The Better Start Literacy Approach: Māori Students

Briefing Report: October 29th 2026

Purpose: This briefing report addresses how Māori students are responding to structured literacy teaching within the Better Start Literacy Approach

Background: The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is an evidence-based classroom literacy approach, developed by Professor Gail Gillon and Professor Brigid McNeill from the University of Canterbury. The BSLA has several unique features: it is our first culturally responsive structured literacy approach specifically designed for our New Zealand education context; it has proven to be effective within controlled research trials implemented in our New Zealand schools; it incorporates a novel online assessment platform that integrates latest technological advancement in the recognition of 5-year-old children's speech; and, it provides high quality professional learning and development (PLD) for teachers throughout the country. BSLA was initially developed within the 2016 Government funded Better Start National Science Challenge. Its effectiveness was investigated through controlled research trials 2016- 2020. The data from these trials have been published internationally.

National Implementation: As a result of the initial successful research trials, the Ministry of Education funded a national rollout of the BSLA across Year 0-3 classrooms that commenced in 2021. Starting in 2025 with the Government's structured literacy teaching strategy, the BSLA expanded to Years 4-8 and the BSLA team is currently a structured literacy provider for literacy teaching Year 0-8 classrooms. BSLA is also designed to support students with high and complex learning needs and all specialist schools are involved in BSLA implementation.

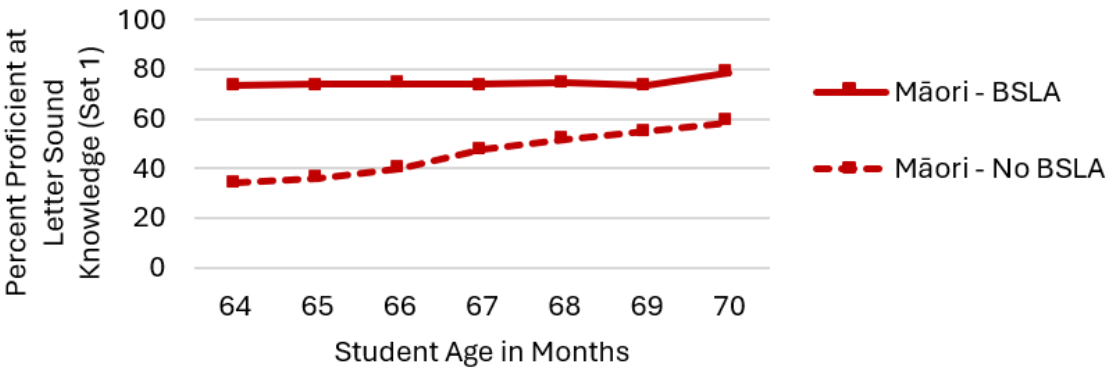
To date, there have been more than **204,000 students**[1] involved with the BSLA as part of this rollout. These students are from **1,174** schools across all regions of New Zealand. Over 18,000 teachers and educators have successfully completed BSLA Professional Learning and Development.

This report presents the findings from robust statistical analysis of **15,501 Māori students.**

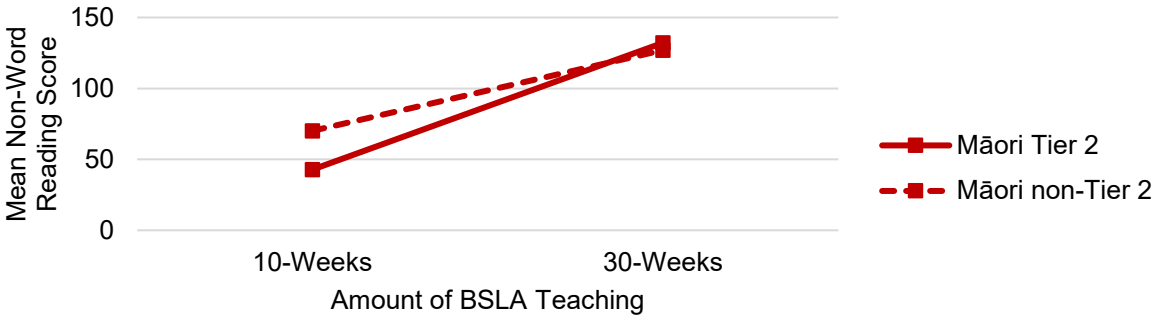
Key Findings

- **Māori students show similar growth on foundational literacy skills to students of other ethnicities.** Over the first ten-weeks of BSLA teaching, Māori show substantial growth in foundational literacy skills such as phoneme blending and letter sound knowledge (with large effect size Cohen's *d* = 0.76 to 1.00). Growth in these skills is at an equivalent rate to the students of other ethnicities, and at an accelerated rate on some skills (e.g., letter sound knowledge)
- **Māori students who receive BSLA show stronger literacy skills than Māori students who have not received BSLA.** A comparison of 5-year-old Māori children who had received BSLA teaching to students receiving classroom teaching as usual indicated significantly higher foundational literacy skills among those who had received BSLA teaching (Cohen's *h* effect sizes *h* = 0.38 to 0.81 across months of age and tasks). See figure below.

[1] Data provided in this paper are current as at 23/09/2026



- **Māori students show large gains in proficiency at reading and spelling over the first year of BSLA teaching.** More than half of Māori students are proficient on Set 1 of non-word reading and non-word spelling after receiving a year of BSLA teaching.
- **Tier 2 teaching supports the skills of Māori who need additional support.** Māori students who receive Tier 2 show greater growth in reading and spelling skills than students who did not receive Tier 2, and are able to catch up to their peers after a year of BSLA teaching. See figure below.



These data suggest that Māori students are responding well to structured literacy teaching within the Better Start Literacy Approach. The Tier 2 BSLA small group additional teaching support for Māori students who have lower-level foundational literacy skills in Year 1 is particularly encouraging. It is the first insight into an approach that is accelerating literacy skills for Māori within regular English medium school settings.

Sources

Gillon, G., McNeill, B., Scott, A., Gath, M., Macfarlane, A., & Taleni, T. (2024). Large scale implementation of effective early literacy instruction. *Frontiers in Education, 9,* 1354182. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1354182

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Smith, J., Gath., M., McNeill, B., & Gillon, G. (17 Nov 2026). Māori learners' progress in the Better Start Literacy Approach: National evidence of literacy growth. Paper presentation at the New Zealand Association for Studies in Education annual conference in Christchurch, New Zealand.

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