

**Autonomy, limits and experiencing success****(Address to Centre for Special Education Graduands - 8 December 1998)***Professor Ian Evans**Psychology Department, The University of Waikato*

E kui ma, e koro ma  
e nga matua, whaea  
rau rangatira ma  
e nga hoa mahi  
e te rangatahi  
tauirā ma  
tena koutou katoa

This is indeed a day on which we can all feel really good.

Not because this is the last boring lecture you'll have to suffer through for a while; not because you don't have to take notes or try to guess if what I say will be in the final! Those of you graduating today and receiving your certificates and diplomas can feel good because you have achieved something truly worthwhile.

You have worked hard; you have (most of the time!) resisted temptations and distractions, you have grappled with new and difficult ideas, you have acquired skills, and you have succeeded in obtaining an important tertiary qualification. You feel good because you have achieved academic mastery.

The family and whanau who are here with you, partners and good friends who have come to help celebrate your accomplishments – they feel very good too. Not just because your hard work might now translate into a paying job, and not because your excuses for avoiding activities with friends and family have now disappeared. They feel good because in contemplating what you have accomplished, they know deep down that they played an important part. They were able to support, to encourage, to put your needs before their own; without that caring, nurturing role you simply would not have been able to be as successful as you are now. They are proud that they helped to make it all possible.

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For the academic staff and administrators here – and I’ll include myself as an honorary member! -- we feel very good too. We feel good because we challenged, stimulated, demonstrated and imparted our skills and knowledge. We resisted when you begged piteously for more time, or less reading, or to not to have to think critically through a problem. We expected and demanded the very best because in the end you will mirror our values and standards. And thus many of the needs of the lecturers, tutors and all the academic teaching staff have also been met – we can look with satisfaction on a job well done – and of course, no more marking for a while!

This shared pride is worthy of comment because it relates to more serious issues we have to contend with. Many of us in the tertiary education field resist very strongly the commercial or business model that is increasingly being imposed upon us. This is not because we fear competition or feel we should not be accountable, or believe that societal needs should not influence the direction and standards of academic courses and programmes. What we are most concerned about is the cynical presumption that the external profit motive, rather than internalised goals and standards, shapes our behaviour. The analogy between teaching institution and business is inaccurate; we are not, and can never be, a profit making enterprise.

Students, we are sometimes told, are our customers. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. If we want to use a market analogy at all, then we have to use a correct one. Students are our products. Our customers are New Zealand citizens at large, who pay the true costs of tertiary education and reap the benefits of informed, knowledgeable, dedicated people who will use their skills and talents to better society. This is not some airy fairy graduation speech rhetoric. If students are good at what they have been taught to do, we all benefit enormously.

This is especially true for the recipients of today’s degrees and diplomas, because all of you have learned to work with people who experience special needs due to a disability of some kind. You have opted to train in the area of human services and education and have gained the special skills and knowledge that allow you to be highly competent in this domain. Such a commitment is admirable, since it means your work and your lives will not be dedicated simply to self-interest and to material profit. You have a sense of higher purpose: you have a transcendence, a belief in something important beyond your own particular needs and self-advantage.

We should all be incredibly grateful that you have chosen the field of human services and are now able to provide support, education, and therapy to people in need. For it

is easy to feel a little detached from the domain of disability, to think that it refers to other, less fortunate people than ourselves. But the harsh reality is that each of us is just a sliver of fate away from disability ourselves: a minor genetic anomaly, a fragile strand of DNA, a weakening cerebral blood vessel, the insidious neural tangles of ageing, or a momentary loss of concentration, a bald tyre, or a case of stubbies away from serious injury. I don't mean to sound morbid but to face an absolute reality: that by investing our educational resources in students such as yourselves we are not just thinking of the needs of people currently experiencing handicapping conditions, but are thinking of a little insurance for our own futures. All of us.

How might I want to be treated if I were to become disabled, and how do we expect you to treat those individuals whom you will be employed to support and educate?

Here, like so many fields of human endeavour, we can look to the same needs that make this occasion so happy. We, as academic staff, have to have a huge sense of personal satisfaction, not because you were customers who bought out knowledge and expertise off us, but because you are our products and you reflect our values. We are proud of you because we know that in the end, if we got it right, you will be better than we are. In the end you will know more and make changes in services we haven't even realised are possible, and we are not at all threatened or defensive that that should be so. We want you to do well in the same way that you will want your students and clients to succeed.

For your parents, partners, family and whanau, they have the satisfaction of knowing that they helped – that you are not or were not alone. We know that good things can only be done in a society that supports and nurtures each other. He tangata, he tangata, he tangata. Your future clients will need that same sense of caring.

For yourselves, while you may acknowledge that support, you know that it was you and your efforts that actually resulted in your achievement.

And so it is with people with disability. We have to teach skills and create expectations of standards, not for ourselves but because our clients or students will then be able to benefit all of us. We need also to support people with disabilities in such a way that they have the satisfaction of overcoming obstacles on their own, and being able to accomplish new things.

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This balance between personal autonomy and the interdependence we have with each other is one of the hardest things to negotiate. All my professional life I have worked with children and adults with intellectual disabilities and what we call challenging behaviour. Increasingly we have come to understand that allowing such individuals to achieve self-determination is really our ultimate treatment goal. Even when we argue that what we are hoping to ensure is quality of life, that implies somehow we will decide what that means.

Possible qualities of like keep changing and there is a danger, when resources are always limited, to generate too great a sense of entitlement. If we focus instead on helping people have true self-determination, then we are creating the best opportunity to satisfy that fundamental need for achievement.

Lest it sound like I am espousing some self-centred nineties philosophy, let me hasten to add the other component in the equation – the bit coming from your families! You needed their help and support to achieve what you have. This is one of the most complex tensions in personal life and society as a whole: how do we reconcile our individual goals and aspirations and desire for autonomy, with the fact that we are social beings, entirely dependent on our inter-relatedness with others? This is a huge dilemma. In my research programme we have recently been working on reducing family conflict by trying to better understand the tensions between adolescents' desire for independence and their need to negotiate this successfully within a family system. The answer appears relatively simple: that teenagers have to be allowed autonomy or decision on matters that are personal, entirely their own. But aspects of their behaviour that affect the family or larger group have to recognise the needs of that larger group, even if the rules may seem arbitrary and based on convention. And activities that relate to moral principles have to adhere to the rights of the entire social group. If your preferred activity genuinely affects no one else, you must have freedom to exercise your choice. But if you do affect others then you have duties as well as rights.

Think now about people with disabilities and how rarely it is possible for them to make truly autonomous choices. Our anxiousness to protect, nurture, support and guide, results in our taking control over their lives. Even young children do this. In a recent study we completed of children with very severe intellectual disabilities who were mainstreamed (included) in a regular primary school, we observed the behaviour of their non-handicapped peers. These children were not at all cruel and bullying as the parents feared. The ones who might have felt negative simply avoided the

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children with the disabilities. But the others, who became friends, became like little parents – bossing the handicapped children around, moving their wheelchairs, sitting them on the floor with them, wiping up their drool, combing their hair. They were being over-protective. When we taught these children that simple principles of fairness and equity applied to all, they immediately realised that the children with the disabilities had to have their opportunity to regulate the interaction, to decide on the play, to have their turn, or in the words of Lotto, to call the shots.

“Choice” is one of the current buzz words in services for people with intellectual disabilities, but the choices we actually allow are quite limited: “do you want to do reading or writing today?” “do you want to wear the red socks or the green socks?” “do you want juice or do you want milk?”

Autonomy means being able to set your own direction within restraints that you accept. The students here today recognised that you did have a choice as to whether to read a text book or watch TV, but little choice as to whether to hand in an assignment or not. The limits that you all accepted were based on the recognition that as students having chosen to pursue these educational goals, the standard would be imposed from someone you respected as having the knowledge and wisdom that you wanted. When you teach students with disabilities or disadvantages, you have to make sure that they respect and recognise that you have something to offer that they desire, or all your efforts will be focussed on trying to control behaviour directed towards some other goal entirely.

Almost all the challenging behaviour that I have worked with in my professional career can essentially be traced to efforts at counter control by the people involved – be they classroom students or adult clients. For not only do people with disabilities desire something very different than that decided for them by others in society, they like everybody else, desire to feel in control. To understand this phenomenon you only have to watch a four-year old pouring a cup of milk and insisting that “I can do it all by myself” – place even a guiding finger on the milk carton and watch the reaction – it is really better to have the milk go all over the floor in the first place.

Effective parents understand that it is necessary to create learning opportunities for children in a context that is secure. That is to say, the context encourages trial and error learning without the errors being too disastrous. Effective parents also know that in the end this type of responsive parenting – when one allows the child to develop their own needs and interests without infringing on the right of others – actually lays

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the foundations of ultimate independence from them. This independence is not, hopefully, in the sense of becoming disconnected, but in the sense of acquiring freedom to grow and to develop, learning new and better ways but reflecting parental values. Individualism and collectivism are not opposing forces – they are complimentary.

How, we often ask, can we realistically foster the same kind of autonomy and self-determination in people with very significant intellectual disabilities? By definition such a disability appears to impose constraints upon a person's capacity to set a long term plan for themselves, or to understand the degree to which current behaviour will impact future outcomes.

Well you will be happy to know I will not give you a technical lecture on how to do this, but I have said enough to give you some general pointers. People with severe disabilities must experience mastery over some facets of their life – they must have the same kind of success experience that you are enjoying today. Thus as teachers and caregivers and support staff, we have to afford opportunities for the experience of genuine success, not artificially created. There is an interesting study in the developmental psychology literature in which children were allowed to reward themselves with lollies for doing well in a game of skill. Then the game was made much easier by the adults in charge, and the children naturally did well – however on this occasion they did not help themselves to a reward. External, artificial reward is less powerful than the knowledge that one has done well.

In addition, people with intellectual disabilities must have aspirations that go beyond the immediate objective. They must see the value of the outcomes of actions, not just for themselves now, but for themselves in the future, and they must see the value for others around them.

And people with disabilities must be allowed to make mistakes and learn the consequences of their actions. With freedom comes responsibilities and duties, and also risks. As we have moved from the physically safe environments of the institution to the civic right of community living and a normalised lifestyle, so it is necessary for individuals, parents and families, and society, to accept certain risks associated with these opportunities. Protection easily becomes control – I know best what is good for you.

You have chosen a career that requires a great deal of personal commitment and dedication – as well as some risks. It will not be easy and it will not always be well paid! But it is a noble path.

No graduation address can be completed until we mention life's journey in some way! So I want to quote you a few lines from a marvellous poem by Hone Tuwhare called "Roads":

I dream of roads  
But seek instead a tumble  
stumble-footed course I know  
will earn me sad wounds  
cutting deep to bone

I have learned to love  
too much perhaps  
rough tracks hard of going  
poorly lit by stars.

I certainly hope you don't end up with too many wounds, but I do know that you have chosen a "rough track hard of going" and while it may be poorly lit, your academic teachers and that community of people concerned with the plight of others do provide you with at least some starlight to guide your way.

I wish you every success in your future careers and again, on behalf of your families, whanau, and teachers, congratulate you on your achievements.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa.

