Beyond the Perfect Student: Recognising Potential

From the desk of Jenni Foley, Deputy Head (Academic)

The students are outside, moving through their morning Rajio Taiso exercises, when suddenly a loud shouting voice cuts the air across the quadrangle.

“Takeshi! Takeshi! Come to the kitchen! Now!”

The school chef is running towards them, his face pale with panic. The kitchen fryer has broken down. Breakfast for the entire school — fish fingers — is in jeopardy. There is no time to waste. The chef needs someone who can fix the machine, and he knows exactly whom to call.

It is not the student with the highest marks. It is a boy who struggles in class, who would hardly be held up as an example of academic success.

Yet this boy has a particular gift. His dormitory room is full of broken radios and cassette players, brought to him by friends hoping he can repair them. He has an instinct for electrical things, an ability to understand how they work and work out why they don't.

Summoned to the kitchen, Takeshi-kun takes his tester, examines the fryer, tracks down the fault and fixes it.

Breakfast is saved.

Now imagine this scene took place in 1977, at Rikkyo School in England. A few weeks ago, in Tokyo, I met the boy from that story — now a former student reflecting on his school days. Takeshi described himself, with disarming honesty, as “a bit of a bad boy”. He attended Rikkyo between 1977 and 1981 and did not find conventional academic success easy.

What stayed with me was the contrast between how he might have been judged in the classroom and how indispensable he became when a real problem arose. For a moment, the usual measures of success fell away. What mattered was not how well he performed in a lesson, but what he could do when something went wrong.

And that was only the beginning of his story.

Years later, Takeshi suffered a brainstem haemorrhage that left him partially paralysed. Unable to play the music he loved, he faced the challenge of rebuilding his life around his changed circumstances. Drawing on his technical abilities and English-language skills, he forged a new career as a recording engineer and studio producer, eventually working with global companies.

His journey was neither straightforward nor predictable. It required resilience, adaptability and the ability to find a new direction when the future he had imagined was no longer possible.

Looking beyond the grades

Academic achievement matters. Qualifications open doors and provide essential foundations for the future. But examination results cannot tell us everything about a young person's potential.

Can they solve problems, think creatively, adapt when circumstances change and persevere when things go wrong? Can they recognise their strengths and find ways to use them?

These qualities matter enormously in life, yet they may not always be visible in a classroom or captured by a test.

As parents and educators, we must be careful not to define young people too narrowly by their current performance. Some talents emerge early; others take time, experience and the right opportunities to develop. A student who struggles in one setting may flourish in another.

Our responsibility is not to lower expectations, but to recognise that success can take many forms. We should encourage academic ambition while remaining attentive to the less obvious strengths that make each young person distinctive.

Takeshi-kun could hardly have predicted where his technical talent would eventually lead him. Nor could anyone at school have known all the challenges he would later face. But his story reminds us that the abilities we nurture today may become the foundations on which young people build futures we cannot yet imagine.

Success is not about every student following the same path. It is about helping each young person discover what they can do, develop their capabilities and find their own way of making a difference.