

Time to change the metaphor???

Way back in the dim past when I was at high school, the school motto, on everything from our hat badges to our exercise books, was “Per ardua, ad astra” – through hard work, one reaches the stars. Thankfully no-one then had heard of “mind-set” and wacky ideas about anyone and everyone being capable of reaching the greatest heights with a bit of extra application. Indeed, such an idea would have been met with disbelief from the authorities who had neatly categorised us all – and our futures - into very distinct streams. Everyone was expected to work hard – but not everyone was expected to achieve, if, by achieve, one meant high levels of academic success.

However, those students who found themselves deposited in the school’s academic stream very soon discovered that *both* parts of the school motto certainly applied to them. As far as the school was concerned, they were supposed, not only to work hard, but also to aim for the stars, or, in other words, to pass every conceivable exam and to end up at university and in the professions.

Though much has changed since I left my panama hat days behind me, today’s equivalent of my generation’s “top stream” students are still expected to aim for high achievement in similarly visible ways. As noted Canadian researcher Francoys Gagné has emphatically put it, the goal for these students should be “personal excellence”. Not surprisingly, a star has often been used as a metaphor or logo for gifted programmes with this focus on achievement.

But here’s the question: is this really appropriate in today’s world, for today’s students?

Finding myself earlier this year talking to a group of gifted Māori children at the start of a series of workshops my colleague Kathryn Bluett-Atvars and I were doing with them, I was very much aware of the sharp contrast between our Western focus on individual success and the very different Māori view of exceptional ability as being used to contribute to the welfare of the whole community, and thus their concern with relevant qualities of the individual – in particular qualities such as manaakitanga (nurturing and caring for others, generosity of spirit, recognising that the success of one is the success of the group) and wairuatanga (spirituality, being a sensitive and reflective thinker, grounded and calm, insightful).

And so I found myself using a very different metaphor, worded like this:

*A great tree begins as a sapling.
Its roots are deep in the earth.
It stands tall, above all other trees.
Its branches spread out to provide shelter for everything living beneath it.*

*You come to us like saplings.
Your roots are deep in your culture, your history, your pride as Māori.
Your natural qualities and abilities – the things you are good at – mean you stand tall amongst your peers in what you can achieve.
One day, when you are fully grown, you will use what you are good at to provide leadership for others, to serve your community with your skills and knowledge.*

I have a sense of comfort with this metaphor. It seems to me so much more fitting in a world where the individual search for success has translated so often into a search for power over others, into a greedy desire for wealth and fame, into wilful ignorance of uncomfortable realities that conflict with self-interest, into the empty lives so often offered to us through the media as substitutes for lives of genuine integrity and achievement. And also a metaphor that is so much more fitting for an

increasingly global community, a world that can generate young people like Sam Johnson in New Zealand, Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg and all their young followers, a time in our human history where more than at any other time we need our most gifted and able individuals to use their skills and their wisdom to guide us through the treacherous riptides of selfish preoccupation to a new stability, a place where there is some hope for a future for humanity and the world we live in and all its creatures.

A world in which our saplings can still hope to grow into great trees.

