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 Gerich 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 'ambitious'. 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 'round 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 34 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 Reading Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (IPRIL) saw New Zealand rank 33rd in a list of 40 countries. New Zealand was once world-class in literacy, ranking number one in 1970's international surveys; now, our persistent literacy gap has been exacerbated by our national bullying problem, high crime rates and severe poverty traps.

Education Professor Bill Turner of Massey University believes "becoming literate is arguably the most important goal of schooling". Of course, a lack of library 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 dyslexics; Turner states that approximately 10 percent of our students are recognised as dyslexics. He says that, were dyslexics 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.

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In 2006 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 'prestigious' background, or have what Turner calls the "literacy cultural capital" to feed them through their education. Our system seems to be advantageing 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 13-30 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, Turner 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. Turner notes that in a context where new graduates leave teacher training underemployed, 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 RTT/IS (Resource Teacher: Literacy), who will be trained and supervised 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 Silly has taught there for four years, since receiving her EAL/RI teach in 2008. She says 70 to 90 different languages can be heard during the roll call in her Year 4/5 classroom. Silly and her colleagues are supported by eXcitE Reading Recovery, RTT/IS 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 programs within a meaningful and culturally inclusive curriculum, knowledge of how the English language works and the ability to implement teaching methods to cater for a range of learning needs.

Silly credits Gould with having "revolutionised" her literacy program by assisting her to make it more innovative and relevant. Her previously separate reading, writing and vocabulary programs are now interwoven into a 90-minute comprehensive and contextualised literacy block, including guided reading, independent creative writing and peer-peer work, all focused around the same topics. "The fact that students physically move between teachers every 30 minutes is also important to Silly, who has seen her students' results skyrocket. Last year, one ELOG student's reading age increased by two years within three months of arriving at the school.

The second aspect Gould 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 honestly claim that she has a degree in Linguistics. This enables her to assist students to identify and understand the various parts of speech, 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 Java, and spent three years in charge of ESOL students in a south London school.

Austin is well known as being "the highest standardised" British system, and says the emphasis Finland's emphasis on "personalisation" of learning. New Zealand and Australian students often dwell over Finland's multi-graded education system. Finland ranked third in the PISA PIRLS results, and there is much to admire in its education policy and practice. They have small class sizes, no standardised testing, and teachers who are both highly qualified and autonomous, with only one or seven applicants accepted into training.

Yet the Finnish also possess a significant advantage over us. The Finnish language has what is called a 'phonological 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 'knowing it out' worked most of the time. Instead, English has approximately 44 sounds, and 1,200 letter combinations to represent them. How can 'knowing it out' be always good spelling advice? Consider that word we met at the start, 'ambulance', and put it alongside 'audible', 'passage', and 'occasional', all of which include a 'bl' sound, and you soon get the idea. The words that make up the English language represent a complex system of rules, patterns and anomalies, and even if we could spell our system entirely on the 'final', we would still need to develop strategies to accommodate this complexity.

This is important for assessment, too. Gould argues that the primary purpose of tests and assessments is to identify and address learning needs to inform teaching, rather than real students. Austin adds that two different students might perceive a very different thing from something like a running record (writing) 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 clear. Austin's linguistics training serves her well.

Yet Austin doesn't appear to consider linguistics her real secret weapon. She is an isolate of literacy consultants Jay Aitch and Graeme Phillips, both of whom encourage intelligent, creative approaches to literacy teaching. Aitch's popular literacy program places strong emphasis on music and sound. Aitch stresses the importance of hearing and repeating words sounds from an early age. She encourages students to use music and song to familiarise themselves with sounds, and to deduce which letter combinations will spell a particular word. Children become comfortable in recognizing sounds, and understand that each is represented by several different letter combinations. They then become adept at choosing and

The 1975 International Educational Achievement Survey ranked New Zealand number one in literacy.

In the 2011 results (released December last year), New Zealand ranks 25th out of 43 countries, with no notable change from 2001 and 2003 results. Maori and Pacific children are disproportionately affected by our struggle with literacy.

In 2009 the New Zealand Centre for Education Research identified "literacy" as the primary indicator of children's success in school.

10,000 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 "grass-saturated" environment do better in school, through enjoyment and confidence in reading is more important than frequency.
2. Visit the library and read current topics of interest.
3. Keep a daily journal, visual diary and/or pet logs. 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. Be familiar with different ways to represent sounds through music, song and rhyme.
5. Read pre-primary education, to prepare them for school and address learning issues early on.
6. Numeracy and expansion planning in different reading for meaning - especially if they read a lot of electronic texts.
7. Play with puzzles, word games and enjoy the challenges of English.
8. Eat a good breakfast and get sufficient sleep - this is crucial to school performance.
9. As a reminder: Students who report enjoying reading perform markedly better in literacy tests.
10. Try to understand how you think your child could develop their own passion for language and literacy.