

# The Better Start Literacy Approach

## Briefing from the November 2023 Report to the Ministry of Education

### Background

The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is an evidence-based classroom literacy approach for Year 0-2 classrooms, 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 for teachers through a University of Canterbury micro-credential, providing teachers with postgraduate level study recognition for their implementation of BSLA. The development of the BSLA occurred through the Better Start National Science Challenge | E Tipu e Rea, a research programme funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, initiated in 2015 as a National Government initiative.

### 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 commenced in 2021. To date, there have been more than **55,000 students**<sup>1</sup> involved with the BSLA as part of this rollout. These students are from **885** state funded primary schools across all regions of New Zealand.

### Key Findings of our November 2023 Report

Robust statistical analysis of anonymised assessment data from subgroups of children within the BSLA data collected from over 55,000 students has resulted in the following key findings:

- There is significant growth in foundational literacy skills over the first ten weeks of BSLA teaching for students who start the BSLA upon school entry (aged 5y0m to 5y3m; all  $t$ 's > 115.38, all  $p$ 's < .001). Children's proficiency rates improved from between 15-36% at baseline to 62-83% across phonological awareness and letter-sound knowledge tasks following the first 10 weeks of BSLA teaching.
- There is significant growth in children's reading, spelling, and oral narrative skills over the first 30 weeks of BSLA teaching [reading: *Cohen's d* = 0.60; spelling: *Cohen's d* = 0.22; oral comprehension: *Cohen's d* = .59; vocabulary diversity: *Cohen's d* = .69].
- Children's proficiency rates on foundational literacy assessment measures reach 87-96% proficiency after 30 weeks of BSLA.
- Students of Māori ethnicity, Pacific Peoples ethnicity, and those who are identified as English Language Learners are responding well to BSLA teaching. Relative to their baseline scores, growth for Māori and Pasifika is approximately double that of NZ European students.

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<sup>1</sup> Data provided in this paper are current as at 25 Oct 2023

- Students' response to BSLA teaching over the first ten weeks is a key predictor of later reading and spelling scores (all  $p$ 's < .05).
- Students who receive Tier 2 teaching (based on identified need for additional support after the first 10 weeks of BSLA) are able to catch up to their peers in reading and spelling after receiving Tier 2 small group support.
- Individual student performance is related to peer performance: students are more likely to experience reading and spelling success when there is higher average level of peer reading success at the same school ( $p$  < .05).
- The length of time that schools had been implementing the BSLA was associated with the probability of student spelling success: the longer schools had been implementing the BSLA, the less likely students were to be performing at the lowest level on non-word spelling.
- Statistical modelling suggests that BSLA students are performing better than they would if they received other types of literacy instruction (referred to as "standard teaching"), with the probability of performing at the highest levels of reading and spelling almost doubled with BSLA teaching (increased from 13% to 22% for reading, and 12% to 20% for spelling).

### Enhancement in Teacher Knowledge

Across the first 5 cohorts of the BSLA micro-credential (2021-2023), there have been a total of 4,158 teachers and literacy specialists who have completed their training. This represents a 94% completion rate for literacy specialists and 91% completion rate for class teachers (despite COVID-19 pandemic school disruptions). Cohort 6 is currently underway, and enrolments have begun for Cohort 7, which will commence in February, 2024. Two key findings related to teachers' linguistic knowledge from data collected include:

- After completing the BSLA micro-credential, teachers and literacy specialists showed growth in their linguistic knowledge across all aspects (phonics, phonological awareness, and morphology) and teaching domains (knowledge, skill, and pedagogy) (all paired samples  $t$ -tests  $t$ 's > 8.54,  $p$ 's < .001).
- Most teachers (approximately three quarters) rated their ability to support children's learning across linguistic domains as "Very Good" following completion of the micro-credential, compared to less than half prior to the micro-credential.

### Conclusion

Results from the implementation of the Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) across New Zealand are very promising. Students are demonstrating strong growth in foundational phonic and phonological awareness skills during the first ten weeks of BSLA teaching, which together with improved oral language skills then translate into growth in reading and spelling across the next twenty weeks of BSLA teaching. Findings indicate that when well-supported with quality professional learning and development and evidence-based reading instruction through the BSLA, teachers can do an incredible job of uplifting literacy development in their students and in reducing existing literacy inequities.