

# Get the word out

KARENA SHANNON argues that we are failing to impart the crucial skills of speaking fluently and grammatically to our tamariki.

**A**s previous writers have pointed out in the *Listener*, the takeover of teacher training by the universities has deprived teachers of the hands-on wisdom of practitioners. A proliferation of educational theories, programmes and approaches and, at the centre, a failure of leadership to determine what is most important have compounded the issue. Critical decision makers in education ministries over the years are operating at ever-increasing distances from the people they claim to serve – a gap that has compromised their vision and negatively impacted language learning and support.

Our text-based education system mistakenly equates language development with literacy skills, which in turn contributes to a cultural bias against Māori and Pasifika languages that have strong oral traditions. It means that low literacy levels (generally measured in English rather than te reo or Pasifika languages) can easily reinforce the failure cycle for our most vulnerable tamariki. Moreover, it discounts the importance of oracy (the ability to express oneself effectively) as the foundational skill on which successful literacy develops for all.

The innate skills of listening and speaking precede the constructed skills of reading and writing. Our relatively recent obsession with literacy has demoted and discounted oracy as the necessary scaffold for literacy development. This has resulted in a “cart before the horse” approach and there is a grave danger that these two complementary components will be completely uncoupled. If we had resourced and addressed oracy development to the same extent we have misguidedly resourced and addressed literacy underachievement in the past 20 years, low-oracy tamariki would be significantly better off.

Not surprisingly, the literacy report *Now I don't know my ABC: The perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand*, released last month, discovered that by age 15, two out of five Kiwi children are only just meeting literacy standards or failing entirely to meet them. Solutions are now being canvassed and, belatedly, there is talk of New Zealand needing a national strategy and

implementation policy to lift literacy achievement. To those of us involved in language learning and promotion, the answers seem obvious: put the horse back in front of the cart – put oracy in front of literacy.

Let us restate in the most forceful terms: language is power. If our government is truly committed to equitable social outcomes, we must first recognise and address this core truth. Resourcing our tamariki to become confident and competent communicators is critical. From the moment we can talk, the successful negotiation of our wants and needs relies on our language proficiency. Telling our stories confidently and competently is key to

participation in society – we are failing those who can't.



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**A**ccording to a 2020 Canterbury University study, there are now “too many tamariki with too few words”, who urgently need their “educators” to effectively address this area of concern. It has been well documented over several decades that these tamariki are tragically over-represented in unemployment queues, mental health and addiction services and, ultimately, prisons.

Although we are all aware of the cascade of negative effects of poor literacy, we must first address how we can best establish and foster oracy. Rather than uncoupling oracy and liter-

acy, we must view them as inseparable, piggybacking each other through all stages of education. As language educators know all too well, good literacy is launched on a sea of confident talk.

Any future strategy to address this long-underserved low-oracy cohort must be led by language specialists. Ideally, these would include Māori and Pasifika speech language therapists who could combine practical and theoretical knowledge to train educators with the knowledge, resources, proven strategies and encouragement to develop oracy first. Whether this scaffolding for success is available to all depends on our willingness to successfully challenge our “cart before the horse” practice that permeates the current literacy education landscape. ■

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