

# The Better Start Literacy Approach

**Briefing Data Update: September, 7 2023**

The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is an evidence-based and culturally responsive early literacy approach developed specifically for our New Zealand education context. Professor Gail Gillon, FRSNZ (Ngāi Tahu) and Professor Brigid McNeill from the University of Canterbury Child Well-being Research Institute developed this structured literacy approach based on the science of reading. Professor Angus Hikairo Macfarlane CNZM, FRSNZ (Ngāti Whakaue, Professor of Māori Research UC) and Tufulasi Taleni (Kai Pacific at UC School of Teacher Education) guided the integration of strengths-based and culturally responsive teaching practices within BSLA. The approach supports the professional development of teachers and literacy specialists to improve children's early reading, writing and oral language success in their first 2-3 years at school.

Development of the BSLA occurred through controlled research trials funded through the Better Start National Science Challenge | E Tipu e Rea programme of research funded by the Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment. It was first evaluated with a cohort of 141 children from low socio-economic communities who had low levels of oral language and phonological awareness in Christchurch post-earthquake (Gillon et al., 2019). Results indicated that the BSLA was effective at accelerating children's development of key literacy skills, including for Māori and Pacific children. The BSLA was next trialled with 402 children with varied language profiles and across schools from diverse socioeconomic communities in Christchurch and Auckland (Gillon et al., 2022). This research extended on the previous findings to show that the BSLA has significant benefits for all learners in English medium education in terms of accelerating foundational literacy learning.

## National Implementation

As a result of the successful research trials, the Ministry of Education is currently funding a national rollout of the BSLA across New Zealand primary schools that started in 2020. To date, there have been more than 50,000 students<sup>1</sup> involved with the BSLA as part of this rollout from 877 primary schools across all regions of New Zealand. Over 35,000 students have now received at least 10 weeks of BSLA teaching. Further, more than 3,300 teachers and literacy specialists have been trained through the BSLA micro-credential training.

In 2021, the social and economic return on investment of the national implementation of the BSLA was evaluated by ImpactLab, an independent Wellington-based organisation. Their analysis indicated that every dollar invested in the BSLA delivers \$38.20 in measurable good to society in New Zealand, resulting in a total social value of \$381,797,503.



## Key Research Findings

Robust statistical analysis of the assessment data from over 50,000 students collected through national implementation has resulted in the following key findings:

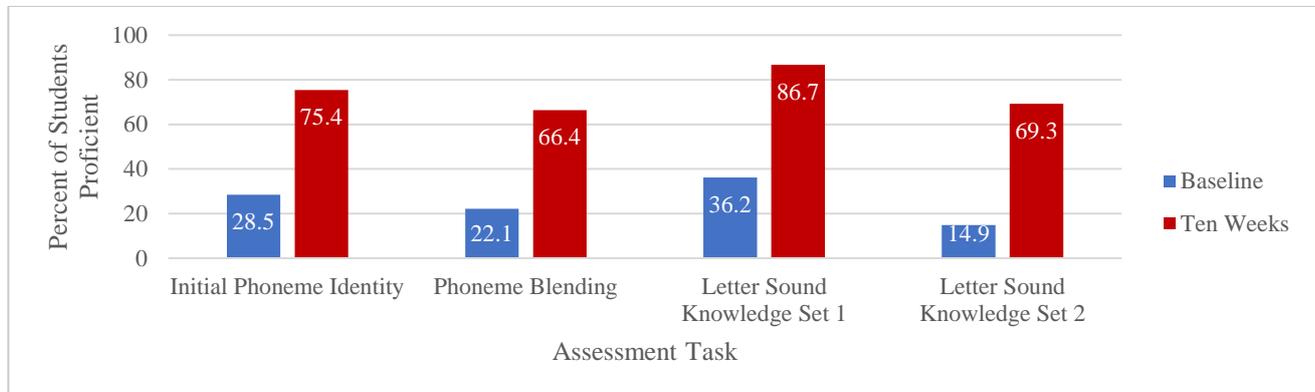
- There is significant growth in foundational skills (phonological awareness, letter-sound knowledge) over the first ten weeks of BSLA teaching for 5-year-old students (all  $t$ 's > 140.70, all  $p$ 's < .001; Cohen's  $d$  effect sizes<sup>2</sup> range 0.90 to 1.30 across tasks- large effects). Results are most pronounced for children starting BSLA at school entry (aged 5y0m to 5y3m - see Figure 1).
- English Language Learners (ELL) show similar growth to non-ELL students on foundational phonological skills (all  $p$ 's > .11). ELL show a higher rate of growth in listening comprehension over twenty weeks of BSLA teaching than non-ELL [ $F(1,642) = 6.24, p = .01$ ] catching up to their peers in some areas. These analyses used a matched control group in order to control for factors such as ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status.

<sup>1</sup> Data provided in this paper are current as at 4 Sept 2023

<sup>2</sup> Partial eta-squared ( $\eta^2_p$ ) effect sizes can be interpreted as follows: 0.01 = small effect, 0.06 = medium effect; 0.14 = large effect; Cohen's  $d$  effect sizes can be interpreted as: 0.20 = small effect, 0.50 = medium effect, 0.80 = large effect

- Tier 2 students (those who require additional support after ten weeks of BSLA teaching) are able to catch up to their demographically-matched peers on word reading and spelling tasks after receiving Tier 2 BSLA teaching (Cohen's  $d$ 's  $< 0.10$  after 30 weeks BSLA).

**Figure 1. Percent of students proficient at foundational literacy skills before and after 10 weeks of BSLA (n = 12,140 aged 5y0m to 5y3m at baseline)**



- Students are demonstrating significant growth in word decoding and spelling over 30 weeks of BSLA teaching (effect sizes of  $\eta^2_p > .16$  indicating large effects).
- Students are demonstrating significant growth in oral language comprehension and oral narrative skills over 30 weeks of BSLA teaching (effect sizes range  $\eta^2_p = .02$  to  $.07$ , indicating up to moderate effects).
- Growth relative to baseline skills at school entry is particularly high for Māori and Pasifika children - approximately double that of NZ European learners (see Figure 2).

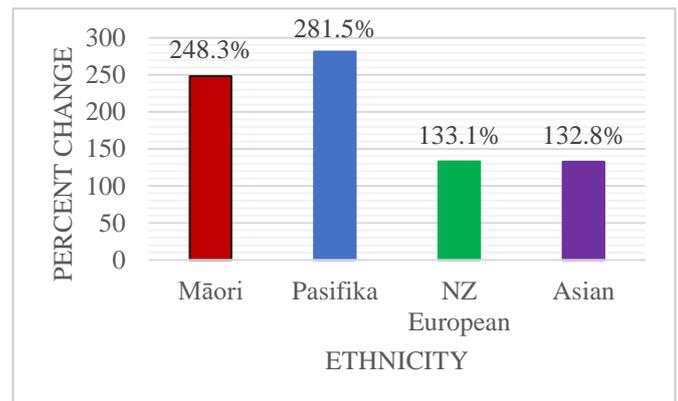
Other key findings include:

- Fidelity checklists completed by teachers indicate high student engagement with BSLA lessons (97.5% of lessons were rated as “moderate or high” in student engagement).
- Teachers completing the BSLA online micro-credential training show significant improvements to their knowledge and their confidence after completing the micro-credential ( $t$ 's  $> 13.85$ ,  $p$ 's  $< .001$ ; Cohen's  $d$ 's  $> 1.05$  indicating large effect sizes).
- Whānau of BSLA students report positive impacts for their tamariki:

*“My daughter is 6 and doing the BSLA. It is fantastic. She is engaged, confident and sounds out all words. Compared to my 8 year old son who was not taught this way, she is way ahead for just 6 years old.”*

*“I wish the programme was available to my year 3 and 4 sons as this would have been so helpful. Have noticed how quickly my daughter is sounding out words, reading and spelling at the age of 5.”*

*“I think it's fantastic, I've seen great progress with my 6 year that was really struggling with all forms of school work but now knows letters and sounds and can sound out words with confidence.”*



**Figure 2. Relative change in proficiency on initial phoneme identity over ten weeks of BSLA (age 5.0 to 5.3 at baseline)**

## Conclusion

Results from the implementation of the Better Start Literacy Approach across New Zealand are very promising. Students are demonstrating strong growth in foundational phonic and phonological awareness skills during the first



ten weeks of BLSA teaching, which then translate into growth in reading and spelling across the next twenty weeks of BSLA teaching. The BSLA is beneficial for all students, including those learning English as a second language and those requiring additional support (Tier 2) to master foundational oral language and phonic and word decoding skills. Findings indicate that when well-supported with quality Professional Learning and Development and structured evidenced-based reading instruction through the BSLA, teachers can do an incredible job of uplifting literacy development in all children and reducing existing literacy inequities.

Published research reports detailing data from BSLA can be found on the BSLA website

<https://www.betterstartapproach.com/>