

Must 'success' be defined as the pursuit of perfection? I think not

Genevieve Juliana Mutyaba had just completed her A-Level at Mengo Secondary School in Kampala and had the markings of a successful life ahead of her.

From all accounts, she was an A-student. "Genevieve has always been among the brightest and most disciplined students," her father, Robert Mutyaba, recalled. "She dreamed of becoming a great engineer and an academic."

Friends said she dreamed of joining Makerere University to study engineering, and, from her academic track record, she had the brains and the drive to get in.

Then came the A-Level examination results. Genevieve scored 19 out of a possible 20 points. An excellent showing by any measure. But, apparently, not good enough for some, as this paper reported this week.

"Residents said she struggled to cope with remarks from some colleagues, who repeatedly taunted her on how an excellence (sic) student had scored 19 instead of the perfect 20 points.

A neighbour was quoted in the news report: "Many people believed she would score 20 points, but when the results were released, some of her friends kept asking what had happened. Those comments appear to have weighed heavily on her."

A few days after the results were released, Genevieve was found unresponsive in her bedroom at the family home in Nansana, on the outskirts of the city. She was later confirmed dead in what police are investigating as a possible suicide.

I read the story twice. First, in general interest. Then, with the pain and disbelief of a parent. It is one thing to deal with the disappointment of failure. It is something else altogether to have to deal with such severe consequences for falling just short of per-

fect. **Allowing ourselves and our children to be kinder to themselves and others, as long as they are doing the best they can, might be the best way to love them.**

Daniel K. Kalinaki
In My View



fection.

When and how did we get to a place where we expect not just hard work and application from our children, but perfection?

Part of the blame lies with the education ecosystem where schools compete for grades in a closed loop where the appearance of success begets more top students, higher fees and even more success – where success is stripped of all qualitative aspects until it is just a letter grade from the alphabet.

We in the media are not blameless. My colleague, Tabu Butagira, has written comments elsewhere that I hope he will share with a wider audience. Essentially, our reportage on top schools and top students fuels this competitive streak that piles pressure on pupils, parents, and schools.

Competition is not inherently a bad thing. The healthy variety drives human achievement in many spheres, including academic settings. Stripped of nuance and context, however, and piled on in high-pressure settings without psychosocial support, it could be harmful.

Much of the dilemma – and the heavy work involved – falls on the shoulders of

parents. We want our children to do well, and we drive them to work harder, be better, and do more, but we are often ill-equipped to deal with the inevitable setbacks or disappointments.

As most parents know, there is no formula for parenting. There are many books and videos and anecdotes, but the damn thing is lived reality; we all learn on the job and are probably as anxious about our children falling short as they are about disappointing us.

I have no answers or clever pieces of advice, Dear Reader. I am also winging it. I suspect, though, that in a world where jobs and careers are becoming increasingly uncertain and vulnerable to technological shifts, but where it is also possible for people to become successful in new ways, we need to reframe what it means to be successful and how to get there.

We would have failed if we allowed ourselves to get to a point where success equals perfection. The world, with all its imperfections, near-misses and even absolute blow-outs, is still a pretty wonderful place. Life is about managing imperfection and picking oneself up, not about seeking perfection. Doing one's best diligently might seem a low bar, but it might be what matters most in the end.

Allowing ourselves and our children to be kinder to themselves and others, as long as they are doing the best they can, might be the best way to love them – and allow them to find success, whichever way they define it. Go well, Genevieve; you were enough.

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