

Discussion paper on advice provided to the Minister of Education in October 2024  
Topic: The use of kupu Māori in the Ready to Read Phonics Plus Readers

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The October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024, report to the Minister of Education titled *Kupu Māori in the Ready to Read Phonics Plus Readers* was forwarded by the media to several academics last week. I would like to provide comment on this document and advice to the Minister.

The report indicates that last year the Minister received advice raising issues related to the use of kupu Māori in the Ready to Read Phonics Plus Series. What is unclear, however, is who provided this advice and what evidence supported this advice provided to the Minister. I would like to clarify several points raised in the report to the Minister in October 2024. My comments relate to the following concerns raised in the report:

**Concern raised:**

1. *Introducing two orthographies simultaneously (English and Te Reo Māori) could be confusing for young children and make it more difficult for them to learn English.*

**Comment:**

The weight of scientific evidence challenges the suggestion that kupu Māori in the readers may confuse children who are learning to read in English. Research evidence suggests that exposure to two languages is advantageous to young children's reading development. Even limited exposure to another language can increase children's awareness of a word's structure and enhance their metalinguistic skills (Yelland et al., 1993 Göncz, & Kodžopeljić, 1991). When exposed to two languages children learn that words can be represented in more than one way. This develops their cognitive flexibility skills. In general, exposure to two languages is thought to either enhance children's phonological awareness, metacognitive abilities and working memory skills that are important for learning to read (Oshchepkova et al., 2023; Adesope, et al 2011) or at the very least does not disadvantage young learners (Melby-Lervåg et al. 2011).

In considering the integration of te reo Māori within English readers, it is important to consider the research related to the orthographic consistency of the language being read. Consistent orthographies like te reo Māori are easier for young children to learn than complex languages like English. There may be advantages to enhancing young learners' phonological awareness skills through bilingual te reo Māori and English literacy teaching contexts (Denston et al., 2024). Orthographic exposure to two languages can also facilitate vocabulary acquisition in both first and second languages (Salomé et al., 2024).

Therefore, although this is an area in need of further research, the science related to bilingual literacy development and the consistent orthography of te reo Māori does not support a hypothesis that introducing a few kupu Māori into readers could be confusing.

**Concern raised**

2. *There is limited evidence about the use of the kupu Māori in the Ready to Read Phonic Plus readers.*

**Comment**

The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA, Gillon et al., 2024) integrates this reading series into every day lesson plans from new entrants to Year 3. We have provided MoE with nine detailed reports since 2021 that clearly indicate the success of this approach with our 5- 7-year-old learners in our New Zealand schools. We have published, through internationally peer reviewed processes, data supporting the success of BSLA with 5-year-old children during their first year at school (Gillon et al. 2024). These data provide strong evidence that within our New Zealand education context, and through quality teaching practices (supported by PLD) teachers are successfully using these readers in structured literacy teaching. Our data demonstrate the approach is accelerating children’s phonic, phoneme awareness, word reading, spelling and oral language skills (Gillon et al. 2024). Our latest report to MoE (May 2025) detailed the success of BSLA with over 77,000 5- 6-year-old children. Importantly the data reveal that BSLA is working successfully across ethnicities, socio-economic groupings, in all regions of New Zealand, across genders, and for English language learners. These data represent our country’s most significant insight into how well our 5-year-old children are learning literacy within a structured literacy teaching approach that include these readers with kupu Māori.

**Concern raised**

3. *A report of the Early Literacy Initiative suggested in 2021 having kupu Māori may be confusing for children.*

**Comment**

The limited teacher survey data collected within the Early Literacy Initiative evaluation suggested that Reading Recovery teachers were finding it challenging to use the Ready To Read Phonic Plus Series. At the time this evaluation was undertaken Reading Recovery teachers had recently been required to teach children in small groups and use the Ready to Read Phonic Plus readers. Most had not received PLD in structured literacy teaching at that time. In contrast, the majority (83%) of teachers surveyed that were implementing BSLA indicated that they were well supported to use these readers within their practice. Data in this Early Initiative report does not support the suggestion that the kupu Māori were confusing for young readers for teachers who had received quality PLD in structured literacy teaching approaches.

**Concern raised**

4. *An MoE statement discussed that the book “At the Marae” had multi-syllabic words and other kupu Māori with differing vowels that had not yet been introduced into the*

*phonic scope and sequence. The suggestion made was that this reader does not align to structured literacy teaching practices.*

### **Comment**

There is no agreed level of the number of phonetically regular words for texts written in English that should be used within a structured literacy approach. The weight of research evidence suggests a moderate level of regular words within a text is appropriate. Following a phonic scope and sequence too strictly limits the quality of the oral narrative story, opportunities to ensure cultural relevance and the opportunity for incidental learning. We outlined this debate in our report to MoE on the development of the Ready to Read Phonics Plus series (November, 30 2021). An extract from our report is below.

*“Recent research suggests that within a context of phonics-based instruction and use of decodable texts for early reading instruction, the proportion of targeted phonetically regular words (e.g., moderate versus high proportion), relative to high-frequency or irregular word patterns has no significant impact on continuing reading achievement (Boggio et al., 2021; Price-Mohr & Price, 2020). A strict adherence to word selection according to a prescribed set of phonemes and graphemes that have been previously taught to children obviously limits story themes and story structure. This can lead to less interesting or motivating texts for the children to read and may limit learning with very simple language and syntactic structures (Castles et al., 2018). These texts can also be taxing for reading comprehension as there is no predictable story structure. Price-Mohr and Price (2020), for example, provide an example of decodable text that is highly constrained in its use of phonic patterns, but challenging to understand.”*

Clearly it is important for each reader within the Ready to Read Phonics Plus series to provide children with practice in the target phoneme patterns and previously taught words. *At the Marae* is introduced at the end of Tupu level (when children have already been introduced to many regular phonic patterns). *At the Marae* targets initial and final blends and vowel patterns that are aligned to the Tupu level phonic scope and sequence. There are multiple opportunities within this reader for the teacher to support children’s reading of the target phonic patterns. This practice is provided through words in the story such as: *stop, chat, kids, starts, speaks, stuck, stands, need, been, boot, Miss, Lee, sing, then, time, home*. This reader therefore does follow the Tupu phonic scope and sequence and is aligned to structured literacy teaching practices. In addition, the helpful notes at the back of the book and MoE resources online provide adequate supports for teachers to manage the kupu Māori within this reader.

### **Statement made**

4. *Kupu Māori should not be introduced into readers in English as decodable texts in Māori do not introduce English words.*

### **Comment**

Māori immersion language contexts where Māori instructional readers are being introduced is a different language context to the learning of English. We live in an English language dominated culture in New Zealand. When children are learning te reo Māori they are

surrounded by English language, texts, stories, television, and English spoken language in their everyday lives. There are plenty of opportunities for children to be exposed to written English. This, however, is not the case for children learning to read in English medium contexts where they may have little exposure to te reo Māori in spoken or written form.

Additionally, Māori has a consistent orthography. There is some evidence to suggest learning to read initially in a language that is phonetically regular can help to boost phonological processing skills and support subsequent reading in less consistent languages like English (Lecocq et al., 2009). This research would support the practice of first focusing on te reo Māori alone before introducing a complex orthography like English. However, there may also be a case for kura leaders to discuss this matter and to collectively decide whether the introduction of a few phonetically regular English words may be advantageous to introduce into their reading series (following the benefits of translanguaging, Seals, 2021).

**Statement made:**

5. *There is a note in the report that the exclusion of Kupu Māori into new readers applies only to decodable texts in Year 1.*

**Comment**

The MoE position on what year level kupu Māori should be introduced is unclear. Our BSLA data show that most children can read proficiently at the Tupu level for an unseen text at the end of Year 1 at school, but many children would still be working with the Māhuri and Rākau Ready to Read Phonics plus books in Year 2. That is; many children would not be moving onto Journals in Year 2 where they may be exposed to more kupu Māori. Following the Minister's notes it would suggest that kupu Māori in new readers within the series at Māhuri and Rākau levels (which children in Year 2 would be using) is acceptable.

**Concern raised**

6. *Kupu Māori are taught as “told words” and since there are a number of other “told words” in English that the children must learn to read it is implied that having kupu Māori may burden working memory for younger learners.*

**Comment:**

The research evidence does not support the theory that the best way to teach irregular words is by memorisation or rote learning of the visual pattern of the word alone. Rather, following the science of learning framework once children have mastered some common phoneme-grapheme patterns they should be encouraged to use this knowledge to decode the regular or known part of the word that contains a less familiar pattern (Pace et al. 2024). Teachers' having strong linguistic knowledge supports this teaching strategy.

Developing teachers' linguistic knowledge and their understanding of the theoretical frameworks behind the science of reading is part of the professional learning and development contract for structured literacy teaching. Therefore, all teachers engaged in structured literacy PLD should be learning that as children progress in their first year they should bring children's attention to the regular part of the word to support the learning of less

frequent or unusual grapheme-phoneme patterns. Following the science of reading model once children can identify, for example, the first consonant in words like puku, manu, or kai they will be able to use this knowledge to support their learning of these words in written form. This teaching strategy would be consistent with teaching of irregular orthographic patterns in English. Teachers applying the same teaching strategies to the teaching of kupu Māori and the teaching of irregular patterns in English will support children's learning of both word types.

**Statement made:**

7. The Minister has provided a directive to include the correct pronunciation of te reo Māori words within the English curriculum.

**Comment**

This is an encouraging and positive directive. Within our New Zealand cultural and education context there are many advantages to introducing a few commonly known kupu Māori into a children's instructional reading series. Children flourish when their language, culture, and identity are acknowledged and valued (Highfield, & Webber, 2021. Macfarlane, et al, 2007). Many 5-year-old children coming into English medium schools in New Zealand will be familiar with the kupu Māori introduced in the readers. This is thanks to the excellent job teachers are doing in our early childhood education centres in developing young children's knowledge of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori. Seeing a few familiar kupu Māori in print in their early readers is a powerful signal to children that the language is valued.

Recent discussions in the scientific literature are highlighting the importance of cultural relevance and responsiveness within decodable reading series for young children's reading instruction. We are leading the way in New Zealand in this regard. We are attracting positive attention as a country for our initiative in structured literacy teaching. The culturally responsive approach we have taken within the Better Start Literacy Approach (including the integration of readers with kupu Māori) is being applauded by world leaders in literacy. Maintaining the integrity of the Ready to Read Phonics Plus series is critically important to our growing reputation as a leading country in the national introduction of structured literacy teaching practices that are culturally inclusive.

**Advice to the Minister.**

Since the report in October 2024, new evidence is available to the Minister and structured literacy PLD for teachers is being implemented at a national scale. The new evidence provided in our May, 2025 report on 77,000 children's response to these readers and teachers having a greater understanding of how to use these readers with kupu Māori in ways aligned to structured literacy teaching provides an opportunity for revisiting this discussion. Based on the current state of our research evidence related to this topic I offer the following advice for the Minister consider.

It is important to maintain the integrity of the Ready to Read Phonics Plus Series. Without any scientific rationale to remove *At the Marae* as a reader I would urge the Minister to

consider that this reader is printed as both a small reader and a “big book” version for sharing. This allows teachers to choose which version of the book best suits their learners.

I recommend that the pattern established within the current series for the introduction of kupu Māori is maintained for new texts written within this series. The pattern to date is approximately 38% of the readers in the series have common kupu Māori within the text.

- There are only 5 kupu Māori that are introduced at the Kākano level 2. Most of these words are repeated over more than one reader: ka pai, waka, puku, awa, kura. I recommend that at least 30% of any new readers written for Kākano level 2 include one or more of the kupu Māori already introduced at kakano level.
- The more complex kupu Māori are introduced in the late Tupu through to Rākau levels of the readers. I recommend that at least 30% of the new readers written at these higher levels within the series contain two or more kupu Māori within the reader as relevant to the story line. These could be kupu already introduced within the series.

I offer this advice in the spirit of our collective desire to uplift the early literacy skills of children across the country. The Ministry of Education is leading a very important change in ensuring all children are taught to read used teaching approaches that are evidence-based and follow structured literacy science of reading principles. My advice is positioned within the continued importance of using science and evidence to guide decision making. Within this context it is important to maintain the integrity of the Ready to Read Phonics Plus Series, support and acknowledge teachers’ excellent work that they are doing in using these readers every day in their teaching practice. My advice is also positioned within the critical importance and value of upholding the mana of te reo Māori within the culturally inclusive and responsive way that we have established within this reading series.

Gail Gillon  
August 18<sup>th</sup> 2025

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