

Children's perspectives on structured literacy teaching and their emerging perceptions of themselves as readers and writers

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Lisa Furlong¹ , Sally Clendon^{1,2}, Gail Gillon¹ , and
Brigid McNeill^{1,3} 

Abstract

This study focused on the methodological imperative of listening to children's voices in educational research, specifically in the context of structured literacy teaching. Adopting a qualitative, descriptive, multiple case study design, the research explored the experiences of five children (aged 5–6) engaged in structured literacy teaching through the Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) and their emerging perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. Aligning with a child-centred methodology, data collection measures included drawings, an emoji-based survey and individual interviews. Analysis involved exploration of focal points and key features in children's drawings, qualitative analysis of emoji survey ratings and deductive content analysis of children's interview transcripts. Overall, children's experiences of the BSLA reading and spelling lessons, as well as shared story time, were positive. Aspects most enjoyed included phonological awareness activities, decodable readers, and shared storybooks. All children could clearly articulate their literacy learning goals, most with a high level of specificity. Drawings by strong readers more often depicted themselves in positions of authority or leadership during reading and writing activities, while emergent readers tended to portray themselves as peers or in supported roles with a teacher. Children's emerging self-perceptions as readers and writers did not always align with literacy assessment data, highlighting how engaging children through multiple expressive modalities can reveal complex, relational, and affective dimensions of learning and self-perception. This study contributes to the growing call for child-inclusive methodologies in education research and highlights how educators and researchers can more meaningfully incorporate children's voices in the evaluation and refinement of structured literacy approaches.

¹Child Well-being Research Institute, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

²Institute of Education, Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

³School of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Corresponding author:

Lisa Furlong, Child Well-being Research Institute, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Email: lisa.furlong@canterbury.ac.nz

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Introduction

Young children can express their opinions and provide perspectives on what is important to them (McCormack et al., 2010), yet are rarely given the opportunity to do so (Dockett and Perry, 2005). Children can provide valuable insights into how they perceive themselves, their knowledge, and their abilities, and can identify key targets for teaching and the people needed to support them. As researchers and educators, we need to genuinely engage with accounts of children's perspectives, experiences and beliefs and accept these accounts as valid evidence to inform our teaching practices (McCormack et al., 2022).

As young children's perspectives are rarely taken into account in developing understandings of their experiences (Cologon et al., 2018), children are seldom recognised as holders of expert knowledge, or even as experts in their own lives (Dockett and Perry, 2005). The importance of considering and accepting children's views has gained more acceptance in recent years, primarily through the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). This recognises that children have the human right to participate in society, to share their experiences and perspectives in child-friendly ways and for others to listen and act. Several research studies have shown that listening to children upholds their human rights, supports richer understandings of their experiences and contributes to more responsive educational practices that support children's agency (Cologon et al., 2018; Paige-Smith and Rix, 2011). For example, the Starting School Research Project in Australia has focused on exploring children's experiences of their transition to school and considering their voices in decision-making about school transition (Dockett and Perry, 2005). In New Zealand, the Office of the Children's Commissioner analysed the views of 6000 young people (aged 6–19 years) on 'What makes a good life?' Having positive educational experiences was a prominent theme in children's responses (Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki, 2019).

Children's attitudes about reading and writing, their success with reading and writing and the nature of the instruction they receive for reading and writing have been found to influence their motivation and achievement (Guthrie and Alvermann, 1998). A child's perception of themselves as a reader and writer is influenced by their understanding of what the reading and writing processes involve (Kauffman, 2006). Furthermore, their understanding of what it means to be literate, their understanding of what behaviours are valued in reading and writing, and their self-efficacy or their belief in their capacity to read and write, influence their participation and performance in reading and writing tasks. For example, children's self-efficacy beliefs may influence their willingness to attempt a task, the amount of effort they put in and their capacity to persevere or show resilience when facing challenges (Cassery, 2013).

For children who struggle to read and write, their attitude towards reading and writing can become increasingly negative throughout the school years (McKenna et al., 1995). These negative beliefs might reflect these children's experiences of failure with reading and reading-related achievement tests (Wolters et al., 2014), often leading to frustration and disengagement with reading (Toste et al., 2020). This differs from more able readers, who typically report more enjoyment of reading and higher frequency of reading for both recreational and academic purposes

(Canady and Krantz, 1996). A study by McCarthey (2001) explored the perceptions of 12 fifth-grade students (approximately 10–11 years old) according to whether they were a low, average or high-performing reader. Using interviews as the primary method of data collection, this study found that high-performing readers tended to define themselves more strongly in relation to literacy and perceived this as being more central to who they were as individuals. The positive affirmations that these high-performing readers received from teachers, peers and family members around their reading ability further validated their literate identity. Conversely, for low-performing readers, being literate was not incorporated within their identity or self-concept, and they instead focused their identity more on their social relationships or hobbies (McCarthey, 2001).

These findings suggest that instructional experiences may contribute to children's developing perceptions of themselves as readers and writers, particularly during the early years of school, given the central role that literacy plays in fostering positive self-perceptions that in turn support enjoyment and frequency of reading for both recreational and academic purposes. Researchers have suggested that differences in reading self-concept and/or self-efficacy appear within the first year of school (Arrow et al., 2026; Chapman et al., 2000). Arrow et al.'s (2026) research in New Zealand identified that children with lower literacy skills at school entry were more likely to have lower self-perceptions of their reading abilities and to have behavioural difficulties. Although these children continued to perform significantly lower on literacy tasks, they made consistent progress across the first two years of school. Arrow et al. (2026) suggested that children's experiences within the classroom learning environment might be important for maintaining levels of self-efficacy and preventing the Matthew Effect. The Matthew Effect in reading reflects the biblical principle that 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer' (Matthew 25:29); that is, children who read well will read more, strengthening their vocabulary and reading skills, whilst those who struggle to read will read less, limiting vocabulary growth and widening the achievement gap over time (Stanovich, 1986). Other research (e.g. Peura et al., 2021) has shown that mastery experiences and positive encouragement, for example, may contribute to children having a positive self-efficacy trajectory (Peura et al., 2021). Certainly, the instructional approach that teachers adopt in the teaching of reading is known to have a powerful influence over children's reading development.

The term *structured literacy* was first coined by the International Dyslexia Association in 2014 to describe a teaching approach that is highly explicit, systematic and sequential in the teaching of the essential components of reading, including phonics, phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (Spear-Swerling, 2019b). Structured literacy approaches include cumulative practice with ongoing review, high levels of student–teacher interaction and immediate corrective feedback (Spear-Swerling, 2019b). The effectiveness of structured literacy approaches is well-supported by research evidence (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The explicit nature of structured literacy has been criticised by some as privileging code-focused instruction, described as a *drill and kill* approach, that dulls students' interest and stifles their creativity (Spear-Swerling, 2019a); however, minimal research supports this view (Archer and Hughes, 2011). While structured literacy approaches emphasise the cognitive skills needed for successful reading and writing, literacy is also widely understood as a socially, culturally and historically situated construct. Children's self-perceptions as readers and writers are shaped not only through the acquisition of literacy skills, but also through participation in meaningful literacy practices across home, school and community contexts.

The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is a structured literacy approach that is strengths-based and culturally responsive to the New Zealand educational context. The approach is grounded in the He Awa Whiria framework (Gillon et al., 2024b). He Awa Whiria braids together Indigenous

and Western knowledge streams as a platform for culturally responsive and equitable outcomes, and considers the ecological, psychological, and cognitive influences on children's literacy development (Gillon and Macfarlane, 2017; Gillon et al., 2024). Research evidence (e.g. Gath et al., 2025; Gillon et al., 2023, 2024b) shows that the BSLA is an effective structured literacy approach within a diverse range of school communities, including communities with English language learners, Māori and Pacific learners and children affected by the Christchurch earthquakes and COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of the BSLA, there is an opportunity to engage with children, as the recipients of this instruction, to understand what they like about the BSLA, how they learn within the BSLA and what their teachers and families do to best support the development of their early literacy and oral language skills. In this study, the perspectives of five children who had engaged with the BSLA were explored. To gather their perspectives, we adopted age-appropriate and child-friendly techniques that not only empowered children and gave them the opportunity to share their perspectives, experiences, and beliefs, but also obtained valid, child-led information which can inform teaching practices. These techniques included drawings, individual interviews with children, and the use of an emoji survey, all focused on children's experiences of the BSLA and their perceptions of themselves as readers and writers.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive, multiple case study design. A case study approach was selected to obtain an in-depth, holistic and meaningful understanding of children's experiences and perspectives of the BSLA. Case study methodology allowed the researchers to investigate the BSLA as a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context (Yin, 2014) and the complex processes and activities associated with the BSLA that are not easily separated from the context in which it is being implemented. In this study, each child was treated as an individual case, situated within the shared context of classroom-based structured literacy instruction. This multiple case design enabled exploration of both individual experiences and cross-case patterns, while recognising the influence of broader classroom, school and social contexts on children's literacy learning.

This research was approved by the University of Canterbury Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC 2021/161).

Participants

Participants were five children aged 70–80 months (5;10–6;08) from two different schools in New Zealand: one school in a small North Island city, and the other in a small South Island town. Brief descriptions of the children's literacy skills at school entry and after 20 weeks of BSLA teaching are provided in Table 1 as context for interpreting their drawings, emoji survey responses and interviews. The table below has used these children's assessment data to classify their literacy skills as *emerging*, *developing*, or *consolidated*.

Children's parents provided their written informed consent for their child's participation in the study. Assent was obtained from each child at the beginning of the data collection session by their classroom teacher using a child-friendly information sheet presented as a PowerPoint presentation. Children then indicated their willingness to be involved by completing an assent form.

All children were part of classrooms where the BSLA was being taught by their teacher, and at the time of data collection, all children had received a minimum of 20 weeks of instruction, that is, ~80 BSLA lessons. A BSLA lesson is approximately 30 minutes in duration and develops children's knowledge and skills in three areas: (a) vocabulary, oral narrative and listening

Table 1. Children's literacy assessment results at school entry and after 20 weeks of Better Start Literacy Approach teaching.

Pseudonym and age at data collection	Literacy skills at school entry	Literacy skills after 20 weeks of Better Start Literacy Approach teaching
Bella (70 months/5;10)	- Emerging phoneme identity skills. - Developing letter-sound knowledge.	- Consolidated phoneme identity skills and letter-sound knowledge. - Developing phoneme blending. - Emerging phoneme segmentation. - Can read and spell some CVC¹ non-words.
Jun (73 months/6;01)	- Consolidated phoneme identity skills. - Developing letter-sound knowledge. - Developing phoneme blending.	- Consolidated letter-sound knowledge and phoneme identity skills. - Consolidated phoneme blending and segmentation skills. - Can read and spell non-words with complex vowel patterns and diphthongs.
Cassie (80 months/6;08)	Emerging phoneme identity skills and letter-sound knowledge.	- Consolidated phoneme identity skills and letter-sound knowledge. - Developing phoneme blending. - Emerging phoneme segmentation. - Can read and spell some CVC non-words.
Manaia (76 months/6;04)	- Developing phoneme identity skills and letter-sound knowledge. - Consolidated phoneme blending.	- Consolidated letter-sound knowledge and phoneme identity skills. - Consolidated phoneme blending and segmentation skills. - Can read and spell non-words with consonant blends and complex vowel patterns.
Sefina (75 months/6;03)	- Developing phoneme identity skills. - Emerging letter-sound knowledge.	- Consolidated phoneme identity skills and letter-sound knowledge. - Consolidated phoneme blending. - Developing phoneme segmentation. - Can read and spell some CVC non-words (spelling stronger than reading).

¹CVC: consonant–vowel–consonant.

comprehension through shared book reading activities; b) phonic, phoneme awareness and morphological awareness activities; and (c) activities to support children to transfer their developing phonic and phonemic awareness skills to the reading and writing process. In addition to these 30-minute whole class lessons, children also participate in daily 10–15-minute small group reading lessons using the Ready to Read Phonics Plus Readers – decodable texts written specifically for New Zealand children. For further detail about the BSLA lesson components, see Gillon et al. (2024).

Data collection

Multiple data sources are common in case study research as each data source provides different vantage points which can help improve the depth and credibility of findings (Yin, 2014). This study utilised children's drawings, an emoji survey and individual interviews as the methods of data

collection. These data were all collected towards the end of the children's first year of school and after 20 weeks (approximately 80 lessons) of BSLA teaching. Data collection methods are described in further detail below.

Children's drawings

There are several advantages to using drawings as a method of data collection with children: children are familiar with the process of drawing, drawing allows children to express themselves in a non-verbal way, and drawings provide a platform for discussion (Dockett and Perry, 2005). For this study, children were provided with an adequate drawing space (i.e. desk and chair), a selection of coloured pencils and a piece of paper with a box in the middle of the page. They were asked to draw a picture inside the box of themselves reading to someone, reflecting the focus of the current study. No further instructions were provided. Once the child had indicated they had finished their drawing, the researcher engaged in a discussion about the drawing, including seeking clarification on features of the drawing. Engaging in this discussion is important as drawings can be open to interpretation (Dockett and Perry, 2005). Furthermore, providing children with the opportunity to contextualise the drawings ensured that adult assumptions were minimised. Following this, a standard set of questions was asked about the drawing and children's responses were recorded on paper. The following questions were asked based on other similar research studies that have utilised children's drawings; however, the questions were refocused to capture children's experiences of learning to read (Coté and Golbeck, 2007; Fury et al., 1997; McLeod et al., 2025): Who is in this drawing? How do you know this person? Do you usually read to this person? Where are you? What are you doing? What are they doing? What are you reading about?

Emoji survey

This child-friendly survey (utilising emojis on a Likert scale) was adapted from the Speech Participation and Activity Assessment of Children (SPAA-C) (McLeod, 2004) with all items modified to focus on children's reading experiences rather than speaking. On the modified SPAA-C, each child was read the seven questions in the left column and then asked to colour the face that answered the question, for example, How do you feel about the readers you get given to read at home? How do you feel about your classroom lessons for reading? The survey also included a blank face, allowing children to indicate another emotion. Two children selected this option and verbally described their feelings rather than drawing them. Other response options on the modified SPAA-C were: Happy, In the Middle, Sad, I Don't Know. Data collected for analysis were the face descriptors for each question answered.

Individual interviews

Each child was interviewed individually by a researcher in a quiet space at their school after completion of the drawing and emoji survey. Physical prompts were used throughout the interview when asking children about specific teaching resources and activities. For example: What do you like most about these readers? Which ones are your favourite games and activities to play for reading and writing? When you get choosing time, do you ever choose reading or writing activities? Other interview questions related to children's learning, for example: What are you learning at the moment in reading and writing? What do good readers and writers do? Interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription.

Researcher positioning and reflexivity

The two researchers who collected data were practising speech and language therapists with experience working with children. Throughout the research process, these researchers sought to actively mitigate adult–child power dynamics and ensure that children’s voices were listened to in a meaningful and respectful way. During data collection, examples of this included using warm, age-appropriate language; reassuring children that there were no right or wrong answers; playing a game and engaging in informal conversation prior to data collection to build rapport; offering choices about where to sit; and ensuring researchers were positioned alongside rather than opposite children during data collection. Children were explicitly positioned as experts in their own experiences (e.g. ‘I’m here to learn from you’), were able to lead the pace of interactions, and were given the space and time to redirect conversations to signal to them that their priorities mattered. When drawing, children chose their colours, explained their drawings in their own words before questions were asked, and were asked for permission for their drawing to be kept by the researchers. Collectively, these practices aimed to create a safe and supportive space in which children could make meaning and share their thoughts and feelings about learning to read and their experiences as readers and writers.

The authors recognise that their disciplinary backgrounds in speech and language therapy and their familiarity with structured literacy approaches (including the BSLA) may shape how reading is conceptualised and how children’s responses are interpreted. In particular, our framing aligns with the *Reading is Language* perspective (Snowling and Hulme, 2025), which positions language as foundational to reading success, with skills such as phonological awareness, phonics and vocabulary grounded in broader language development. As such, our analysis necessarily foregrounds aspects of literacy that are closely tied to language processing and early decoding development. We recognise that this represents one of several possible theoretical lenses through which literacy can be understood.

We also acknowledge that the children in this study were in the early stages of learning to read, where instructional emphasis is typically placed on acquiring foundational decoding skills (i.e. learning to read), rather than on more complex meaning-making processes (i.e. reading to learn) (Chall, 1983). Through our data analysis processes, we interpreted these responses as reflecting both developmental stage and instructional context, while recognising that alternative interpretations are possible, including that children may be orienting to the normative expectations of the classroom environment.

Finally, while this study is situated within the context of an existing instructional approach (BSLA), the analysis is interpretive rather than evaluative, with children’s drawings, interviews and emoji responses treated as sources of meaning-making. The effectiveness of the BSLA as a structured literacy approach has been established in previous research (e.g. Gath et al., 2025; Gillon et al., 2023, 2024b); however, the purpose of the current study was not to evaluate outcomes, but to explore how children experience and make sense of their early literacy learning within this context.

Data analysis

Children’s drawings. Children’s drawings were analysed through consideration of meanings expressed in the drawings about reading. This was done by exploring focal points and key features in the drawings such as facial expressions (e.g. expressed emotions), accentuation of body features (e.g. large ears indicative of listening), colours used (e.g. how colours evoke different emotions), conversational partners (e.g. who they choose to draw themselves with) and sense of self (e.g.

proportion of objects and people, size differentiation) (Holliday et al., 2009; McCormack et al., 2022). Children's drawings were also analysed through the descriptions they each provided for their drawings. Researchers have suggested that interpreting children's artwork should be done with caution and sensitivity. The authenticity of children's responses can be compromised by adult-selected stimuli (Holliday et al., 2009) and the power imbalance between adults and children. Furthermore, 'when undertaking analysis, there is the risk that children's meanings are not "heard" as a result of mis- or over-interpretations by (adult) researchers' (Carter and Ford, 2013: 100). As recommended, the drawings were interpreted alongside other data, and the children contributed to the interpretation process (Carter and Ford, 2013) through the questions asked about their drawings. The authors remained attentive to the possibility that interpretations may reflect dominant instructional or personal assumptions. Where possible, alternative explanations were considered to avoid privileging interpretations that aligned solely with the BSLA.

Emoji survey. The survey was analysed qualitatively by looking at the ratings (provided by the emojis) that children gave to each statement. Children's survey responses were also interpreted based on their drawings and BSLA assessment data, that is, how their survey responses did or did not align with these other data sources.

Individual interviews. A deductive content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008) was used to analyse children's interview transcripts. Initially, this involved familiarisation with the interview transcripts through active reading and note-taking. A categorisation matrix was then developed from the interview guide. The text in the interview transcripts was then reviewed and coded for correspondence with the categories within the matrix.

Results

In this section, detailed profiles of each child are provided. The profiles were created from the children's literacy assessment data, drawings, emoji surveys and interview responses to foreground individual experiences and perspectives. Assessment data are included to contextualise each child's early literacy profile and to support interpretation of their drawings, emoji surveys and interview data. The assigned descriptors (e.g. emerging and consolidated) are not intended to define literacy or to determine how children perceive themselves as readers and writers. Rather, they provide background information about children's developing skills, while recognising that children's perceptions of themselves as readers and writers extend beyond this and are also shaped by broader social, relational and instructional experiences. Table 2 provides a comparative summary across the profiles of the five children to highlight key patterns and points of variation. Pseudonyms replace children's actual names. Interpretations of drawings are offered as possible interpretations, based on available guidance (Fury et al., 1997) and other similar research that has utilised children's drawings as data sources (e.g. McCormack et al., 2010, 2022), recognising that multiple or alternative meanings are plausible.

Bella (5;10): Bella's assessment data at 20 weeks indicated overall developing foundational literacy skills with the ability to apply her knowledge to some consonant–vowel–consonant (CVC) words for reading and spelling. In comparison to the other children, Bella presented as an early reader, yet her drawing, emoji survey, and interview responses indicated positive feelings about her perception of herself as a reader and writer and of her experiences with literacy learning.

In her drawing, Bella drew both herself and her friend with happy faces. She explained that her friend is happy in the picture because 'she likes the book'. Bella's own mouth in the drawing is

Table 2. Comparative summary of child profiles across assessment data, drawings and self-reported experiences.

Child (age)	Assessment profile	Drawing representation of reading	Emoji survey: Feelings about survey	Interview themes
Bella (5;10)	Developing foundational literacy skills; early reader.	Drew herself reading to a friend in their classroom; both smiling; close proximity; bright colours used.	Happy about how she reads and spells; happy about reading lessons, spelling lessons and story time.	Enjoys the BSLA games and readers; confident and specific describing her classroom's learning goals for literacy and strategies that good readers and writers use.
Jun (6;01)	Consolidated foundational literacy skills; strong reader.	Drew himself reading a large book to a group of four children; positioned at the front; others listening; mostly purple and yellow used.	Happy about how he reads; neutral about how he spells; happy about reading lessons; bored about spelling lessons and story time.	Enjoys being challenged by reading and spelling tasks; prefers words over pictures; confident and specific articulating classroom learning goals for literacy and strategies that good readers and writers use.
Cassie (6;08)	Developing foundational literacy skills; early reader.	Drew herself reading closely with the teacher, surrounded by stars and love hearts; smaller size; no ears for Cassie or her teacher; only black used.	Happy about how she reads and spells; happy about reading lessons, spelling lessons and story time.	Recognises the learning value of BSLA games and readers; confident but broad description of current classroom learning goals for literacy; confident describing what good readers and writers do; describes shared reading and writing activities with her teacher.
Manaia (6;04)	Consolidated foundational literacy skills; strong reader.	Drew himself reading to his younger brother at home with some distance between them; larger size for Manaia; mostly red used.	No rating for how he feels about his reading; neutral about his spelling; sad about reading lessons; neutral about spelling	Enjoys readers and classroom story books; connects readers to personal experiences; confident and specific in articulating the

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Child (age)	Assessment profile	Drawing representation of reading	Emoji survey: Feelings about survey	Interview themes
Sefina (6;03)	Early developing phonological awareness; early reader; relative strength in spelling.	Drew herself reading to another child from her classroom; larger than her friend; holding a book titled 'Too ee' (for Tui); navy blue used only.	lessons; sad about story time. Happy about how she reads and spells and proud about her home readers; happy about reading and spelling lessons; tired about classroom story time.	classroom learning goals for literacy. Enjoys readers and classroom story books; confidently described the stories for selected readers and classroom story books; confident and specific in articulating classroom learning goals for literacy.

BSLA: Better Start Literacy Approach.

open, which she explained was because 'I'm reading the book'. With her friend's hair swinging up to one side, on the side closest to Bella, this possibly portrays that her friend is listening to the story Bella is reading to her. In the drawing, Bella and her friend are sitting close together, which may indicate her level of comfort and familiarity with her reading partner or the closeness of their friendship. Bella used bright colours in her drawing, which suggest a sense of positivity (Fury et al., 1997). She was careful to use the correct colours for their school uniforms and drew a solid brown line around herself and her friend. She explained that this is because they are 'in the classroom'.

Bella's drawing aligned to her emoji survey responses in which she reported feeling happy about the way she reads and spells, happy about the readers she is given, happy about classroom lessons for reading and spelling, happy about story time and happy about small group reading time.

Bella's interview responses further supported her positive feelings around literacy learning. She talked about enjoying elements of the games and activities in the lessons. She described one of the games that involves competition or playful deception: 'we hid them [picture cards] under the leaves. And we try and guess. And sometimes she [teacher] bes sneaky. Sometimes she don't put one in under leaves'. She also talked about liking the readers 'because they have cool pictures and nice pictures' and because she was familiar with the characters: 'We have three characters. This is Nat our first one. Tāne was our second one. And Sam is our last one'. She also connected her enjoyment of the readers with her ability to read the text, commenting that she likes them (the readers) 'because ... I know lots of them ... I only don't three and I know all the other ones'.

Bella explained that her current learning is focused on following the words in the books and 'learning two [sounds], "w" that is /w/ and "h" that is /h/'. When asked what good readers do, she said they 'say the words' and 'we point our finger and slide it'. She described good writers as being able to 'write words what they know'. Interestingly, she also identified that good writers have a role in helping others: 'they even help other people that don't how to [sound out]'. Bella described the role of her teacher: 'she tell us to sound out the words or she helps us with the sound and then kind of says the word'. Bella also reported getting support from her family at home: 'They help me with the words that I don't know' (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Bella's drawing.

Note. Bella's drawing of herself reading a book to a friend in the classroom (represented by the brown line). Bella is on the left. She has an open mouth because she's 'reading the book' and her friend is smiling because she 'likes the book'. Bella and her friend are wearing school uniforms. Reprinted with permission from Lisa Furlong, Sally Clendon, Gail Gillon and Brigid McNeill.

Jun (6;01): Jun's assessment data at 20 weeks indicated overall consolidated foundational literacy skills with the ability to apply this knowledge to words containing complex vowel graphemes. In comparison to the other children, his assessment data presented him as a strong reader. This aligned with Jun's drawing and emoji survey responses, where he presented himself as a confident and capable reader. In his drawing, Jun is holding a large book in his hands, facing a group of four children. There is distance between Jun, as the reader, and the rest of the group. This may suggest a leadership or teacher-like role, with himself positioned at the front, or alternatively, a familiar reading setup he has observed. His position at the front of the group, and reading to four children with a large book, may indicate his level of confidence in his reading ability. When asked about his drawing, Jun explained that they are 'in the classroom' and that he is 'reading to them' and 'they're listening'. When asked if he usually reads to these children, he responded with: 'sometimes I read to my whole class', again suggesting he is confident in himself as a reader. All the children in the group have large, wide eyes, suggesting that they are focused on Jun, with heightened interest or engagement. They are all smiling, indicating that they are enjoying listening to Jun read. Jun has mostly used purple and yellow in his drawing; colours which are associated with a sense of positivity, with yellow often representing energy, joy, happiness, and warmth (Furth, 2002) and purple, often associated with wisdom, an escape from reality and magical images, possibly related to the story being read (Fury et al., 1997).

Jun's emoji survey responses corresponded to his portrayal of himself as a reader in the drawing. Jun reported that he feels happy about reading and enjoys his lessons for reading. Interestingly, he reported feeling 'in the middle' about spelling, then drew a 'bored' face for spelling lessons. This could indicate that he is not challenged by the spelling tasks provided in class, given his strong spelling skills. Interestingly, Jun also indicated feeling 'bored' during story time at school, possibly related to his own self-confidence in his reading ability and desire to do this himself or be the person reading to the class, mentioning in his interview that 'I've helped her (teacher) read one. I had to read to the whole class'.

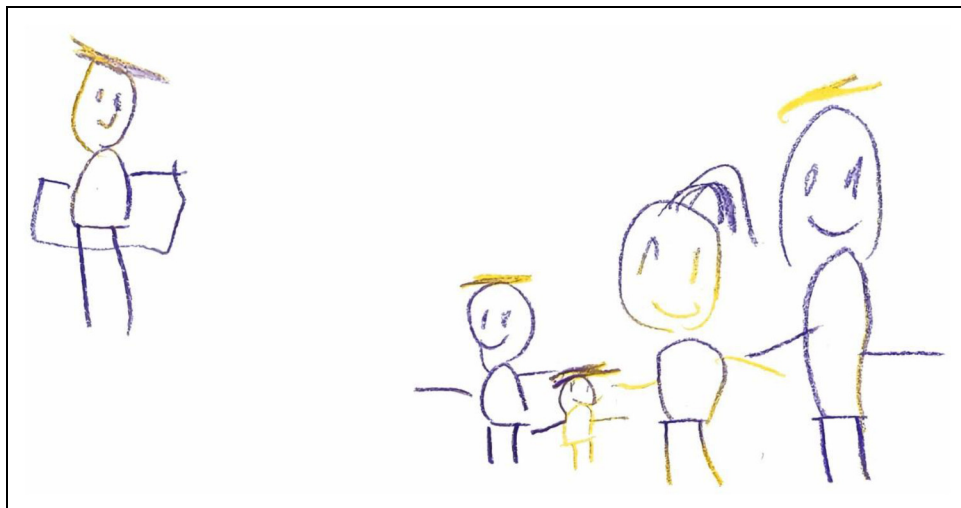


Figure 2. Jun's drawing.

Note. Jun's drawing of himself reading a large book to a group of four children in the classroom. Jun is positioned at the front of the group holding the book, while the other children face him, listening. They are shown with wide eyes and smiling faces. Jun explained that he is 'reading to them' and that 'they're listening', and that this takes place in the classroom. Reprinted with permission from Lisa Furlong, Sally Clendon, Gail Gillon and Brigid McNeill.

Jun's interview responses further indicated his confidence as a reader and how he likes to be challenged with his literacy learning. When talking about playing the bingo game, he said he prefers playing with words rather than pictures: 'Because I don't like looking at all the pictures. They tell me all of the ... what they are instead. But I want to read'. He also explained how he connects personally with the characters in the readers: 'Hoot Hoot is just like ... I just like staying up at night when it's nighttime' and 'Weka in the flap is just like being wriggly'.

Jun could clearly articulate the current learning focus in the classroom: 'We're learning about the digraph "qu". Where the "q" goes, "u" goes too'. He identified a good reader as someone who is 'getting mostly all the correct words' and someone who 'helps people read'. Furthermore, he described a good writer as someone who can 'write neat sentences'. He reported that his teacher provides support when she sometimes says to 'sound it out' and his family at home provide support 'because they just tell me all of the letters' when he is trying to spell a word (Figure 2).

Cassie (6;08): Cassie's assessment data at 20 weeks indicated overall developing foundational literacy skills with the ability to apply her knowledge to some CVC words for reading and spelling. Her assessment results suggested she is an early reader, which is reinforced by Cassie choosing to draw herself with her teacher, perhaps indicating she needs individual support for reading. In the drawing, Cassie is facing her teacher, sitting close to her with crossed legs, and reading a book. When asked about the drawing, Cassie explained that they're reading 'to each other', again suggesting that Cassie's teacher might be providing some individualised support and that they're sharing the reading of the book because it might be challenging for Cassie to read this herself in its entirety. Interestingly, neither Cassie nor her teacher have ears in the drawing. In other studies (McCormack et al., 2010, 2022) examining children's drawings in relation to communication, absent ears have been interpreted as not feeling heard or that others don't want to listen, again suggesting that Cassie

might not read well. Cassie also commented that ‘sometimes I want to (read to this person) and sometimes I don’t’. She is smaller in the drawing than her teacher, which may just portray that she is a child, and her teacher is an adult or might suggest that she perceives her teacher to be better at reading than she is. Cassie has only chosen to use black for her drawing, despite having multiple colours available. Dark colours like black might evoke a sense of negativity, less energy or enthusiasm (Fury et al., 1997), perhaps aligning with her perception of herself as a reader or her enjoyment of reading. Alternatively, her choice to only use black may reflect a preference for simplicity, ease of use or her particular drawing style. Outside of the drawing of herself and her teacher, Cassie has drawn stars and love hearts, perhaps suggesting that despite her possible struggles with reading, her teacher creates a safe, fun, and inclusive learning environment.

Cassie’s portrayal of the learning environment aligned with her emoji survey responses in which she is happy about the readers she is given, happy about classroom lessons for reading and spelling, happy about story time and happy about small group reading time. Cassie also described feeling happy about how she reads and spells.

In her interview, Cassie shared that she liked the games and the readers ‘because they help you learn’. She also explained her love of writing about the readers: ‘cause [because] you can draw. The teacher says to draw a picture of what’s in the book. And you got to write it’. Cassie described the current learning in the classroom as ‘we like to learn about words. And letters. And numbers’. She commented that a good reader is someone who ‘sits down and reads quietly’ and they ‘share the books’, and a good writer as someone who ‘do lots of words’ and ‘they do good handwriting’. In agreement with the suggested interpretation of her drawing, it appears that Cassie feels well-supported by her teacher. The way that Cassie described this relationship suggests it is collaborative where the teacher and her students work together: ‘some words the teacher spelled and ... a lot of words I did’ and ‘sometimes the teacher reads the book first and then we read it out’ (Figure 3).

Manaia (6;04): Manaia’s assessment data at 20 weeks indicated overall consolidated foundational literacy skills with the ability to apply this knowledge to words containing consonant blends and vowel digraphs. In comparison to the other children, his assessment data presented him as a strong reader. In his drawing, Manaia drew himself reading to his younger brother. Manaia is wearing glasses and has a wide mouth, indicating he is reading the story aloud. Manaia explained that in his drawing, he is reading to his younger brother at home. They are facing towards each other, clearly showing that one child is reading (Manaia) and the other is listening (his younger brother). Manaia’s brother is smiling and has big eyes, suggesting he is engaged in the story being read by Manaia. In the drawing, Manaia is ‘reading him ABC’. This might suggest that in this interaction, Manaia perceives himself as having a teacher role, given the age of his brother, who is not yet at school and Manaia, a seemingly confident and strong reader, based on his assessment data. Furthermore, Manaia appears to be showing the book to his brother, again, possibly adopting a teacher role in this example. There is some distance between the two children in the drawing. When asked how often he reads to his brother, Manaia replied ‘not that much’. This distance therefore may be related to the level of comfort or familiarity with this activity with his brother. He has drawn himself larger than his brother, which may portray the age difference or that Manaia is more senior or experienced at reading. Manaia has mostly used red in his drawing, which has been associated with anger or aggression. Alternatively, it may reflect a preference for bold colours or an attempt to emphasise key elements, rather than a particular emotional state.

Manaia did not comment on how he feels about his reading but did choose feeling ‘sad’ about classroom lessons for reading and ‘in the middle’ for small group reading. Manaia chose ‘in the middle’ for how he feels about spelling and for classroom lessons for spelling and ‘sad’ about story time. Despite his assessment data presenting him as a strong reader, it might not be a preferred activity for Manaia.

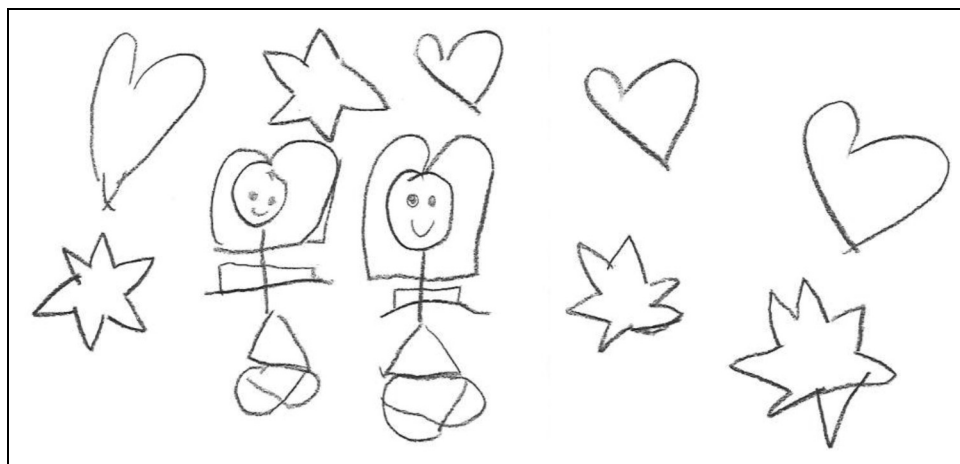


Figure 3. Cassie's drawing.

Note. Cassie's drawing of herself reading a book with her teacher. Cassie is shown on the left, sitting close to her teacher with crossed legs, facing her teacher while they read 'to each other'. Cassie is drawn smaller than her teacher, and neither she nor her teacher have ears. Reprinted with permission from Lisa Furlong, Sally Clendon, Gail Gillon and Brigid McNeill.

In contrast to the findings of the emoji survey, Manaia's interview responses indicated he has some positive feelings about literacy learning. He talked about the characters and storyline in the readers: 'I like how weka falls'. He was able to connect the readers to his own experiences, reflecting on one reader and telling a personal story related to feeding eels. In addition, he described the readers as 'funny' and associated the readers with reading success: 'I like this one. I know how to read this whole entire book'. He also described the children's storybooks used for shared reading as being 'so fun'. Manaia described the current learning in his classroom as focused on 'learning about "e"s at the end and "l"s' (Figure 4).

Sefina (6;03): Sefina's assessment data at 20 weeks indicated consolidated skills for early developing phonological awareness, including phoneme identity and phoneme blending. At this time, she was beginning to apply her foundational knowledge to the reading and spelling of some CVC words and demonstrated relative strength in spelling. In comparison to the other children, Sefina presented as an early reader. In her drawing, Sefina, as the reader, is larger than the other child and is holding the book. The larger size of Sefina as the reader and of the book might suggest authority, knowledge or confidence in reading. On the book cover, Sefina wrote 'Too ee'. She explained that this is because she's reading 'about tui'. Aligning with her assessment data, this shows application of foundational literacy skills to spelling, that is, representing phonemes as graphemes in the book title. Sefina explained that the picture is of 'me and Auera' and that she knows Auera because 'she's inside our class' and 'sometimes we sit and read books together'. The proximity of the two children in the picture alongside these comments suggests that they're familiar or comfortable with one another but perhaps not best friends. Sefina only used navy blue for her drawing, a colour which is often associated with knowledge, power and authority. This is consistent with interpretations relating to the size of Sefina as the reader and the size of the book and may suggest that Sefina perceives herself as a better reader than Auera.

Sefina's emoji survey responses indicated that she feels happy about how she reads and spells. She indicated the feeling of 'proud' for the statement about home readers, again suggesting she feels

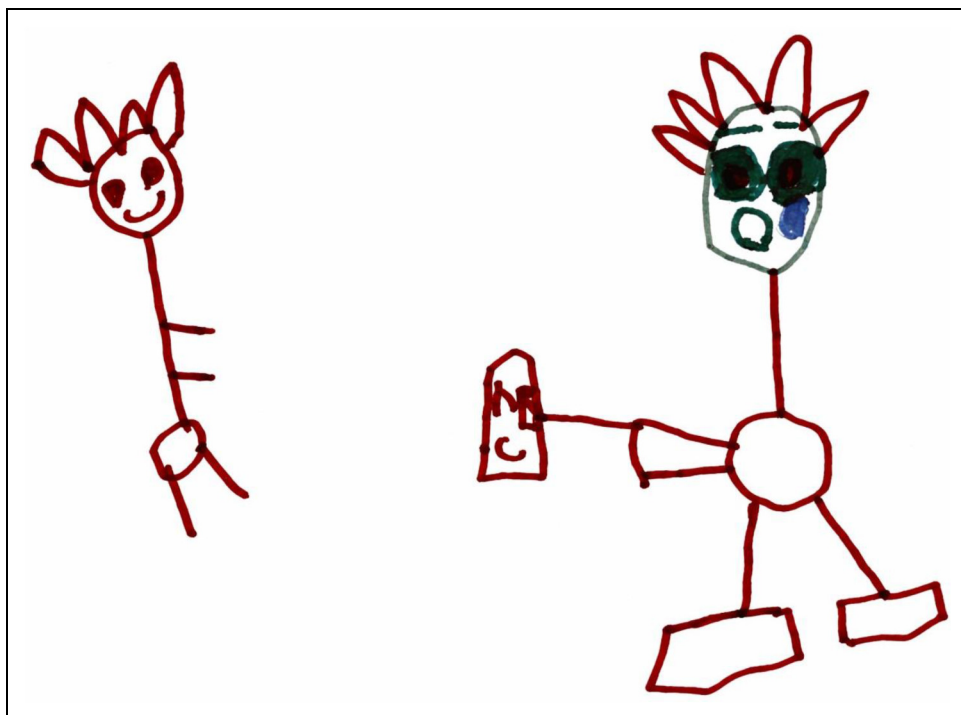


Figure 4. Manaia's drawing.

Note. Manaia's drawing of himself reading a book to his younger brother at home. Manaia is facing his brother with a wide open mouth and glasses because he is 'Reading him ABC'. Manaia's brother is drawn smiling with large eyes. Manaia is depicted as larger than his brother, with distance between them. Reprinted with permission from Lisa Furlong, Sally Clendon, Gail Gillon and Brigid McNeill.

knowledgeable and confident as a reader, aligning with her portrayal of herself as a reader in her drawing. Sefina feels happy about classroom lessons for reading and spelling and happy about small group reading lessons but indicated the feeling of 'tired' about story time.

In the interview, Sefina shared positive feelings towards the readers used in her classroom. She pulled out several of the books and made comments: 'I like about the kids on this one. They're on the tree' and 'I like about them making pancakes'. She also positively reflected on the children's storybooks used for shared reading, for example: 'These were cool 'cause these people want to make it inviting to a party. And then this boy or girl trying to make marbles'.

Sefina described the current learning in her classroom as learning about 'vowels' and 'endings with -ing'. Her perception of good writers was that 'they sound it out' and 'they look at the picture' and write about it. She explained that her teacher 'helps us' and at home, her sister 'tells me some Māori words in the books' (Figure 5).

Discussion

There have been strong calls in the literature for researchers and educators to obtain children's perspectives so that children can be actively engaged in the development of services or approaches designed to support them (Doell and Clendon, 2018; McCormack et al., 2022). In this study,



Figure 5. Sefina's drawing.

Note. Sefina's drawing of herself reading a book with Auera. Sefina is larger than Auera and is shown holding the book, which is titled 'Too ee' (for Tui). Reprinted with permission from Lisa Furlong, Sally Clendon, Gail Gillon and Brigid McNeill.

various data-gathering techniques were used to capture five children's experiences of participating in structured literacy teaching through the BSLA. The study adopted a triangulated, child-friendly methodology to position children as experts of their own literacy learning experiences using drawings, an emoji survey and individual interviews as the methods of data collection. The drawings and the emoji surveys provided a window into the children's perspectives of reading and writing, their perceptions of themselves as literacy learners and their emotional engagement and cognitive reflections about literacy. The interview findings revealed aspects of the BSLA games and activities, Ready to Read Phonics Plus books, and quality children's storybooks that the children enjoyed, such as the characters and storyline, as well as their understandings around what good readers and writers do, and their perspectives on the supports provided by their teacher and family.

Children frequently described reading in terms of accuracy, sounding out words and getting words right. These responses may reflect both the children's developmental stage (i.e. learning to read) and the instructional context in which they are learning, including an orientation to normative classroom expectations. It is important to note that the BSLA is not only focused on supporting children's foundational decoding skills. There is significant emphasis on oral language, vocabulary, and story structure teaching using quality children's storybooks (Gillon et al., 2024). A possible explanation is that the children in this study may have perceived the oral language teaching in BSLA as a more familiar activity, building on experiences they have had prior to school entry at home and/or in their early childhood pre-school environments. The oral language teaching in BSLA is also based around interactions between children and their teacher, with shared responsibility and co-construction of meaning. In contrast, the decoding aspect of the teaching (at least in the New Zealand context) is more novel as it is usually introduced at school entry. It is also

something that children engage in more independently (with scaffolding as needed). These factors, combined with others such as the development of decoding skills often being highly valued by families of children in the first few years of school (Evans et al., 2004), may have influenced the aspects of the instruction that were more salient to the children and that therefore shaped their descriptions of reading.

Children's drawings provided insight into emotional and relational dimensions of literacy, through features including proximity to others, facial expressions and colour choices. In this study, children's self-perception as readers varied and was not always aligned to their literacy profile, suggesting complexity in how they understand themselves as readers and writers. Interestingly, children with similar literacy profiles sometimes displayed differing self-perceptions. For example, Jun, with more consolidated skills, expressed boredom, perhaps through lack of challenge, whilst Sefina, with more emerging skills, expressed pride and confidence. This complexity somewhat aligns with McCarthy (2001), who found that high-performing readers often incorporate literacy as part of their identities, whereas less proficient readers may focus on alternative self-concepts that do not include literacy or, in the case of Sefina, may still perceive themselves as competent and confident with reading, underscoring that perceptions of reading ability are not merely skill-driven. The differing literacy profiles of the children in this study, their experiences of classroom reading instruction and their perception of themselves as readers highlight the need for understanding individual learning needs and differentiating classroom instruction so that children are both extended and scaffolded in their learning, depending on their current skill level.

When considering children's engagement with the BSLA teaching as a structured literacy approach, our findings highlight the enjoyment value of specific games and resources, particularly those which are interactive or game-based; however, emotional responses varied by activity, suggesting that enjoyment might be influenced by many factors including the child's skill level, personal preferences and the perceived challenge of the task. The explicit nature of the BSLA teaching came through in the data with specific references to linguistic terminology like 'vowels' and 'digraphs' and being able to identify what good readers and writers do, like 'we point our finger and slide it'. This reinforces that the explicit nature of structured literacy teaching does not necessarily constrain children's enjoyment or engagement, as sometimes critiqued (Spear-Swerling, 2019a). Furthermore, specific instructional supports from teachers, mentioned by these children, highlight that children can critically reflect on and evaluate teaching approaches when given appropriate modalities for expression. Finally, children's drawings and interview data highlighted the social nature of literacy experiences; these were deeply relational, involving shared interactions with significant others, like teachers, peers and parents.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that child participants were speakers of Standard New Zealand English. As such, the findings do not reflect the experiences of children engaging with literacy across multiple languages, dialects, or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the small sample size restricts the generalisability of findings and may not adequately represent the diversity of children's literacy experiences.

Conclusion

These findings highlight how structured literacy approaches, such as the BSLA, are experienced by children, what engages them in their literacy learning, and how their voices can meaningfully

inform refinements to instructional practice. Listening to children provides insights that extend beyond assessment data alone, offering a richer understanding of their enjoyment, engagement, motivation, and perceived challenges. Clinicians and educators can consider the use of child-centred tools, such as emoji-based surveys (e.g. SPAA-C; McLeod, 2004) and children's drawings, to elicit children's perspectives in accessible and developmentally appropriate ways. These tools can highlight areas of enjoyment as well as areas of challenge for children, can be used to refine instructional approaches, design engaging learning materials and ensure differentiated instruction for individual learners. For researchers, the findings of this study reinforce the importance of creating opportunities for children to share their perspectives and experiences as part of the research process, recognising them as key stakeholders with a right to be heard.

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ORCID iDs

Lisa Furlong  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2596-8395>

Gail Gillon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9501-8147>

Bridgid McNeill  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7298-880X>

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This project was approved by the University of Canterbury Human Research Ethics Committee (2021/161). Informed written consent was obtained from participants' parents/caregivers and written assent was obtained from participants.

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Data availability statement

Consent and assent obtained from parents and children did not include provisions for data sharing beyond the research team; as such, the data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

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