

MEDIA RELEASE
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Autism a learning preference, not a disability says international educationalist

New Zealand schools should view autism as a learning preference, rather than a difficulty or disability, says UK educationalist Neil Mackay.

His comments come in response to Autism New Zealand's statement that social stigma, intolerance and ignorance in the education system are holding back the development of children with autism and driving many parents to remove their children from mainstream learning environments.

Neil Mackay is in the country this week presenting training workshops to over a thousand teachers and principals on how to meet atypical learning needs without affecting the classroom experience of other students.

He says that with the growing numbers of autistic learners, teachers need to support their inclusion in the mainstream by understanding their learning preferences and employing practical tools and strategies to improve outcomes in the classroom.

"This means fine-tuning learning so students feel empowered and supported to achieve. For children on the autism spectrum, it's about helping teachers to understand that these children often need detail, order and certainty in their learning environment and finding practical solutions so these students can operate comfortably and confidently in the classroom," says Mackay.

Neil Mackay is a consultant to the New Zealand-developed *4D 4:Difference* programme which works with teachers in over 500 4D schools.

Originally designed for children with dyslexia, 4D best practice is consistent with and supportive of Ministry of Education priorities.

Mackay says 4D teaching strategies, encourage teachers to 'notice and adjust' when students are 'stuck' without having to wait for an official label.

"Automatically labeling autistic students as disabled, rather than recognising and responding to their unique and preferred ways of learning is not only limiting but also damaging. Placing a focus on preference rather than disability enshrines the right to be autistic."

The 4D programme encourages teachers to go beyond traditionally valued written evidence of achievement and to accept evidence in alternative forms, such as storyboards, mindmaps and flowcharts, all of which are validated by the National Curriculum and National Standards.

With the National Review of Special Education currently underway, Neil Mackay, together with representatives from Autism New Zealand and the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand are meeting with the Ministry of Education to reinforce the benefits of teacher training and education as the primary strategy for helping these children reach their potential.

www.4d.org.nz

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For more information or interviews please contact:

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About Neil Mackay:

Neil Mackay is one of the world's foremost thinkers on dyslexia and author of the acclaimed resource book *Removing Dyslexia as a Barrier to Achievement*. The creator of Britain's Dyslexia Friendly Schools concept, Mr Mackay is an experienced teacher with 28 years in mainstream secondary and primary schools. As a consultant to the British Dyslexia Association and Education Authorities in the UK, Hong Kong and Malta he has presented fresh insights that have both challenged and liberated traditional thinking around learning.