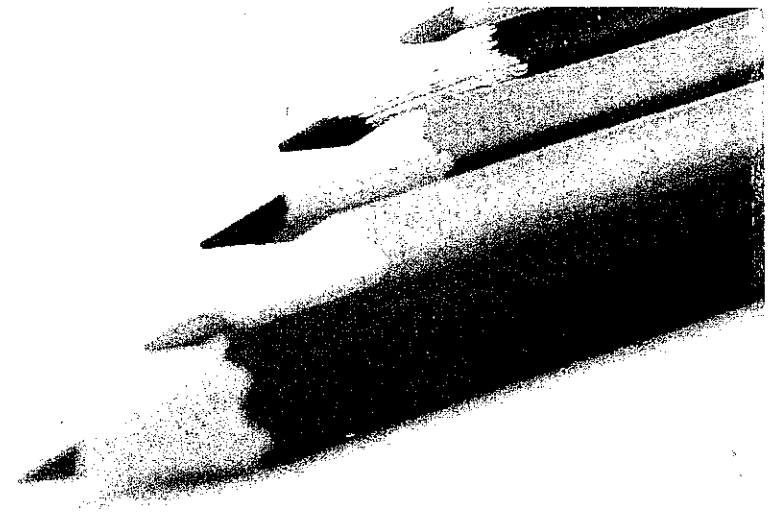


Word Up,

Many of the city's students struggle with the basic task of reading. So what are our teachers doing to tackle the literacy gap? Renée Gerlich investigates.

Photography by Mark Tantrum



Imagine you are a teacher. A little boy in your class has put up his hand, and when you walk over to the desk where he sits with his draft book and pencil, he asks you to help him to spell the word 'ambition'. You picture the word.

It would be easy for you to spoon-feed him the answer, but you really want this boy to become a confident independent reader and writer, and every opportunity counts. He has difficulty with literacy and his parents struggle to help him with his homework. You clearly can't tell him to 'sound it out', so you're trying to think of another way. The boy needs some strategies - and so, it seems, do you.

"Many new graduates don't appear to be leaving university sufficiently equipped to run an effective reading and writing programme in a classroom setting," says Murray Gadd, who has worked in Wellington for 14 years as a literacy consultant. "To their credit, teachers are really crying out for support in this area."

In December last year, the results of the five-yearly Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) saw New Zealand rank 23rd in a list of 49 countries. New Zealand was once world-class in literacy, ranking number one in 1970's international surveys; now, our persistent literacy gap has been correlated with our national bullying problem, high crime rates and severe poverty traps.

Education Professor Bill Tunmer of Massey University believes "becoming literate is arguably the most important goal of schooling". Of course: a lack of literacy skills is a serious hindrance in all forms of learning, not to mention the development of life skills, social networks and finding gainful employment. Its greater social implications are wide-ranging: this gap urgently needs tackling.

We also have a high rate of dyslexia: Tunmer states that approximately 10 percent

of our students are recognised as dyslexic. He says that, were dyslexia simply a neurological condition, "that number would be more like 1-2 percent". It is a spectrum disorder, but it appears to be over diagnosed, its symptoms tangled up with a host of other factors relating to the challenges we face with literacy.

Many new graduates don't appear to be leaving university sufficiently equipped to run an effective reading and writing programme in a classroom setting

- Murray Gadd

In 2009, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research completed a longitudinal study in an effort to discover which factors contributed most to school achievement. It tracked a group of Wellington children from the age of 6 to 16, collecting their assessment results, along with other relevant data, including information on their lives at home. This study concluded that the biggest effect on school achievement - the factor most indicative of whether a child will get good grades in school - was their mother's education level. This does not mean that highly literate mothers inevitably produce highly literate children, but that these students most likely come from a 'print-saturated' background, or have what Tunmer calls the "literate cultural capital" to fuel them through their education. Our system seems to be advantaging children who are predisposed to succeed, disproportionately. How can we make it more equitable?

Currently, students who have persistent difficulties with literacy after their first

year at school can receive support via the Ministry Reading Recovery programme. Reading Recovery teachers are trained to deliver specific 12-20-week one-on-one support, where the approach does not vary fundamentally from child to child. This costs the country \$30-40 million annually, which should be money well spent if it works.

While the impact varies from case to case, Tunmer says that statistics are not showing an improvement on the national literacy gap. The individual support is still required, but the approach is not always successful, and sometimes frustrating for students. Tunmer adds that in a context where new graduates leave teacher training under-equipped, the programme is something of an "ambulance at the bottom of the cliff" scenario.

If Reading Recovery does not produce results, children receive help from an RT:Lit (Resource Teacher: Literacy), who will have been university-trained. There are 109 RT:Lits in the country, and they work closely with other teachers to create a programme catered to individual children. There is often a waiting list.

At Mt Cook School on Tory Street in central Wellington, 55 percent of students speak English as a second language, which means the school needs a particularly effective literacy programme. Sam Silby has taught there for four years, since receiving her BA/BTeach in 2008. She says "10 to 18 different languages" can be heard during the roll call in her Year 4/5 classroom. Silby and her colleagues are supported by resident Reading Recovery, RT:Lit and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, as well as a long-term professional development from consultant Murray Gadd, to cater for the learning needs of second-language speakers.

According to Gadd, there are three crucial and equally important aspects to strong literacy support in the classroom. These are:

the capacity to deliver programmes within a meaningful and culturally inclusive context; knowledge of how the English language works; and the ability to implement teaching methods to cater for a range of learning needs.

Silby credits Gadd with having "revolutionised" her literacy programme, assisting her to make it more inclusive and relevant. Her previously separate reading, writing and vocabulary programmes are now interwoven into a 90-minute concentrated and contextualised literacy block, including guided reading, independent creative writing and peer-to-peer work, all focused around the same topics. The fact that students physically move between tasks every 20 minutes is also important to Silby, who has seen her students' results skyrocket. Last year, one ESOL student's reading age increased by two years within three months of arriving at the school.

The second aspect Gadd outlined was an understanding of how the English language works. Amy Austin, a highly regarded Year 3 teacher and head of the writing programme at Island Bay School, can testify to this: she has a degree in linguistics. This enables her to assist students to deduce spellings and meanings, and to improve their sensitivity to language, as they pick up on patterns and consistencies. Before starting at Island Bay, Austin worked as an English teacher in India, and spent three years in charge of ESOL students in a south London school.

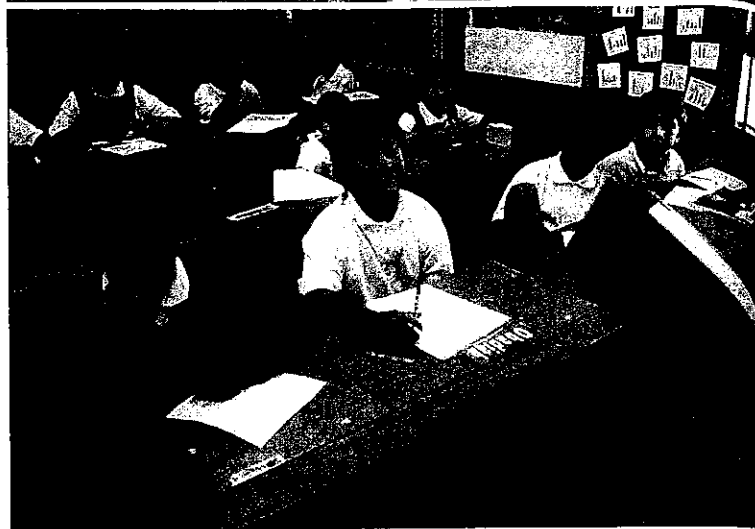
Austin is relieved to be out of the "highly standardised" British system, and says she admires Finland's emphasis on "personalisation" of learning. New Zealand and Australian educators often drool over Finland's much-vaunted education system; Finland ranked third in the 2012 PIRLS results, and there is much to admire in its education policy and practice. They have small class sizes, no nationalised standards or testing, and teachers who are both highly qualified and autonomous, with only one in seven applicants accepted into training.

Yet the Finns also possess a significant advantage over us: the Finnish language has what is called a 'shallow orthography'. This means there is a relatively consistent and straightforward mapping of the sounds of the language to letter combinations. Imagine how much easier becoming literate would be, if 'sounding it out' worked most of the time!

Instead, English has approximately 44 sounds, and 1,200 letter combinations to represent them. Hence why 'sounding it out' is not always good spelling advice: consider that word we met at the start, 'ambition', and put it alongside 'shoe', 'sugar', 'passion' and 'ocean', all of which include a 'sh' sound... and you soon get the idea. The words that make up the English language represent a complex system of roots, patterns and anomalies, and even if we could model our system entirely on the Finns', we would still need to develop strategies to accommodate this complexity.

This is important for assessment, too. Gadd argues that the primary purpose of tests and assessments is to identify and address learning needs to inform teaching, rather than rank students. Tunmer adds that two different teachers might deduce a very different thing from something like a running record (reading) assessment, depending on their own sensitivity to English. A conclusion like 'this child needs assistance with digraphs' can only be drawn when the language knowledge is there. Austin's linguistics training serves her well.

Yet Austin doesn't appear to consider linguistics her real secret weapon. She is a fan of literacy consultants Joy Allcock and Gwenneth Phillips, both of whom encourage intelligent, creative approaches to literacy teaching. Allcock's popular literacy programme places strong emphasis on music and sound. Allcock stresses the importance of learning and recognising word *sounds* first. She encourages students to use music and song to familiarise themselves with sounds, and to deduce which letter combinations will spell particular words. Children become comfortable in recognising sounds, and understand that each is represented by several different letter combinations. They then become adept at choosing and



Previous Page: Active reading away from the home: Sarah Torrington reads to Torrington and Mikayla Wollman at the Dowse Art Gallery in January.

Above (top to bottom): Two students reading independently during a comfort study period at Seatoun School; pupils at Newtown School engage in an in-depth discussion with their teacher in class; Reading comes alive! Island Bay school teacher Amy Austin, in costume with her Year 3 students during their Margaret Mahy day last year.



Above: Primary students are distracted by the camera during literacy lessons in their classroom at Seatoun School.

deducing which combinations make particular words.

Phillips encourages teachers to practise daily observational drawing with children. To Phillips, concentrated *looking* is integral to good writing, and is also a means to encourage students to draw their writing from personal reflection. Last year, one of Austin's literacy tasks involved sending students outside "to look for signs of spring in the playground" to record in their journals.

It seems clear that, if we want to tackle the literacy gap, supporting teachers to develop an in-depth understanding of the English language early on is a critical task. Yet Gadd emphasises that good teachers are "excited by language, and good fiction readers". Austin belongs to a writers' group, and her passion for writing and language comes through

vividly in her conversation. She lights up when discussing her students, their writing – from which she readily quotes excerpts – and their confidence in considering themselves writers. She even lets them edit her own work: "they love telling me how I can make my writing better!"

Her approach, though enhanced by her linguistics training, incorporates active looking, movement, listening, sound and music. What Austin brings to teaching is a willingness to think creatively about her literacy programme, a strong support network – and a love of language. And this is, thankfully, something that any teacher, parent or caregiver can bring to help the child struggling with a word like 'ambition' – no matter what their handle on the beast that is English orthography.

Literacy Statistics

- » The 1970 International Educational Achievement survey ranked New Zealand number one in literacy
- » In the 2011 results (released December last year), New Zealand ranks 23rd out of 49 countries, with no notable change from 2006 and 2001 results
- » Maori and Pasifika children are disproportionately affected by our struggle with literacy: in 2005, it was reported that approx 50% of Maori students leave school without any qualifications (compared to 21% for non-Maori)
- » In 2009 the New Zealand Centre for Education Research identified mothers' education levels as the primary indicator of children's success in school
- » 70,000 New Zealand school children are affected by dyslexia, according to the Dyslexia Foundation

10 Tips for parents Increase your child's confidence in literacy

There are many ways you can support your child's improvement in literacy. Encourage your kids to:

1. Read daily. Children from a 'print-saturated' home environments do better in school - though enjoyment and confidence in reading is more important than frequency.
2. Visit the library to find material on topics that interest them.
3. Keep a daily journal, visual diary and/or pen pals. Encouraging children to describe the world around them on walks, after activities or through observational or expressive drawing will help them generate ideas for writing.
4. Become familiar with different ways to spell sounds through music, song and rhyme.
5. Attend pre-primary education, to prepare them for school and address learning issues early on.
6. Summarise and explain what they have read, and become skilled at reading for meaning - especially if they read a lot of electronic texts.
7. Play with jokes, puns, word games and enjoy the silliness of English!
8. Eat a good breakfast and get sufficient sleep - this is crucial to school performance.
9. Be a reader yourself! Students whose parents report enjoying reading perform markedly better in literacy tests.
10. This one's for you! How do you think your child could develop their own passion for language and literacy?