Those Who Can, Teach

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What it Takes to Make the Next Generation

Andria Zafirakou

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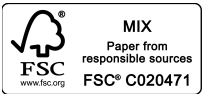
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This book is dedicated to my greatest
teacher – my Yiayia

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Prologue

The road to Downing Street feels longer than the return flight to England. I am in the back of a taxi after a whirlwind twenty-four hours. The tarmac judders under the wheels of the black cab on the M4 – much as it had as we came in to land just a couple of hours ago at Heathrow Airport. My feet finally touching firm ground. Or perhaps not quite yet.

I have just returned from Dubai where I won the Global Teacher Prize – nicknamed the Nobel Prize of teaching – and now I am on my way to Westminster to meet the prime minister, Theresa May.

We cross a flyover and I look down. That's the exit I would ordinarily take to head towards my classroom at Alperton Community School in Brent. Left at the roundabout, a short weave through familiar housing estates and shop-lined streets to my art department, my comfort zone. Yet we're heading away from the school I love, speeding towards central London, where the prime minister awaits.

It doesn't seem real.

I am not quite sure, even now, where this all started. How I was picked from more than 30,000 others – an arts teacher from a London school. I have blurred memories of the moment that my name was called, of a speech I had pieced together, of the cheers, the celebrities, the well-wishers backstage, my fellow finalists and my parents' proud faces in the crowd – though we will come to that.

For now, I have barely slept because this girl – herself from an inner-city London school – had not wanted to miss one minute of flying business class, albeit on a red-eye flight, for the first time in her life.

In my hand luggage I'd packed a black dress and a gold-flecked jacket, which I'd changed into on the plane – I iron down the creases with my hands – and a beaded necklace, because I know this prime minister takes trouble over her own accessories. It's not so much about impressing her, but playing the part, not letting the side down. My make-up is freshly applied, even if my eyes are a little bloodshot from lack of sleep, and I'm surviving on adrenalin alone. In the cab with me are a handful of representatives from the Varkey Foundation, which is responsible for the Global Teacher Prize. We make polite conversation, but my stomach is turning – I would give anything to be heading the other way through traffic, home to my husband and daughters.

We push on through the morning rush hour. A few miles north from here is Camden, and St Michael's

Primary School, where I started my own education. I think then of the teachers who inspired me, those guardians of childhood who can make or break our experience of school. They are rarely praised for their efforts, yet I have just been awarded $1 million – £700,000 – for mine. The figure makes my head spin.

I was only ever doing my job.

Soon enough we're pulling into the gates of the Houses of Parliament. We're met by Barry Gardiner, the MP for Brent, and his assistants, who lead us into the Palace of Westminster and towards the public gallery in the House of Commons. We're seated in a special part of the gallery for VIPs, one without a screen, so it feels as if we're in the very heart of Prime Minister's Questions. Seconds later, Theresa May is on her feet, mentioning my name.

'I know members across the house will wish to join me in congratulating Andria Zafirakou, who recently won the Global Teacher Prize. It is a fitting tribute for everything she has done, and I look forward to meeting her shortly to congratulate her in person.'

Cheers from the MPs rise up from the floor and the CEO of the Varkey Foundation, Vikas Pota, turns to me and smiles.

Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Opposition, is next on his feet, informing the prime minister that he had already met me the week before.

'They're squabbling over you,' Vikas whispers.

We sit watching the debate until the prime minister leaves the floor, and one of her ushers arrives to collect me. I'm taken to her office. Inside it is beautifully decorated, all dark wood-panelled walls hung with rococo-style paintings. The fabrics are William Morris designs; even the carpet is thick and sumptuous. I think of the lino floors and breeze-block walls in my own school – a world away.

The prime minister puts her hand out, congratulating me again on my award. We pose for photographs and sit down on one of the sofas in her office. Her desk is scattered with paperwork, important documents requiring signature, a reminder that very few people get the opportunity to sit where I am sitting. I know I must use my time wisely. She wants to talk about me, but I interrupt to tell her about my school, about the students. I wonder how often – if ever – kids like ours at Alperton are represented inside the Houses of Parliament.

'In our borough in Brent there are more than one hundred languages spoken,' I tell her. 'Eighty of those languages are spoken at our school. For many of our students, English is an additional language and very often it's something they have to pick up at school, which is an initial challenge, and requires more time and support from teachers.'

I pause to see if she is taking all this in; she nods for me to continue, her brow crinkled in concentration. I'm aware of the clock ticking on the wall, her assistant perched on a chair nearby to tell us when our time is up.

'Our children have tough lives, Prime Minister. Brent is one of the most deprived boroughs in London: some students share homes with four different families, which can make it hard for them to find a quiet place at home to study. There are high levels of deprivation and poverty, and day to day we have concerns about gang violence and radicalisation.' I check them off on my fingers. 'But our school is theirs: it's the place they can be sure to get two good meals a day; it's somewhere warm; it's somewhere they can change their future. And the arts can make such a difference to their lives. I have students who have unlocked trauma through their artwork, who have spoken for the first time because they found a home in the art room…'

I want to tell her more. About how the arts help kids like ours, about how invaluable it is to children who don't speak English, or those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). But her assistant moves, gesturing to her that our time is up. As I leave, she tells me that I will be having a tour of 10 Downing Street, and then the schools minister has something special he wants me to ask me.

I leave her office wondering if I said too much, if I was too passionate, too fierce – too north London. I have that sense again that I am an imposter, that I don't belong here, that I am talking quickly out of some need to convince these people that I am worthy, but perhaps I'm still trying to convince myself.

We walk along the Mall to Downing Street and I stand outside that infamous black door. The second it opens, my eyes are wide – there is so much history inside this building. I pass by Winston Churchill's leather club chair in the lobby, then down a corridor past a Henry Moore sculpture. We continue further into the house, past more sculptures, this time by Barbara Hepworth, and paintings by Lowry. I stop in front of one of them.

'I teach my children about this painting,' I say, taking in every brushstroke of its industrial scene.

I follow Nick Gibb, the schools minister, up that famous yellow staircase – a reminder of Hugh Grant dancing down it in *Love Actually* the only thing grounding me in this world in which I feel so wholly out of place. Every inch of these walls is covered in famous portraits of former prime ministers, all of them painted by lauded artists. Even the ceilings are decorated in ornate cornicing the like of which I have never seen before. These artefacts belong in a gallery – they are the type of things my students will have only ever seen in books.

Together with Nick Gibb and the representatives of the Varkey Foundation, we drink tea and eat biscuits in Winston Churchill's old bedroom, which is now one of several meeting rooms. I smile at all the right times, careful not to put a word out of place. But being on my best behaviour feels exhausting, and I long for the safety of my classroom, the smell of pots of paint and pastels, turpentine and school dinners.

Nick and I met just a few weeks ago when I found out that I had been shortlisted for the prize. I'd had to put my prejudices about the government away that day, because under Michael Gove, when he was education secretary, Nick Gibb had implemented the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a qualification that has put emphasis on core subjects such as English, maths and science, which has meant having to forsake some of the more creative, practical subjects in schools. I had tried to talk to him about what it had done to my school at our first meeting, tried to explain what it had taken away from the students. But this man's mind was not for changing.

Today he is all charm. We celebrate my award, and he recites the history of this famous building and many of its former inhabitants. Then suddenly, apparently with some trepidation, he takes from inside his blue suit jacket a piece of folded-up paper. This must be what the prime minister had mentioned.

'Andria, we would like you to help us with a recruitment drive,' he says.

I stare at the piece of paper in his hands. On it is a mocked-up photograph of a teacher posing. I assume they want that teacher to be me. Among all of the surprises today had in store for me, I had not expected a job offer from the government. This feels like the kind of thing you see in films: a meeting in Downing Street, wined and dined, then told what you can do for your country.

All eyes are on me as I hold the piece of paper in my hand, and for the first time that day, and quite unusually for me, I don't know what to say. Something – instinct? – is stopping me from saying yes.

'Thank you,' I say instead. 'I'll think about it.'

I hear a short intake of breath around the table, and then silence follows. The schools minister wriggles a little inside his suit. In that small gesture, I sense that for him – and perhaps even for the prime minister herself – my acceptance of the job was a fait accompli.

Vikas is the first to speak.

'Could you give a reason as to why you would like to think about it, Andria?'

I have been concentrating so hard all day on doing and saying the right things. I have focused on smiling, on being the person they expect me to be, on toeing the line and being on my best behaviour – which is not how I usually get things done. It is not, in fact, what won me the award. But surely these people know that? I wouldn't be here now if I had toed the line, if I had smiled and said yes and no in all the right places, if I had been on my best behaviour at all times, if I hadn't pushed for more in my school or gone above and beyond to care for my students. Breaking the rules was what brought me here. From this side of the table, I am not even sure whether I am the authority on teaching that they think I am, and for a moment, I don't know what to say in answer to Vikas's question.

But then a vision of my school and all its students flashes into my head, and I know that is the one thing that I am expert in – the lives of my students – and the fact that this very government, the same one that is trying to woo me into working for them now, has done nothing to help my kids succeed. In fact, they have taken away far more opportunities than they have given.

The people who sit in 10 Downing Street are like gods to us teachers. They are the decision makers – but we are the people on the ground living with the consequences of their decrees. How ironic that in a building where so much emphasis and importance is put on art, decor, painting, sculptures – a place where they want to surround themselves with all these beautiful things – I need to remind them just how important the arts are to young people. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my students, and this is my one opportunity to speak for them. I take a breath, unsure what exactly is going to come out.

'I don't think this government has done enough to support the arts,' I say.

The room is silent. I turn to the schools minister: 'For example, you introduced the EBacc, which has destroyed textiles. The British fashion industry has some of the best designers in the world, yet you have killed the textiles curriculum for kids. My curriculum. Where will these designers of the future come from now?'

Everyone around the table looks a little awkward, but I continue.

'In my world, I teach children who have English as a second language, and the arts are one of a handful of subjects, alongside maths, that give them a level playing field. Why is that not important to the government?'

'Well, evidence shows that—' Nick Gibb starts.

But I don't give him a chance to answer. This is nothing to do with evidence and paperwork; this is to do with the students I teach every day, who are missing out because of some decision made in rooms just like these.

'What about the kids with special educational needs and disabilities?' I say. 'Those who need to spend extra time on a piece of work, the ones who otherwise are written off? My subject gives them time to make progress, to give them confidence, to show them they have skills and potential just the same as everyone else. Why is that not important to the government?'

The schools minister takes a look around the table. Does he realise that all the EBacc certificate has done is heap pressure on kids who are already struggling, and increased the workload of teachers who are only just keeping their heads above water?

'Well,' he tries again, 'evidence shows that children who do these subjects will make faster progress and go on to get better jobs…'

He starts quoting facts and figures, and as he does, I feel myself switching off, because that is not my experience in the classroom, that is not what I know of school life. How could I have possibly felt an imposter all day when these

people – the decision makers – know nothing about the realities of being a teacher? When I speak again I know I'm more passionate, more fiery, and, I'm aware, more north London than Downing Street – but I am speaking up for the children I have taught. Education is not about government statistics; it is not about schools meeting targets, about assessments and league tables, Ofsted and EBacc, or even – I glance at the piece of paper still in my shaking hand – recruiting teachers. It is about the students. It is about real human beings, and we teachers are already doing our best to help these kids – not always with the support of their own parents – and we need all the help we can get. So I speak for many teachers, too, and for all my colleagues who have burned out through stress. This might not be what this minister wants to hear, but it is the truth.

'What about the mental health of teachers?' I say. 'What are you doing about that? Their workload is increasing, they're working their holidays just to keep up.'

I pause, and see, for the first time, every face staring at me. I know then this is not the time or the place. I am not winning. Not on this occasion, not in here. Everything I have kept bottled up, not just today, but for the duration of my fourteen years' teaching, has just been laid bare on this table. I realise then that this award does not represent the pinnacle of my career. This is just the beginning. A turning point.

I think about the prize money. If the government isn't going to do anything to help these kids, then I will. Every

day when I step into that school, it is not just about what I am – or rather, what we are – teaching them, it is about what the students teach us. And I owe it to those students to use my winnings wisely.

By the time I arrive back in Brent, the sky is black and the glow of lights from the window of my home is a welcome beacon. I knock on the door, and my husband throws it open, and on sight of his smiling face, I burst into tears.

'What's wrong?' he asks.

'I think I'm going to be assassinated by MI5!' I say, collapsing into his arms.

He laughs, and says exactly what I need to hear: 'Let me pour you a glass of wine.'

I'll give myself this evening to celebrate with my family, and tomorrow the hard work begins. I am not someone who has toed the line and I never will be. It doesn't matter what government policy says: this teacher from Brent is determined to preserve the arts for our kids – because experience has taught me just what a difference it makes to their lives. And now I am going to tell you.

One

In November 2007 a tall, skinny boy with curly black hair walked into my classroom. I had, by then, been a teacher for two years – the story of how I got started we will come to. But I am starting here because, despite the fact that I was supposedly the professional, this fourteen-year-old boy taught me one of the most valuable lessons I have learned throughout my teaching career.

Alvaro looked very smart compared to my other pupils, a couple of whom raised their heads from their work as he walked in. The reason he looked so dapper was because he was sporting a crisp new school blazer emblazoned with the Alperton Community School logo. Each intake of pupils in Year 7 gets a blazer given to them by the school. There has been much talk over the years about whether pupils should wear uniform, but in my school, it is a vital leveller. For these young people, it is one of the most important gifts we can give them – a symbol that no matter your background, you deserve the same opportunities as the person beside you.

Alvaro's blazer fitted neatly at the cuffs, unlike those belonging to some of the other kids, who had been wearing the same blazer they were given aged eleven, their parents unable to afford another throughout the five years they would stay with us. Experience had taught me that these same students would be wearing their Year 7 blazer in Year 11 when they left the school, a length of their forearm exposed where they'd grown out of it over the years. That's why we always see the Year 7 pupils in a blazer two sizes bigger, and why Alvaro's – who had joined in Year 9 – now fitted him perfectly.

Alvaro had joined our school from another one in the London borough of Brent, one especially set up to deal with those with special educational needs and disabilities. In collaboration with the local authority, my head teacher had agreed to take an additional ten pupils from this local special educational needs school into Alperton. The reason, I have to admit, I was unsure of at the time. After all, these kids weren't expected to sit GCSEs; they did not have the ability and would only ever leave school with entry-level certificates, subject qualifications a rung down from GCSEs. In a public service – which, like many others, earns its stripes based on results – if anything, these ten children would adversely affect our position in the school's league tables. But the head teacher had clearly put social inclusivity before ticks in boxes. In short, she wanted us to help these ten pupils succeed in a mainstream school. She wanted to

give them the same chance as everyone else. Who could argue with that?

I knew little about Alvaro before he walked into my classroom. I had read his notes, but the only thing that leapt out to me from his records was that he was electively mute – a child who refuses to speak in almost all social situations, a condition often associated with anxiety. I was used to talking to children who didn't speak English, but this was different. I had no experience or special training to deal with a child with this condition, and that morning perhaps I hadn't known quite what to expect. Little to nothing was probably my answer. My expectations of these kids and what they could achieve were low.

Alvaro arrived late to class alongside his teaching assistant, and I directed him to a spare desk at the side of the room. His TA left him once he got settled, and I made my way through a well-worn pathway between desks to hand him a worksheet. I smiled, I welcomed him, I placed the worksheet in front of him along with a few pieces of A3 paper. He didn't look up. Instead he stared straight ahead, his eyes glassy, refusing to make contact with my own. Alvaro wasn't like the rowdy boys I was used to. I clocked a couple of the other students' eyes flickering towards his desk. I understood how intimidating it must have been for him to walk into a new classroom with all these people he didn't know, and so, without much fuss or fanfare, I put a couple of

bottles and a jar on his desk, and told him that we were drawing still-life objects.

'Have a go,' I said, and then I went to help another student with his hand up on the other side of the room.

I watched Alvaro from my vantage point, but he didn't move, just continued to stare straight ahead. Who knew then that this silent boy would change the way I taught for ever?

In my classroom I want to inspire creativity. We play Kiss FM or Classic FM while the kids hum along under their breath. I have one rule that when the chatter gets so loud that I cannot hear the music, the radio goes off. It's a good way to keep the kids in line. My desk is draped with beautiful fabrics, and hanging on the wall alongside classic works of art are my students' attempts at their own masterpieces. It is a colourful room. But it hasn't always been like this.

When I arrived for my first interview, fresh out of teacher-training college, I felt intimidated and scared. In fact, I wanted to turn around and leave. The school then was in a faded old brown-brick Victorian building, with huge panelled windows in every room that had long stopped fitting the mortar of the place and now refused to open. Instead, the only airflow came from the broken panes of glass, and so – I would later learn – there were two seasons at Alperton Community School: summer, when the place felt like a greenhouse, or winter, when

the freezing air would rush in and pupils shivered while they worked in their coats. What did the windows matter anyway? They were so dirty, it was impossible to see outside. And did we even want to? My school is not surrounded by lush green hills, but an urban landscape: the back of Alperton Tube station, traffic, trains, concrete, noise and black pollution, and more recently, fly-tipping. Back inside the classroom the walls were painted a dingy green and the lino floor was ripped in places. The class work that was on the wall was sun-bleached and criss-crossed with dust and cobwebs, and the place smelled musty and damp from the rotten wooden units that held the ceramic butler sinks together in the corner.

I didn't want to stay. I had come here from a teaching placement at a very different school, where every room was equipped and fitted out with the latest technology. It had been too easy, yet left me feeling out of my depth. My own schooling had been in an inner-city primary. As a girl I had attended St Michael's Church of England School in Camden Town, and that part of London wasn't the popular tourist trap it is now. Back in the eighties it was a total dive. My family had migrated from Cyprus to England in the early seventies, and my grandparents had bought an apartment in a big Georgian house in College Place for just £5,000. The reason they – and many other Cypriots – had settled in Camden was because it was close to the only Greek Orthodox church in London – later, my father would be priest there.

Although I was born in London, being part of a huge migrant family meant I always felt like the outsider. But that wasn't a bad thing. Camden in those days was a dangerous place: we never went out after dark. The streets were sprayed with graffiti and people used to steal from the church. There were mornings we woke to the news that another body had been found in the council bins. But it had a real sense of community, a sense of acceptance, that difference should be embraced and not feared. We respected one another.

In my class at school, I cannot think of one English kid. Instead, we were a mix of Bangladeshi, Irish, Chinese, Somali, Pakistani and Greek children. The teachers at our school had been there for their entire careers; they had taught our siblings, our cousins, our parents before them. Within every school day was stitched a rich history of our family that teachers would call on to remind us where we came from. 'You're a chatterbox, just like your cousin,' was a comment levelled at me often. And yet it made me feel safe and secure that my teacher knew my family so well, that she understood where I had come from.

Because, back then, the teachers didn't move around schools like they do now. Their classrooms were a home from home, and they decorated them in their own unique style. One of my favourite teachers was Miss Matar. She was an Englishwoman who dressed every day in Sierra Leone gara cloth robes, and heavy beads that jangled when she walked. On her hands she wore oversized rings

that sparkled, and her classroom was decorated with beautiful draped fabrics in wild, bold colours, complete with a reading area made cosy with rich, earthy-toned upholstered cushions.

Miss Calder in the room next door loved her plants, and kept boxes of bright red geraniums on every windowsill. I would put my nose right up to those petals, frustrated that something so beautiful refused to release a scent. But it was the perfect place to study, a sumptuous, colourful and bright learning environment. Every child – though many came with their own unique challenges – was treated equally. Our diversity was celebrated, our different faiths encouraged. I would go home to my Greek mum after school and teach her Diwali songs that I'd heard my friends singing in the playground.

To go from that to teach in a school with children from predominantly middle-class backgrounds seemed as if I were dialling down the vibrancy of school life. Not only that, I would feel intimidated, as if I were not worthy of teaching children that I had so little in common with, let alone facing their parents. Perhaps, in some ways, arriving at Alperton Community School was akin to me coming home, returning full circle, back to a school like the one I had loved so much as a child.

So I changed that Victorian classroom. I stripped the walls so they could be painted and then draped them with rich fabrics, like those I'd remembered from my school-days. I found a corner to display my own artwork, so the

children would see that I too was a work in progress, and in a nod to Miss Calder, I put flowerpots on every windowsill. I breathed life into that classroom, and I saw the difference it made to the kids. Because otherwise, what would it tell them about themselves if I put such little effort into the room I invited them into? I like to think my classroom told these kids they were worthy of respect and effort.

I kept my eye on Alvaro throughout the lesson, but unlike the other kids who were head down, working, he sat staring straight ahead. I went back over to him, realising he had no pencils of his own.

'Here, Alvaro,' I said, 'use some of these pencils.'

I scattered some in a pile on his desk. As I walked away, he picked one up tentatively, as if he had no idea what to do with it. Instinct told me to leave him to acclimatise, to allow him to slowly become accustomed to his new environment. I had received no training on teaching SEND kids; often – as in life – we teachers are left to rely on our intuition. We see enough children coming through our classrooms day in, day out, year in, year out, to understand what humans want and need. But back then I was relatively new to the job, still feeling my way, not entirely confident that I was doing the right thing for each and every one of my pupils.

I watched Alvaro, and after a few minutes he started to draw. Towards the end of the class, I wandered around the room, taking a look at what each student had done.

When I reached Alvaro's desk, I had to squint to see the image that he had committed to paper. In the middle of the sheet of A3 was the tiniest jar, not much bigger than a postage stamp. But it was the attention to detail that surprised me: the curve of the lid perfectly drawn with sensitive strokes; a 3D image starting to emerge from a full hour of drawing. Not that it was finished. Its size was troubling, though unsurprising. As an art teacher, you learn to read a lot about a child by the way they draw. This huge sheet of white paper with just a tiny object in the middle of it told me just how little confidence Alvaro had about being here. How small he felt in my class.

But I also spotted something else – talent. Some children could never manage to draw a 3D object, so there was definitely potential here. But how to bring this boy out of his shell? I had no idea if it was even possible.

'This is a good start, Alvaro,' I said, then I went to the art cupboard to get him some supplies. I made him a folder and pressed on a sticker with his name written on it. Inside I slipped a sketchbook and put it on his desk.

'Your homework is to draw me another object,' I said, aware that I was speaking more loudly and over-pronouncing my words in a way I wouldn't with any other student. I worried that I sounded patronising, but how could I be sure that he understood the instructions? I had no idea at that point whether there was any cognitive disorder.

'Do you understand?' I asked.

He continued looking straight ahead.

At the end of the class he crept away without a word.

The following week we continued our still-life theme, only this time I changed the paper to black and gave the kids some white and grey oil pastels so they could practise shading and toning. Alvaro was sitting at the same desk, and I saw beside him the plastic folder that I had given him the previous week – so he had been able to remember that.

I demonstrated in front of the class and then started going around each desk to help students with their sketches. By the time I got to Alvaro we were midway through the lesson. He sat silently, of course, but I noticed his shoulders were more relaxed than the previous week. Some progress, at least. He was concentrating on his work, and when I looked closer, I saw what it was, a barely there drawing, as small as the last, but he had made the mistake of using his lead pencil on black paper.

'Alvaro,' I said gently. 'You can hardly see what you are drawing. Why don't you try this white pastel instead?'

He shook his head quickly, clutching his pencil tightly, as if he were afraid to exchange something he had got used to for this new, strange crayon. I left him to it. Perhaps he preferred that almost invisible drawing. Perhaps he wanted to disappear into the walls of this classroom unnoticed.

During the lesson I collected the homework. I stopped beside each desk, commenting on what each student handed in. But when I approached Alvaro, he had nothing

ready to hand to me. He kept his head down, absorbed in his work.

'Did you do your homework, Alvaro?' I asked. He didn't speak, just shook his head into his drawing.

I walked away. He wouldn't have been expected to do homework in the school he had come from. Perhaps it was an alien concept to him.

As the children filtered out after class, two of the girls hung back to discuss their projects with me. I was talking to them, looking at their work, when, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Alvaro pass by my desk on the way out. He left something on the corner, I had no idea what, and my eyes flickered over to it. What I saw took my breath away – a pencil drawing of the body of an electric guitar, effortlessly captured where the light fell on it, shaded and toned in perfect, beautiful detail. He must have spent hours on it. He had signed it 'Alvaro'.

'Alvaro!' I shouted. He was heading to the door but he stopped stock-still.

In my excitement I left the two girls and dashed over to him.

'Did you do this?' I said, quickly.

He didn't answer, just stared, facing forward. No eye contact.

I moved in front of him, waved the picture in his face.

'Alvaro,' I said, 'this is brilliant.'

Slowly, for the first time, his eyes met mine.

'Did you really do this?' I asked.

He nodded.

'How long did it take you?'

He didn't answer.

I bombarded him with questions. Was it his guitar? Had he downloaded the photograph from the internet? How did he know how to shade it so well? Had he got more like this?

He searched the classroom with his eyes, shifting from foot to foot, as if hoping someone might rescue him. Instead, from the other side of the room, the two girls heard my excitement and rushed over to start complimenting him too.

The bell began to ring, but I couldn't let him leave, not yet. I dashed to my cupboard and grabbed as much equipment as I could lay my hands on: a box of oil pastels, some watercolour paints, brushes, different paper, charcoal, more pencils. I hurried back to him.

'This is what I want you to do,' I said. 'Draw more for me. Draw anything. Your favourite things, your house keys, your football, your earphones, anything you like. Do you understand?'

He stared at the equipment I was pushing into his folder.

'Do you understand, Alvaro?' I said again. 'I want you to draw five things for me, anything you like. Can you do that?'

He stared back at me for a second, then nodded. Then he snatched the folder from my hand and scurried out of the room.

'Miss?' one of the girls said beside me, and I remembered suddenly the students who had waited so patiently to see me.

That night, long after Alvaro had left, I still held his picture in my mind's eye. Had I really underestimated him?

Every lesson I planned, I kept Alvaro in mind. I thought of his tiny sketch in the middle of that huge A3 sheet of paper, and knew that I needed to find a way of building his confidence. One of the ways I decided to do this was to get him using different materials, so the following week I asked the class to paint a still life. I demonstrated, as I always do, and then wandered around the class checking everyone's work. Only when I got to Alvaro, he sat staring at the brushes and colours.

'I thought you might like to try painting this week,' I said, perching on the corner of his desk.

Alvaro shook his head.

'I can't get you a GCSE unless you show me the other things you can do,' I said to him.

He sat staring straight ahead.

'OK, let me start it off for you,' I said, knowing it was not ability but confidence that he lacked.

I dipped the tip of my brush into the paint, and dragged the inky end of it along the paper.

'There,' I said, handing it to Alvaro. 'Now you try.'

He took it from me, tentatively touching it to the paper, then traced a line around the other side of the bottle he was drawing.

'Good,' I said, moving on to the next desk. Only when I looked back a second later, he had put the brush down.

I went back to his desk.

'Great, now what about this bit?' I said.

He didn't respond, so again, I picked up the brush and painted the line in myself, then handed it to him, and watched how he did the same.

'Brilliant,' I said, wandering away.

I looked at the work of another couple of students, and then my eyes flickered back to Alvaro. He was sitting there staring at his piece of paper again. I knew then I would have to guide him through this, that he would only paint another brushstroke if I did one for him first. So that is how we continued throughout the lesson: for every line I made, he matched it with another. Slowly though, they grew longer and broader as he grew in confidence over the next hour. I was aware of other hands up, desks I needed to reach, and I had to juggle Alvaro's needs with those of all my other students. At the end of the session, I was rewarded.

I was leaning over another student's desk, when I felt a presence behind me.

'W… where do I put this, miss?'

'Over there, on the rack,' I said. But I didn't recognise the voice that had asked me. When I turned

around, I saw why. Alvaro had spoken. This boy, who was mute when he had first come into my class, with special educational needs and few expectations of himself, had spoken to me for the first time – art had done that. I didn't say anything, I didn't want to make a fuss or embarrass him. I noticed he had a stammer – perhaps that's why he preferred not to speak. But he had talent. He had potential. How foolish I had been to underestimate him.

Alvaro continued attending my classes, and each week I saw his confidence grow. It was as if, with recognition of his talent, he felt worthy in other areas of his school life too. I saw how he made friends; I watched him in the canteen at lunchtime interacting with the other kids; saw how he played football in the playground during breaks. He didn't shuffle into my classroom any more – he strode in, chattering with the others with a sense that he deserved to be there. The day that I told him off for talking, the entire class burst out laughing.

'Oh my God, Alvaro,' I said. 'I just told *you* to be quiet.'

He blushed with embarrassment, but smiled, with his crooked teeth and train-track braces.

We pushed on for the next two years, and when GCSE exam time came, he took his place among all the other students. And Alvaro, who had never been expected to take an exam, got a grade D. His mother turned up with him to collect his results.

'Thank you, thank you,' she said, wrapping me in a hug.

Alvaro couldn't stop smiling all day. Out of all the exams that he had sat, this was the only GCSE that he had got.

The head of the department, Armando, came over to congratulate him.

'You know, he was only three points away from a C,' he told me.

'A C? But if he'd got a C he could have sat an A level,' I said.

My colleague nodded. And I felt a spark light up inside me.

'We should do it,' I said. 'We should try and get him a place on the A-level course. Would you like to do that, Alvaro?'

His face told me everything I needed to know.

That summer I lobbied the head teacher to allow Alvaro a place on the A-level art course. Eventually she called me and said that if I thought I could get him through, she was happy for me to give it a go. She wanted his classes timetabled, so that he could resit his English and maths GCSEs at the same time.

'No problem,' I said.

Alvaro became a regular fixture in the art rooms. Whenever he had a spare period, he would be sitting at the back of our classes, working on his portfolio or trying to improve in some way. The younger students loved having him there – he got a reputation for being our artist in residence – and they would often go up to

him during class for help, or ask him how he managed to draw or paint the way he did. It was a joy to see how he interacted with them. His stammer would disappear. He seemed perfectly at ease in that mentoring role.

On A-level results day, I was lying on a Greek beach where my parents have a holiday home. My sister, Maria, is also a teacher and our phones buzzed in unison when the results came in. Most years' results coincide with my annual holiday, and the rest of the family know not to bother Maria and me as we scan through the grades, frappés in hand, sand between our toes. When I spotted Alvaro's name, I jumped up and screamed. People must have thought there was a shark on the beach.

'What is it?' Maria said.

'Alvaro got an A!'

I saw Alvaro a few weeks later when he came into school to collect some of his work and sort out his folder. I'd never seen him smile so much.

What Alvaro had taught me was invaluable. It is often those who have special educational needs who are so easily underestimated – hadn't I done that myself when Alvaro first walked into my classroom? Yet he had proved me – and everyone else – wrong. He had gone on to get an A at A level when he had never even been predicted to gain a GCSE.

The statistics for children with learning difficulties can make uncomfortable reading. They are twice as likely to

be bullied at primary school; they are seven times more likely to be excluded from school; they are twice as likely to live in poverty, and less likely to be employed. It wasn't just me back then who had low expectations – so does society. And teachers are not being equipped to help support them. A 2015 review remarked on a woeful lack of training for teachers of SEND kids, concluding that 'good teaching for SEND is good teaching for all children'. Five years later, I have not noticed any improvement in teacher training.

There are kids like Alvaro at school every day, sitting at the backs of classrooms trying to blend in with the walls, or too afraid to make a sound for fear of being noticed. Alvaro had retreated into a silent world because he thought he didn't deserve a place in the real one. So often we can overlook students like him. Teachers can be so hectic and buried in other work that we can't afford to give the Alvaros the time and patience they so desperately need. But look at what they can achieve if we do.

Alvaro's is a very human story, but it fundamentally changed the way I thought about teaching. I vowed that I would never again judge a child on first impressions. But the reality of what lay behind the disguises many kids adopt at school, I had yet to learn.