

# Science of Reading Policies: International Impacts and Impressions

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## “Why are you rushing this minister?” Imposing an Aotearoa New Zealand Strain of the Science of Reading

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**Abstract:** Publicised claims of young people’s low literacy rates on international assessments concern parents, teachers, and policymakers in Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ). Policymakers often turn to policy solutions from elsewhere when faced with crisis narratives. In this illustrative case study, we have captured a particular moment in ANZ as the diffusion of international literacy policies informed by the science of reading (SOR) has morphed into a particular policy strain: structured literacy. Policy diffusion captures the movement of policy across borders, grounded in assumptions that ‘best practices’ transfer equally from one context to another. Drawing on discourses from the SOR movement, intermediary associations in ANZ wield grey literature in public media spaces to persuade politicians, teachers, and the public to take up imposed policy. In this article, we combined a Foucauldian-informed view of discourse with the classic rhetorical tools of persuasion (ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos) to analyse a sample of government literacy policy statements, grey literature, and media articles to

critically consider how the contest was framed for the public and teachers and its potential effects.

**Keywords:** science of reading; discourse analysis; rhetorical analysis; policy diffusion; Aotearoa/New Zealand

### **“¿Por qué se apresura con esto, ministro?” Imposición de una variante neozelandesa de la ciencia de la lectura**

**Resumen:** Las afirmaciones difundidas sobre los bajos niveles de alfabetización de los jóvenes en evaluaciones internacionales preocupan a padres, docentes y responsables de políticas en Aotearoa Nueva Zelanda (ANZ). Frente a narrativas de crisis, los responsables políticos suelen recurrir a soluciones adoptadas en otros países. En este estudio de caso ilustrativo, capturamos un momento particular en ANZ en el que la difusión de políticas internacionales de alfabetización, informadas por la Ciencia de la Lectura (SOR, por sus siglas en inglés), ha evolucionado hacia una variante específica de política: la alfabetización estructurada. La difusión de políticas se refiere al movimiento de políticas a través de fronteras, basado en suposiciones de que las “mejores prácticas” pueden transferirse de un contexto a otro por igual. A partir de los discursos del movimiento de la ciencia de la lectura, asociaciones intermediarias en ANZ utilizan literatura gris en medios de comunicación públicos para persuadir a políticos, docentes y a la sociedad en general de adoptar una política impuesta. En este artículo, combinamos una visión del discurso inspirada en Foucault con herramientas retóricas clásicas de persuasión (ethos, pathos, logos y kairos) para analizar una muestra de declaraciones gubernamentales sobre políticas de alfabetización, literatura gris y artículos de prensa, a fin de reflexionar críticamente sobre cómo se enmarcó el debate ante la opinión pública y los docentes, y sus posibles efectos.

**Palabras clave:** ciencia de la lectura; análisis del discurso; análisis retórico; difusión de políticas; Aotearoa/Nueva Zelanda

### **“Por que essa pressa, ministro?” A imposição de uma vertente neozelandesa da ciência da leitura**

**Resumo:** As alegações divulgadas sobre os baixos níveis de alfabetização dos jovens em avaliações internacionais preocupam pais, professores e formuladores de políticas em Aotearoa Nova Zelândia (ANZ). Diante de narrativas de crise, os formuladores de políticas frequentemente recorrem a soluções importadas de outros contextos. Neste estudo de caso ilustrativo, registramos um momento específico em ANZ no qual a difusão de políticas internacionais de alfabetização, baseadas na Ciência da Leitura (SOR), transformou-se em uma vertente particular de política: a alfabetização estruturada. A difusão de políticas refere-se à circulação de políticas entre países, fundamentada na suposição de que “melhores práticas” podem ser transferidas igualmente de um contexto para outro. Com base nos discursos do movimento da ciência da leitura, associações intermediárias em ANZ utilizam literatura cinzenta nos meios de comunicação públicos para persuadir políticos, professores e o público a adotarem políticas impostas. Neste artigo, combinamos uma abordagem do discurso inspirada em Foucault com as ferramentas retóricas clássicas da persuasão (ethos, pathos, logos e kairos) para analisar uma amostra de declarações governamentais sobre políticas de alfabetização, literatura cinzenta e artigos da mídia, a fim de considerar criticamente como o debate foi apresentado ao público e aos professores, e quais são seus possíveis efeitos.

**Palavras-chave:** ciência da leitura; análise do discurso; análise retórica; difusão de políticas; Aotearoa/Nova Zelândia

## “Why are you rushing this minister?” Imposing an Aotearoa New Zealand Strain of the Science of Reading

In this article, we make a modest contribution to the literature on the science of reading (SOR) policy movement by presenting an illustrative case from Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ). In ANZ, the national government campaigned on a literacy guarantee consisting of “teaching the basics brilliantly” by “teach[ing] every child to read using structured literacy” (National Party, 2023a, p. 2). Elected in October 2023, the government swiftly mandated structured literacy as the preferred teaching approach to bring the SOR into the classroom starting in Term 1 (January/February) 2025. The pedagogical mandate followed an intense focus on early decoding skills arising from repeated, often angry, public calls to improve literacy outcomes as measured by international literacy tests (e.g., Bridges, 2023). Structured literacy comprised the vanguard of a series of wholesale educational reforms initiated by the government, including an hour a day each for reading and writing, a rewritten English curriculum statement for Years 0–6 to increase the focus on formal aspects of literacy (including attention to decoding, handwriting, and spelling), development of yearly tests including phonics checks, accreditation of Professional Learning Providers for structured literacy and requirements for initial teacher education providers to teach structured literacy (Ministry of Education, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e). Compulsory structured literacy training for all teachers of Years 1–3 students (ages 5–7) began in Term 3 (July) of 2024, with training for teachers of Years 4–6 students (ages 8–10) estimated to begin in Term 1 2025<sup>1</sup>, illustrating the speed of implementation and, we suggest, a case of policy diffusion (Portnoi, 2016).

Policy diffusion captures the movement of policy across borders, grounded in assumptions that ‘best practices’ transfer equally from one context to another (Portnoi, 2016). Amplified by crises, such as low scores on international tests, political expediency may attract policymakers to adopt policies from elsewhere, regardless of their success in other contexts. Like many Western countries, in ANZ, partisan swings post a general election can usher in a mandate to change education policy (Thrupp et al., 2020). Since the *Tomorrow’s Schools* reforms of the 1990s, neoliberal attributes of accountability, efficiency, choice, and individualism have been common components, regardless of the political party in charge. The rapid imposition of neoliberal educational policymaking in ANZ presented a stark contrast to previous education policymaking, where education “was perceived as one of the major avenues through which equality of opportunity within an egalitarian society can be achieved” (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 131).

In ANZ, diffused international policies promoting SOR-based literacy policy have morphed into a particular strain: structured literacy. Structured literacy has become synonymous with scientific, evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction, privileging synthetic phonics and decodable texts. Coined by the International Dyslexia Association in 2014, the SOR underpins structured literacy, but the terms “are not interchangeable” (Wilson, 2024, p. 35).

While the SOR provides evidence used to inform structured literacy approaches (Wilson, 2024), all the information used by policymakers may not always stand up to the same scientific scrutiny, including grey literature, reports from think tanks, and other unpublished sources. Intermediary associations such as think tanks (The New Zealand Initiative) and nonprofit groups providing advocacy (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa) or synthesising research and delivering professional development (The Education Hub) can be found occupying the policymaking space alongside subject associations, teachers’ associations, and researchers in ANZ (see Aydarova, 2023, for a discussion of the U.S. context).

As we were conducting our analysis for this paper, we watched policy diffusion in motion, largely playing out in public media spaces (Cox & Johns-O’Leary, 2024; MacPhee et al.,

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is correct in noting that teachers of students in years 4–6 were expected to implement new pedagogy prior to receiving their training.

2021). Terms with distinct histories in the research literature have been cooked down into a conceptual stew to evoke a simplistic contest. Politicians and the media have reduced the nuanced distinctions between whole language and balanced literacy, between structured literacy and phonics instruction, and between the SOR and the science of learning until they barely resemble their original origins. For instance, in a press release, the Minister of Education, Erica Stanford, proclaimed, “Structured Literacy is about getting back to basics and teaching children to read by using sounds and phonics to understand words” (Stanford, 2024c, para. 6). This quote also exemplifies the slippage between concepts, where literacy is equivalent to decoding skills, contributing to an oversimplification of a more nuanced field.

Policymakers seeking a ‘quick fix’ to a policy problem may hasten policy diffusion (Portnoi, 2016). The title of this article comes from an interview on *Breakfast News*, where Minister of Education Erica Stanford was challenged on implementing a new literacy and numeracy curriculum from the beginning of 2025 (Smith, 2024). When asked by the news presenter, “Why are you rushing this minister?” Stanford replied, “There’s a difference between pace and rush. We’re not rushing this”. Ignoring calls to slow the rush and support teachers to implement the changes, Stanford directed teachers to “just get started” (Smith, 2024, 4:05).

The speed and content of policy imposition have been met with some resistance. A subject association, for example, drew attention to their concerns regarding the process of curriculum development “and the lack of representativeness and expertise” in the writing team along with feedback timelines that were “very short and... [did] not allow for the level of consideration needed to ensure a quality curriculum” (White et al., 2024, p. 43). Independent analysis of the feedback on the draft curriculum identified a range of issues, from an overwhelming level of detail that disregarded teacher expertise and professionalism, to a lack of attention to the unique bicultural context of ANZ, to responses that embraced the explicit direction (White et al., 2024).

Rather than draw simplistic battlelines following the ANZ strain of policy response to the ‘Reading Wars’ (Bridges, 2023), the public nature of the contest, the pace of change, and the mandates to direct teachers’ practice drew our attention to the use of discourse (Foucault, 1972) in combination with rhetorical modes of persuasion (Aristotle, 1954) to impose change. In our illustrative case study, we address the following research questions:

- How is the contest framed?
- What are some potential effects?

Through this critical analysis, we aim to support teachers so that they might affirm or resist the diffused policies on offer. Next, we present the literacy landscape in ANZ to contextualise the analysis.

## **Background and Context: Literacy Instruction in ANZ**

Disputes about the best way to teach reading are long-standing and international (e.g., Tierney & Pearson, 2021). In ANZ, similarly, there is a long history of public contests about the focus of teacher attention and the materials that should be used to provide the instructional sequence. Arguments about materials can be traced back to the colonial reading series, which, in the early colonial period, followed a bottom-up letter-based sequence and then later employed look-say and story-based methods sequenced using word-building tables (Price, 2000).

For ANZ teachers, concerns about the reading materials centred on the unnatural and irrelevant content of overseas series. Home-grown teaching methods sought to reflect children’s worlds, for example, by scribing children’s writing, creating stories through art and the environment, using teacher-made big books, and scaffolding independent and peer-assisted reading (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Holdaway, 1972, 1979). The *Ready to Read* series (from 1963) reflected a desire to have a national series of readers suitable for local children and published in

ANZ. The focus was on short but meaningful stories, engaging plots, and familiar content (Smith & Elley, 1994). The national handbook (Simpson, 1962) advised teachers to use the story's meaning as the basis for instruction, with small group lessons that involved discussion prior to "teaching in the course of reading" (p. 61) and engaging in close analysis as the need arose. National advice directed teachers to develop a "balanced reading programme" comprised of varied classroom approaches (Department of Education, 1971, p. 4).

Researchers of literacy have been key participants in deliberations about teaching focus. Clay's (e.g., 1991, 2001) influential works, including the Reading Recovery intervention, highlighted the importance of gaining meaning from text, with instruction in other aspects of texts serving that aim. Other scholars criticised the meaning-led approach, identifying the importance of phonemic awareness and word reading (e.g. Castle et al., 1994; Tunmer & Chapman, 2002; Tunmer et al., 1998). Educational psychologists Professors Tunmer and Nicholson led public criticism of Ministry advice for teachers by the mid-1990s.

Criticism of teaching methods was framed against the backdrop of international assessments of reading, which invited public scrutiny of the ANZ education system against the global competitive environment. International testing and the resulting public argument paved the way for neoliberal reforms, with common features: decentralised institutions, market choice, and accountability through assessment (Hood, 2015). Friedmanite economics required "free trade, a competitive education system and cuts in government spending" (Coddington, 2003, p. 9). The *Tomorrow's Schools* policy directives (Department of Education, 1988) echoed this wider reform trend, with schools positioned as self-managing entities. Since this time, schools have competed for students and teachers in the marketplace and purchased professional development and materials from both private consultancies and Ministry-funded and accredited providers.

Public criticism based on international assessments focused on identified inequities for minority groups (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2005). Academics criticised ANZ's approach as 'whole language', emphasising the importance of efficient decoding (Elley, 1998/2017), positioning any potential defenders as "'wrong headed', 'flawed', and 'anti-science'" (Soler, 2006, p. 531). While the defence of the current system focussed on understanding and spreading overall high performance (Elley, 1998/2017), particular criticism from Professors Tunmer and Chapman focussed on the use of context, Reading Recovery, and the Running Record observational assessments (Tunmer et al., 2008).

In parallel to the early reading discussion, the 'rising illiteracy' debate focused on employment and productivity, promoting basic adult literacy skills for employability (Coddington, 2003; Kerr, 1999). In this era, the business think tank (the Business Round Table) engaged in public conversation, again with the backdrop of international assessments, "I am not surprised but I am, nonetheless, appalled" (Kerr, 1999, p. 210). Through commentary on international assessments, the early reading discussion in primary school and the debates on the economic costs of illiteracy in secondary and post-secondary education have been combined for public consumption. Criticism of teachers underpinned the push for policy change, as seen, for example, in the *National Business Review* newspaper headline, "Why your employees are illiterate: Educators refuse to acknowledge that our children are struggling to read under the present system" (Soler, 2006, p. 534).

Ministry advice to teachers changed as a response to these public critiques, echoing policy initiatives internationally. Similar to the National Reading Panel in the United States, the Literacy Taskforce (Ministry of Education, 1999b) and the Literacy Experts Group (Ministry of Education, 1999a) were set up to establish a literacy strategy so that "by 2005, every child turning nine will be able to read, write and do maths, supported by assessment tools that will allow progress to be accurately tracked" (Smith, 1999, para. 1). This report underscored the role of phonemic awareness in early literacy acquisition and signalled a policy shift to more direct teaching of decoding (Limbrick, 2001; McNaughton, 2022; Tunmer et al., 2013). Teachers were now advised to offer "deliberate, focused instruction" to develop phonics and phonemic

awareness (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 32). Over subsequent years, National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) data indicated increases in the accuracy of decoding. However, the evidence continued to show inequities, and reading comprehension outcomes did not improve accordingly (McNaughton, 2022; Tunmer et al., 2013). The use of commercial programmes also increased, often with little evidence of effectiveness (Parr et al., 2004).

The 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results again instigated public deliberation, with familiar public positions heralding policy shifts. Headlines indicated that experts were again “appalled” (Moir, 2013). Critical academics identified constructivist approaches, lack of attention to “literate cultural capital” (p. 158), and Reading Recovery as causes (Tunmer et al., 2013). Researchers continued to refine interventions focussed on explicit and systematic word-level decoding (Chapman et al., 2018; Gillon, 2017). Increasing use of privately developed assessments and packages of resources continued (Cameron & Dempsey, 2019). From 2015, offerings that explicitly aligned with SOR were available as commercial resources (Kane, 2021; Learning Matters, 2024). By 2018, more than 90% of teachers reported teaching phonics explicitly; teachers’ phonological and phonemic knowledge was reportedly good, whereas knowledge of phonics and morphological constructs was described as weak (Chapman et al., 2018).

Grey literature became a feature in the public commentary in 2020, when a structured literacy advocacy group was set up “to advocate for the adoption in schools of the Science of Reading and evidence-informed literacy instruction - Structured Literacy - so that all NZ children reach their potential, become valued members of society and lead fulfilling lives” (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2020, para. 9). At that same time, the Atlas Network partner<sup>2</sup> and business think tank, now called the New Zealand Initiative, joined the call for reform, bringing together like-minded academics and consultants to amplify the message (New Zealand Initiative, 2022). Both groups issued public research reports calling for reform. In 2023, structured literacy provider Learning Matters hosted a Symposium, bringing together key international advocates, including US journalist and structured literacy proponent Emily Hanford, Australian and New Zealand academics and practitioners (Learning Matters, 2023). The SOR movement, in the form of structured literacy, had developed a strong media presence and public sympathy in ANZ (e.g., Braae, 2023).

In summary, repeated public criticism of literacy teaching methods in ANZ has contested the relative importance of children’s engagement with reading materials against their facility with decoding words. While teacher-developed methods privileged relevance and personal attachment (e.g., Ashton-Warner, 1963), more ‘scientific’ methods have privileged decoding, standardised assessment tools, and performance on international tests (e.g., Tunmer et al., 2013). In the digital era, the contest is amplified and globalised, increasingly conducted through the publication of grey literature and promoted through the media. Given the historically powerful influence of the open market for education, international assessments, business think tanks, and the more recent addition of localised incarnations of international advocacy, we focused our analysis on discourse (Foucault, 1972) combined with the rhetorical modes of persuasion (Aristotle, 1954) to understand which discourses were being deployed and consider their possible effects.

## Theoretical Framing and Research Design

Foucault’s (1972) theorising on discourse and power-knowledge (Foucault & Gordon, 1980) informed our approach to analysis and results. Discourse illuminates how language and power are bound up with one another; it is both a noun and a verb. Discourse, according to

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<sup>2</sup> The Atlas Network, located in the United States, is a globally connected, non-governmental organisation centred on promoting “individual liberty, property rights, limited government, and free markets” (Atlas Network, 2025, para. 3). *Our mission*. Atlas Network. Retrieved 9/06/2025 from <https://www.atlasnetwork.org/our-mission>; ideals commensurate with neoliberalism.

Foucault (1972), represents “sometimes the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice” (p. 80). Importantly, discourses have effects.

One of the effects of discourse, of practices of power, is knowledge. Power-knowledge is joined in Foucault’s (1977) view,

power produces knowledge... power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (p. 27)

Knowledge can be weaponised, “knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting” (Foucault, 1984, p. 88). Knowledge, in this sense, is not a commodity to be discovered but rather becomes a mechanism to categorise. In our case, knowledge captured in the texts we analysed serves to categorise what counts as ‘good’ or ‘correct’ reading pedagogy.

We combined discourse analysis with rhetorical analysis. From the moment we began reading the texts for analysis, it was clear that the authors deployed Aristotle’s (1954) ‘modes of persuasion’ to deploy discourses of science, professionalism, free market, and equality. Their use of *kairos*, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* supported them in constructing a crisis (low literacy achievement) and presenting the solution (structured approaches to literacy instruction).

In rhetoric, *kairos* is understood as the “right or opportune time to do something” (Kinneavy, 1986, p. 80). It emphasises deploying the correct modes of persuasion to the audience at the correct time (Drew, 2023). In seeking to persuade their audience, the authors of the texts we analysed used varying combinations of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* to seize a particular policy moment (*kairos*), instilling a sense of urgency to increase the uptake of their discursive solution.

*Ethos* focuses on the author, their character, credibility, and reputation (Beason, 1991). Appeals to *ethos* can be made through the use of expertise, self-criticism, and similitude. Expertise or experience is frequently used to establish the credibility of an author. Authors use self-criticism as an appeal to *ethos* to promote trustworthiness. Similitude emphasises common ground between the audience and the author, often through the use of the pronoun ‘we’ to suggest the author is ‘one of us’.

For Aristotle (1954), the mode of *pathos* was used for “putting the audience into a certain frame of mind” (p. 8). Appeals to *pathos* are emotional appeals. *Pathos* is a powerful element in a compelling argument to the extent “where there is no extant *pathos* then the rhetor must either give auditors a reason to care (perhaps invent a *pathos*) or wait for a more propitious *kairos*” (Drew, 2023, p. 33). As we will evidence, appeals to *pathos* were an important mode of persuasion for our authors.

Finally, *logos*, understood as reason or logic, involves “the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself” (Aristotle, 1954, p. 8). A well-designed argument can appeal as a form of common sense (Weedon, 1997). In appeals to *logos*, authors use evidence such as statistics, data, facts, and research studies. In our analysis, we argue that the authors’ use of *ethos* (author credibility), *logos* (reason), and *pathos* (emotion) has been deployed with *kairos* (an opportune moment) to promote particular discourses.

We constructed an illustrative case study to examine the imposition of literacy policy (White & Cooper, 2022). We selected texts from roughly 2 years prior to the election (November 2021) to the release of the draft re-written English curriculum (August 2024) to form a bounded case, capturing a snapshot in a time of rapid transition, excluding social media. Informed by our awareness of the role of intermediary associations and the media, we privileged text selection to include grey literature (Hood & Hughson, 2022; Johnston, 2023; Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023; Videbeck, 2021), current affairs programmes (Bridges, 2023), and a press release (Stanford, 2024c) as well as statements of policy intent (Ministry of Education, 2024b; National Party,

2023a, 2023b; Stanford, 2024b) and a Ministerial report (Stanford, 2024b). Our intent was not to conduct an exhaustive search but to present an illustrative sample of popular and influential texts to critically consider how the contest is being framed for the public and teachers and its potential effects (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Data Sources and Abbreviations*

Source
NOV 2021. White paper that preceded the 2023 election from the Atlas Network–affiliated New Zealand right-wing think tank, the New Zealand Initiative, <i>Reading with the light switched on</i> (Videbeck, 2021)
MAR 2022. Report <i>Now I don't know my ABC: The perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand</i> from the Education Hub, a professional learning provider that also synthesises research to “bridge the gap between research and practice” (Hood & Hughson, 2022)
MAR 2023. National Party’s education policy platform for the 2023 election, <i>Teaching the basics brilliantly</i> (National Party, 2023b)
APRIL 2023. Manifesto from the New Zealand Initiative, <i>Save our schools: Solutions for New Zealand’s education crisis</i> (Johnston, 2023)
MAY 2023. Episode of the current affairs programme <i>Paddy Gower Has Issues</i> , “The Reading Wars”, which aired prior to the 2023 election (Bridges, 2023)
8 SEPT 2023. National Party’s more detailed policy <i>National’s Literacy Guarantee</i> (National Party, 2023a)
17 SEPT 2023. Episode of the current affairs programme, <i>Q+A with Jack Tame</i> , “Literacy expert on how best to teach kids to read” with U.S. journalist Emily Hanford (Braae, 2023)
DEC 2023. White paper written for the incoming minister of education from Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, a nonprofit advocacy and teacher support group that promotes “combining the art of teaching with the science of reading”, <i>Draft white paper on literacy policy for incoming minister</i> (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023)
May 2024. A press release from the Minister of Education, <i>Transforming how our children learn to read</i> (Stanford, 2024c)
JUNE 2024. Report from the Ministerial Advisory Group to the Minister of Education, released within a package of Cabinet papers (Stanford, 2024b; categorised as both a statement of policy intent and a report)
AUG 2024. The draft English learning area curriculum statement (Years 0–6) released for a 25-day consultation period on 26 August 2024 (Ministry of Education, 2024b)

We imported the texts for analysis into HyperResearch, a qualitative data analysis software programme. We began the development of our HyperResearch code book by independently coding the same text (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023). We initially coded for the rhetorical tools of ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos and then followed with coding to identify discourses (White & Cooper, 2022). We then met to discuss and consolidate our coding. Next, we independently coded a portion of the total dataset, followed by another meeting to clarify and consolidate the coding. The independent coding generated 44 discourses, which we ‘clumped’ into four majority discourses (see Table 2). Finally, we met to conduct a second round of analysis

on the report of all the material coded to the code book to refine our analysis. This round of analysis confirmed the majority discourses of science, professionalism, free market, and equality that we report next. The findings were developed through a recursive process of revisiting the literature alongside our theoretical framing.

**Table 2***Majority discourses*

Majority discourse	Sub-discourses	
Science	Science of reading	Knowledge
	Science of learning	Pedagogy
	Structured literacy	International Dyslexia Association
	Evidence	Progress
	Evidence based	Proficiency
	Mastery	Achievement
	Neuroscience	
	Professionalism	Accountability
	Assessment	Mastery
	Standardise	Crisis
	Teachers	Punitive
	Training	Parents
	Reporting	Pathologise
	Curriculum	Resources
	Curriculum Narrowing	Texts
	Fidelity	
Free market	Audit	Global
	Neoliberal	Reform agenda
	Privatisation	Remedy
	Economic	Common sense
	Ideology	
Equality	Disadvantage	Students
	Equity	Success
	Te Tiriti o Waitangi	

### Discourses of Science

The SOR has become shorthand for a body of research, including experimental studies, cognitive science, and neuroscience, dating back to the 1830s (Shanahan, 2020). The ‘Science of Reading’ is frequently ascribed the status of a proper noun, having “grown capital letters” (Rabern, 2015, p. 293). The use of discourses of the SOR to justify particular educational policies, curricula, textbooks, pedagogies, or assessment regimes is no recent phenomenon (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). It is commonly summoned to justify narrow instructional programmes that privilege phonics instruction (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). In the current reading wars disputes, the SOR underpins one side of the contest, typically captured in phonics-based (scientific) vs. whole language (unscientific) approaches (Yaden et al., 2021). While often presented as a settled body of science, particularly in media texts (MacPhee et al., 2021) and the marketing of published programmes (Seidenberg et al., 2020), researchers tend to be more cautious (Shanahan, 2020; Tierney & Pearson, 2021). Proponents of the SOR caution against simplistic translations from basic science to instructional solutions, “without direct, rigorous, and

repeated evaluations of the ability of those insights to improve instructional practice” (Shanahan, 2020, p. S240).

We identified discourses of science across a range of the texts we analysed, from grey literature (Hood & Hughson, 2022; Johnston, 2023; Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023; Videbeck, 2021), to statements of policy intent (Ministry of Education, 2024b; National Party, 2023a, 2023b) and reports (Stanford, 2024b), to current affairs programmes (Braae, 2023; Bridges, 2023) and press releases (Stanford, 2024c). Our analyses showed how discourses of science are mobilised in combination with ethos and pathos, or on their own as logos, and framed by an urgent appeal to kairos to position structured literacy as the *only* viable, scientific policy solution for ANZ.

In the unpublished, non-peer-reviewed report from the Education Hub (Hood & Hughson, 2022), the authors position their findings in the title with pathos: *Now I don't know my ABC: The perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand*. The release of the report received a great deal of media attention and is cited in the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) report (Stanford, 2024b). They present a range of recommendations; however, the emphatic declaration “it is essential that children learn to decode text through explicit, systematic phonics instruction” (p. 22) and the suggested use of “school-entry assessment” (p. 24), arising from their review of the literature [logos] inform policy recommendations and can be seen in the draft English Learning area (Ministry of Education, 2024b).

In combining the rhetorical technique of ethos with a discourse of science, authors across several of the texts take two approaches. One move is to mobilise ethos through self-criticism, to establish trustworthiness by positioning themselves as fallible, in search of the truth, “I challenged my beliefs, and the assumptions that led to those beliefs, at all levels – the scientific evidence, theory and practice, as well and the links between them” (Videbeck, 2021, p. 35). The second is to position their argument as logical: “Although well established with proven efficiency, the science of reading is not fixed [ethos]. We [ethos] must, of course, be open to adjusting practice expectations in classrooms as the science and evidence shifts [ethos]” (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023, p. 5). This humble approach to science does not appear often in the texts we analysed. Instead, we argue that the ethos of the text’s author in our illustrative case is most often abandoned in favour of ascribing the expertise to ‘the science’, thereby ‘doubling-down’ on the message: structured literacy and the science of learning become not just the preferred solution—they are the *only* option. Here, scientific power-knowledge (Foucault & Gordon, 1980) operates to determine what is possible in the classroom.

To position structured literacy as the only solution to the literacy ‘crisis’, discourses of science were frequently mobilised to construct a binary between scientific and unscientific reading instruction. For example, in the National Party’s statement of policy intent, “Balanced literacy is not a scientific approach to reading... Structured literacy teaches children in an explicit and systematic way that aligns with the science of how our brains learn best [logos]” (National Party, 2023a, p. 6). In this claim, ‘the science of how our brains learn best’ is presented as logos, evidence to be taken at face value.

Firmly locating alternatives to structured literacy (e.g., balanced literacy or whole language) as positioned on the ‘losing’ side of the binary was reinforced by defining the kinds of evidence that ‘count’ as scientific:

‘Evidence-based’ literacy instruction is a very generic term and does not provide any clarity on which evidence base underpins the pedagogy, the content of what is taught or the teaching principles that should be adhered to in teaching that content. The status quo, dominated by Balanced Literacy approaches, has been termed ‘evidence-based’. This term is not specific enough to ensure consistency of teaching across schools and accountability to students and parents, nor does it give reassurance that the instruction is based on findings from the science of reading. (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023, p. 24)

Yet again, authors rely on the rhetorical technique of *logos* to persuade. The move of defining appropriate evidence was also reiterated in the MAG report, presenting a 2,389-word appendix defining the “standards of evidence” for what counts as quality research, explaining, “the theories that comprise the science of learning have, by definition, been tested using experimental methods [*logos*]” (Stanford, 2024b, p. 32). The appendix to the MAG report then proceeds to detail the components of such an approach.

Lifting Literacy Aotearoa (2023) authors also combined discourses of science with *pathos* to construct a formidable argument: “Learning to read is a human right [*pathos*]. Forty years of multidisciplinary international research has clearly established a consensus about how the human brain learns to read (the Science of Learning and Reading), and the teacher knowledge, principles, components, and practices that are evidenced based and current best practice (Structured Literacy) [*logos*]” (p. 27). Notwithstanding the erroneous claim that there is a consensus amongst the scientific community (see Shanahan, 2020; Tierney & Pearson, 2021), the Lifting Literacy Aotearoa authors present a compelling case of *pathos* fortified with discourses of science (*logos*), which becomes difficult to challenge.

Across the texts, the discourse of science becomes synonymous with structured literacy, as found in “Structured Literacy brings the Science of Reading into the classroom” (Videbeck, 2021, p. 44) and “By combining quality empirical studies with science-based evidence from cognitive psychology and neuroscience [*logos*], a clear winner emerges [*pathos*] – Structured Literacy” (p. 13). Here, discourses of science—and now, by association, discourses of structured literacy—operate as *logos* to persuade the reader.

In the draft English Learning Area (Ministry of Education, 2024b) that was circulated for consultation in August 2024, discourses of science served as an all-encompassing rhetorical technique of *logos*. For example, teachers are presented with “teaching guidance” through “a comprehensive teaching and learning programme underpinned by the science of learning” (Ministry of Education, 2024b, p. 8). There are no citations provided to evidence the claims made in the 556-word section of the draft English curriculum titled “The Science of Learning in Practice”. In this section, teachers are presented with a mix of pedagogies (“starting lessons with revision”), an assortment of concepts (“cognitive load and working memory”), and curriculum clarifications (“scope and sequence”; Ministry of Education, 2024b, p. 8). Teachers are to take these claims at face value: “When teachers use worked examples for guided practice and combine new learning with previous knowledge, it improves cognitive flexibility for students” (Ministry of Education, 2024b, p. 8). Moreover, teachers are bound to follow the teaching sequences: “All steps in the teaching sequence are essential” (Ministry of Education, 2024b, p. 20). The word “essential” occurs 33 times.

When combined with *pathos*, discourses of science become common sense and difficult to refute:

Let’s be clear that ultimately what we are recommending is a commitment to the science, research and evidence... Learning to read and write should not be considered the preserve of the wealthy who can afford extra tuition to teach reading in an one-to-one environment, or be the result of a ‘post-code lottery’ – [*pathos*] the geographic good fortune that the local school has heard of the science of reading. (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023, p. 27)

The mobilisation of discourses of science—and by association, discourses of structured literacy and the science of learning—construct a compelling opportune moment (*kairos*) for government policy-making: “If we are serious about reversing New Zealand’s decline in academic achievement, we cannot leave learning to read to chance” (National Party, 2023a, p. 6). The use of ‘the science’ to create *ethos*, and therefore authority positioning, has effects for teachers who find themselves caught in the net of power relations (Foucault, 1977), where a particular form of knowledge holds sway. Next, we consider discourses of professionalism.

## Discourses of Professionalism

Professional autonomy and decision-making comprise discourses of professionalism. In all educational systems, teachers are responsible for operationalising the curriculum, and their decisions “determine the fate of [the] curriculum” through implementation (Hodge, 2024, p. 1). Teachers notice, recognise, and respond to children’s learning, driving curriculum design and decision-making daily, based on their beliefs, knowledge, and professional expertise. Teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge describes the underlying knowledge base of what to teach and how it is best taught within a particular subject (Shulman, 1987). In literacy, the subject knowledge of literacy and literacy learning draws from multiple disciplinary domains (Metz, 2021; Myhill et al., 2023).

Discourses of professionalism can enable or constrain teacher agency, which is informed by teachers’ beliefs about children, their role, and the purpose of education (Biesta et al., 2015). Teacher agency is enabled when teachers employ professional and contextual knowledge, and knowledge of research, as well as routines and processes for evaluating success and refining teaching reflexively (Hizli Alkan & Priestley, 2019; Parr et al., 2024). Teacher agency is constrained when educational policies dictate narrow curriculum and assessment regimes, limiting professional decision-making (Timperley et al., 2018).

We identified discourses of professionalism across multiple texts that we analysed, from grey literature (*Lifting Literacy Aotearoa*, 2023; Videbeck, 2021), to statements of policy intent (Johnston, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024b; National Party, 2023b) and a synthesis of research (Hood & Hughson, 2022) and reports (Stanford, 2024b). Next, we evidence discourses of professionalism reinforced by pathos, aimed to limit teacher agency to that of curriculum delivery agent, rather than curriculum designer.

In their policy proposal to the incoming Minister of Education, *Lifting Literacy Aotearoa* (2023) alerts readers to the “shocking truth” [pathos]... that the majority of New Zealand teachers simply do not have the right knowledge and practice expertise to deliver classroom-wide literacy success. They have been severely let down [pathos] by our education and training system” (p. 27). This discourse of professionalism positions teachers as not professional enough; they lack the ‘right knowledge and practice expertise’ to do their job. In other words, power-knowledge produces the ‘correct’ knowledge for practice, and in doing so, constrains teacher professionalism (Foucault, 1977).

Following discourses of science, as discussed in the previous section, there is but one solution: tighter specification of what to teach, in what order, and how to teach it. The National Party’s campaign promises will deliver it:

National’s Teaching the Basics Brilliantly plan will ease the burden on teachers [pathos] by taking the guesswork [pathos] out of the curriculum, upskilling them through professional development, and supporting them with high-quality teaching resources and lesson plans mapped to the curriculum. This will free teachers up [pathos] to teach, not just plan. (National Party, 2023b, p. 11)

Heavily bolstered by pathos, this discourse of professionalism invokes sympathy for busy teachers, positioning planning as burdensome ‘guesswork’ for teachers who need ‘upskilling’. Providing teachers with ‘high-quality teaching resources and lesson plans mapped to the curriculum’ also limits their agency.

Discourses of professionalism extend to teacher education and professional development, reinforced through pathos and further fortified with ethos through similitude and reference to logos (standardised assessment tools).

The whole education system desperately needs more transparency [pathos]. Something that is colloquially known in economics as ‘sunlight regulation’. It is not good enough [pathos] that we [ethos] only get a glimpse of our [ethos] reading

performance when international surveys, like PISA or PIRLS, are released [logos]. There is opaqueness at every level of the system [pathos], from what is taught in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes to the information that parents get from their schools regarding the curriculum and performance of their children. Professional Development and Initial Teacher Education therefore need to be at the centre of the reset. (Videbeck, 2021, p. 19)

In this extract from the grey literature, teacher educators are positioned as ‘hiding’ their practices from concerned citizens and parents, who only get a glimpse through the verifiable outputs of internationally comparable standardised tests. Given that this situation is ‘not good enough’, the only logical remedy is tighter control and accountability. Functioning as logos, international, large-scale standardised assessment tools can hold ‘every level of the system’ accountable through transparency (e.g., Verger et al., 2019).

Discourses of professionalism include attention to assessment. Assessment in various forms provides a basis for teacher decision-making and planning. A key aspect of teachers’ professional knowledge is assessment knowledge, which encompasses teachers’ knowledge of how to design formative and summative assessments and their interpretation of assessment data (Gess-Newsome, 2015), operationalised through feedback (Parr & Timperley, 2010). But assessment is not just for teacher decision-making.

Parents deserve [pathos] to understand their child’s progress [logos] and know they’re getting the support and extension needed to reach their full potential. Assessment is key for communicating student progress [logos] to parents and ensuring their trust in the school system is not misplaced [pathos]. (National Party, 2023b, p. 8)

Using tools of assessment to provide concrete evidence [logos], fortified with pathos, the discourse of professionalism positions teachers as accountable.

Not only are teachers accountable to parents, but they are also accountable to demonstrate the ‘correct’ professional knowledge to gain recertification.

National will require evidence [logos] of professional learning and development in reading, writing, maths and science instruction in order to re-certify. This will ensure [pathos] that all teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge [logos] to teach the basics brilliantly, and to use assessment to lift achievement. (National Party, 2023b, p. 11)

In this policy platform statement, the government ‘ensures’ through targeted testing of students *and* teachers, that teachers can be accountable professionals and focus on curriculum delivery.

In the draft English Learning Area (Years 0–6), the vision of accountability plays out as phonics checks that are required after 20 weeks and 40 weeks at school (Ministry of Education, 2024b, p. 37) alongside yearly testing. Discourses of science are employed with regard to “more detailed diagnostic assessments” (Ministry of Education, 2024b, p. 41), to provide ‘diagnostic’ explanations for why a child has failed to make progress. As Foucault (1977) observed, we have reached a moment where “the examination is at the centre of the procedures that constitute the individual as effect and object of power, as effect and object of knowledge” (p. 192). In other words, the power-knowledge resulting from exams can be mobilised to reinforce the ‘correct’ teaching of reading. The effect of positioning the curriculum as scientific is teacher accountability for the delivery of the scientifically backed scope and sequence. The effects for children are tight assessment regimes focussed on the extent to which they demonstrate mastery of taught skills along the scientific sequence. Neither teachers nor students can escape the exercise of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1977). Next, we present free-market discourses as identified in our dataset.

## Discourses of the Free Market

We identified a constellation of free-market discourses contributing to a common sense understanding of how education systems operate in a competitive global marketplace. In these discourses, the logic of the free market is applied to education, whereby a person's education is conceived as an individual commodity that requires economic investment and reaps economic rewards: "Individuals should bear the costs of investment in themselves and receive the rewards. They should not be prevented by market imperfections from making the investment when they are willing to bear the costs" (Friedman, 2002, p. 105). These discourses underpinned the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms in ANZ (Department of Education, 1988), which have framed the deliberations on teaching reading going forward. Discourses of the SOR privilege the universal in learning by focusing on individual internal cognitive functions (Tierney & Pearson, 2021) and complement discourses of the free market. Scholars have argued that the local, cultural, and social aspects of learning are neglected or delegitimised as impediments to a free market (Soler, 2016). The free-market discourse

stands in stark contrast to one that sees literacy as a social practice rooted in cultural and socioeconomic differences, as reconceptualized with the emergence of New Literacy Studies, critical literacy, and socioculturally related views of literacy and reading practices in recent decades. (Soler, 2016, p. 431)

In other words, a free-market approach to education can be seen as eschewing the cultural, historical, political, and social position of literacy practices in favour of global or one-size-fits-all approaches. We identified free-market discourses across a range of the texts we analysed, from grey literature (Johnston, 2023; *Lifting Literacy Aotearoa*, 2023; Videbeck, 2021), to statements of policy intent (Stanford, 2024b) to current affairs programmes (Bridges, 2023). Next, we evidence how ethos, pathos, and logos create an opportunity [kairos] to "rush" or increase the "pace" of change (Smith, 2024, 4:05), mobilising free-market discourses and reinforcing competition as the solution to ANZ's literacy woes.

Free-market discourses include reference to international competition, requiring large-scale reform, including the creation of a market model for education. Global competitiveness in the free market is supported by logos, by drawing on evidence from large-scale tests as evidence of falling standards, or a literacy crisis [kairos] that, in turn, justifies reform to stay in the race for global rankings. In Minister Stanford's cabinet papers responding to the MAG report, she explains,

My goal is to get New Zealand back in the top ten countries [pathos] in the OECD, delivering a world-leading [pathos] education system that is focused on excellence and puts young New Zealanders on the global stage as confident, capable, and innovative learners. (Stanford, 2024b, p. 5)

The discourse of reform requires a crisis [kairos] to avoid small, ineffective changes and pave the way for large-scale, wholesale system change. As Friedman (2002) argued,

There is enormous inertia — a tyranny of the status quo — in private and especially governmental arrangements. Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (pp. xiii–xiv)

Minister Stanford mobilised the crisis [kairos] using logos, referencing ANZ's PISA rankings on the world stage. The next move was to persuade, firstly, politicians and then teachers and parents using pathos and humanising the argument through reference to individuals, as a representation of that statistical decline, by invoking, not a distributional shift in average outcome levels, but

images of individuals who cannot read, and the societal consequences of not being able to read. Within this exercise of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1977), the parameters of the problem and the knowledge needed to solve it have been demarcated for us; we cannot view outside of them.

We identified the appeal to free-market discourses through global competition in the current affairs programme *Paddy Gower has issues*:

I'm going to fill you in on how we [ethos] ended up all the way back at 27<sup>th</sup> in the world [logos] for reading... And so here is the guts of it, our [ethos] global ranking on literacy has plummeted over the last 20 years. In this study of 400,000 children in over 60 countries [logos] out just last week, we have fallen from 13<sup>th</sup> back in 2,001 to 27<sup>th</sup> way behind [logos] England, the United States, Australia, the Slovak Republic, and Latvia. Now, the effects of this are actually massive [pathos]. We [ethos] are getting more and more people who cannot read [pathos]. They have told me that they feel ashamed and they feel stupid [pathos]. It leads to truancy, mental health problems, unemployment, and even prison [pathos]. (Bridges, 2023, 14:07)

Aired roughly 5 months before the election, Gower skillfully weaves ethos, logos, and pathos to ignite a crisis [kairos]: the reading wars.

In education, free-market discourses travel through diffused policies borrowing logic from the private sector, thereby “aligning education systems to the operational logic” of capital from private sources (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 103). The ideals are seen in advocacy for global educational reform. Reform discourses have been described as a “complex amalgam of policies and practices” (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019, p. 1) that have been traced to the education reforms of Pinochet, Reagan, and Thatcher in Chile, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019). The reforms create an environment of competition among schools, leading to standardisation of teaching and learning, priority on basic skills and workplace literacy, and test-based accountability and privatisation (Sahlberg, 2023). We identified free-market discourses positioning the Ministry of Education as a buyer of commercial products and services in a global, competitive market rather than a direct provider of resourcing for the system: “When a large buyer like the Ministry of Education (effectively a monopsony) selects only one supplier, it can also reduce competition in the wider market, killing off other competitors [pathos] who might compete against the subsidised product” (Videbeck, 2021, p. 78).

Within this logic, the development of the national series of early reading texts, such as those first developed by the Department of Education, is identified as an impediment to the globally competitive market model. Whereas the government had traditionally sought to provide reading materials relevant to ANZ children, the economic logic applied to education systems requires access to a competitive market.

Since 1963, Ready to Read levelled books have been provided to schools for free. By choosing Ready to Read, the Ministry picked the levelled reader approach over explicit phonics and decodable texts, and a single supplier (SOE Learning Media and later Lift Education). Alternative approaches and suppliers would have found it difficult to compete. (Videbeck, 2021, p. 77)

In this free-market discourse, the Ministry of Education becomes a consumer in the publishing marketplace, where the commodification of learning materials is at play through the competition for providers of structured literacy curricula (which are argued to be preferable to teachers’ planning) and for decodable texts (as a competitor to Ministry-provided levelled texts). The recommendation for change draws on the logic of competition and choice to create a marketplace of providers for book series and their accompanying programmes:

We do not recommend funding one universal decodable book series. Instead we recommend allowing schools to select books from a pre-approved list. In terms of

how to operationalise this, there are a couple of ways this could be done. Either run a centralised procurement process to negotiate the lowest price across a range of suppliers, or provide access to funding for schools based on a roll-based formula to acquire resources from a pre-approved list of suppliers. (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023, p. 42)

Interestingly enough, this is the approach that the Ministry of Education recently signalled, where, depending on the size of the roll, schools will receive between \$500–\$5,000 per year to purchase “high-quality materials that support a structured approach” in addition to materials provided by the Ministry (Stanford, 2024a, para. 4).

An international global marketplace for decodable texts is explicitly promoted by the Atlas-aligned, right-wing think tank, the New Zealand Initiative. In this account, decoding is separated from reading, to argue against “home bias” (Videbeck, 2021, p. 79) and for international access to the marketplace,

Learning how to read English is the same process no matter where in the world a child is. It would be a shame if excellent, established and tested resources [logos] were not able to be used, or suffered [pathos] competitive disadvantage because of funding or home bias [pathos]. (Videbeck, 2021, p. 80)

Notwithstanding critiques of so-called SOR materials for ignoring the cultural, linguistic, and social capital students bring to school (Thomas, 2023), the persuasive modes of pathos and logos urge the uptake of free-market discourses. The impact of these economic ideals is to commodify early literacy teaching and programmes, a move that rests on the deprofessionalisation of teaching (Soler, 2016). The effect is to promote a competitive global education marketplace, opening up ANZ’s education system to an international free market, based on commercial reading packages.

Not only should the materials students read be selected from the competitive global free market, but the education of their teachers should be opened to competition as well. The pre-election manifesto from the New Zealand Initiative proposed that “Re-establishing specialist teacher training institutions would introduce much-needed [pathos] competition for the universities in ITE” (Johnston, 2023, p. 41). Private training providers would compete with teacher education degrees, which focus on social justice and culturally responsive, critical, and localised approaches to literacy in a system where the long history of colonisation has created inequity of outcome over successive generations (McNaughton, 2022). Next, we consider our fourth and final discourse—equality.

## **Discourses of Equality**

ANZ has a long history of using discourses of equality in education policymaking (Seve-Williams, 2013). Discourses of equality include reference to equality of opportunity and equality of access. When woven into educational policy, these concepts result in anything but equality in terms of outcomes or achievement. Many teachers and researchers have abandoned reference to equality in preference for equitable, suggesting “equal and fair in light of relevant similarities and differences” (Burbules et al., 1982, p. 171). This has come to mean an understanding of levelling the playing field, rather than just opening the gate, providing the same sports gear, and allowing the players in. Aydarova (2023) describes the use of equality as one of many empty signifiers in the literacy wars, explaining that the lack of common understanding allows readers to “fill them with the meanings they see fit” (p. 560). In her analysis of policymaking in Tennessee, she found that mythologies of the science of reading allowed lawmakers to “naturalize social inequality” and “maintain the status quo instead of disrupting it” (p. 576). Similarly, Durán and Hikida (2022) suggest the literacy wars have become a smokescreen, allowing policymakers to ignore the issues that are more difficult to address, such as poverty. They argue, “There is not currently (or

historically) a pedagogical crisis specific to literacy. Rather, what we see is an ongoing crisis of equity” (p. 15).

In the context of literacy, researchers highlight the complexity of cultural, linguistic, and social capital that students bring to school and how SOR, and the structured approaches to literacy pedagogy they promote, do not adequately address these complexities (e.g., Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021; Noguerón-Liu, 2020). These critiques suggest that literacy policies grounded in discourses of equality will fail to serve the very students they purport to remedy. We identified discourses of equality across a range of the texts we analysed, from grey literature (Videbeck, 2021) to statements of policy intent (Ministry of Education, 2024b; National Party, 2023a, 2023b; Stanford, 2024b) to current affairs programmes (Braae, 2023; Bridges, 2023), research review (Hood & Hughson, 2022), and press releases (Stanford, 2024c). Next, we evidence how discourses of equality are mobilised in combination with pathos and logos, bolstered with kairos, to promote a particular vision of literacy pedagogy as common sense.

In our analysis, discourses of equality were frequently combined with pathos. In the statement of policy intent, for example, “National firmly believes [pathos] all children should have an equal opportunity to learn, achieve and excel at school” (National Party, 2023b, p. 6). In the current affairs programme, a *NewsHub* reporter exclaims to Paddy Gower, “I’m just like, why can’t every kid learn how to read in this country [pathos]. I want to know from the Minister. Why doesn’t every school teach children how to read in this way?” (Bridges, 2023, 39:05). It is difficult to present alternatives to such common-sense appeals, who wouldn’t want all children to have these opportunities?

In the more extended policy intent statement, the National Party brings logos in to convince the reader:

National will ensure *all* children are taught to read using structured literacy, a proven approach [logos], by making it a requirement at primary school... National wants *every* child at primary school to have access to structured literacy because the foundations of reading are too important to leave to chance [pathos]. (National Party, 2023a, p. 3, emphasis added)

In the *Q&A with Jack Tame* (Braae, 2023) episode in which he interviews American journalist Emily Hanford, renowned for her promotion of structured literacy (Tierney & Pearson, 2021), the now Minister of Education Erica Stanford explained,

My vision for education in New Zealand is that we deliver consistent *access* to the very best possible teaching and resources *to every single student*, no matter where they are, and that starts with *every single child* learning to read using structured literacy. We will no longer be leaving literacy to chance [pathos] in New Zealand [kairos]. *Every* school will have the choice of a structured literacy provider to give all teachers the knowledge of the science of reading, the understanding of how the brain learns to read [logos]. (Braae, 2023, 0:25, emphasis added)

This emphatic proclamation suggests that equal treatment and access will result in achievement for all. But we know that merely providing ‘access’ does not ensure achievement. Research from the United Kingdom, for example, suggests that over-emphasis on phonics instruction will not lead to the outcomes that have been promised in the rhetoric (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

The lack of scientific evidence does not get in the way of good policy solutions, however. A press release from May 2024 combines pathos and logos to mandate structured literacy, Structured literacy will change the way New Zealand children learn to read – improving achievement and setting students up for success [pathos]... Being able to read and write is a fundamental life skill that too many young people are missing out on [pathos]... Domestic and international evidence [logos] shows this method is the most effective way of equipping children with strong reading

skills that are critical for their futures [pathos]... I want all children to have this opportunity. That is why, beginning in Term 1 2025 [January], all state schools will teach reading using the proven structured literacy approach [logos]. (Stanford, 2024c, para. 1–5)

The exercise of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1977) has already determined the ‘right’ kind of knowledge (structured literacy) that must be applied to *all* children and *all* state schools. Additional evidence is unnecessary.

It can be enlightening to consider the discourses that have been omitted when developing education policy based on discourses of equality. On the one hand, there is a certain common sense appeal, of course, all students should receive “equal opportunities” (Ministry of Education, 2024b, p. 39) for literacy learning. On the other hand, there is little explicit attention to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, a foundational document in the ANZ policy context (Burns et al., 2024). Briefly, Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) was signed between the Crown (Britain) and representatives of Māori (Indigenous peoples) in 1840, but it has a very chequered history in terms of interpretation and implementation, particularly in education (Burns et al., 2024). At the time of writing this article, the Education Act (New Zealand Government, 2020) described the “Crown’s responsibility to give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi” (p. 33), presenting the expectation that each school is “working to ensure that its plans, policies, and local curriculum reflect local tikanga Māori [Māori social norms and protocols], mātauranga Māori [Māori knowledge], and te ao Māori [Māori world view]” (p. 33).

Across the dataset, there was limited reference to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Johnston, 2023; Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023; Stanford, 2024b). In the New Zealand Initiative’s (Johnston, 2023) manifesto for saving education, the only mention of Te Tiriti o Waitangi was to recommend that it be removed from the Education Act and “be amended to enshrine a focus on educational achievement” (p. 23). Ironically, this recommendation is currently being pursued (Ministry of Education, 2024a). The policy advice paper (Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2023) echoes this advice: “The primary goal for literacy policy under the Education and Training Act 2020 should be to ensure all students learn to read and write proficiently”, suggesting “this objective would also fully honour the Crown’s commitments to Māori under Te Tiriti o Waitangi” (p. 18). And lastly, in the Minister of Education’s (Stanford, 2024b) overview to the Cabinet attached to the release of the MAG report, she explains, “*The New Zealand Curriculum* should acknowledge Te Tiriti o Waitangi” (p. 6), much less emphatic than “give effect to” in previous iterations (New Zealand Government, 2020, p. 33). We argue that the removal of reference to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, combined with discourses of equality, serves to further marginalise learners.

## Concluding Thoughts

In this illustrative case study, we have captured a particular moment in ANZ as the diffusion of international literacy policies informed by the SOR has morphed into a particular policy strain: structured literacy. After critically examining the rapid imposition of policy, using discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972) combined with the classical rhetorical tools of ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos (Aristotle, 1954), we offer three key points to conclude.

Our first point is that the argument about how to best teach reading is a contest of power. In our analysis, we illustrated how power-knowledge operates and creates effects for teachers and young people. Through our analyses, we have identified how SOR discourses operate as relations of power that demarcate what counts as knowledge (Foucault, 1977). As Foucault (1984) suggested, power-knowledge can be weaponised, making its way through the language of advocates, think tanks, and public media into policy through “a profusion of entangled events” (p. 89). Finding and tracing the key discourses showed how language and power are bound up with one another in contests about early reading. Together, these discourses operated to create a “regime of truth” (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, p. 131)—in this case, an

irrefutable science that teachers are accountable to deliver, preferably using resources accessed from an educational marketplace, facilitated by equal access to governmental purchasing power. Through our analysis, we could view the current “battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays” (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, p. 131).

Discourses have effects (Foucault, 1972). Our reading of the international literature also suggests that these discourses are recognisable globally and result in diffused educational policies (Portnoi, 2016), many of which have negative outcomes. Researchers have identified diffused policies, including the domination of testing to the detriment of teacher agency and turning to the free market to provide curriculum and professional learning solutions (Lupton & Hayes, 2021; Thrupp et al., 2020). Negative effects have been identified for educational equity, particularly for children from minority language groups and indigenous cultures (Durán & Hikida, 2022; Lupton & Hayes, 2021).

Our second key point emphasises the importance of a critically literate public to see persuasive moves repeated across texts (Sandretto & Klenner, 2011). Our analysis illustrated the authors’ use of Aristotle’s (1954) ‘modes of persuasion’ to mobilise the discourses of science, professionalism, free market, and equality. Their use of *kairos*, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* was apparent in the repeated rhetorical structures across intersecting texts, which constructed a crisis of low literacy achievement and a simple, ready-made solution. Across the texts we studied, *logos* rhetorical moves referenced aspects of the results of international large-scale tests to present data that the country has a literacy-specific crisis [science]. *Pathos* moves were then used to equate the types of literacy assessed in these assessments with approaches to teaching decoding at the beginning of school through stories of children and adults who cannot read. In parallel, *pathos* moves positioned universities and education academics as vested interests [professionalism]. *Pathos* moves were then employed to insist on transparency through further testing [science]. *Ethos* moves invoke a science—that has ‘known’ for a long time but has been held out by ‘vested interests’ [science/professionalism]. Finally, urgency was invoked through *kairos* to inspire a wholesale reform agenda based on international knowledge [science] and encouraging a globalised education marketplace [free market] using the logic of a level playing field of equal access to state resources [equality]. These moves, skilfully deployed, persuade readers by combining the power of authority, logic, and emotion. The result is the creation of a ‘common sense’ (Weedon, 1997) in a public sphere where teachers face a choice of defending a failing system or ‘getting on board’ with the changes. Thus, our second key point is the power of textual analysis to make these moves obvious, even predictable, implying (again) the ‘new basics’ of critical literacy for teachers and parents as consumers of media texts replicating discourses of science.

In our third and final key point, we note the importance of scientific literacy (Seidenberg et al., 2020), given where these discourses are playing out. In our analyses, the use of grey literature in the digital realm meant that advocates and interest groups were able to advance agendas, using media expertise, even though they may “not possess traditionally defined educational expertise” (Malin & Lubienski, 2015, p. 1). We argue, therefore, that teachers need critical scientific literacy to be able to critique and understand ‘the evidence’, in its many and nuanced forms. Through their critical analysis, they may then enact their professional agency to resist or affirm the policies on offer.

A limitation of our small illustrative case rests in the selective sampling of texts, which focused on intermediary associations in the public media, popular journalists, politicians, and the draft curriculum. Future research can draw upon a wider range of texts, including social media, to trace the uptake of discourses and the use of rhetorical modes of persuasion to examine how diffused policies operate to frame literacy policymaking in ANZ. Future research could build on our study by examining the effects of these discourses on teacher professional practice to gauge the uptake and/or resistance of imposed policies based on the SOR.

Through this analysis, we have come to understand the diffused international, economic, and political nature of education policymaking as it morphs into a strain of the SOR in ANZ. At the same time as we were watching policy diffusion in action, we also engaged with the growing body of research evidence showing that globalised and standardised approaches do not hold up for particular young people (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021; Seidenberg et al., 2020; Tierney & Pearson, 2021) and that the approaches developed in the field, and critiqued as ‘unscientific’ sometimes work just as well, or better (Shanahan, 2020). Even proponents of science-based approaches to literacy instruction caution against the over-simplification of the SOR (Seidenberg et al., 2020). Our illustrative case study of ANZ provides a window into the power of persuasive public rhetoric to direct the contestation of literacy policy.

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