Discursive Constructions of a "Literacy Crisis" in Australian Newspaper Editorials

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Abstract: This study examines the narratives of a "reading crisis" surrounding early literacy instruction in Victoria, Australia, by analysing newspaper editorials from *The Age* newspaper, amid the ongoing "reading wars" and debates over approaches to teaching reading, particularly between synthetic phonics and balanced literacy. Using Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Halliday's (1994) systemic functional linguistics (SFL), the paper investigates the media's linguistic strategies in three 2023 editorials that critique specific aspects of early reading instruction, focusing on how the balanced literacy approach to teaching reading is portrayed in relation to synthetic phonics. It examines public responses to these editorials, illustrating the media's role in shaping engagement with educational discourse and the complexities of literacy instruction, which go beyond a simplistic preference for either approach. By examining the interaction between discourses about literacy instruction in media portrayals and public reception of these discourses, this paper reveals how crisis narratives

around literacy instruction are discursively constructed and how they influence public perceptions and, potentially, educational policies on early literacy education.

Construcciones discursivas de una "crisis de alfabetización" en los editoriales de periódicos australianos

Resumen: Este estudio examina las narrativas de una "crisis de lectura" en torno a la enseñanza inicial de la alfabetización en Victoria, Australia, mediante el análisis de editoriales del periódico *The Age*, en el contexto de las continuas "guerras de la lectura" y los debates sobre los enfoques de la enseñanza de la lectura, en particular entre la fonética sintética y la alfabetización equilibrada. Utilizando el modelo tridimensional de análisis crítico del discurso (ACD) de Fairclough (1989) y la lingüística sistémico-funcional (LSF) de Halliday (1994), el artículo investiga las estrategias lingüísticas de los medios en tres editoriales de 2023 que critican aspectos específicos de la enseñanza inicial de la lectura, centrándose en cómo se representa el enfoque de alfabetización equilibrada en relación con la fonética sintética. Asimismo, examina las respuestas públicas a estos editoriales, ilustrando el papel de los medios en la configuración del compromiso con el discurso educativo y las complejidades de la enseñanza de la alfabetización, que van más allá de una preferencia simplista por uno u otro enfoque. Al analizar la interacción entre los discursos sobre la enseñanza de la lectura en las representaciones mediáticas y la recepción pública de esos discursos, este artículo revela cómo las narrativas de crisis en torno a la alfabetización se construyen discursivamente y cómo influyen en las percepciones públicas y, potencialmente, en las políticas educativas sobre la alfabetización inicial.

Palabras clave: lectura inicial; educación en alfabetización; enseñanza de la fonética; medios educativos; análisis crítico del discurso

Construções discursivas de uma "crise da alfabetização" em editoriais de jornais australianos

Resumo: Este estudo examina as narrativas de uma "crise da leitura" em torno do ensino inicial da alfabetização em Victoria, Austrália, por meio da análise de editoriais do jornal *The Age*, no contexto das contínuas "guerras da leitura" e dos debates sobre as abordagens de ensino da leitura, em particular entre a fonética sintética e a alfabetização equilibrada. Utilizando o modelo tridimensional de análise crítica do discurso (ACD) de Fairclough (1989) e a linguística sistêmico-funcional (LSF) de Halliday (1994), o artigo investiga as estratégias linguísticas da mídia em três editoriais de 2023 que criticam aspectos específicos do ensino inicial da leitura, com foco em como a abordagem de alfabetização equilibrada é representada em relação à fonética sintética. Também examina as respostas públicas a esses editoriais, ilustrando o papel da mídia na configuração do engajamento com o discurso educacional e as complexidades do ensino da alfabetização, que vão além de uma preferência simplista por uma ou outra abordagem. Ao analisar a interação entre os discursos sobre o ensino da leitura nas representações midiáticas e a recepção pública desses discursos, este artigo revela como as narrativas de crise em torno da alfabetização são construídas discursivamente e como influenciam as percepções públicas e, potencialmente, as políticas educacionais sobre a alfabetização inicial.

Palavras-chave: leitura inicial; educação em alfabetização; ensino de fonética; mídia educacional; análise crítica do discurso

Discursive Constructions of a "Literacy Crisis" in Australian Newspaper Editorials

Reading is universally acknowledged as an essential skill, foundational for individual growth and societal advancement. The capacity to read proficiently is a gateway to lifelong learning and a multitude of opportunities. This recognition has drawn diverse stakeholders into the conversation about reading instruction, spanning educators, researchers, policymakers, parents, and publishers. Each group brings its perspective, underscoring the multifaceted nature of early reading instruction. The discourse on reading instruction has evolved significantly, attracting substantial scholarly interest across various fields, including cognitive science (Adams, 2003), neuroscience (Hruby & Goswami, 2011), behavioural science (LaFrance & Tarbox, 2020), educational psychology (Kim, 2020; Solity, 2020; Treiman, 2018), and others. These diverse investigations reflect the complexity and depth of reading processes and instructional methodologies.

The "reading wars" (Pearson, 2004) describe the longstanding debate between advocates of the "whole language" approach and the "code-based" approach to reading instruction. Castles et al. (2018) suggest a consensus has emerged on the importance of teaching decoding skills, effectively marking the end of the reading wars. This consensus reinforces systematic phonics instruction, addressing critiques that the whole language approach does not sufficiently emphasise phonics. However, the debate continues regarding the extent and method of phonics instruction, with proponents divided between those advocating for a balanced approach—integrating code and meaning—and those supporting a code-first-then-meaning approach. Disagreement persists over what constitutes "systematic" phonics instruction. How phonics should be taught remains unresolved (MacPhee & Paugh, 2023; Sanden et al., 2022; Solity, 2020; Torgerson et al., 2019; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). The reading wars now focus on what constitutes "systematic" phonics and can be termed the "phonics wars" (Ahn et al., in press).

Systematic phonics instruction generally encompasses three main approaches: synthetic, analytic, and contextualised. Synthetic phonics, based on the "simple view of reading" (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990), teaches grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) in a structured, sequential manner, focusing on sound blending to form words before exploring meaning. This is often considered the only truly systematic method due to its predetermined progression. Analytic phonics, in contrast, starts with familiar whole words, breaking them down without isolating GPCs, and tends to be more inquiry-based, adapting to students' existing knowledge. Contextualised phonics incorporates phonics within meaningful contexts, blending elements of both synthetic and analytic approaches (Ahn et al., in press). The ongoing "phonics wars" focus on defining systematic phonics instruction, including the use of decodable and authentic texts, grouping methods, and contextualisation of instruction (Ahn et al., in press).

Amidst heated debates, the media's influence has grown increasingly significant in intensifying tensions between different instructional methods. Historically, media outlets have played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion on educational policies and practices (Anderson, 2007; Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Baroutsis & Lingard, 2023; Bierbaum, 2021). Edelman (1988) characterised the media as fabricating "alternative realities" that shape public discourse and amplifying perceived "crises" through selective representation of facts and narratives. Media bias extends beyond topic selection to narrative framing, reinforcing ideological positions (Chen et al., 2020). Recent literacy discussions have been shaped by journalists like Emily Hanford, emphasising structured phonics while sidelining alternative approaches (Pondiscio & Fletcher, 2024). The media often presents a biased, negative view of educational issues (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2023; Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Hattam et al., 2009; Snyder, 2008), creating a skewed understanding and unjustly blaming schools for perceived crises. This fuels the "reading crisis" narrative, necessitating critical examination of the media's role in literacy discourse. Analysing

media representation is therefore crucial for understanding the discursive framing of education (Mockler, 2024).

Australian educational policy varies by state/territory. While New South Wales and South Australia followed England's lead by adopting synthetic phonics, Victoria maintained a flexible pedagogical model until 2024, empowering educators to tailor teaching methods to the unique needs of their school communities. In support of this flexibility, the Victorian government launched a comprehensive online literacy teaching toolkit aimed at enriching teachers' instructional strategies across educational levels. However, the toolkit's inclusive approach in presenting various ways to teach phonics faced criticism for allegedly blurring the lines between structured, evidence-based methods and less systematic strategies and for creating confusion, potentially undermining the effectiveness of reading instruction (Hunter et al., 2024). The backdrop of heated pedagogical debate and media scrutiny sets the stage for this research, which explores public engagement with media portrayals of the phonics debate in Victoria.

This study critically examines editorial sections dealing with educational issues in the Australian newspaper *The Age*. *The Age* is one of Australia's oldest and most popular newspapers that is owned by Nine Media. Following a merger with Fairfax, the paper tends to include left-leaning broadsheets, which are longer in length and more formal in tone than rival tabloids in the Australian media market (Fenech & Wilkins, 2019). The investigation centres on how narratives surrounding literacy instructional approaches, particularly synthetic phonics, which is part of the code-based literacy teaching approach, and balanced literacy, are framed within the media and how these portrayals resonate with the Victorian public. Grounded in Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA), the news media genre perspective, and systemic functional linguistics (SFL; Halliday, 1994), this research aims to illuminate the intricate relationship between media discourse and public discourse, enhancing understanding of the media's influence on public opinion and educational discourse in the context of ongoing debates on the "reading wars" and perceptions surrounding the "reading crisis." The targeted focus of this investigation on a small number of articles provides the avenue for examining the role of language in the media's discursive construction of education (Mockler, 2024), in this case, literacy education.

The findings raise questions about how these narratives shape public understanding and policy decisions regarding literacy education. While the media presents synthetic phonics as a necessary corrective to perceived educational failure, public discourse suggests a more complex reality, where interpretations of literacy instruction extend beyond the binary framing of approaches to teaching reading. As literacy instruction in Australia continues to evolve, the implications of media-driven discourse on policy and public discourse warrant further examination.

To understand the editorial framing of literacy instruction, it is necessary to first consider how "evidence" is constructed and selectively cited in discussions of reading instruction. This provides an important context for how authority and legitimacy are established in the editorials, and it informs the linguistic and ideological analysis that follows.

"Selective" Evidence in Reading Instruction

The application and interpretation of scientific evidence in education, particularly in reading instruction, is a complex issue. While evidence-based approaches are often invoked in policy discussions, what qualifies as "evidence" is not always uniformly agreed upon (Derewianka et al., 2024; Green et al., 2024; Semingson & Kerns, 2021), leading to varied applications and conclusions in practice. Media discourse frequently presents claims about literacy instruction as being grounded in "evidence," yet without specifying the nature of the research being referenced. Although a range of research methods are employed in literacy education, the evidence that is implicitly aligned with media discourse tends to centre on quantitative measures, such as test

results, randomised controlled trials (RCTs), meta-analyses, and findings from controlled experimental studies—methodologies widely regarded as the gold standard in scientific research. These forms of evidence are frequently cited in policy discussions and likely form the basis of the media's broad claims about what "research shows" in literacy instruction. However, their selective privileging of evidence constructs a narrow and incomplete view of literacy research, often sidelining qualitative studies, practitioner expertise, and classroom-based research, which offer critical insights into real-world teaching and learning.

The following sections critique the limitations of RCTs, meta-analyses, and laboratory studies in literacy instruction research. While valuable, these methods face challenges in direct classroom application. Issues include ethical and contextual constraints in educational RCTs, overgeneralisation risks in meta-analyses, and difficulties translating controlled studies to real-world teaching.

Randomised Controlled Trials in Educational Research

While highly valued in fields like medicine, RCTs encounter distinct challenges in educational settings due to the diverse and dynamic nature of learning environments. Unlike clinical trials, controlling variables in educational settings proves difficult. Children differ in backgrounds, levels of interest, motivation, and learning needs, making it nearly impossible to form uniform groups necessary for traditional RCT designs. Furthermore, ethical and practical concerns hinder the random assignment of students to specific teaching methods, as it could unfairly disadvantage certain groups (Pawson, 2006).

Moreover, defining a "control" condition in educational research adds further complications. Unlike medical trials that use placebos, educational research lacks a clear equivalent. Should the control group continue with the standard curriculum, or should they be withheld from certain interventions? This ambiguity makes it challenging to interpret "effect size," complicating the assessment of an intervention's true impact. For example, the Fresh Start literacy intervention demonstrated progress in the treatment group (Gorard et al., 2016), but further analysis revealed baseline imbalances that distorted the results, raising questions about the program's actual effectiveness (Wrigley, 2018).

Meta-Analysis in Literacy Education

Meta-analysis, widely used in literacy education research (Clinton, 2019; Graham et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000; Peng et al., 2018), can oversimplify complex educational issues. Aggregating dissimilar studies may lead to misleading conclusions, ignoring contextual nuances (Simpson, 2017; Wrigley, 2018). Another major concern is overgeneralisation (Wrigley, 2018). This concern becomes apparent when nuanced findings from varied instructional methods are oversimplified into broad educational policies. For instance, Hattie's (2009) work, while highlighting varied impacts of different teaching approaches, demonstrates how overgeneralisation can disregard valuable strategies like inquiry-based learning in a specific educational context. Though less effective than direct instruction for immediate fact recall, inquiry-based methods are shown to foster superior long-term understanding and application (Hepworth & Walton, 2009), underscoring the critical need for nuanced interpretation in educational research and policy.

Additionally, meta-analyses can suffer from publication bias, where studies demonstrating positive or significant effects are more likely to be published than those showing negative or nonsignificant outcomes in a biased sample (Schmidt & Hunter, 2015). This suggests that such bias is highly likely to distort effect size estimation and lead to false-positive results, threatening the generalisability of meta-analytical results and skewing the perceived effectiveness of educational interventions, especially when studies have small to medium sample sizes (Suggate, 2016; Thornton & Lee, 2000). As Torgerson et al. (2019) highlighted, predominant reviews on phonics teaching that report positive research results may overlook studies with less favourable

outcomes and provide limited statistical power to identify the effect of phonics on group differences.

Direct Application of Laboratory Results to Classrooms

The transfer of laboratory findings to classroom contexts presents considerable challenges, as unlike laboratories, educational environments are inherently multifaceted and dynamic, influenced by student differences, teacher skills, and socio-economic backgrounds. The history of educational research provides instructive examples of risks associated with inappropriate application of scientific findings. The misinterpretation of Cattell's (1886) research on word recognition, which found that readers recognised words faster than individual letters, was interpreted to mean that words are read as whole rather than individual letters. This pedagogical interpretation engendered the promotion of whole-word memorisation techniques instead of decoding skills. This approach sidelined the critical role of phonetic decoding skills in early reading development, a misunderstanding rectified many years later by Adams (1994), Chall (1967), and the National Reading Panel (2000), which affirmed the value of systematic phonics instruction. Moreover, the success of educational programs can vary significantly depending on "implementation variance" or how they are implemented. This variability emphasises the need for educational strategies to be adapted to specific classroom contexts, accounting for factors like teacher training, available resources, and student engagement levels.

Shanahan (2020) highlights the complexities of applying research findings to teaching strategies, citing Cattell's study to illustrate how misinterpretations can lead to ineffective or inappropriate instructional methods. Similarly, Goodman's (1965) advocacy for a multi-cueing approach was challenged by Stanovich (1980), who argued that this method could be a compensatory tactic for struggling readers rather than a universally beneficial strategy. Furthermore, misconceptions such as supposed links between reading difficulties and left-handedness, as debunked by Kushner (2017), illustrate the potential detrimental consequences of misapplying research. Collectively, these examples underscore the critical need for careful evaluation and application of research within complex classroom settings.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics

Over the past three decades, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has become a key theoretical and analytical framework used in educational research (Rogers et al., 2005; Rogers et al., 2016). CDA is a powerful means for examining how discourse functions as a medium of communication and a tool for reinforcing power and ideology. Originating from critical linguistics, CDA transcends description to reveal the production and implications of discourse, emphasising the importance of uncovering power dynamics embedded within language. The term *critical* signifies an approach focused on exposing and challenging the ideological foundations of discourse, questioning what is often perceived as given, revealing and critiquing how language sustains social inequality and perpetuates power imbalances.

Critical analysis of media discourse occupies a central place in CDA and includes prominent studies such as Fairclough (1989), Fowler et al. (1979), and van Dijk (1988, 2015). These studies show how language can be used to enhance or downplay negative actions. Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional (3D) model presents significant methodological advances in contextualising language analysis by elucidating the complex relationship between language use, social structures, power, and ideologies. The model dissects discourse into three interrelated dimensions: (i) the text, spoken or written; (ii) discursive practices, including production, distribution, and consumption of texts; and (iii) social practices, which are broader societal norms and power relations that influence and become influenced by discourse.

CDA frequently intersects with systemic functional linguistics (SFL), as both explore the relationship between language and social contexts. Developed by Halliday (1978, 1994), SFL views language as a tool for meaning-making through the components of registers such as tenor,

mode, and field, each corresponding to the interpersonal, textual, and ideational metafunctions respectively. These components reveal how language choices shape social relationships, convey communicative purposes, and align with particular contexts, making SFL integral to CDA (Flowerdew, 2008; Parvin, 2017).

Research using CDA and SFL reveal how media discourse perpetuates societal biases and power dynamics. For example, studies by Baker et al. (2013) and Potter (2016) show how language choices in news reporting reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies. Young and Harrison (2004) emphasise that both CDA and SFL view grammar as purposeful and shaped by sociocultural contexts, which both influence and are influenced by discursive events. This alignment is evident in early studies, such as Fowler et al. (1979), which reveal how journalists craft selective "angles" in events to shape reader perceptions (Matthiessen, 2012). Furthermore, Martin (2000) notes that SFL brings precision and transparency to CDA, enabling a deeper analysis of the linguistic choices that contribute to media bias. Together, CDA and SFL offer valuable insights into the interplay between language, power, and ideology in media texts.

By applying these frameworks, researchers have examined how Australian newspapers shape public perceptions of social realities, particularly through the representation of social groups. Teo's (2000) study demonstrates how elements of SFL, such as lexical cohesion, are used in Australian newspapers to depict Vietnamese migrants as criminalised "others." This study highlights how linguistic choices in media texts contribute to constructing ethnic minorities in ways that align with prevailing societal biases. The combined approach of CDA and SFL underscores the potential of language to influence societal attitudes, making these frameworks essential tools for analysing media discourse.

Methodology

This study investigates narratives surrounding early literacy instruction in the state of Victoria, Australia, focusing on discursive representations of synthetic phonics and balanced literacy within editorials of *The Age*, Victoria's leading newspaper. Set against the backdrop of the contentious "reading wars" and debates over synthetic phonics, this research utilises Fairclough's 3D model and Halliday's SFL as theoretical and analytical frameworks. CDA and SFL are both applied within a constructivist framework, acknowledging that meaning-making involves interpretation and judgement. SFL contributes by providing a detailed linguistic framework for analysing meaning-making in discourse, focusing on how language constructs social reality through lexical cohesion and evaluative language.

The analysis centres on three editorials from 2023 (See Table 1), chosen based on their significant relevance to the debate on synthetic phonics and balanced literacy and the notable public engagement they attracted, evident in their comment sections. This strategic choice permits an in-depth exploration of how linguistic constructs employed by the media frame public discussions and attitudes toward different literacy instructional methodologies.

Table 1

Selected Editorials from The Age

Date (Year 2023)	Title	Author
August 28th	The 'hopeless' phonics test failing Victorian students but costing millions	Robyn Grace
August 29th	Our phonics-phobic state government is creating a generation of kids who can't read	Jo Rogers
October 27th	As other states back phonics, experts say, Victorian kids could be left behind	Robyn Grace

This research employs Fairclough's 3D model to analyse how discourses on balanced literacy and synthetic phonics are produced, distributed, and consumed by the media in ways that may shape public discussions. Fairclough's model structures discourse analysis across three dimensions: (1) Production, exploring how discourse is crafted through language choices and ideological framing; (2) Distribution, examining how the media circulates discourse to reinforce or contest dominant narratives; and (3) Consumption, investigating how audiences engage with and interpret editorial discourse.

SFL complements this framework by offering linguistic tools like lexical cohesion and evaluative language analysis. Lexical cohesion examines how patterns of word choices contribute to thematic development, and evaluative language analysis investigates how attitudes, judgements, and emotions are expressed through particular words and phrases. These tools enable a nuanced exploration of how editorial texts construct meaning, circulate ideologies, and influence discourse on literacy instruction.

Within the production phase, two levels of analysis are undertaken. First, the headlines, leads, and key quotations are examined through the lens of news values and relevance theory, to identify how specific language choices foreground or frame particular aspects of the literacy debate. Second, the main body of the text is analysed for lexical cohesion, identifying patterns of lexical usage that contrast synthetic phonics and balanced literacy. The distribution phase focuses on how editorial discourse circulates within media networks, shaping broader public discussions. This includes examining intertextual references, citations of expert opinions, and recurring motifs that reinforce particular perspectives on literacy policy and instruction.

In the consumption phase, public engagement with the editorials is analysed by identifying thematic patterns within the public comments. Contrasting public responses with the editorial content offers a comprehensive view of the discourse process—tracing the evolution of narratives from message crafting (production), dissemination (distribution), and audience reception and interpretation (consumption). This phase illuminates how media texts, as intermediaries, facilitate the shaping and reshaping of discourses on literacy instruction, highlighting the interplay between media influence and public opinion.

By applying CDA's 3D model alongside SFL's linguistic toolkit, this study provides a systematic analysis of how media discourse constructs, frames, and circulates ideological perspectives on literacy education. This methodological approach provides insights into how language frames and circulates ideological perspectives on literacy instruction, positioning CDA and SFL as vital tools for examining media discourse.

Results

Production and Distribution of Discourses in the Editorials

This analysis begins with examining how *The Age* editorials contribute to the production and distribution of discourses on early literacy instruction in Victoria. Applying Fairclough's 3D model, it explores how editorial language choices lead to the production of public discourses surrounding synthetic phonics and balanced literacy, how dominant media structures (consisting of popular newspapers like *The Age*) promote certain perspectives over others pertaining to these discourses. The following sections detail these strategies, beginning with how headlines and leads frame the literacy debate.

Framing the Literacy Crisis: Headlines and Leads as Strategic Devices

This section examines how headlines and leads frame the literacy debate as a Victorian crisis, using emotional language and interstate comparisons to critique government inaction and heighten urgency. This analysis draws on concepts such as news values, the criteria that make certain stories newsworthy such as negativity, timeliness, and impact (Bednarek & Caple, 2014), and relevance theory, which posits that an utterance is considered "relevant" to the extent that its positive cognitive effects are large and the mental processing effects small (Sperber & Wilson,

1986). News headlines are designed to optimise relevance by maximising their cognitive impact while minimising the effort required to understand their implications. This theory suggests that readers' decisions to click on a headline are directly related to perceived interest in the topic and inversely related to the cognitive effort needed to contextualise it in a personally meaningful way. Headlines that balance these aspects can effectively attract readers by promising useful information with minimal mental effort, while enhancing newsworthiness and sensationalism to boost audience engagement.

Headlines and leads condense complex stories, reflecting a newspaper's ideology and guiding reader interpretation. They prioritise critical information, setting the tone through strategic lexical choices that resonate with readers' prior knowledge. Cohesion is achieved through repeated and related words, reinforcing key themes. The selective emphasis on word choices and framing techniques shapes readers' engagement with the issue, subtly reinforcing ideological positions. The following analysis examines how these linguistic and structural elements, alongside strategic lexical choices, contribute to both compelling storytelling and the ideological framing of literacy instruction that reinforces specific viewpoints.

Analysis of the selected editorial headlines (see Table 1) highlight how they strategically frame the literacy issue as a distinctively Victorian crisis, using language that stokes fear and fosters a sense of personal connection. By naming *Victorian kids* and contrasting Victoria with other states, the headlines localise the crisis while implying broader governmental neglect. Collective terms like *our* and *kids* encourage readers to view the issue as a community concern, reinforcing a shared sense of urgency.

Emotionally charged language, including terms such as *hopeless* and *could be left behind*, conveys imminent consequences, positioning readers to see government actions as inadequate. Phrases like *experts say* add credibility, while economic references such as *costing millions* link fiscal responsibility to educational policy failures. This layered approach goes beyond informing; it connects readers' anxieties about education to a critique of governance, shaping the issue as both a localised and systemic problem.

Contrasting Victoria's literacy approach with other states, the headlines further construct implicit conflict, reinforcing a narrative of failure and urgency. Grace (2023b) presents Victoria as lagging behind, positioning it within a competitive framework that casts its policies as inadequate. The authority claimed by *experts say* strengthens this critique, suggesting that the state is disregarding widely accepted, evidence-based practices. Such comparisons not only evoke a sense of urgency but also situate Victoria within a broader narrative of failure, designed to invoke disappointment and foster alignment against perceived inefficacy, encouraging readers to view Victoria's approach as an outlier in national literacy education. Similarly, Grace (2023a) describes the phonics test as *hopeless*, while Rogers (2023) emphasises the state's *phonics-phobic* stance, implying that the crisis is a product of policy negligence rather than external factors. This vocabulary acts as a vehicle for simplifying complex issues, embedding an ideological critique within an emotionally resonant framework that encourages readers to perceive themselves as part of an informed, critical audience aligned against government actions. These headlines encapsulate a mix of urgency, disappointment, and negativity, constructing an accessible yet ideologically potent narrative that implicitly assigns blame while intensifying readers' engagement.

Hedging and Scepticism: Moderating Accusations in Editorial Leads

The editorial leads sustain the critical stance established in the headlines while incorporating cautious language that tempers the immediacy of accusations. The analysis examines the following editorial leads:

> *A mandatory phonics test introduced in Victoria this year... may have too few words to be useful and could be conducted too early in the school year to detect problems...* – 28th August (Grace, 2023a)

> *It is puzzling to read that according to the 2023 NAPLAN results, 28.9% of Victorian school children are struggling to meet literacy and numeracy proficiencies…* – 29th August (Rogers, 2023)
>
> *The reading standards of Victorian students could noticeably decline unless the state government adopts a consistent teaching approach...* – 27th October (Grace, 2023b)

Words like *could* and *may* evoke plausible concern, prompting readers to consider potential consequences rather than definitive outcomes. This rhetorical choice lends a tone of measured critique, presenting the arguments as reflections rather than accusations. Similarly, phrases such as *It is puzzling* introduce a contemplative stance that avoids outright condemnation, subtly prompting readers to question the adequacy of government actions. Embedding caution within the language used, the leads create an aura of credibility and objectivity, making the critique appear more rational and persuasive.

Beyond softening direct criticism, the leads construct implicit cause-and-effect relationships, positioning government inaction as a key factor in educational decline. By associating the decline in literacy standards with inconsistent policies and low NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) scores with ineffective phonics testing, readers are encouraged to perceive an interconnected chain of events that implicitly suggests government responsibility. This subtle causality fosters an interpretive stance where the literacy crisis appears as an outcome of systemic neglect. Readers are invited to infer these links as credible, feeling like they are arriving at conclusions independently. This structure taps into existing public concerns and constructs a framework in which the government's role in educational failure feels self-evident, though the connections are never explicitly laid out. This approach engages the reader in a more sophisticated, active role, positioning them as evaluative participants in assessing the government's culpability.

By extending the narratives introduced in the headlines, the leads intensify the sense of systemic inadequacy. Rogers (2023) highlights the NAPLAN results as evidence of governmental failure, painting the literacy crisis as a symptom of broader policy failures. Grace (2023b) also underscores this by emphasising the potential decline in reading standards, aligning with the alarmist tone of the headlines. Grace (2023a) broadens the critique of the phonics test's design and timing, casting a shadow over the government's overall competency in implementing educational policies. Each lead continues the themes of crisis, disappointment, and urgency, mirroring the headlines' framing. The accessible yet authoritative language transforms policy critiques into terms that resonate on an emotional level, positioning readers as witnesses to systemic issues that demand attention. By aligning with journalistic values of urgency and negativity, these leads reinforce a perception of the literacy crisis as a reflection of entrenched policy failures, inviting readers to engage critically and emotionally with the state's approach to education.

Strategic Use of Quotations: Creating Credibility and Casting Doubt

This section analyses how editorial writers strategically use double quotation marks to subtly project their perspectives. The editorials demonstrate a predominant reliance on direct and indirect quotations to construct a narrative that seemingly exudes factuality and authority. As Tuchman (1978) articulates, quotations from newsmakers confer incontrovertibility on reported facts. However, this journalistic practice, while lending credibility, is a gatekeeping tool that privileges voices in positions of power and marginalises the underrepresented (Scannell, 1992). This selective quotation approach silences minority perspectives, contributing to a one-sided view.

Rogers's (2023) tactical use of double quotation marks serves various purposes. The term "science of reading" is quoted to either underscore its significance or highlight the public's unfamiliarity with the concept, thereby setting a tone of authority or alienation. Furthermore,

Rogers employs quotation marks to mock the government's portrayal of literacy outcomes as "phenomenal NAPLAN results," undermining the official stance with sarcasm. This tactic questions the credibility of the government's claims and steers public sentiment against the portrayed optimism, thus shaping a narrative that is critical of existing literacy instruction strategies.

On the other hand, Grace, in both her editorials, utilises double quotation marks more frequently to cite direct speech, employing them 28 times across two editorials (Grace, 2023a, 2023b). Her strategy includes using quotation marks for sarcasm, evidenced in her reference to the government's description of Victoria's NAPLAN achievements as an "outstanding job" and in her mocking the state's flexible approach to teaching as "choos[ing] their own adventure" (Grace, 2023b). This sarcastic employment of double quotation marks serves to discredit the government's strategies and align readers with the author's critical perspective. Grace (2023a) also employs double quotes to emphasise her disapproval, describing Victoria's phonics test as *hopeless* and *time-consuming* to further delegitimise the state's educational policies.

Furthermore, Grace's editorials exhibit a skewed portrayal of expert opinions. The editorials feature 22 direct quotes from a diverse array of professionals, including a professor of cognitive psychology, a director from a literacy centre, a founder of a dyslexia association, alongside disgruntled teachers and principals, all advocating for synthetic phonics. Conversely, the perspective favouring a balanced literacy approach is markedly underrepresented, evidenced by a solitary quotation from one school principal who utilises both approaches. This imbalanced citation practice favours a phonics-focused standpoint, thus sidelining alternative literacy approaches and their advocates.

Lexical Choices and Ideological Positioning in Editorial Narratives

This section examines how textual coherence is achieved in the main body of each editorial through lexical cohesion, which constructs four distinct motifs that negatively characterise balanced literacy approaches vis-à-vis synthetic phonics. It analyses how lexical choices occurring throughout each editorial create an underlying "structure of relations" that become "mutually accessible and relevant" to the readers and editorial writers (Teo, 2000, p. 33). Analysing lexical cohesion reveals underlying ideologies about literacy approaches embedded within each editorial by its writers. These are presented in Table 2 and Table 3, which contain excerpts from each editorial and lexical choices (in bolded text) used in each excerpt to construct motifs.

In Table 2, verb and noun groups from Rogers' (2023) editorial work together to emphasise a literacy crisis. Terms like *can't read*, *illiterate children*, and *school illiteracy* construct a narrative of educational failure, while phrases such as *one in four Victorian students who cannot read proficiently* amplify the perceived urgency. Additionally, verbs denoting struggle—*fall[ing] behind*, *downplaying*, and *ignoring illiteracy*—are linked with noun groups that suggest emotional harm, such as *psychological damage*, *poor self-esteem*, *anxiety*, and *depression*, casting balanced literacy as exacerbating not only academic but also psychological issues. These repeated references to reading deficiencies (e.g., *illiteracy*, *lagging behind*) and psychological impacts (e.g., *stress*, *anxiety*, *behavioural issues*) frame balanced literacy as a "threat." This persistent association constructs balanced literacy as a "menace" with broader societal implications, implicitly positioning synthetic phonics as a necessary corrective to these alleged failings.

The lexical choices in Table 2 from Grace (2023b) portray balanced literacy as a deviant instructional method, misaligned with normative literacy practices observed in other states. A binary opposition is established between Victoria's literacy approach and the perceived status quo, emphasised through terms like *other* and *own* which underscore the divide. Balanced literacy is depicted as unregulated and inconsistent, diverging from research-backed methods and lacking uniformity. Phrases such as *whatever you like* and *whichever ones* convey the notion of the Victorian

government's laissez-faire attitude towards literacy and further question the validity of balanced literacy within the Australian educational context.

Table 2

Lexical Choices in Editorial Excerpts that Characterise Balanced Literacy as a Threat and as Deviant

Balanced literacy as a threat (Rogers, 2023)	Balanced literacy as deviant (Grace, 2023b)
creating a generation of kids who **can't read**	As **other states** back phonics
one in four Victorian students who **cannot read proficiently**	**Unless** the state government adopts a **consistent** teaching approach
School **illiteracy**	"choose their **own** adventure"
illiterate children suffer **psychological damage**, **poor self-esteem**, **anxiety**, and **depression** from **feeling "dumb"**	**didn't follow the lead of other**, more **prescriptive**, states
struggling with literacy	**devolved autonomy** down to individual schools
No wonder teachers are so **stressed**	tolerating high levels of **variability**
behaviour **problems**	allows primary schools to **choose their own** literacy strategy
they begin to **fall behind**	practices that **don't align** with reading science research
must stop **downplaying** or **ignoring illiteracy**	students with **dysregulated** behaviour
	'do **whatever you like**'
	allowing them to choose their **own** path
	Use **whichever ones** appeal to you
	has made it **impossible to compare** the state's results to **other** jurisdictions

Table 3 continues this negative portrayal by framing balanced literacy as futile and ineffective, as seen in Grace (2023a). Negative adjectives and noun phrases—*hopeless*, *utter waste of time*, *nowhere near*—emphasise its perceived shortcomings. Through such language, Grace frames balanced literacy as not only incapable of improving literacy rates but as a fundamentally failed approach that generates inconsequential results, disappointing both teachers and students.

Table 3

Lexical Choices in Editorial Excerpts that Frame Balanced Literacy as Useless and Inferior

Balanced literacy as useless (Grace, 2023a)	Synthetic phonics as superior to balanced literacy (Grace, 2023a, 2023b; Rogers, 2023)
'hopeless'	**evidence-based** space
would have been better off using the free phonics test	more **meaningful**
"hopeless"	**costs** schools much **less**
little meaningful data	**good, valid, effective** assessment
"nowhere near" the level they were expecting	**doesn't actually cost** anything
waste of time	**best** practice
just a **tick and flick**	reading **success**
utter waste of time	**improved** our academic results and student engagement
we did it and have **never looked at it again**	**good** processes

Balanced literacy as useless (Grace, 2023a)	Synthetic phonics as superior to balanced literacy (Grace, 2023a, 2023b; Rogers, 2023)
attempt to put **lipstick on the pig**	**high quality** reading instruction
not an **adequate** sample	**best evidence-based** learning and teaching practices
would result in **over- and under-identification** of children with literacy issues	**scientifically evidence-based best** practice
high **false positive** and **false negative** rates **don't make the cut**	**evidence-based** intervention
	scientific evidenced-based best teaching practice
	evidence-based teaching practice

Table 3 also presents lexical choices across all three editorials that depict synthetic phonics as superior to balanced literacy. Phrases like *evidence-based*, *scientifically... best practice*, and *high quality* reflect a motif of synthetic phonics as trustworthy, financially beneficial, and aligned with educational excellence. These terms glorify synthetic phonics by highlighting its basis in scientific evidence, its positive impact on academic results, and its cost-effectiveness, implicitly suggesting that balanced literacy is the inferior approach. In juxtaposing synthetic phonics with balanced literacy, the latter is framed as an approach lacking rigorous foundations, offering no tangible successes, and placing a financial burden on educational institutions. This comparison subtly conveys that balanced literacy is undeserving of serious consideration within Australian education, echoing the purposeful and pervasive employment of lexical terms in Table 2 to cast a negative light on balanced literacy.

Contextualising the Argument

It is essential to contextualise the critique of Victoria's literacy instructional approach, which is strongly stated in the editorials, within Victoria's reading achievements. Despite criticisms, Victoria consistently secures high scores in the reading section of the NAPLAN, challenging the editorials' negative portrayal of balanced literacy. Figure 1 underscores Victoria's leadership in the 2023 NAPLAN Year 3 reading results, with a substantial portion of students rated as strong (50%) and exceeding (21.2%; ACARA, 2023). Furthermore, the same figure shows that Victoria reported the lowest percentage of Year 3 students needing additional support, with only 6.3% in the needs additional support (NAS) category and 20% in the developing category. This pattern continues into Year 5, evidencing a reduction in the percentages of students underperforming, which questions the sweeping criticisms of Victoria's phonics strategy.

In discussing the fourth-grade slump (Chall et al., 1990; Chall & Jacobs, 2003), a concept highlighting a critical point where students might lag behind due to the complexities of reading texts, it is crucial to note that this phenomenon was not evidently mirrored in Victoria's context. The slump underscores the limitations of the balanced literacy approach and the importance of phonics-based decoding skills for navigating challenging texts, as outlined by Buckingham (2016). However, contrary to expectations, Victoria's NAPLAN data in Figure 1 indicate a marginal decrease in the percentages of Grade 5 students in the NAS and developing bands, challenging the presumption of a widespread decline in literacy standards after the early grades. This suggests that, despite critiques, Victoria's educational strategies might be mitigating the expected decline typically associated with the fourth-grade slump, indicating a nuanced success in the region's literacy outcomes.
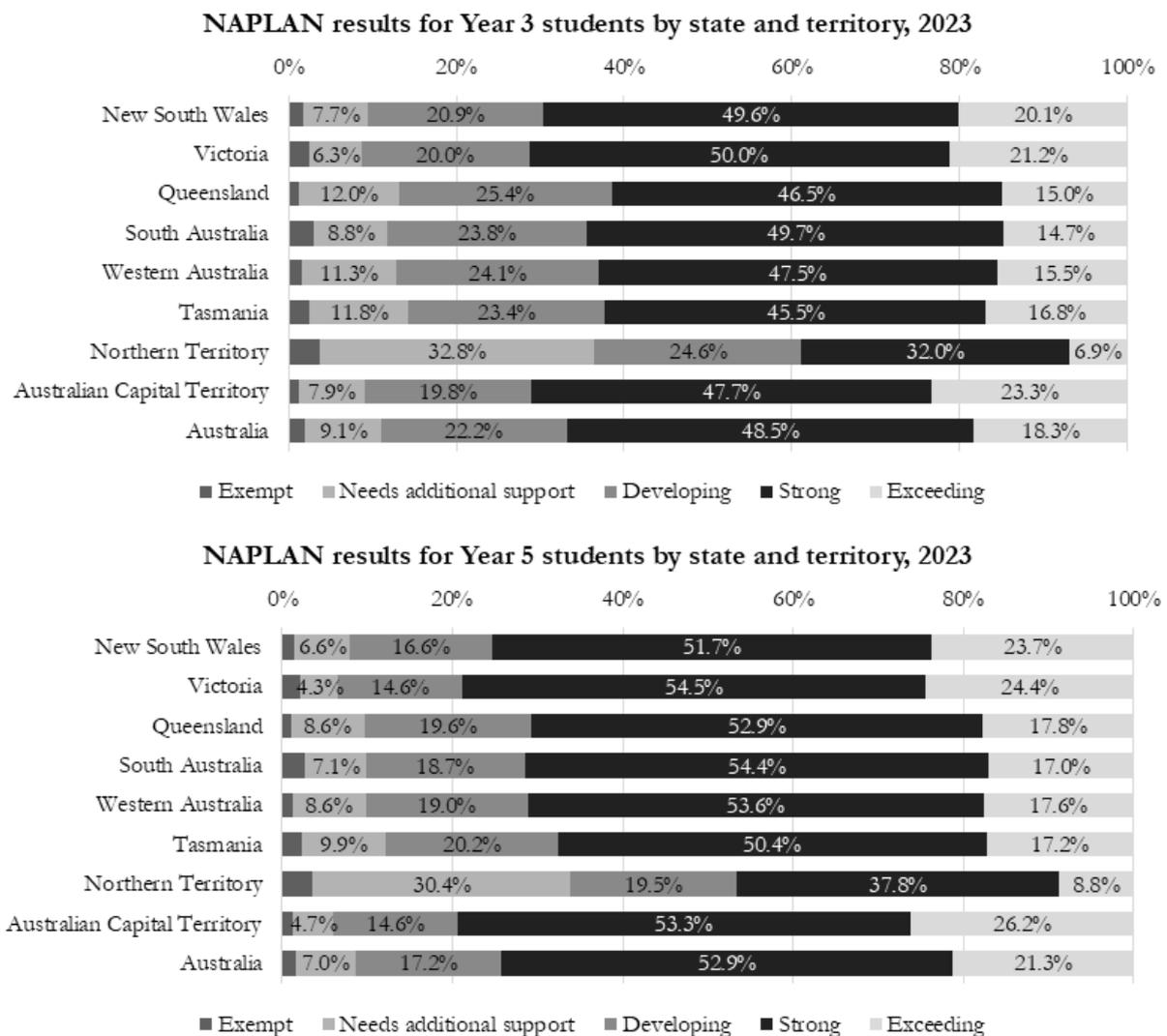
Additionally, the critique of Victoria's *phonics-phobic* statement requires further examination, especially in light of the Victorian Department of Education's Literacy Teaching Toolkit (LTT). Prior to July 2024, the LTT presented an evidence-based perspective on various phonics instruction methods. Although synthetic phonics has proven effective particularly for

students with dyslexia or reading difficulties, its universal application to students who show typical or exceeding levels of reading progression remains inconclusive (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022a). The LTT critically recognised the crucial role of phonics knowledge in aiding the development of early readers. It also considered the diverse strengths and limitations of different phonics strategies in meeting varied student needs.

The blatant call for phonics teaching in each editorial sidelined issues surrounding the teaching of synthetic phonics. While synthetic phonics has demonstrated effectiveness, its most significant impact appears confined to a particular subset of students. *The Reading Guarantee* report (Hunter et al., 2024) posits that, in aiming for a 90% reading achievement rate (which 20% of Victorian students do not meet), a targeted synthetic phonics approach could be optimally beneficial for about 10% of students within the lower-performing bands. This targeted approach underlines the contention that the universal application of synthetic phonics requires further scrutiny. The implication is that while synthetic phonics can be valuable, its indiscriminate application may not address the nuanced needs of the broader student population, suggesting that a customised approach might be more effective in enhancing literacy outcomes.

Figure 1

NAPLAN Achievement for Years 3 and 5 Students in Reading by State and Territory, 2023

NAPLAN results for Year 3 students by state and territory, 2023

State/Territory	Exempt	Needs additional support	Developing	Strong	Exceeding
New South Wales		7.7%	20.9%	49.6%	20.1%
Victoria		6.3%	20.0%	50.0%	21.2%
Queensland		12.0%	25.4%	46.5%	15.0%
South Australia		8.8%	23.8%	49.7%	14.7%
Western Australia		11.3%	24.1%	47.5%	15.5%
Tasmania		11.8%	23.4%	45.5%	16.8%
Northern Territory		32.8%	24.6%	32.0%	6.9%
Australian Capital Territory		7.9%	19.8%	47.7%	23.3%
Australia		9.1%	22.2%	48.5%	18.3%

■ Exempt ■ Needs additional support ■ Developing ■ Strong ■ Exceeding

NAPLAN results for Year 5 students by state and territory, 2023

State/Territory	Exempt	Needs additional support	Developing	Strong	Exceeding
New South Wales		6.6%	16.6%	51.7%	23.7%
Victoria		4.3%	14.6%	54.5%	24.4%
Queensland		8.6%	19.6%	52.9%	17.8%
South Australia		7.1%	18.7%	54.4%	17.0%
Western Australia		8.6%	19.0%	53.6%	17.6%
Tasmania		9.9%	20.2%	50.4%	17.2%
Northern Territory		30.4%	19.5%	37.8%	8.8%
Australian Capital Territory		4.7%	14.6%	53.3%	26.2%
Australia		7.0%	17.2%	52.9%	21.3%

■ Exempt ■ Needs additional support ■ Developing ■ Strong ■ Exceeding

Public Consumption of Editorials

Building on the analysis of production and distribution, this section examines how the editorial discourse is consumed and negotiated by the public. It explores how readers engage with, interpret, and respond to the editorial content through comment sections, highlighting the transition from media framing to audience reception whereby mediatised discourses about literacy instruction are reproduced, reformulated, or challenged by everyday civilians.

This section examines 117 comments from the public (81 from Rogers's editorial and 36 from Grace's editorials), identifying recurring themes and sentiments. By contrasting the public's responses with the more polished language of the editorials, this analysis reveals the nuanced relationship between media narratives and public engagements. It demonstrates how editorial viewpoints shape discussions and policies on literacy instruction, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between media representation and educational discourse.

Conflicting Perspectives on Literacy Instruction

A significant theme across the comments is the ongoing debate between phonics and balanced literacy approaches. For instance, Oscar (pseudonym) champions the phonics approach with confidence:

> The science is well and truly in, and has been for over a decade...The refusal to discard nonsense such as "balanced literacy" is a betrayal of our youngest citizens. Enough is enough; let's get on with using teaching strategies that actually work.

This comment aligns with the perspective presented in the newspaper reports. Emotive nouns like *refusal* and *betrayal* reflects the tone taken by the comment writer. Similarly, Toby takes the same stance and advocates for synthetic phonics by asserting that "[their] better half specialises in early literacy and dyslexia... it is not phonics but rather synthetic phonics which should be taught at the start of school."

These public comments reflect a frustration with balanced literacy, presenting phonics as a proven method. Oscar and Toby imply that balanced literacy fails to meet educational standards and should be abandoned in favour of evidence-backed phonics. However, opposition exists, as seen in Thomas43's perspective: "Phonics has its place, but there is a lot more to teaching reading... many words can't be taught by phonics." Similarly, Jim Nbibs critiques a narrow focus on phonics, arguing that "there is no long-term evidence of lasting reading competency... when beginners are subject to Direct Instruction," highlighting the importance of broader literacy experiences beyond passing "standardized tests." These perspectives challenge the one-size-fits-all view of phonics, emphasising diverse approaches to literacy.

Parental and Teacher Responsibility

Many commenters stress parental involvement in literacy development. Marc notes the need for parents to "foster an environment where reading and writing is encouraged," while Rivelo critiques parents' lack of commitment: "Parents are also the issue... Many parents couldn't be bothered." Rider bluntly attributes literacy success to parental responsibility: "If a kid can't read and write it's their parents' fault." In contrast, Cath points out that "many parents will have literacy issues themselves... the reasons why this might not happen aren't straightforward." FrostCat broadens the focus by attributing school illiteracy to systemic issues: "School illiteracy is no fault of children or their parents... they have to follow their state's English curriculum." These varied comments reveal the complexity of assigning responsibility, suggesting that while parental involvement is crucial, educational policies and systemic factors also significantly impact literacy outcomes.

Critiques of Educational Policy and Governmental Decisions

Frustration with government policies is a recurring theme. Clara95 questions: "Why is the Andrews government so resistant?... this is children's foundation for life and success we're talking about." Emily echoes this sentiment, attributing literacy challenges to government restrictions on synthetic phonics: "28.9% of Victorian children could not read proficiently... Schools and teachers are wonderful but are being denied evidence-based knowledge." Seb's sarcasm reflects a broader discontent with political figures: "Why is it always Dan? Good grief!" The comments collectively criticise the Victorian government's perceived reluctance to adopt evidence-based approaches to teaching reading, positioning this resistance as a major barrier to literacy improvement.

Personal Stories and Experiences

Media portrayals of the phonics debate have spurred a variety of personal anecdotes. Tess endorses phonics by describing her grandchildren's success: "My grandchildren... are reading and writing very well... all six are reading and writing very well for their ages. The three schools are all using a phonics-based approach, which I personally think is the better way to learn to read." Conversely, Amelia shares a positive experience with an alternative method, "My daughter started primary school in the mid 80's... I introduced the Spalding Method... she has been an avid reader." These stories highlight how personal experiences contribute to the debate, showing that while media narratives often promote one view, individuals bring forth diverse perspectives rooted in personal successes.

The media's portrayal of literacy instruction, particularly the emphasis on specific teaching methods, not only shapes public perception but also ignites a dialogue that encompasses a spectrum of experiences and beliefs. Personal anecdotes shared in response to the editorials challenge, affirm, or expand upon the media's narratives, illustrating the multifaceted nature of literacy instruction and the impact of media representation on public opinion.

Discussion

Editorial headlines are crafted to maximise reader engagement, balancing cognitive impact with ease of comprehension. The analysis demonstrates how the "literacy crisis" in Australia's educational landscape is constructed discursively through editorial rhetoric, which underscores the perceived failure of balanced literacy in literacy instruction in relation to synthetic phonics, particularly in Victoria. Editorials and divisive public comments highlight aspects of these literacy approaches, such as their efficiency, the stakeholders involved, and personal experiences with literacy instruction. Using Fairclough's 3D model of CDA, the analysis focuses on the production, distribution, and consumption of educational discourses surrounding literacy instruction, complemented by insights from SFL.

These editorials produce a crisis narrative by actively framing the debate rather than merely reporting on it. Synthetic phonics is positioned as a necessary intervention in a failing system, while balanced literacy is portrayed as inadequate. By presenting their perspective as informed and objective, editorials shape how the debate is understood, potentially discouraging alternative viewpoints. Through framing key insights as urgent or provocative, the media captures attention and appeals to readers' concerns, reinforcing a crisis narrative through emotive and evaluative language that evokes concern, urgency, and indignation.

Once established, this narrative is reinforced and circulated through strategic rhetorical techniques. Selective quotations and the strategic use of double quotation marks introduce sarcasm and scepticism, subtly positioning the Victorian government's stance as questionable. Lexical cohesion reinforces this portrayal, with repeated negative framing of balanced literacy and authoritative positioning of synthetic phonics. These rhetorical strategies are amplified through headline language, which intensifies urgency and failure, ensuring that synthetic phonics is framed

as the only viable solution. The repetition of crisis-related terminology across the editorials further sustains this narrative, shaping how the issue is perceived in public discourse.

Conversely, public engagement with this "crisis" extends beyond simple dichotomies. Literacy instruction involves complex factors, from individual responsibilities to broader policy and media influences. This complexity underscores that educational policies are interpreted by diverse actors rather than being implemented in straightforward terms (Braun et al., 2010). While the analysed editorials promote a pro-synthetic phonics agenda, the public's engagement reflects a broader debate. The mediatisation of this issue has transformed it into a "reading war," positioning citizens not just as passive consumers of information but as active participants in shaping the discourse (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2023).

The implications of this mediatisation for literacy instruction in Australia are significant. Compton-Lilly et al. (2023) note that the media often simplifies and sensationalises literacy issues, feeding a narrative of crisis. Despite NAPLAN results (ACARA, 2023) suggesting that Victorian literacy outcomes are not as dire as portrayed, media practices risk misrepresenting research, fostering a "manufactured reading crisis" (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023, p. 394). Such practices can distort the public's understanding, undermining the integrity of literacy instruction (Aukerman, 2022). The media should interpret research responsibly rather than propagate simplistic claims to audiences that may lack the expertise to critically evaluate them. Literacy is inherently complex, and therefore portraying it through limited approaches contradicts the depth of this field (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023).

While the influence of media and the types of evidence privileged in literacy instruction remain contested, recent developments in Australia reflect a growing policy alignment with synthetic phonics as the dominant model. Media discourse has played a central role in framing this approach as the only scientific and effective method, marginalising alternative perspectives and narrowing the scope for pedagogical diversity. This echoes findings by Worthy et al. (2018), who showed how dyslexia interventionists in the United States positioned their preferred programs as the only legitimate option, despite limited research support. The example of Emily Hanford's reporting in the US powerfully illustrates how a particular narrative about the "science of reading" has been constructed, promoted, and widely rewarded in public discourse. Rather than exposing complexity, this reporting has successfully *sold a story* (Hanford, 2022), one that frames synthetic phonics as the singular solution to literacy failure. Although distinct in scale and context, this trend suggests that news media increasingly favour simplified, high-impact narratives, placing added responsibility on readers to question what is being framed as "settled science."

While it is beyond the scope of this study to directly measure the impact of media on literacy policy decisions, King et al. (2017) demonstrate that media interventions significantly shape public discourse and policy focus. The increased prominence of synthetic phonics in policy debates can be attributed, at least in part, to the media's role in amplifying certain perspectives over others. However, an objective and inclusive media portrayal, informed by diverse research—including classroom-based studies and various forms of evidence—could help shift public discourse of literacy instruction and reduce the polarisation seen in the "reading wars" or "phonics wars."

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