

What Does It Take To Be 'The World's Best Teacher'

The resumption of the popular webinar series hosted by Learning Possibilities where Mehool Sanghrajka, the company CEO, talks to leading figures in the world of education and technology. In his conversation with Andria Zafirakou, winner of the Global Teacher Prize, Mehool explored her early life as a child of a Greek immigrant family living in North London and the struggles, she had with her parents to convince them to let her study art at school. Fast forward more than 20 years, and she is having those same conversations with parents at the London school where she works. Her teaching experiences, the ups, the downs, and the rich cast of characters are wonderfully shared in her recent book.



As an excellent riposte to the hoary old gibe about teachers, often misquoted, from George Bernard Shaw, Andria's book is entitled 'Those who Can Teach', it is a celebration of the rich rewards to be gained from teaching. Andria is filled with love – the love of her job, the love of the kids she teaches, her love of the creative arts and her love of life. Who else would think about giving away a million dollars of prize money, to create a charity to revitalise the arts in schools through funding artists in residence?

Alperton High School in West London, where Andria works, despite its proximity to the Wembley National Stadium, has many of the features of urban deprivation

endured by the poorest parts of Britain. She writes movingly in her book about how, through her care, guidance, and her teaching of the visual arts, she brings self-esteem and a sense of achievement to children who often struggle with numeracy and English, which for many is their second language. The students at Alperton come from over 100 countries and 35 languages are spoken within the school community – as another mark of her love and commitment to the children in her care. Andria has mastered some basic phrases in many of these languages so she can greet parents at the school gate in their mother tongue

Her book contains many charming vignettes and success stories of students that she has helped along the way. Andria tells how the visual and creative arts help to unlock the lives of children who have suffered many traumas, and for whom the school is the often the only safe space that they have – a haven of peace in their sea of troubles. She tells, for example, the story of Alvaro, who came to the school as a refugee and was entirely silent for his first few weeks at the school. Art has no language barriers, and step by step Andria helped the boy to express his feelings through drawing and slowly over the course of a school term he began drawing tiny lost figures; then as he gradually started to speak, he came to know how to belong. The book is filled with many moving accounts of life at the chalk face, but also about the value of leadership and teamwork amongst the teachers for whom their work at a school like Alperton is a definite calling. As Andria says about her work: 50 per cent is teaching and 50 per cent is child psychology – trying to figure out why the kids are behaving as they are.



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In common with many teachers all over the world, lockdown meant that Andria had to pick up the skills of emergency remote teaching with technology ‘on the hoof’ – but, thanks to the support from excellent school colleagues and in particular, a friendly ICT teacher, they helped her master the rudiments and soon she was away! Like so many passionate perfectionists, she quickly grasped the formulation of creative lessons that were a million miles away from the ‘talking-head teacher on Zoom’ lessons that turned so many kids away from technology-enabled learning. In some cases, it would take her three hours to prepare for a one-hour class. Mehool asked, are there any takeaways from the new skills learnt during the pandemic that would stay with her?

‘I wouldn’t be without my desktop visualiser, now’ answered Andria – showing how low tech and intermediate tech solutions can enhance any subject, and in the case of the visual arts, you don’t have to go down the rabbit hole of computer animation and graphics to embed technology in regular professional practice.

The organisation that Andria established with the proceeds of her success at winning the Varkey Foundation Global Teacher Prize, provides the funds for professional artists to be attached to schools for extended periods. Andria’s foundation enables the artists to connect directly with young people and inspire their own creativity, and, with this, a sense of identity, self-esteem, and the confidence to communicate.

Without doubt, Andria laments, over the past decade the arts have become increasingly marginalised on the school curriculum in England, with the thrust towards an ever-more academic curriculum, as characterised by the EBacc. Yet it is dedicated teachers like her, working in the creative arts, who provide opportunities for children to communicate, collaborate, improve their self-esteem, and develop many of the very skills that employers are crying out for.

Sadly, for the creative arts in education, it was ever thus. In 1982, when Andria was still a pupil at St Michael’s Primary School in Camden Town, the late lamented Sir Ken Robinson was principal researcher and editor of the influential ‘The Arts in Schools’ report, published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. At the time the report helped to shape the emergent national curriculum in England and ensured that the arts kept their rightful place. Yet despite its wide readership and nine reprints over successive years the battle to keep the arts in schools still goes on. It seems that every generation has to fight their own fight against the Gradgrinds of education who insist that more ‘facts’ should be taught to the exclusion of all else!

It is thanks to the wisdom and generosity of Andria and others, like her, who share the same passion and commitment together with purposeful and enlightened school leadership that schools in England, despite all the performative pressures continue to provide a rich and enabling curriculum for all children.



You can see more of these inspiring photographs of the Artists in Residence programme in action at <https://www.artistsinresidence.org.uk> and learn more about Andria, her book, her inspirational, passionate public speaking and inspirational coaching at www.andriazafirakou.com.

