

‘For those whose journey into adulthood has been interrupted or permanently hindered, examinations become an unfairly blunt tool’

Alex Yates

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In the second of our series of blogs from alternative provision headteachers, Alex Yates of the Royal Free Hospital School explains why academic progress is secondary to progress in life experiences

At The Royal Free Hospital Children’s School we work with a range of vulnerable young people with medical or mental health needs. Evidencing progress is an obvious challenge, as we are working with a target group for whom there tend to be many complex and interlocking contextual issues.

Hence, many of our progress indicators – especially the pastoral assessment tools we have developed as a school - veer strongly away from the academic. Nevertheless, the data generated is as equally valuable and valid as academic tools when planning for and meeting the needs of each individual pupil.

For this reason, I always approach results day with a degree of ambivalence. It is impossible to deny the focusing effect that the ladder-like system of GCSE and A Levels can represent for many young people. However, for those whose journey into adulthood has been either interrupted or permanently hindered by other challenges in their lives, examinations often become an (un)fairly blunt tool.

We had a full spread of results across our Year 11 pupils this year. However, there seems to be no comparison between the relief of the A* student and the disappointment of the pupil whose recovery simply came too late in the year; the student who received results nowhere near what they might have achieved

Encouraging real-life achievement

Real achievement in life is not linear and doesn’t play out neatly like results day. While there are certainly staging posts, we believe it is healthier for young people to take a developing and evolving view of their own progress.

Each new pupil to the Day School signs an agreement which explicitly sets out the following expectations around ‘developing’:

- Be ready to change and grow - this may involve significant effort on your part. We recognise this can be very challenging for some young people but we are there to help you on the journey.

- Develop independence – it is our task to prepare you for your next steps in life and pupils will need to work hard to prepare for the transition to other education, employment or training.
- Develop resilience – one of our specialisms is helping young people to try and think differently and take responsibility for their actions.

So the culmination of the school year at RFHCS is not GCSE exams, but the five-day Outward Bound activity week in July. We see this as a chance to really test the progress they have made at RFHCS. Only if our young people successfully graduate through the very real challenges that such a week offers do we have confidence they will be able to start realising their true potential in the future.

Alex Yates is headteacher at The Royal Free Hospital Children's School in London.