

14 August 2001

Draft Media release

Classroom noise key to literacy debate

Classroom noise is a major contributor to educational failure and should be addressed immediately, according to the Oticon Foundation in New Zealand. The charitable trust has sponsored ground-breaking research into the extent of classroom noise in the nation's primary schools.

"We know for a fact that in some cases, classroom noise is so bad it drowns out the teacher's voice. Improvements in classroom acoustics are necessary, including the installation of low-cost soundfields," said audiologist Karen Pullar, Secretary to the Trustees.

The classroom acoustics research study found that most children are 'hard of hearing' in a normal classroom environment. "We also know that those most at risk of educational failure include up to 20 percent of a class at any one time," she said.

International research has shown that children with 'mild' hearing loss, the kind that most people would not detect, are at twelve times higher risk of educational failure than their normal hearing peers. In New Zealand up to half of all children are affected, with Maori and Pacific Island children twice as likely to fail due to hearing loss.

"Those doubly-disadvantaged due to the poor listening environment include children with ear infections, glue ear, speech and language difficulties, learning disabilities, behavioural problems like attention deficit-disorders, permanent hearing impairments, or English as a second language."

Ms Pullar said that educationalists need to look at the physical barriers to children's learning alongside the pedagogy of teaching and learning. "Children's brains are not fully developed for listening until they are in their teenage years. Primary age children find it harder to correctly hear the teacher's voice. They miss key words, phrases and concepts in poor listening conditions and don't really understand that words that are spoken," said Ms Pullar.

Anecdotal evidence from the more than 150 NZ classrooms already fitted with Easy Listener soundfields show improvements in oral language, literacy levels, classroom harmony, on-task behaviour, and a reduction in special education referrals and costs. "The Ministry of Education is conducting a three year study to quantify the educational benefits, meanwhile teachers have reported improved literacy in good listening environments," said Ms Pullar.

Now in its 25th year, The Oticon Foundation in New Zealand is a registered charitable trust of leading hearing aid manufacturer, Oticon New Zealand Ltd. Income generated from the sale of Oticon products is distributed through the Oticon Foundation in New Zealand to groups and organisations seeking financial support for projects that benefit people with hearing impairment. Each year this amounts to around \$100,000.

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