



Building a  
Neuroinclusive  
School

● QUICK GUIDE ●

# Supporting Neurodivergent Learners with Structured Literacy

## What is structured literacy?

Structured literacy is an explicit, systematic approach to teaching literacy skills that aligns with both the science of learning and Te Mātaiaho's view of how learning happens. It benefits many learners, including those with diverse neurodevelopmental profiles.

One-size-fits-all  
delivery risks creating  
barriers.

## Is structured literacy “one size fits all”?

Absolutely not! As in all areas of teaching, and in line with Te Mātaiaho, educators must adapt structured literacy instruction to the needs of the learners in front of them.

Brain-based differences shape how learners respond. For example:

**Dyslexic learners:** Some thrive with standard structured literacy instruction. Others may need more intensive, multi-modal instruction and specialist 1:1 support. Early identification is key, “waiting to fail” is not acceptable.

**Learners with processing, sensory, or anxiety challenges:** Fast-paced, whole-class delivery can overwhelm and hinder learning.

**ADHD learners:** Highly repetitive lessons may lack the novelty and stimulation needed to sustain engagement.

**Gifted learners:** May grasp content quickly and need reduced repetition or more advanced material to stay engaged.

Within a whole-class structure, great teachers differentiate instructions, adapt teaching methods and group learners dynamically to ensure that all brains are supported and celebrated.

## How can teachers identify learners who need more?

Use the Notice – Recognise – Respond framework!

### ● Notice ●

Notice how learners respond to structured literacy lessons:

- Who is racing ahead or lagging behind?
- Who is closely watching or relying on peers?
- Who appears anxious, disengaged, excited or frustrated?

### ● Recognise ●

Recognise potential reasons for differing responses:

- Is a learner racing ahead because they need more challenge?
- Is someone disengaging due to overload, anxiety, or a missing step?
- Is another relying on peers for social comfort or because they aren't keeping up?
- Is someone acting out due to not being challenged or sensory overwhelm?

### ● Respond ●

Respond by asking: *What does this learner need to succeed, and how can I build that in to my whole class instruction?*

**Neuroinclusive teachers recognise, support, and celebrate all brains—so every learner can thrive.**

## What are some practical ways to differentiate learning?

### 1. Manage attention and focus

- Focus on one key element in a lesson at a time.
- Direct attention to key elements in a lesson. For example, focus on precision in a handwriting lesson but not in a creative writing lesson.
- Use micro-breaks to recharge focus.
- Minimise visual clutter; keep displays functional, relevant and streamlined.



### 2. Layer in multi-sensory input

- Use diverse sensory inputs strategically: try singing instead of chanting; coloured pens to highlight spelling patterns; play-dough, or paint to form letters.
- Enhance visual-spatial engagement for those who respond well to it: draw sounds; use construction tools to build sentences.
- Adjust stimulation levels to suit individual needs.

### 3. Flex within the structured literacy framework

- Add variety to repetition, like asking students to invent pseudo-words from known spelling patterns; using creative contexts or extended word sets.
- Use AI to create texts at different levels but using the same vocabulary for a whole class reading lesson.
- Modify instruction: clarify for some; deepen for others.
- Dynamically pair or group students with similar skill levels (rather than peer-teaching) as many neurodivergent students are more comfortable with this connection.



## When to look for support

If a neurodivergent learner isn't making progress despite your efforts, it may be time to seek extra support beyond the whole class setting. Early, positive intervention can prevent issues from escalating and help the learner re-engage confidently. Talk to your Literacy Leader about available options and how to access them.

**For more Structured Literacy & Numeracy resources including recorded workshops, check out our website at [www.neurodiversity.org.nz/bns](http://www.neurodiversity.org.nz/bns)**