

But it is also true that the education system is full of inspired and inspiring people whose dedication can have a transformative effect on the young students involved, regardless of their circumstances.

Halfway through my time at Wembley High School, in 1998 when I was about fourteen years old, one of my teachers – a woman called Denise Adler – took it upon herself to make an intervention. One year, just before we broke up for summer, she told my class that she would be taking us on a trip: this time I wouldn't need a passport, because it was to B&Q, the DIY and home improvement company. It was the first time I had ever set foot in the place. It had never occurred to us to improve our 'home', and, in any case, since at that point Brent Council had moved us from one squalid accommodation to another for four years running, it didn't particularly feel like we had a home to improve. Everything felt transient and unsettled, and I had no desire to set down roots for the future.

Ms Adler knew that none of us had anything to do that summer, and that we needed a project: painting our form room might give us something to focus on. The 'form class' was the starting point of your school day, where the register was taken. You'd then set off for your various classes in different parts of the building, coming back again for another registration after lunch. Form class was a point of consistency, a team that stayed the same even though its members' daily routines diverged.

I loved Ms Adler: she was full of life, always laughing, always smiling, always kind and forgiving of minor transgressions. She looked at you as though you mattered, and I think it was true: each and every student mattered to her. She was the French teacher but we also considered her a spiritual guide, a mother figure, a sheltering tree around which we all huddled. She had gone to Wembley

High School herself many years before, was still local, and understood her community, a community she loved dearly. I remember her often telling me that I had 'the best smile', even if, deep down, I often had little to smile about. I am sure she said the same to many others.

At B&Q Ms Adler asked us to pick two colours. We picked blue and white: a colour scheme simple enough for a group of young, rowdy teenagers to agree on. She paid for the paint and equipment herself and we made our way on the 245 bus to the school on East Lane in North Wembley. This was quite an expedition for me: the 40-minute bus ride was one of the first times I had left my immediate area and the places I was accustomed to. Over the course of most of a week, we cleaned, brushed down the walls, and applied multiple coats of paint to the walls (blue) and the ceiling and borders (white). As we shared pizza, and laughed and bantered among ourselves in the empty school, a bond grew between us. It was our room. We painted it, we showed it love, it was going to be our home away from home. It was more of a home for me than the place that I slept in at night.

I never actually got to ask Ms Adler why she did this; why she gave up her summer holiday to spend time with us when she really didn't need to. What drove her to think that, actually, these children deserve better than six weeks of utter boredom? I don't know what the answer is, but I have some ideas. I think she was aware that poor children from deprived backgrounds fall behind in the summer months, largely due to the lack of stimulation, and I think she knew that, in our case, we were at risk not just of boredom but of something much worse.

Brent, and in particular the areas where we grew up – Wembley, Stonebridge, Harlesden – was a pretty awful place in the mid-1990s. Newspapers referred to it as a place