Thinking first and Tutors

At both of the Campus start of year assemblies, I shared a story with those present about some building work that I completed over the recent holidays. Over many years, I have worked alongside my father on many home projects; he has been an excellent teacher. The holiday work I completed on my own this time. It required a lot of thought, a lot of planning and quite a lot of drawing on the skills I had learned over the years working alongside my Dad.

Completing the work successfully was a great pleasure and I must confess to a certain level of pride when I checked that my new door and its step were exactly level with the door and step to which I was matching them. Sharing the news with my father was a delight and, not surprisingly, he did say to me that he always knew I could do it.

This story was shared at the assemblies because, from the very start of the year, I felt it was important for students to be reminded that there would be no task set for them this year that a teacher felt that the student could not do. It does not mean that the task might be more challenging for some students than others. However, teachers will assign tasks that build on prior learning and that are constructed in such a way that a student, through Thinking first, will be able to complete.

As an educator, I am alarmed when I hear parents talk about engaging the services of a tutor for their child, sometimes in more than one subject area and even from Prep.

Occasionally, there is a specific learning need identified by the Head of School where engaging a tutor has been discussed as part of an individual learning plan for a child. Or, as happens in even the most expensive private schools, a Year 12 student is looking for a competitive advantage with regards to their VCE, and so engages a tutor to deepen their understanding in preparation for exams. Both of these are appropriate uses of a tutor.

Teachers at Overnewton are passionate about what they teach and they want every child in their classrooms to be learning to the best of their ability. Time and time again, Overnewton teachers go out of their way to provide additional support to students outside of their regular classroom time, so that the students may build the tools and the confidence to complete the tasks set for them.

When a tutor is engaged for a student there can be an impact on a student’s learning. For me, the most important reason being that there is a subtle message being reinforced for the student that they cannot do the work on their own. The student decides that they cannot do the task unless the tutor is telling them how to do it rather than building their own educational resilience, and confidence that they already have the skills for the task to be done.

Whilst at school, it is not uncommon for a student to disengage themselves in a particular class because their tutor is coming to work with them that evening and will teach them the work. Again, there is a message here that the student does not need to use their time wisely at school, they can disrupt others in class and then try and connect with the work with their tutor.
There are times too when I have heard from teachers that the tutor has taught a student an incorrect method or a method that is different to the one used at Overnewton to solve a problem, and that this creates unnecessary confusion for a student. It means too that the tutor is working against, rather than with the College, for the best learning of the child.

I understand completely that it is difficult for a parent when their child is experiencing struggles with their homework and they are at a loss as to how to help them. As a parent, I know this dilemma only too well myself.

Passionately, I believe that engaging a tutor for Overnewton children, unless for the reasons stated above, is ultimately setting our students up to not succeed as well as they might. From a very early age, children have incredible capacities to learn and to think. Employing a tutor can stifle their thinking rather than encouraging them to be Thinking first.

Your child’s teachers want to do everything in their power to help your child’s learning.

I appreciate that there will be a range of thoughts about the use of tutors in our community. I know too that some of my comments will not sit comfortably with some people. Nevertheless, I do hope that they encourage all of us to stop and be Thinking first about whether every avenue for learning has been exhausted within the College before looking outside of it for a tutor.

Had I not taken my father’s advice and drawn on skills that he knew he had shared with me, I would have had a disappointing end to my home project. As it is, I did not need to get someone else to give me a hand; I had the skill when I stopped, thought and planned for the task. The end result was exhilarating. This is a feeling I want all of our Overnewton students to experience with their learning too.