Dear Parents and Friends

Celebrating the Differences in Children

This week I dare to reduce the photos and open the contentious issue of labelling our children.

I’ll start with my own teaching experience and three wonderful students. One could spell easily, one learnt his spelling and one tried extremely hard but struggled. One ate everything, one tried most things and one wouldn’t eat anything green. One had great empathy and made friends easily, one took a long time to be comfortable in social situations and one seemed oblivious to it all.

To the discerning child labeller, one of these students had learning difficulties, one a food intolerance and one was on the ‘spectrum’.

As an educator I find this type of diagnosis alarming. Often performed with good intention by someone with no qualifications or expertise, a person who has been on a course, watched a TV programme or read an article on the internet. Our fears, as educators and parents, that if a child isn’t succeeding makes us vulnerable and we look for a label.

These students were different and as a result different strategies were required for each of them at school and at home. Importantly, I celebrated the differences of each student. For one, it meant having to provide different strategies to learn and retain meaning. Another, it meant using social stories and practical situations to develop social skills. The third was developmental. In time, like with many students, he overcame the fear of green food but at the time I made sure he never had to eat this at school.

These students weren’t perfect and possibly they could be ‘labelled,’ but I am very cautious of the harm stigmatisation can do. A significant predictor in student success is a student’s self-belief. By labelling, we risk creating a mindset in our children that can potentially harm their growth as individuals. For parents with formally diagnosed children, labels can be a source of information that assist the school in developing an appropriate program. Not surprisingly, many of these strategies are already being used in classrooms at St Francis Xavier as they are effective teaching practices.

St Francis Xavier celebrates the diverse range of students within our school. As members of many associations including, Dyslexia – SPELD Foundation, Disabilities Services, Reading Recovery and Learning Support Consultants, teachers are regularly exposed to and access contemporary teaching strategies which promote high expectations for all students. Additionally, St Francis Xavier employs a Disability Support Coordinator two days per week to work with teachers and parents to adjust curriculum plans and access qualified and recommended service providers to support students learning.

Differences are a normal part of life. I strongly encourage families to arrange a meeting with classroom teachers at an appropriate time and discuss their children. Differences can be challenging but St Francis Xavier believes they are a celebration and what makes our school unique and special.

God Bless

Ben Doyle
Our 3 Year Old’s have been reading lots of stories about sheep! We loved reading Where is the Green Sheep? By Mem Fox. We also enjoyed Russell the Sheep by Rob Scotton and made our own ‘Russell the Sheep’ which are roaming the hills in our classroom!