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The Scientisation of Literacy Education and the Fantasy of Governable Literacy

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Abstract

Appeals to science have become increasingly central to contemporary educational reform, yet the meaning of science in policy remains far from self-evident. This article examines how scientific authority is discursively constructed across three recent Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU) underpinning reforms of compulsory schooling, teacher education, and the national curriculum, all with significant implications for early literacy education. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, the analysis conceptualises science as a floating signifier whose meaning is temporarily stabilised through chains of equivalence. To examine why these articulations become politically compelling, the study further employs Glynos' Critical Fantasy Studies. A qualitative discourse analysis identifies three complementary articulations of science: as procedural rationality through mapping and assessment, as methodological authority through evidence-based literacy instruction, and as an epistemological foundation for curriculum knowledge and teaching. Although these articulations differ across policy arenas, they collectively constitute a broader hegemonic project in which literacy is increasingly framed as an object of scientific governance. The analysis argues that this project is sustained by a fantasy of governable literacy: the promise that children's literacy development can become progressively more visible through assessment, predictable through evidence, and governable through curricular specification. Rather than questioning the value of scientific research, the article demonstrates how science itself becomes politically organised and mobilised in the governance of literacy education, with important implications for teacher professionalism, curriculum, and educational policymaking.

Setting the scene

This article examines the scientisation of literacy education in contemporary Swedish education policy through an analysis of three recent Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU) underpinning forthcoming reforms of compulsory schooling, teacher education, and the national curriculum. Across these reforms, appeals to science, evidence, and scientific foundations have become increasingly prominent as sources of legitimacy for educational change. Literacy education has emerged as a particularly important site for this development, with curriculum, teacher education, and early reading instruction all being rearticulated through claims about scientifically grounded knowledge and evidence-based practice.

The scientisation of Swedish education policy has developed over a longer historical period. Although the idea that schooling should rest on a scientific foundation has long been present, the meaning of science has shifted repeatedly in response to changing political priorities, institutional reforms, and epistemic debates. Early reforms drew primarily on psychological and pedagogical research (Landahl & Larsson, 2022), while the post-war construction of the comprehensive school reflected a social-engineering logic grounded in educational psychology and large-scale experimentation (SOU 1948:27; Lundgren, 1999). During the 1970s, critical and sociological perspectives reshaped the field (Sundberg, 2021), whereas reforms since the late 1990s have increasingly privileged evidence-oriented governance. Birck's (2025) historical analysis demonstrates how science has never functioned as a neutral descriptor of knowledge but as a malleable policy construct whose meaning has been repeatedly rearticulated through changing governance regimes, institutional reforms, and shifting relations between research, policy, and practice (see also Bergh & Forsberg, 2024; Lindblad, 2022).

Existing research has generated important insights into the historical emergence of scientisation, the evidence movement, and changing relations between research and educational governance. This body of work has primarily examined scientisation as a historical, institutional, or governance phenomenon, tracing changing relationships between research, policy, and professional practice. Despite these important contributions, little attention has been devoted to how science itself becomes discursively constituted within interconnected policy reforms, how different

meanings of science are articulated across governance, teacher education, and curriculum simultaneously, and how these articulations acquire political force despite ongoing epistemic contestation. Rather than treating scientisation as a general policy trend, this article examines the discursive mechanisms through which particular scientific traditions become stabilised as authoritative while others become comparatively marginal. Research has shown how educational governance increasingly relies on scientific expertise and evidence as foundations for policy (Biesta, 2007; Hargreaves, 1996).

In Sweden, however, the scientisation of literacy reform has acquired a particularly coherent character across several interconnected reform arenas. Early reading instruction, curriculum epistemology, and teacher education are all increasingly framed as domains requiring stronger scientific anchoring. This orientation has also been articulated at the highest political level. Minister for Schools Lotta Edholm and then Minister for Higher Education and Research Mats Persson (Edholm & Persson, 2023), for example, argued that Swedish teacher education should place greater emphasis on internationally recognised research on learning, cognitive science, and memory research. Their intervention exemplifies a broader policy tendency to present particular scientific traditions as authoritative foundations for literacy reform. This development resonates with broader analyses of scientisation as a governing rationality in education (Popkewitz, 1991, 2008). Alongside changes in policy language, contemporary reforms have been accompanied by new funding priorities strengthened state agencies, changing forms of expert advice, and governance arrangements that reinforce particular understandings of scientific authority.

At the same time, these developments have not gone uncontested[1]. Consultation responses from several Swedish universities and university colleges question the increasing curricular prescription, the privileging of cognitive-scientific perspectives, and the tendency to present one research tradition as capable of resolving normative questions concerning literacy education. Rather than rejecting science itself, these responses highlight that what counts as legitimate scientific authority remains politically and epistemically contested. Beyond the discursive privileging of certain research orientations, the scientisation of literacy reform is also materially reinforced through contemporary funding infrastructures[2]. Discourses of science are therefore not only discursive, but materialised through institutional structures that shape which forms of expertise become visible, authoritative, and consequential for educational reform.

To examine how science itself becomes politically articulated, this article draws on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985; 2001) discourse theory, conceptualising science as a floating signifier whose political efficacy derives precisely from its semantic openness rather than conceptual stability. Because its meaning is never fully fixed, science can organise diverse reform agendas while appearing self-evident and politically neutral. To explain why particular articulations become especially compelling, the analysis further draws on Glynos' (2021) Critical Fantasy Studies. Whereas discourse theory explains how meanings become temporarily stabilised, fantasy theory illuminates how policy discourses become affectively invested through promises that complex educational problems can be rendered increasingly visible, predictable, and governable.

Accordingly, this article asks: How is science articulated, partially fixed, and mobilised across three contemporary Swedish literacy reforms, and what hegemonic project does this articulation support? A secondary question concerns the fantasmatic dimension of this project: what vision of educational order, certainty, and governability is sustained through these articulations of science?

Theoretical Framework

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory provides the conceptual foundation for the analysis. In this framework, discourses are understood not as linguistic reflections of social reality but as the practices through which meaning is constructed and temporarily stabilised. At the centre of this model are signifiers whose meanings are not inherently fixed but become partially stabilised within particular articulatory practices. Among these, the floating signifier occupies a key role. Floating signifiers are those whose meanings are especially open, contested, and available for political struggle. Their significance lies in their capacity to be filled with different content by different actors while still appearing unified on the surface. Precisely because their meaning is unsettled, floating signifiers such as "democracy," "quality," or "science" can serve as nodal points that organise discourses and hold together otherwise disparate elements.

Another essential concept is the chain of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985 p.127), which links signifiers together as mutually supportive or reinforcing. For example, articulating "science" in proximity to "quality," "effectiveness," and "national equality" does not describe an empirical relationship but constructs a semantic and political alignment. Opposed to equivalence is difference (ibid.), through which discourses demarcate what they are not. Discourses operate by drawing boundaries between what is legitimate and what is excluded. These boundaries form what Laclau and Mouffe (1985 p. xiv-xvii) call antagonistic frontiers, which are central to the formation of hegemony. Through articulatory work, discourses attempt to impose a particular order of meaning, making certain interpretations appear natural and obscuring their political contingency.

While Laclau and Mouffe provide a powerful framework for analysing how signifiers become partially fixed through chains of equivalence and difference, their framework offers fewer resources for understanding why particular discursive constructions become affectively compelling. To address this dimension, the analysis draws on Glynos' (2021) development of Laclau and Mouffes discourse theory through what he coins Critical Fantasy Studies. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Glynos conceptualises fantasy, and a so called fantasmatic dimension of social and political life (ibid. p.2), not as illusion or false belief but as a narrative structure that organises desire by promising the overcoming of a perceived lack. Fantasies are politically significant because they sustain attachment to social arrangements by offering visions of harmony, completeness, or resolution. Importantly, fantasies can be organised around entirely true propositions; their significance lies not in their empirical validity but in the affective investments they mobilise.

In educational policy, fantasies may operate through promises that complex social and pedagogical problems can be rendered transparent, governable, and ultimately solvable. From this perspective, contemporary appeals to science can be understood not only as epistemic claims about knowledge production but also as components of a broader fantasmatic narrative. Such narratives promise that educational difficulties can be overcome through better evidence, more precise assessment, more effective teaching methods, and stronger curricular guidance.

The concept of fantasy therefore supplements the discourse-theoretical analysis by directing attention to the promises embedded in policy discourse. In the present study, particular attention is paid to what is conceptualised as a fantasy of governable literacy: the promise that literacy development can be made increasingly visible, predictable, measurable, and controllable through scientific rationality.

This theoretical apparatus is well suited to analysing scientisation in education. The appearance of "science" in policy texts may seem neutral, but its insertion reorganises the discursive field: it authorises certain forms of knowledge and disqualifies others. It positions some pedagogical traditions as evidence-based and others as unscientific. It also justifies new governance technologies, e.g. assessment systems, early interventions, teacher standards, by appealing to allegedly objective criteria. Discourse theory makes visible the political work done by these seemingly neutral references to science.

In literacy research, as elsewhere, the meaning of “science” is no neutral conceptual ground. Cognitive science and meta-analytical research on phonological decoding often claim primacy, while sociocultural perspectives highlight communication, meaning-making, social practice, and children’s multimodal texts. These paradigmatic differences foreground why “science” can function as a floating signifier in literacy policy: it can be selectively mobilised to support certain epistemic traditions while excluding others. While Laclau and Mouffe provide the conceptual vocabulary for analysing how “science” functions as a floating signifier, Popkewitz’s work adds a crucial layer for understanding the governing effects of such discursive constructions. Popkewitz (1991, 2008, 2011, 2014) conceptualises educational reforms as operating through “systems of reason” that classify what counts as legitimate knowledge, desirable conduct, and proper pedagogical action. References to science, in this view, do not merely stabilise meaning but configure the conditions of possibility for teaching and learning: they shape who the teacher can be, how students are imagined, and what practices become thinkable, desirable, or necessary. Integrating Popkewitz with Laclau and Mouffe thus allows the analysis to move from how “science” becomes discursively fixed (floating signifiers, nodal points, chains of equivalence and difference) to what such fixations do in the governance of literacy. Popkewitz (e.g. 1998, 2014) highlights the productive power of scientific rationalities – their capacity to classify, normalise, and regulate – making it possible to analyse not only the semantic construction of “science,” but also the epistemic and professional subject positions that contemporary Swedish literacy reforms seek to produce.

The Swedish Commission System and Official Government Reports

The analysis builds on three official governmental reports addressing different levels of education, from primary schooling to teacher education, each with a strong emphasis on literacy teaching, particularly reading. These reports are published as *Statens offentliga utredningar* (SOU; Swedish Government Official Reports) which are a central feature of the Swedish model of policy preparation and decision-making (Christensen et al., 2016; Dahlström, 2021; Lindvall & Rothstein, 2006). Sweden (similar in Norway and Denmark) has a long tradition of relying on government commissions of inquiry to collect evidence, assess policy alternatives, and formulate proposals that inform legislation and public policy (Tamas, 2019). Historically, these commissions brought together academic experts, civil servants, political representatives, and organised interests in a consensus-oriented process aimed at producing broadly supported policy proposals. The findings are published in SOU reports and then undergo consultation through the referral process, followed by a *Lagrådsremiss*, during which the legislative text and government bill are prepared before the Riksdag makes its final decision. The commission system has traditionally served as an important mechanism for incorporating expertise into policymaking. By combining scientific, administrative, and stakeholder knowledge, commissions have contributed to the broad political agreements often required in Sweden's system of (frequent) minority governments. Compared with similar arrangements elsewhere, the Swedish model has been unusually extensive in both legislative preparation and policy development (Dahlström, 2021).

Since the 1980s, however, the system has undergone significant transformation. Broadly representative commissions have increasingly been replaced by inquiries led by a single special investigator, often supported by a small secretariat and advisory board (Christensen et al., 2016; Eriksson, 2025). Scholars have argued that this shift has reduced opportunities for deliberation and stakeholder influence, while increasing political steering of inquiry processes (Tamas, 2019). The growing specialisation of policy issues has intensified the demand for expert knowledge, even as different/other form of scientific knowledge has become more politically contested (Dahlström, 2021; Peters & Pierre, 2019). Recent research highlights the importance of examining who is included in contemporary commissions and whose knowledge is granted authority (cf. Eriksson 2025). Although academic experts constitute a relatively small share of participants, they may exert considerable influence on policy outcomes, particularly in reports characterised by limited representation and deliberation (ibid.). The three SOUs examined in this study are all reports led by a

special investigator although they differ in their advisory bodies and are at different stages in the legislative process (see Table 1).

Materials and Methods

3.1 Materials and case selection

The three Swedish government reports included in this study together define the current trajectory of educational reform in Sweden: *En tioårig grundskola* (SOU 2021:33), *Ämneskunskaper och lärarskicklighet* (SOU 2024:81), and *Kunskap för alla* (SOU 2025:19). The documents were selected because they span three institutional arenas through which literacy policy is currently being reorganised.

The **SOU 2021:33** proposes the introduction of a ten-year compulsory school system, replacing the current structure of a preschool class (year F) followed by nine years of primary schooling. A central implication of this reform is that the first year of schooling, which is currently year F and characterised by loosely formulated curricular standards, would be incorporated into the regular primary school curriculum. This curriculum is, according to *SOU 2025:19*, expected to become more strictly regulated. Thus, the new structure of the first year for six year olds specifically has strong focus in the report. The report was commissioned by the Swedish Social Democratic government in 2020.

The **SOU 2024:81** proposes a comprehensive restructuring of teacher education, spanning programmes from early years education to subject-teacher training. The report recommends admission requirements based on minimum grades, specifically at least a C in Swedish at the upper-secondary level, and suggests a reorganisation of programmes with a stronger emphasis on subject didactics, reading and writing development, particularly in the early years, and cognitive science. In this model, teacher education would become more tightly regulated, reducing the autonomy of universities in designing their programmes. The report was commissioned by the right-liberal government in 2023.

The **SOU 2025:19** aligns with *SOU 2021:33* and outlines the new curriculum for the proposed ten-year compulsory school system. The report places strong emphasis on literacy development, especially reading, and provides more explicit guidance for future curricular formulations, although the final curriculum has not yet been published. The proposed directions for early reading and writing development are, for example, consistent with a phonics-oriented approach. The report was commissioned by the right-liberal government in 2023.

All three reports are summarised in Table 1 below.

Each report carries high policy authority, functions as a key step in the legislative and reform process, and contains explicit problem representations and proposed solutions related to reading and writing development. The analysis was conducted as a structured, Excel-based qualitative policy analysis designed to combine systematic mapping with discourse-theoretical interpretation. The three reports were first read in full, after which all relevant sections focusing on literacy (see section 3.2.1) were extracted and assembled into a single working corpus.

Table 1
Description of the three government official reports (SOU), English title, type of report, advisory board, type of expert input, number of pages, legislative status (June 2026).

SOU number	English title	Type of report	Advisory board [*Ämnesråd*]	Type of expert input	Number of pages	Legislative status (June 2026)	Included chapter
SOU 2021:33	A ten-year compulsory school system: The introduction of a new Year 1 in compulsory school, special needs schools, special schools and Sami schools	Special investigator	Bureaucrats	Research overview by two external professors; interview study conducted by a consultancy firm	654	2024/25:UbU17 Decision (Riksdagen) on 27 May 2026, with implementation in autumn 2028	4 to 8
SOU 2024:81	Subject knowledge and teaching skills: A reformed teacher education programme	Special investigator	Bureaucrats	Meetings with external academics and school organisations Survey of the organisation of subject teacher education	511	Decision 19 December (Government), implementation in 2027 and 2028.	10 to 20
SOU 2025:19	Knowledge for all: New curriculum with focus on knowledge and learning	Special investigator	Selected academic experts, Bureaucrats	Through the expert group and some external experts.	914	Referral stage Intended implementation in autumn 2028	2 to 11

3.2 Analytical approach

The study combines a systematic lexical–contextual mapping of “science” and related signifiers with a discourse-theoretical interpretation drawing on Laclau and Mouffe. The point of departure is that policy texts do not merely describe educational reality but participate in constructing it through articulatory practices that temporarily stabilise meaning. In this perspective, references to “science” do not primarily operate as neutral pointers to research but as political and discursive resources that authorise certain forms of knowledge, delimit legitimate pedagogy, and organise relations between state agencies, teacher education, and school practice. The analysis therefore attends both to (a) how science-related terminology is used in literacy-relevant contexts and (b) what discursive work such usage performs in the construction of policy rationalities.

The first analytical step consisted of systematically identifying explicit references to science (vetenskap) and related science-oriented terminology within the literacy-related sections of the three reports (Chaps. 4–8 in SOU 2021:33;

Chaps. 10–20 in SOU 2024:81; and Chaps. 2–11 in SOU 2025:19). The purpose was to map how scientific authority is invoked across the three inquiries.

The mapping included explicit references to science (e.g., science, scientific foundation), evidence-oriented terminology (e.g., evidence, evidence-based), research-oriented terminology (e.g., research, systematic reviews, meta-analyses), and recurrent scientising proxies that attached scientific legitimacy to particular forms of governance or pedagogy (e.g., systematic, explicit teaching, mapping and assessment instruments).

Each occurrence was logged together with its immediate textual context and page reference. This corpus formed the empirical basis for the subsequent discourse-theoretical analysis of how scientific authority was articulated and mobilised across the reports.

In the second step, each logged occurrence was analysed in its textual context to determine what discursive function it performed. The purpose here was not to assess whether the policy claims were empirically true, but to identify how "science" is positioned and what kinds of relations it constructs between knowledge, pedagogy, governance, and professional authority.

The contextual analysis was conducted iteratively. First, occurrences were grouped into preliminary functional contexts based on the surrounding argumentation (for example, science invoked to legitimise national assessment infrastructures; science invoked to privilege particular literacy methods; science invoked to anchor curriculum knowledge as stable and non-relativist). Second, these groupings were refined by examining how each occurrence related to neighbouring signifiers and to the problem representations and solutions advanced by the report. In this way, the analysis moved beyond counting to examine articulation: which signifiers are repeatedly linked with "science," which are positioned as alternatives, and which remain absent or marginal.

The third step consisted of comparing the three reports to identify (a) how "science" is partially fixed differently across reform arenas and (b) how these partial fixations supplement one another. This comparative step was conducted through a matrix that aligned the three documents by (i) dominant science-related signifiers and proxies, (ii) recurring contexts of use, and (iii) the discursive functions and policy rationalities produced. This made it possible to trace both divergence (procedural vs methodological vs epistemological uses of "science") and accumulation (how governance, pedagogy, and curriculum become increasingly organised around scientific rationality across the three reforms).

The mapped corpus was subsequently interpreted through Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. Particular attention was paid to how science functioned as a floating signifier, the chains of equivalence and difference through which its meaning was partially fixed, and the emergence of nodal points and antagonistic frontiers. Guided by Glynos' (2021) concept of fantasy, the analysis also examined how these articulations sustained broader narratives of educational certainty and governability.

Chains of equivalence within the reports

The analysis proceeds report by report. For each report, the dominant chains of equivalence surrounding science are identified and interpreted before the findings are synthesised across the three reports.

4.1 The compulsory school reform report (SOU 20201:33): Mapping, assessment and early intervention

In the compulsory school reform report, science itself occupies a relatively modest position. Instead, the report is organised around the guarantee for early support interventions and a cluster of associated concepts, including mapping, assessment, systematic monitoring, and early identification of pupils in need of support. Throughout the report, mandatory mapping materials and national assessment supports are presented as components of a broader system designed to monitor pupils' knowledge development, identify learning difficulties at an early stage, and facilitate timely interventions. Rather than being justified as isolated assessment tools, mapping and assessment are repeatedly linked to support measures, educational quality, and equity.

This articulation is particularly visible in the report's discussion of the guarantee for early support interventions. The report states that:

Excerpt 1. “Part of the guarantee consists of a mandatory mapping exercise […] The mapping is followed up through the use of mandatory assessment support materials…” (p. 272)

Similarly, mandatory mapping is explicitly connected to assessment and follow-up:

Excerpt 2. “The guarantee for early support interventions means that pupils’ knowledge development shall be systematically monitored and promoted […] and that national support materials shall be used to support equitable assessment.” (p. 233)

The report also links early identification directly to equity:

Excerpt 3. “Another important factor that must be considered is the possibility of identifying pupils’ needs for support at an early stage in order to contribute to providing all pupils, regardless of background, with equitable conditions.” (p. 291f)

Taken together, these formulations establish a chain of equivalence in which mapping, assessment, systematic monitoring, early identification, and support interventions are articulated as mutually reinforcing mechanisms for achieving equity.

The dominant chain of equivalence can therefore be reconstructed as:

mapping → assessment→ systematic monitoring → early identification → equity

Unlike the later reports, science does not function as a central organising principle in the compulsory school reform report. Instead, the dominant articulation revolves around the guarantee for early support interventions and its associated practices of mapping, assessment, monitoring, and early identification (in alignment with earlier policy trajectories for the first year of schooling, ref). Scientific authority remains largely in the background (as a research overview in the appendixes), while equity functions as the principal normative horizon that gives coherence to the chain. From the perspective of Glynos (2021), this articulation can be understood as sustaining a fantasy of visibility. Literacy difficulties are represented as problems that can be rendered increasingly visible through systematic mapping, assessment, and monitoring. The promise is not simply that more information will become available, but that educational uncertainty can be reduced through the early identification of pupils in need of support. In this way, literacy becomes constructed as a domain that can be made knowable and therefore governable through systematic intervention.

4.2 The teacher education reform report (SOU 2024:81): Science as the basis for legitimate instructional practice

In contrast to the compulsory school reform report, science occupies a much more prominent position in the teacher education reform report. Throughout, concepts such as scientific foundation, evidence-based research, scientific support, and research-based knowledge are repeatedly invoked as authoritative grounds for educational reform. Rather than functioning as a general principle of academic report, science is increasingly articulated in relation to specific instructional methods and pedagogical practices. The report repeatedly argues that teacher education should be grounded in evidence-based knowledge and that scientific evidence provides guidance regarding which teaching methods are most effective. This articulation is particularly visible in the report's discussion of reading and writing instruction in teacher education. The report states that:

Excerpt 4. "It should be emphasised that the scientific foundation for pupils' reading and writing acquisition, as well as their continued language development, is grounded in and presupposes a broad and extensive body of research that needs to be evidence-based." (p. 368)

Here, scientific foundation is explicitly defined in relation to a broad and extensive body of research that is required to be evidence-based. Rather than appearing as separate concepts, scientific foundation, research, and evidence are articulated as mutually reinforcing elements within a common framework of legitimate educational knowledge. This logic is reinforced in the report's formulation of the scientific basis for teacher education:

Excerpt 5. "[In teacher education for grades F–3], it is in the report's view important that the programme rests on an evidence-based scientific foundation.

Rather than appearing as separate concepts, *scientific foundation* and *evidence-based* are articulated as mutually reinforcing terms. Science acquires legitimacy through evidence, while evidence derives authority from its association with science. At the same time, scientific authority is connected directly to a specific instructional approach. Science is no longer merely a source of general knowledge but becomes a mechanism for identifying preferred forms of teaching. This articulation is developed further through the report's description of how such teaching should be organised:

Excerpt 6. "There is substantial scientific support for synthetic methods based on structured phonics instruction. Instruction should be carried out in an explicit and systematic manner with gradual progression." (p. 376)

The report does not stop at identifying instructional approaches that are supported by research. Scientific support is translated into a prescription concerning how teaching should be organised. Explicitness, systematicity, and gradual progression are presented as characteristics of scientifically legitimate instruction. The report simultaneously constructs a deficit narrative in which evidence-based research has not yet exerted sufficient influence over teacher education programmes:

Excerpt 7: "The report concludes that evidence-based research concerning which instructional methods are successful has not had a clear impact on teacher education programmes." (p. 376)

This perceived gap between research and practice serves as an important justification for the proposed reforms. The report simultaneously constructs a problem representation in which evidence-based research has not yet exerted sufficient influence on teacher education programmes.

Importantly, the report does not merely promote particular instructional approaches as educationally desirable. Rather, it seeks to institutionalise these approaches through proposed changes to the degree objectives governing teacher education. As such, the chain of equivalence extends beyond recommendations concerning classroom practice and becomes embedded in the formal requirements for teacher qualification:

Excerpt 8. “For a teacher education degree for grades F-3, it is suggested that students shall demonstrate advanced ability to plan and implement evidence-based instruction in reading, writing and mathematics, including the ability to carry out systematic interventions for pupils experiencing reading and writing difficulties.” (p. 395)

Through this formulation, familiarity with and the ability to implement evidence-based literacy, writing, and mathematics instruction become formal requirements for teacher qualification. Evidence-based instructional approaches are thereby transformed from preferred pedagogical practices into criteria for professional competence. As a result, a particular conception of scientifically legitimate teaching becomes institutionalised within the governance of teacher education.

Taken together, these formulations establish a chain of equivalence in which scientific foundation, evidence-based research, scientific support, instructional methods, pedagogical organisation, and professional competence are articulated as mutually reinforcing elements. Concepts that traditionally belong to different domains – science, evidence, research, pedagogy, and teacher qualification – become linked through their common orientation towards educational effectiveness.

The dominant chain of equivalence can therefore be reconstructed as:

scientific foundation → evidence-based research → scientific support → structured phonics instruction → explicit and systematic teaching → professional competence

Within this articulation, science functions as a central organising principle rather than a background source of legitimacy. Scientific authority is repeatedly mobilised to justify particular instructional approaches, while evidence-based research is simultaneously being presented as (uniquely) capable of identifying effective teaching methods. Consequently, an evidence-based scientific foundation emerges as a nodal point around which research, instructional methods, pedagogical organisation, and professional competence are articulated. Unlike the compulsory school reform report, where equity functions as the primary organising principle, the teacher education reform report constructs evidence based scientific legitimacy itself as the central basis for educational reform. Viewed through the lens of fantasy, the report also promises a reduction of pedagogical uncertainty. By repeatedly linking scientific foundation, evidence-based research, and instructional effectiveness, the report constructs a vision in which questions concerning literacy teaching can increasingly be resolved through reference to scientifically validated methods. The fantasmatic dimension lies not in the claim that research can inform teaching, but in the suggestion that scientific evidence can provide a stable basis for determining which forms of instruction are educationally preferable.

4.3 The national curriculum reform report (SOU 2025:19): Scientific foundation, teaching strategies and curricular governance

While the teacher education reform report primarily articulated scientific authority through teacher education and evidence-based instructional methods, the national curriculum reform report extends this logic into curriculum design and educational governance. Throughout the report, concepts such as scientific foundation, scientific support, knowledge development, teaching strategies, and structured instruction are repeatedly linked to one another. Science is no longer presented merely as a source of evidence for identifying effective teaching methods; rather, it becomes a basis for organising curriculum content, teaching practices, and assessment procedures. The report thus constructs a discourse in which scientifically grounded knowledge serves as the foundation for both teaching and curriculum

development. This articulation is particularly visible in the report's discussion of the role of knowledge in schooling. The report states that:

Excerpt 9. “The school shall convey knowledge that is grounded in the best scientific explanations.” (p. 21)

Here, scientific knowledge is positioned as the legitimate foundation of educational content. Science is not primarily associated with research methods or academic inquiry, but with the production of reliable knowledge that schools are expected to transmit to pupils. The report thereby links scientific authority directly to the curriculum's knowledge mission. This logic is reinforced in the report's discussion of teaching strategies for early literacy instruction:

Excerpt 10. “[…] the report reviews which teaching strategies for early reading acquisition have the strongest scientific support.” (p. 434)

Rather than presenting teaching as a matter of professional judgement alone, the report positions scientific support as the primary criterion for evaluating instructional approaches. Scientific authority is thus connected to the identification of legitimate teaching strategies. The relationship between scientific support and pedagogical practice is further developed through the report's description of reading instruction:

Excerpt 11. “Objectives and content relating to early reading and writing acquisition should be designed on the basis of systematic and explicit instruction, with phonics (structured phonics instruction) as the foundation.” (p. 460)

The report does not merely identify instructional approaches that are supported by research. Scientific support is translated into prescriptions concerning how teaching should be organised. Systematicity and structure are presented as characteristics of scientifically grounded instruction, thereby linking research knowledge to specific pedagogical forms. This articulation is subsequently incorporated into the curriculum itself. In its discussion of the Swedish subject syllabus, the report argues that:

Excerpt 12. “The teaching strategies [included in the syllabus] should support teachers' choices that promote reading development on a scientific foundation.” (p. 460)

Scientific foundation is here translated into curricular guidance. Rather than remaining external to educational practice, scientific knowledge becomes embedded within the curriculum through the specification of teaching strategies that are expected to guide teachers' decisions. The report also extends this logic to assessment and follow-up:

Excerpt 13. “[Mapping and assessment materials should] result in concrete and unambiguous recommendations concerning continued teaching on a scientific foundation.” (p. 461)

Through this formulation, assessment is linked directly to scientifically grounded instructional decision-making. Mapping and assessment are not presented merely as tools for measuring learning outcomes; they become mechanisms for directing subsequent teaching according to scientifically supported principles.

Taken together, these formulations establish a chain of equivalence in which scientific knowledge, scientific support, teaching strategies, structured instruction, curriculum guidance, and assessment are articulated as mutually reinforcing elements. Concepts that traditionally belong to different domains—science, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment—become linked through their common orientation towards improving pupils' learning and knowledge development. The dominant chain of equivalence can therefore be reconstructed as:

Scientific foundation → teaching strategies → systematic and explicit instruction → assessment and recommendations → continued teaching → knowledge developement

Within this articulation, science functions not only as a source of legitimacy for educational reform but also as a principle for governing curriculum and teaching. Unlike the teacher education reform report, where scientific authority was primarily mobilised to justify evidence-based instructional methods and teacher competence, the national curriculum reform report extends this discourse into the curriculum itself. Scientific foundation emerges as a nodal point around which knowledge, teaching strategies, assessment practices, and curriculum design are organised within a common discourse of educational improvement and knowledge development. This articulation also carries a distinct fantasmatic promise. Whereas the compulsory school reform report foregrounds visibility and the teacher education reform report methodological certainty, the national curriculum reform report extends scientific rationality into the curriculum itself. Through the coupling of scientific foundation, teaching strategies, assessment, and recommendations for continued teaching, literacy is represented as a domain that can be organised through scientifically specified sequences of instruction. The report thereby constructs a vision of literacy as increasingly governable through curricular and pedagogical design.

4.4 Cross-Case Synthesis: Three Partial Fixations of “Science”

Taken together, the three reports reveal markedly different, yet mutually reinforcing, ways of fixing the meaning of “science” within contemporary literacy reform. In the compulsory school reform report, scientificity is articulated primarily through procedural and organisational terms. Here, “science” is not associated with particular theories of reading or bodies of empirical research but is instead embedded in the governance structures surrounding early literacy identification. Standardised mapping tools, national assessment materials, and systematic routines are treated as if they embody a scientific rationality in themselves. Through this framing, literacy becomes a system to be managed: risks are identified early, diagnostic data are generated systematically, and interventions follow an ordered sequence.

The teacher education reform report constructs scientificity in a more explicitly epistemic manner. Whereas the earlier report emphasises the procedural qualities of scientific governance, this one foregrounds “science” as a methodological authority that determines the legitimacy of particular literacy practices. Evidence hierarchies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and the cognitive-scientific research tradition are positioned as the most reliable guides for teacher education, and synthetic phonics becomes the paradigmatic example of an instructional approach that aligns with these scientific demands. In this context, “science” functions as a mechanism that narrows pedagogical choice and establishes a preferred model of early reading instruction that should be the content of teaching (in comparision with the national curriculum reform report where it is the method of teaching).

The national curriculum reform report extends this scientising movement into the epistemological foundations of the curriculum itself. Here, “science” becomes a philosophical anchor for the nature of knowledge in school subjects. The report argues explicitly that curriculum knowledge should be stable, non-relativist, and derived from scientific and professionally validated experience. Literacy, particularly early reading and writing, becomes a central example through which the report demonstrates how a scientifically anchored curriculum might function. Strategies presented as grounded in research are elevated to curricular principles, and the commentary material is tasked with articulating the scientific rationale underlying instructional decisions.

When viewed together, these reports show how the floating signifier “science” is stabilised differently depending on the policy arena: as systematics and governance tools in the first report, as empirical-methodological authority in the second, and as epistemological foundation in the third. Yet despite these differences, each report points in the same

direction: towards constructing literacy as a domain best organised, justified, and regulated through scientific rationality. Taken together, they progressively construct literacy as an object that can be rendered visible through assessment, predictable through evidence, and governable through curriculum and instructional specification. Read through the lens of Glynos (2021), these articulations can be understood as cumulative rather than merely parallel. The first report promises visibility through assessment, the second promises certainty through evidence-based methods, and the third promises governability through curriculum design. Together, they form a broader fantasmatic narrative in which literacy development appears increasingly visible, predictable, and amenable to scientific governance.

Discussion

5.1 From Floating Signifier to Hegemonic Formation

The analysis demonstrates that science functions as a floating signifier whose political efficacy derives precisely from its semantic openness. Rather than carrying a single stable meaning, science is articulated differently across the three reports: as procedural rationality in the compulsory school reform report, as methodological authority in the teacher education reform report, and as an epistemological foundation in the national curriculum reform report. This variability should not be understood as inconsistency. On the contrary, it enables science to organise different policy arenas while maintaining its legitimacy across them. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue, floating signifiers acquire political force because their meanings remain sufficiently open to articulate diverse projects within a common discourse.

Across the reports, these different articulations become connected through expanding chains of equivalence. Assessment, mapping, evidence-based research, structured phonics instruction, scientific foundation, curriculum guidance, and knowledge development are progressively linked as mutually reinforcing expressions of scientific rationality. At the same time, these articulations depend upon relations of difference. Alternative literacy traditions are largely absent from the dominant discourse. Rather than openly rejecting competing perspectives, the reports establish scientific legitimacy through selective inclusion, thereby narrowing what comes to count as authoritative knowledge in literacy education.

Taken together, the three reports therefore constitute more than separate policy initiatives. They form a broader hegemonic project in which scientific rationality increasingly organises governance, pedagogy, teacher education, and curriculum. Rather than merely legitimising reform, science becomes the principle through which literacy itself is rendered governable.

5.2 The Fantasy of Governable Literacy

While discourse theory explains how these articulations become stabilised, Glynos' (2021) concept of fantasy helps explain why they become politically compelling. Educational practice is characterised by contingency, interpretation, and normative disagreement. This is particularly evident in young children's literacy development, where meaning-making emerges through rich and often unpredictable combinations of talk, gesture, drawing, movement, play, writing, and interaction with others. Such communicative practices are inherently emergent, multifaceted, and context-dependent, continually exceeding any single framework through which they might be described or governed. Yet the reports repeatedly represent literacy as a domain in which this complexity can be progressively reduced through a rather limiting scientific rationality.

The fantasy identified here is therefore not the claim that scientific research can improve literacy education. Such a claim is both reasonable and empirically well supported. Rather, the fantasy lies in the promise that the complexity of children's meaning-making can be progressively rendered transparent, specified, and governable through scientifically grounded governance, evidence-based methods, structured instruction, and curricular specification. Across the three reports, literacy is successively constructed as more visible through assessment, more predictable through evidence, and more governable through curriculum design. The political appeal of science thus rests not only on its epistemic authority but also on its promise to domesticate a field characterised by multiplicity, ambiguity, emergence, and interpretive openness.

The findings also invite reflection on how such fantasies become institutionally sustained. If science is politically articulated rather than simply discovered, then the composition of the expert communities involved in policy preparation becomes analytically significant. Contemporary SOU’s are increasingly prepared by (often single) special investigators supported by comparatively small advisory structures rather than broadly representative commissions. Under such conditions, the selection of expert perspectives necessarily shapes which scientific traditions become available for articulation within policy discourse. Scientific authority, in other words, is not simply transferred from research to policy but mediated through institutional processes that privilege some forms of expertise while rendering others less visible.

5.3. Implications for Teacher Professionalism

These findings also illuminate how scientisation reshapes teacher professionalism. As Popkewitz (1991, 2008, 2014) argues, scientific rationalities do not simply describe educational practice but actively configure the kinds of teachers, students, and pedagogical actions that become thinkable. Across the reports, teachers are increasingly positioned as implementers of scientifically validated practices rather than as professionals exercising situated judgement.

This tendency resonates with Biesta's (2007) critique of evidence-based education. While research necessarily informs professional judgement, educational practice cannot be reduced to identifying what "works." Decisions concerning literacy education remain normative, contextual, and politically contested. The consultation responses submitted by Swedish universities illustrate that these contestations remain active, particularly regarding epistemic pluralism, curricular prescription, and the privileging of cognitive-scientific perspectives. The central issue, therefore, is not whether science should inform educational reform, but how scientific authority is articulated, whose knowledge becomes authoritative, and what forms of professional judgement are thereby enabled or constrained.

The contribution of this study is consequently not to question the role of science in literacy education, but to show how science itself becomes politically organised. Contemporary Swedish literacy reform is characterised less by the expansion of scientific knowledge than by the progressive stabilisation of a particular articulation of scientificity that links governance, curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher professionalism within a common hegemonic project.

Declarations

Author Contribution

O.B. conceived the study, conducted the analysis, and prepared the initial manuscript draft. S.H. contributed through ongoing conceptual discussions, critical review, and substantial revisions that informed the development of the manuscript. The revisions were discussed collaboratively, and the final version represents the joint intellectual work of both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The datasets analysed during the current study consist of publicly available Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU). All documents analysed are publicly available through the Swedish Government's official website. No new datasets were generated during the current study.

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Footnotes

1. The review of consultation responses (remissyttranden) for this paper draws on written submissions from Swedish universities, university colleges and other organisations to the relevant government inquiries. For this paper, only submissions by universities or university colleges were included. For the reform Kunskap för alla – nya läroplaner med focus på undervisning och lärande (SOU 2025:19), the reviewed responses include those from: University of Gothenburg, Stockholm University, Uppsala University, Umeå University, Luleå University of Technology, Malmö University, Linköping University, and Karolinska Institutet.
   For the reform En tioårig grundskola – införandet av en ny årskurs 1 (SOU 2021:33), the following institutions' responses were examined: Umeå University, Malmö University, Linköping University, Uppsala University, University West, University of Gävle, Mälardalen University, Mid Sweden University, Södertörn University, Örebro University, Lund University, Luleå University of Technology, Stockholm University, University of Borås, Dalarna University, Kristianstad University, Halmstad University, Karlstad University, as well as the Royal College of Music and Konstfack.
2. In 2025, the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) allocated more than 100 million SEK to initiatives explicitly grounded in cognitive or phonics-oriented perspectives on reading and writing development. These included two national research schools (together ≈ 84 million SEK), a research environment focused on decoding-based interventions (≈ 14.7 million SEK), and a project on explicit phoneme instruction (≈ 5.2 million SEK). Funding figures are based on VR's 2025 decisions in the educational sciences (UV). Projects included in this total explicitly reference decoding-based instruction, phoneme–grapheme correspondence, cognitive perspectives on reading/writing, or reading interventions:
   – FEELIT (41,835,000 SEK);
   – Kognition i klassrummet (41,983,000 SEK);
   – Att förfina och utöka ljudningsbaserade läsinterventioner (14,653,000 SEK);
   – DEPTH (5,175,000 SEK).
   Amounts refer to "beviljat belopp" as published in VR's 2025 award lists.