences that still trouble him deeply. As a Muslim, he’d been targeted on the street and called “Osama bin Laden” while wearing Muslim-style clothing. As a black youth, he’d been subject to racist remarks. He’d been “jumped” several times by local gangs, and he’d lost one of his close friends in an act of street violence. Yet Ibrahim was by all his teachers’ accounts a buoyant, pleasant, and successful student who, since his interviews with me two years ago, has been doing well at a community college in the city.

I asked Ibrahim what factors he thought helped him succeed in high school, and he quickly mentioned his 9th grade English teacher, Ms. Lori. During Ibrahim’s initial months in the United States, Ms. Lori connected him with students who could help him translate unfamiliar class material. She helped him navigate the challenges of the state’s required Regents exams as well as the college application process. Perhaps most important, she listened as he worked through the emotional challenges of being a newcomer in an environment that often felt unwelcoming and unsafe, and she continued to do so long after his time in her class was over:

Ms. Lori, any time, any kind of problem I have, I always go to her. She helped me a lot, from 9th grade to 12th. She is not my teacher anymore, but anytime I need something, I go to her for anything. We have a lot of trust.

### **Lindsey’s Story**

At first glance, Lindsey’s profile couldn’t seem more different from

Ibrahim’s. A 15-year-old white student raised in a rural community in the northeastern United States, Lindsey was a freshman at her county’s vocational-technical high school when I interviewed her for the first time. Although Lindsey was doing well as a freshman, middle school had been rocky for her. She had endured severe harassment both at school and at home because of her sexual orientation. With Lindsey’s sister serving as ringleader, peers taunted her in hallways and on the school bus, calling her names and throwing things at her. The abuse continued at home, with Lindsey’s sister and stepfather teasing her with antigay epithets even before she came out as lesbian.

Feeling she had no one to turn to, Lindsey became a chronic cutter. She felt she “couldn’t talk to anybody.” The cutting, she said, had been a way “to show the pain that I was feeling on the inside on the outside, to make it kind of go away.” Then, during her 8th grade year, the cutting escalated to a suicide attempt, after which Lindsey finally came out as lesbian to her family and friends.

In high school, things started to turn around, and Lindsey had access to resources that enabled her to feel comfortable expressing herself in positive ways. She joined her school’s gay–straight alliance (GSA); belonged to a community-based group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth; and had supportive relationships with several key teachers who served as a sounding board for issues she faced in school and at home. Lindsey’s English teacher encouraged her to write about LGBT issues for class assignments.

Perhaps most important was Janice Lane, the school nurse and advisor of the gay–straight alliance, whom Lindsey felt she could trust with

anything that was on her mind: “The person I trust most in school to talk to me as an adult would be Janice. I can talk to her about anything.”

Lindsey was doing well in school when I interviewed her (except, as she admitted, in math). She was “out” both at school and at home and was organizing programs to educate peers about anti-LGBT harassment and violence. She had developed a new sense of self-respect that she believed was strongly associated with the supportive relationships in her life. “I teach other people about what I’ve been through,” she said. “And I think that what changed was I started respecting myself, and then I started respecting other people.”

### Two Studies, One Key Finding

Ibrahim and Lindsey were part of two different interview-based studies I’ve conducted in recent years, projects I originally thought would be wholly distinct from each other. Ibrahim was one of 19 young people I interviewed for a study about successful immigrant students, how they had negotiated the various challenges of being newcomers, and the factors that helped them succeed in U.S. school contexts. The research for this study is profiled in my book, *Portraits of Promise: Voices of Successful Immigrant Students* (Harvard Education Press, 2013).

Lindsey was one of 30 adolescents who participated in a study about the school, family, and peer relationships of LGBT youth that I began with colleagues at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. She also took part in a follow-up study six years later when she was 21; her story is one of six longitudinal case studies I write



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about in my book, *In a Queer Voice: Journeys of Resilience from Adolescence to Adulthood* (Temple University Press, 2013).

As different as they may seem at first, both Ibrahim and Lindsey are survivors of circumstances that placed them at extreme risk. Both faced serious threats to their safety, their school success, and their positive sense of identity. Both were targeted by peers and others because of who they were. Yet both developed a strong foundation of resilience and are now thriving.

Although many factors contribute to a young person’s resilience, these two studies highlight the power of relationships as a key factor—if not *the* key factor—in helping young people who face threats to their success and well-being overcome risk and thrive. Relationships with special teachers emerged again and again in both sets of interviews as a central aspect of young people’s resilience-building relational networks.

Certainly, the potential for

nonparent adult relationships to help build resilience has been documented through decades of research with children and adolescents. Two widely cited child developmentalists, psychiatrist Michael Rutter (1987) and psychologist Norman Garmezy (1993), have noted that having mutual, caring relationships with nonparent adults (such as teachers) can protect children and adolescents from a host of risks to their well-being, including poverty and parental divorce. In addition, psychologist Jean Rhodes (2002) has documented the potential for “naturally occurring mentoring relationships”—such as those that students can have with teachers as opposed to those arranged

through formal mentoring programs—to make a profound difference in the lives of adolescents, provided they are of sufficient duration and are marked by key characteristics, such as consistency and empathy.

The voices of the young people I heard give a sense of *how* and *why* strong teacher relationships matter to kids who may be among the most marginalized in their schools or who may face challenges getting the adult support they need at home. The two student stories that follow illustrate additional ways that educators can reach out to young people at risk.

### Eduardo’s Story

Sixteen-year-old Eduardo immigrated to the United States when he was only 18 months old. He was in all respects an American teenager, yet the issues that affected his life and placed him at risk were closely related to his growing up in a Mexican immigrant family, particularly one whose primary source of income was farm work in central California.

Because of the sacrifices his parents made working “in the fields,” as Eduardo called it, since moving to the United States, he felt a lot of pressure to be a role-model child. These pressures were exacerbated by the fact that Eduardo’s parents divorced when he was 8 years old. He was now living with his mother, who worked for an agricultural company until 6:00 or 7:00 p.m. every night, requiring

confidante role. Ms. Alvarez was Eduardo’s primary emotional support and advisor at school who, along with a few other teachers, helped him relieve stress from home. Sometimes, he and Ms. Alvarez talked about the problems he faced at home. Other times, the conversation was lighter but no less supportive: “We just have fun, talk, laugh, and it makes me forget about stuff from home.”

still found the environment only marginally supportive of LGBT students. As in middle school, however, Jessie said that a relationship with a sole supportive teacher was crucial to her getting through:

Every school I’ve been to, there has always been one or two teachers that I really trusted. My drama teacher in high school was like that. I knew I could always talk to her. So, I think—and I know this is probably true for every kid—there is always that one teacher in high school or middle school that they felt they could open up to. I think that’s kind of important. It makes you want to go to school.

## Relationships with special teachers emerged again and again as a central aspect of young people’s resilience-building relational networks.

Eduardo to live largely on his own and assume responsibility for many of his younger brother’s needs. Because of his mother’s long work hours, they didn’t talk much after she came home: “Usually she’ll make us dinner, then she goes into her room, and I do the same thing.” Moreover, because neither of Eduardo’s parents spoke much English, they were unable to help him with homework or other challenges associated with school.

Yet Eduardo was a highly successful student who made a conscious effort to avoid drugs and gangs, considered a B a low grade, and had already taken some college-level courses even though he was only a junior in high school. When I asked him what factors helped him succeed, he pointed to two teachers as the most supportive adults in his life at that time. Eduardo’s advisory teacher, Mr. Blair, served in the crucial role of helping him figure out his future. Eduardo said that Mr. Blair gave him “straight-up” advice about the pros and cons of various college majors and helped him figure out the college application process. Eduardo’s math teacher, Ms. Alvarez, served in more of a

### Jessie’s Story

Jessie was a 19-year-old who self-identified as gay and transgender. The memories of Jessie’s middle and high school experiences were fresh as she recalled patterns of harassment similar to those that Lindsey had endured.

School was in some sense an oasis for Jessie. Although her peers called her names similar to those she was hearing at home, relationships with teachers—and with one in particular—helped her get through this difficult period in her life. Jessie recalled one pivotal conversation with a teacher after a friend of hers died of AIDS:

I had a teacher in middle school. She was my health teacher. She’s like this amazing woman. She’s a lesbian, and everybody kind of knew it. We ended up talking. I told her I had just lost my friend. Then the more we talked, the more we got to the point; that was probably toward the middle of 7th grade. The beginning of 8th grade, I came out to her. She was just very supportive, and she got me through middle school.

In high school, Jessie said that she faced less antigay harassment than in middle school and that she had an easier time making friends, but she

### “That One Teacher”

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the interviews with immigrant youth and those with LGBT youth was the repetition of a single teacher’s name over and over when I asked participants to identify the most supportive adults in their lives. In one of the two schools in which I interviewed immigrant students, participant after participant mentioned Ms. Alvarez as a teacher whom they found especially supportive and important in their lives. She gave them an extra push when they needed it, guidance toward graduation or college, an ear when they were having problems at home, and a place to hang out and talk. One student said that Ms. Alvarez was important not only in her life but also in other students’ lives: “Ms. Alvarez—I’m sure you’ve heard her name like a billion times—she’s like an aunt to me.”

Although the research for *In a Queer Voice* was conducted through community-based LGBT youth groups as opposed to in schools, numerous participants from one youth group attended the same high school. Students in that school repeatedly cited Janice Lane (the school nurse and gay-straight alliance advisor mentioned in Lindsey’s profile) as one of their

most important sources of support. When I asked Matt, a transgender student who had recently graduated from the school, whether he had any supportive relationships with adults there, he said, “I did, especially Janice, who was the nurse that runs the GSA. She was just a very brave woman. And you could tell her anything, and it just stayed there.”

### Being—and Supporting— That One Teacher

What does it take to be a Ms. Alvarez or a Janice Lane—an adult at school to whom multiple students feel they can turn for guidance, motivation, and a supportive ear?

## Teenagers are looking for teachers who really listen rather than feigning interest in their lives.

In the cases of both of these teachers, affinity certainly may have played a role. As an out lesbian school nurse, Janice may have been able to establish trust with LGBT students more naturally than other adults in the building. Similarly, the Latino immigrant students in Eduardo’s school may have turned to Ms. Alvarez as a Latina teacher who might understand some of the issues they faced at home and elsewhere. Still, as education scholar Pedro Noguera (2008) has aptly written,

Differences in race, gender, or sexual orientation need not limit a teacher’s ability to make a connection with a young person. In my own work with students and schools, I have generally found kids to be the least prejudiced of all people. They tend to respond well to caring adults regardless of what they look like. (p. 33)

Of course, a teacher isn’t supposed to be a student’s counselor or friend—and the interviews I’ve conducted

suggest that teenagers aren’t looking for that anyway. As Omar, one of the *Portraits of Promise* participants said, teenagers are looking for teachers who really listen rather than feigning interest in their lives. They’re looking for help as they plan for their futures, whether in college or elsewhere, and with the challenges they continue to face as they try to get through high school. They’re looking for teachers who will stick with them even after they’ve completed their classes, who will leave a door open after school for a chat, a laugh, or perhaps a little guidance.

I’m not suggesting that teachers who already do so much should be

expected to do more without the support of administrators and other leaders in their schools and districts. The students in both sets of interviews told me that one of the things they valued most was when teachers simply gave them time—yet time during the school day is a precious commodity over which teachers only have so much control.

A number of structures show promise for resilience-building through relationship-building. These include advisory programs, in which teachers closely guide a small group

of students over several years; gay–straight alliances, immigrant student clubs, and other safe spaces where students can share their deepest frustrations, concerns, and triumphs; and initiatives that leave time in or after the school day for real human interaction between students and adults. Administrators can also help by leading honest assessments of their school communities to determine whether they are truly safe places where trusting relationships can happen or whether groups of students feel unsafe or silenced.

Clearly that one teacher can make a world of difference—but he or she shouldn’t be expected to do it alone. **EL**

*Author’s note:* The names of all students and educators in this article are pseudonyms.

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### EL online

For more on how schools can support LGBT students, read the online-only article “Respect, Resilience, and LGBT Students” by Robert McGarry at [www.ascd.org/el0913mcgarry](http://www.ascd.org/el0913mcgarry).

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