The Fluidity of "Science" in Contemporary Literacy Reforms: The Swedish Case

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1. Setting the scene

Over the past several decades, the relationship between educational research and policymaking in Sweden has undergone substantial transformation. Although the idea that schooling should rest on a scientific foundation has long been present, its meaning has shifted repeatedly in response to changing political priorities, institutional reforms, and epistemic debates. Recent scholarship shows that "science" (*vetenskap*) in Swedish education policy has never been a neutral descriptor of knowledge but a malleable policy construct whose meaning is continuously rearticulated through political struggle and institutional design. Birck's (2025) historical analysis of the "research-based school," for example, demonstrates how different research traditions have gained or lost legitimacy as part of changing governance regimes, particularly from the late 1990s onward, when decentralisation, marketisation, and accountability reforms reshaped the interfaces between research, policy, and practice (see also Bergh & Forsberg, 2024; Lindblad, 2022).

Historically, Swedish school reforms have relied on shifting constellations of scientific authority. Early twentieth-century expansions of teacher education drew on psychological and pedagogical research (Landahl & Larsson, 2022). The post-war construction of the compulsory school (*grundskolan*) was grounded in a social-engineering logic in which educational psychology and large-scale experimentation were seen as the epistemic basis for system design (SOU 1948:27; Lundgren, 1999). During the 1970s, critical and sociological perspectives reshaped the academic field (Sundberg, 2021), whereas the reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s marked a shift toward evidence-oriented governance. Birck (2025) identifies three particularly consequential shifts between 1997 and 2015: the movement from indirect to direct expectations of research relevance; the positioning of teachers as implementers of externally validated knowledge; and the relocation of responsibility for synthesising and disseminating educational research from academia to state agencies, including the establishment of Skolforskningsinstitutet in 2015. These developments strengthened an evidence-oriented epistemic cluster privileging systematic reviews, intervention studies, and cognitive-psychological research.

The last decade has seen a marked intensification of this scientisation of Swedish educational policy. Political speeches, agency reports, and government investigations routinely invoke "scientifically grounded teaching," "stable knowledge based on science and proven experience," and "evidence-based methods" as foundational principles in literacy, curriculum, and teacher-education reform. This trend mirrors international developments in the evidence movement (Biesta, 2007; Hargreaves, 1996), yet the Swedish articulation has become particularly coherent across multiple reform arenas. Early reading instruction, curriculum

epistemology, and teacher education are all framed as domains in need of stronger scientific anchoring. Public interventions by government ministers further amplify these discourses. Edholm and Persson (2023), for example, argue that Swedish teacher education insufficiently reflects "internationally recognised research on learning," promoting an increased emphasis on cognitive science and memory research. Their argument aligns with a broader policy tendency to treat "science" as an uncontested arbiter of effective teaching, while implicitly narrowing what counts as legitimate scientific knowledge. A broader international backdrop helps illuminate this development. Popkewitz (1991, 2008) shows how the scientisation of schooling is part of a wider reform rationality in which scientific knowledge is mobilised as a governing technology that promises stability, efficiency, and objectivity. Within this rationality, "science" functions not merely as epistemic authority but as a political and administrative resource that shapes what counts as desirable teaching, legitimate knowledge, and even what kinds of students and teachers are imagined as possible. The policy coherence around scientised literacy reform is particularly striking given that the proposals have simultaneously met sustained critique from Swedish academia[i]. In consultation responses and public commentary, several universities and university colleges problematise what they describe as increased detail steering, a narrowed conception of knowledge, and an epistemic privileging of cognitive science as if it were an uncontested foundation for curriculum and teacher education. A recurring concern is that reform proposals move instructional strategies and method prescriptions closer to the level of steering documents, thereby shifting the role of teachers and teacher educators from professional interpretation toward compliance with externally validated sequences. Another line of critique targets the knowledge assumptions attributed to schools and teachers: critics reject problem descriptions that portray contemporary curricula as relativistic or pupils as primarily passive recipients, and instead call for models of knowledge and learning that recognise interpretive work, institutional conditions, and the plurality of research traditions within literacy education. Across the critical responses, the critique is, in other words, directed at the reform texts' selective mobilisation of what counts as science and at the policy consequences of treating one research orientation as capable of settling normative and curricular questions.

Beyond the discursive privileging of certain research orientations, the scientisation of literacy reform is also materially reinforced through contemporary funding infrastructures. In 2025, the Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskapsrådet*) allocated more than 100 million SEK[ii] to initiatives explicitly grounded in cognitive or phonics-oriented perspectives on reading and writing development.^1 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). Such allocations indicate that the state is not only discursively elevating a particular notion of "scientific" literacy, but is also materially investing in the research infrastructures that stabilise this orientation and make it institutionally consequential. This development resonates with international debates about the "evidence movement" in education and the tendency to frame teaching in terms of interventions that can be optimised through research syntheses and effectiveness studies (Biesta, 2007; Hargreaves, 1996). A central critique in this discussion is that evidence-based policy often presupposes a model of professional action in which education is treated as a causal technology for producing pre-established outcomes. As Biesta (2007) argues, such a model risks overlooking that educational practice is not primarily a technical activity concerned with "what works," but a normative and moral practice in which professional judgment necessarily involves questions of educational desirability rather than only effectiveness. In this sense, the policy turn to "science" and "evidence" does not merely reorganise the knowledge base of schooling; it also shifts how teaching is conceptualised as professional action and what kinds

of judgment are foregrounded as legitimate. Internationally, the Swedish development resonates with the longer trajectory of literacy policy in England, where phonics has functioned not only as a pedagogical approach but as a policy technology tied to curriculum specification and national assessment. Wyse and Bradbury's analysis of the English "reading wars" shows how synthetic phonics has been elevated through appeals to scientific evidence and through governance infrastructures that reward particular operationalisations of reading. Their account is useful here not because Sweden replicates the English case point-for-point, but because it highlights how "evidence" can travel as a legitimising language that reorganises the field of possible pedagogies while presenting this reorganisation as neutral and research-led. Read against the Swedish inquiries, the English case offers a comparative lens for understanding how a phonics-centred settlement can be produced through the coupling of evidence hierarchies, assessment regimes, and curricular specification, even when broader understandings of reading – including comprehension, interpretation, and meaning-making – remain central to what schools are publicly said to value. Yet, despite such critiques, Swedish policy discourse increasingly invokes "science" as an apparently self-evident foundation for literacy reform.

This article addresses this puzzle by analysing "science" as what Laclau and Mouffe (1985; 2001) describe as a floating signifier: a signifier whose political power derives precisely from its semantic openness and its capacity to be filled with different, and sometimes competing, meanings. From this perspective, the discursive work surrounding "science" is not simply a matter of citing research; it is a political project that seeks to stabilise particular epistemic, pedagogical, and organisational visions of literacy while marginalising others. Earlier scholarship has noted that concepts such as literacy, evidence, and science often function as politically charged signifiers within education policy (Fairclough, 2003; Levinsson, 2025; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2025). Yet few studies have examined how the meaning of "science" is constructed across multiple, simultaneous reforms and how these constructions together produce discursive coherence. To address this gap, the article examines three recent Swedish government investigations that collectively shape the contemporary literacy landscape: *En tioårig grundskola* (SOU 2021:33), which introduces new systems for early assessment and support; *Ämneskunskaper och lärarskicklighet* (SOU 2024:81), which proposes substantial changes to teacher education; and *Kunskap för alla* (SOU 2025:19), which articulates a curriculum reform explicitly grounded in science and proven experience. Correspondingly, this article asks: How is 'science' articulated, fixed, and mobilised across three contemporary Swedish literacy reforms, and what hegemonic project does this articulation support?

2. 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.

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 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, 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 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.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Materials and case selection

The empirical material consists of three Swedish government investigations (Statens offentliga utredningar, SOU) that together define the current trajectory of literacy reform in Sweden: *En tioårig grundskola* (SOU 2021:33), *Ämneskunskaper och lärarskicklighet* (SOU 2024:81), and *Kunskap för alla* (SOU 2025:19). These documents were selected because they span three institutional arenas through which literacy policy is currently being reorganised: school organisation and early support (SOU 2021:33), teacher education (SOU 2024:81), and curriculum reform (SOU 2025:19). Each SOU 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 SOUs were first read in full, after which all literacy-relevant sections were extracted and assembled into a single working corpus. "Literacy-relevant" was operationalised broadly to include passages concerning reading and writing development; Swedish and Swedish as a second language (SVA); early language awareness; decoding and comprehension; reading instruction and strategies; writing development in early schooling; assessment/support practices tied to Swedish/SVA; and curriculum content and progression in Swedish. Only passages where such issues were the primary focus, or where they were clearly implicated, were included in the corpus.

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.

3.2.1 Step 1: Systematic identification and counting of science-related terminology

The first analytical step consisted of identifying all occurrences of "science" (*vetenskap*) and a defined set of science-related terms in the literacy-delimited parts of each SOU. This step was designed to produce an empirical map of how, where, and with what frequency "science" is invoked in relation to literacy reform, and to prevent the analysis from relying on selectively chosen exemplars.

The search included both explicit and proxy signifiers. Explicit science terms comprised *science, scientific, scientific grounds* (*vetenskap*, *vetenskaplig*, *vetenskaplig grund*), and formulations combining science with professional authority (e.g., *vetenskap och beprövad erfarenhet*). Evidence-oriented terms comprised *evidence, evidence based, evidence informed* (*evidens*, *evidensbaserad*, *evidensinformerad*), and related formulations that position research as an authoritative basis for action. Research-oriented terms comprised *research, state of research* (*forskning*, *forskningsläget*), and references to research syntheses and evaluation genres that function as legitimising intertextual anchors (e.g., systematic reviews, research overviews, meta-analyses). Finally, a set of scientising proxies was included where they clearly functioned as science-like stand-ins in policy discourse, particularly in literacy contexts. These proxies included terms linked to standardisation and systematic governance such as *systematic, systematic routines* (*systematik*, *systematiska rutiner*), national mapping and assessment instruments (*kartläggningsmaterial*, *bedömningsstöd*), and in the teacher-education and curriculum SOUs, recurring terms that construct scientificity through pedagogy (e.g., *explicit undervisning*, *strukturerad undervisning*, and method labels closely tied to evidence claims).

Each occurrence was logged with its immediate context and its location (page reference), allowing patterns of distribution and clustering to be traced within and across documents. The results reported in Section 4 are grounded in this mapped corpus of occurrences rather than in a limited selection of illustrative quotes.

3.2.2 Step 2: Contextual categorisation and discursive coding

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 SOU. 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.

3.2.3 Step 3: Cross-document comparison and synthesis

The third step consisted of comparing the three SOUs 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).

3.3 Operationalising Laclau and Mouffe's concepts

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory informed the interpretive layer of the analysis by providing a set of sensitising concepts that were operationalised in relation to the mapped occurrences and contextual categories. "Science" was treated as a floating signifier insofar as its meaning remained open enough to be filled differently across the SOUs while retaining legitimising force. Instances where "science" appeared to organise other signifiers (e.g., standardisation, evidence hierarchies, explicit instruction, stable knowledge) were interpreted as attempts at nodal fixation. Chains of equivalence were identified where "science" was repeatedly linked to clusters of mutually reinforcing terms and practices that together constructed a coherent policy rationality for literacy. Chains of difference were identified where alternative pedagogies or epistemologies were rendered marginal, absent, or implicitly positioned as less legitimate through contrasts with "scientifically grounded" approaches. Finally, the analysis attended to emerging antagonistic frontiers where "scientific" literacy was implicitly opposed to "subjective," "relativistic," or "unstructured" approaches, and to how such frontiers enable the formation of a broader hegemonic project across governance, teacher education, and curriculum.

4. Results: The Discursive Construction of "Science" Across Three Literacy Reforms

The following section presents the findings from the discourse analysis of how "science" (*vetenskap*) and associated scientising terms are articulated across three major Swedish government inquiries: SOU 2021:33, SOU 2024:81, and SOU 2025:19. Together, these inquiries span central arenas of literacy policy – school organisation and early support, teacher education, and curriculum reform – and outline the core reforms shaping the contemporary Swedish literacy landscape. Although they differ in focus and scope, each inquiry mobilises "science" as a floating signifier whose meaning is partially fixed in different ways across contexts. In examining these articulations, the chapter identifies how "science" becomes a central organising principle in the governance and pedagogical configuration of literacy, enabling the formation of a broader, increasingly scientised policy regime.

The chapter is structured in three steps. First, each SOU is analysed individually to show how "science" is discursively constructed within its particular policy domain. These case analyses reveal clearly distinct yet mutually reinforcing configurations: science as procedural governance (SOU 2021:33), science as methodological authority (SOU 2024:81), and science as epistemological anchor (SOU 2025:19). Second, a cross-case synthesis identifies how these configurations together produce an expanding scientised order of literacy. Third, transversal discursive patterns that cut across all three inquiries are examined. These recurring elements lay the conceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis, where the findings are interpreted through Laclau and Mouffe's notions of floating signifiers, nodal points, chains of equivalence, and hegemonic struggle.

4.1 SOU 2021:33 - Science as a Governance Logic for Early Literacy

Among the three inquiries, SOU 2021:33 contains the fewest explicit references to *science* and *scientific basis* (*vetenskap* and *vetenskaplig grund*). However, the report nevertheless constructs literacy as a domain governed by scientific rationality through extensive use of scientising proxies. Across the sections dealing with Swedish/SVA, reading and writing development, early language awareness, and early support structures, terms such as (ÖVERSÄTT HÄRIFRÅN) *bedömningsstöd*, *kartläggningsmaterial*, *systematisk överlämning, systematisk uppföljning*, *likvärdig bedömning*, *vetenskap*, and *forskning* appear repeatedly in ways that imbue literacy with the qualities of a measurable and technically manageable domain.

Although the inquiry rarely foregrounds phonics as an explicitly named instructional doctrine, its literacy architecture nevertheless orients early reading toward the preconditions for a phonics-centred pedagogy by determining what counts as relevant knowledge in the earliest stages of schooling. The national mapping materials and assessment supports – particularly those positioned as triggers for early intervention – stabilise beginning literacy as something that must be made visible through indicators of foundational reading skills. In this sense, the governance chain that runs from *kartläggning* to *bedömningsstöd* and onward to planned support does not simply "support literacy" in a broad sense but partially fixes literacy as a developmental trajectory that becomes scientifically governable through early identification of risk in basic skill acquisition. This upstream configuration of literacy pre-structures the field that later inquiries (notably SOU 2024:81 and SOU 2025:19) describe as requiring structured, evidence-based reading instruction.

The central mechanism through which scientificity is articulated is the use of national assessment instruments. *Nationella bedömningsstöd* – which appear nineteen times in literacy-relevant passages – are depicted as authoritative tools for identifying pupils at risk of not reaching the knowledge requirements in Swedish/SVA. They trigger formal assessment sequences and early interventions, and their use is consistently associated with objectivity, *likvärdighet*, and diagnostic accuracy. In this sense, the *bedömningsstöd* function as surrogates for scientific judgment. Although the report does not explicitly claim that these instruments are scientifically validated, it constructs their authority through their standardised and comparable form, implicitly positioning scientificity as synonymous with uniformity and reliability.

A second scientising cluster centres on the *nationellt kartläggningsmaterial*, including tools such as *Hitta språket*. These instruments appear nine times in literacy-related contexts and are positioned as mechanisms for systematically mapping pupils' *språklig medvetenhet* at an early stage. Here, the report constructs literacy diagnosis as a technical, stepwise process, where scientificity resides not in reference to reading research but in the systematic generation of data that can be operationalised for targeted interventions. This procedural reading of science is underscored by repeated references to systematic work (*överlämning* and *uppföljning*) and the need to follow literacy progression in a structured and comparable way.

The third and most explicit scientising element is found in the sections discussing the *garanti för tidiga stödinsatser*. Although the inquiry doesn't cite specific literacy studies, it frequently positions the guarantee as grounded in "*evidensbaserad forskning*" and the broader "*kunskapsläge*" on early reading difficulties. The guarantee is designed as a sequenced, rational model—mapping → indication → special assessment → planned support → follow-up—that mirrors the procedural logic of scientific method. In this way, literacy becomes a domain best governed through protocols, routines, and evidence-producing mechanisms.

Taken together, SOU 2021:33 constructs scientificity primarily as governance: literacy becomes governable because it is rendered legible through national instruments, comparable through standardised assessments, and actionable through structured models of early intervention. This configuration does not rest on explicit engagement with literacy research but on the procedural rationality of early detection, standardisation, and the pre-structuring of early literacy as a set of skills to be monitored and intervened upon. It is precisely this procedural fixation of literacy that enables later inquiries to translate "science" into more explicit method prescriptions, particularly in relation to phonics-based reading instruction.

4.2 SOU 2024:81 - Science as Methodological Authority in Teacher Education

While SOU 2021:33 largely equates science with systematics and measurement, SOU 2024:81 articulates "science" as a methodological authority that defines legitimate literacy instruction within teacher education. The report contains a substantially higher frequency of explicit scientising terms – *vetenskaplig grund*, *evidens*, *evidensbaserad*, *vetenskapligt stöd*, *forskningsläge*, *metaanalyser* – and mobilises these terms to construct a normative hierarchy of reading methods.

The inquiry asserts early in the document that teacher education must be anchored in a "vetenskaplig grund" and, more specifically, in an "evidensbaserad vetenskaplig grund" for reading and writing instruction. Here, "science" is not procedural, but epistemic and

disciplinary. It is used to legitimate a specific instructional model: synthetic phonics, described as enjoying "övervägande vetenskapligt stöd" and "tydlig evidens" for its effectiveness. The epistemic privilege accorded to phonics is reinforced through the discursive construction of an evidence hierarchy. Interviewed teacher educators emphasise that literacy methods must rest on "det bästa faktaunderlag" available, which is consistently equated with systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and quantitative intervention studies. Methods lacking such evidence, typically analytic or whole-language approaches, are framed as less scientific, rather than robust research.

A second dominant scientising cluster concerns explicit and systematic instruction. Literacy teaching is repeatedly described as needing to be explicit, structured, and progressive, with systematic training in phoneme–grapheme correspondence and decoding forming the core of early literacy pedagogy. These terms function as scientising proxies, signalling that legitimate literacy teaching is linear, sequential, and behaviourally oriented.

The report further reinforces this methodological framing by drawing on a wide range of research syntheses – Hattie's meta-analyses, Galuschka et al.'s review of reading interventions, VR's overview of multilingual literacy development, and large-scale assessments such as PIRLS and PISA. These references serve an intertextual function: they anchor the inquiry's preferred methods in a broader scientific corpus and legitimise the narrowing of pedagogical possibility in teacher education.

Overall, SOU 2024:81 constructs "science" as a boundary-setting device that distinguishes legitimate literacy methods from illegitimate ones. The teacher is positioned not as a pedagogical interpreter but as a method-implementer whose professionalism lies in adhering to scientifically validated instructional sequences.

4.3 SOU 2025:19 – Science as Epistemological Anchor in Curriculum Reform

SOU 2025:19 is the most explicitly scientising of the three inquiries and marks a further step in the consolidation of scientific authority. Here, "science" is not only procedural (as in SOU 2021:33) or methodological (as in SOU 2024:81); it becomes an epistemological anchor for the entire curriculum.

The inquiry begins by invoking the government's directive that school knowledge must not be "rörlig, relativ eller subjektiv," but instead must be grounded in "vetenskap och beprövad erfarenhet." Literacy becomes an exemplary domain where this epistemic reorientation is to be realised. In the sections addressing curriculum reform for Swedish, the report argues that reading-related *undervisningsstrategier* should support teachers "på vetenskaplig grund," and that the commentary material (*kommentarmaterialet*) should help teachers understand the scientific foundations of reading instruction.

The scientific anchoring is further strengthened through a thematic synthesis of research on early reading and writing. The inquiry identifies strategies "med vetenskapligt stöd" derived from a "tematisk genomgång" of national and international research, culminating in a "sammanfattande bild av forskningsläget." The inquiry gives particular prominence to systematic phonics instruction, claimed to be supported by "omfattande systematisk vetenskaplig evidens." These formulations consolidate a chain of equivalence in which scientifically validated reading strategies are portrayed as both necessary and sufficient for successful literacy development.

The report also deploys scientising proxies to justify systematic curriculum restructuring. International assessments, such as PIRLS and PISA, are referenced as neutral diagnostic tools that demonstrate the need for scientifically anchored reading instruction. Systematicity itself becomes a key curricular principle: reading instruction must proceed through structured, explicit, research-aligned sequences. Assessment materials are to be constructed on the basis of scientifically supported interpretations of literacy development, further entrenching the notion that science provides the epistemic foundation for curriculum content and progression.

Thus, SOU 2025:19 uses "science" as a philosophical justification for curriculum centralisation. Literacy becomes the site where the broader epistemic shift – towards fixed, research-derived, and non-relativist knowledge – is both articulated and implemented. This epistemological orientation aligns closely with what Popkewitz (2011) describes as the "history of the present" in curriculum reform, in which scientificity operates as a stabilising logic that renders school knowledge objective, fixed, and administratively manageable. By invoking science as the guarantor of curricular truth, SOU 2025:19 does not merely reference research; it participates in producing a particular regime of truth in which literacy becomes a site for epistemic consolidation. The curriculum is thereby positioned as the outcome of scientific necessity rather than political choice.

4.4 Cross-Case Synthesis: Three Partial Fixations of "Science"

Taken together, the three inquiries reveal markedly different, yet mutually reinforcing, ways of fixing the meaning of "science" within contemporary literacy reform. In *SOU 2021:33*, 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.

SOU 2024:81 constructs scientificity in a more explicitly epistemic manner. Whereas the earlier inquiry 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.

The third inquiry, *SOU 2025:19*, 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 inquiry 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 inquiry 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 inquiries show how the floating signifier "science" is stabilised differently depending on the policy arena: as systematics and governance tools in the first inquiry, as empirical-methodological authority in the second, and as epistemological foundation in the third. Yet despite these differences, each inquiry points in the same direction: towards constructing literacy as a domain best organised, justified, and regulated through scientific rationality. The three configurations are not contradictory but cumulative, each layering additional elements onto an emerging scientised literacy regime. These dynamics resonate with Popkewitz's (1998) analysis of how reforms construct the teacher as a subject of science. The cumulative effect of the three inquiries is precisely such a construction: teachers are positioned as implementers of scientifically sanctioned methods, while pedagogical judgment is increasingly framed as adherence to research rather than interpretive deliberation. In this sense, the partial fixations of "science" observed across the SOUs work together to produce what Popkewitz describes as a governing rationality – one that narrows pedagogical plurality while presenting its own scientificity as commonsensical and necessary.

4.5 Transversal Discursive Patterns Across Reforms

Although the three inquiries address different aspects of the school system, several discursive patterns recur across them and together contribute to consolidating a particular understanding of literacy. One such pattern is the construction of "science" as a governance technology. Whether articulated through early diagnostic instruments, the structuring of teacher education, or the organisation of curriculum content, scientificity consistently appears as an organising principle that renders literacy measurable, predictable, and administratively manageable. The emphasis on standardisation, early detection, and systematic monitoring positions literacy as a field where scientific logic can be applied to secure efficiency, comparability, and control.

A second transversal pattern concerns the use of "science" to police the boundaries of legitimate pedagogy. Across the inquiries, certain approaches to literacy – particularly those grounded in cognitive science, explicit instruction, and structured phonics – are repeatedly framed as scientifically supported and therefore appropriate for inclusion in teacher education, curriculum guidance, and early support structures. At the same time, sociocultural, interpretive, and multimodal perspectives are either sidelined or presented implicitly as lacking sufficient scientific support. In this sense, "science" is not merely descriptive but performative: it actively shapes the field by elevating certain pedagogies and delegitimising others.

A third recurring pattern is the use of scientific discourse to justify epistemological centralisation within the curriculum. In SOU 2025:19 especially, literacy becomes an exemplary domain through which the inquiry argues for a curriculum anchored in stable and scientifically validated forms of knowledge. The articulation of reading strategies as grounded in scientific research becomes emblematic of a broader shift towards epistemic consolidation across subjects. "Science" thus functions not only at the level of method or assessment but also at the level of what counts as legitimate knowledge in school.

A further pattern concerns how international large-scale assessments are mobilised as evidence of a literacy crisis and then translated into a particular pedagogical solution. Across the inquiries, PIRLS and PISA are repeatedly invoked as authoritative indicators of declining reading outcomes and as justification for strengthening the scientific grounding of literacy teaching. Yet the documents do not make explicit that PIRLS and PISA primarily operationalise "reading" through measures of reading comprehension and text interpretation rather than through discrete tests of decoding skill. This matters discursively because the problem

representation is anchored in comprehension decline while the proposed remedy is articulated through a chain of signifiers that foregrounds early decoding instruction and structured phonics. In other words, "reading" is stabilised as a crisis through comprehension-oriented metrics, but "scientifically grounded literacy reform" is partially fixed through a pedagogical emphasis on letter–sound correspondences, explicit decoding sequences, and method governance. The effect is that the legitimacy of phonics-centred reform is strengthened by an evidentiary backdrop that does not transparently correspond to the particular reading construct being prioritised. Within the scientised literacy regime, international assessments thus function less as neutral diagnostic instruments and more as intertextual anchors that enable a shift in what "counts" as the scientific basis of reading instruction, while leaving the translation between comprehension problems and decoding solutions largely untheorised.

Together, these transversal patterns demonstrate that the scientisation of literacy is not confined to isolated reforms. Rather, it constitutes a discursive movement that permeates governance structures, pedagogical norms, and curricular epistemology. The inquiries collectively contribute to a restructuring of literacy around scientific rationality, which both enables and constrains the possibilities for how literacy can be understood and taught.

The next chapter interprets these discursive formations through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe. By examining how "science" becomes a nodal point around which chains of equivalence and difference are organised, and how these articulations contribute to a hegemonic project in literacy policy, the analysis illuminates both the stabilising force and the political stakes of scientisation. The tensions identified in the results – between different readings of literacy, between scientific authority and pedagogical plurality, between epistemic centralisation and interpretive openness – form the basis for understanding the emerging hegemonic struggle over the meaning of literacy in contemporary Swedish education.

5. The Scientisation of Literacy Policy

The results reveal a striking pattern: across three major policy arenas – governance, teacher education, and curriculum – "science" emerges as the central discursive resource through which Swedish educational (literacy) reform is articulated. Yet what counts as "science," and what it is mobilised to accomplish, varies substantially across the inquiries. This variability is not accidental; rather, it is precisely what allows the term to function as a powerful political device in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) sense. They describe how certain signifiers become "the stake of a constant struggle" (REF), acquiring a privileged position not because their meaning is fixed, but because it is *contestable* and therefore available for hegemonic articulation. In this analysis, I interpret "science" as such a signifier – floating, contested, but capable of anchoring a discursive project that reorganises the field of literacy around particular epistemic and pedagogical logics.

5.1 Science as a Floating Signifier and the Fixation of Meaning

In Laclau and Mouffe's framework, floating signifiers emerge in situations where competing discourses attempt to impose different meanings on the same term, often under conditions of institutional or ideological instability (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 191). "Science" displays precisely this floating quality across the three inquiries. Although it retains rhetorical stability as a positive legitimising principle, its content shifts substantially. In SOU 2021:33, science is associated with systematic procedures, early detection, and uniform assessment; in SOU 2024:81, it becomes tied to methodological authority, particularly reading methods validated

through cognitive-scientific meta-analyses; and in SOU 2025:19, it assumes an epistemological function, defining what counts as legitimate curricular knowledge. Such semantic variability does not weaken the term. On the contrary, it is precisely this openness that allows "science" to be drawn toward the role of a nodal point, i.e. an organising centre around which meaning can be temporarily fixed. As Laclau and Mouffe write:

"The practice of articulation […] consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity." (ibid., p. 113)

Seen through this lens, the inquiries' attempts to stabilise the meaning of "science" take different procedural, methodological, and epistemological forms, yet they are united by the political work of transforming a floating signifier into a structuring principle. It is precisely because "science" remains partially open that it can be extended across governance, pedagogy, and curriculum and made to anchor a new literacy order.

A floating signifier becomes politically powerful only when it is partially stabilised as a nodal point around which other elements acquire meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985 p. 117). Across the inquiries, "science" acts as such a node, stitching together heterogeneous elements into a surface of apparent coherence. This nodal function is visible in the way different literacy-related signifiers – early assessment, synthetic phonics, research syntheses, curriculum stability – are all articulated as derivations of scientific authority.

In *SOU 2021:33*, standardised tools and systematic procedures draw their legitimacy from proximity to "scientific" governance. In *SOU 2024:81*, the term anchors a discursive network built around evidence hierarchies and method validation, positioning certain literacy pedagogies as inherently more scientific. In *SOU 2025:19*, "science" becomes the principle of curricular coherence, the epistemic substrate that defines what counts as stable and non-relativist school knowledge. Across these arenas, "science" is thus not merely invoked but strategically elevated to a point where it exerts a suturing effect - the previously mentioned temporary fixation of meaning in fields of discursivity that would otherwise remain open. The inquiries' efforts to stabilise literacy reform therefore hinge on the successful elevation of "science" into a nodal point that binds governance, pedagogy, and curriculum together.

5.2 Equivalential Logics: Creating a Scientised Chain of Literacy

The nodal point acquires its structuring force through the formation of chains of equivalence, where different signifiers become linked insofar as they can all be presented as expressions of the same principle (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985 p. 131). The inquiries reveal a progressive construction of such a chain. Systematic assessment procedures, evidence-based methods, explicit instructional sequences, meta-analytical research syntheses, and stable curricular knowledge are all positioned as mutually reinforcing expressions of scientific rationality.

In *SOU 2021:33*, scienticity is tied to comparability, early detection, and structured intervention. These terms become interchangeable markers of a procedural ordering logic. In *SOU 2024:81*, "science" is equivalentially linked to cognitively validated reading methods, experimental evidence, and explicit instruction. By contrast, alternative approaches, such as analytic, holistic, or sociocultural, are excluded from this chain, not necessarily through explicit critique but through the repeated association of legitimate literacy teaching with cognitive-

scientific evidence and structured pedagogy. In *SOU 2025:19*, the chain expands further: scientificity is now associated with non-relativist knowledge, internationally measurable outcomes, systematic teaching sequences, and research-supported strategies.

Across the three inquiries, these equivalences accumulate. What begins as a procedural chain becomes doubled by a methodological chain and finally stabilised as an epistemological chain. The cumulative effect is a scientifically inflected redefinition of literacy: reading and writing development appear governed not by interpretative, dialogic, or meaning-oriented pedagogies but by structured, measurable, research-derived principles that are discursively positioned as equivalently "scientific." This process exemplifies Laclau and Mouffe's insight that equivalential articulation is a political act – it constructs a "unity" that is never natural but always the result of strategic linkage (ibid. p. 93).

5.3 Differential Logics and the Production of a Constitutive Outside

The construction of a chain of equivalence always requires a corresponding chain of difference – elements that are marked as not belonging, as threatening to contaminate the coherence of the emerging order (REF). In the inquiries, the chain of difference is constituted by literacy approaches that do not align with the emerging scientised regime. In articulating the chain of difference that secures the scientised chain of equivalence, it is not necessary to enumerate every excluded literacy tradition in its full theoretical specificity. The policy texts' closure operates primarily by naturalising one epistemic cluster – cognitive-scientific evidence, structured progression, and method validation – while rendering alternative conceptualisations marginal, optional, or irrelevant to reform. For this reason, it is analytically sufficient to refer to "sociocultural and meaning-oriented perspectives" as the broader discursive outside against which the scientific identity of literacy is stabilised. Within that category, dialogic, multimodal, and critical literacy traditions can be treated as illustrative instantiations rather than as separate antagonists requiring parallel exposition. The analytical point is not to rehearse disciplinary differences within educational research, but to show how the SOUs construct "science" as the criterion of legitimacy in ways that compress epistemic plurality into a residual category that is either absent or positioned as weaker, less measurable, and therefore less policy-relevant.

This marginalisation exemplifies what Laclau and Mouffe describe as the "constitutive outside" – the elements excluded so that the hegemonic identity may appear consolidated (REF). The scientised literacy order depends upon the construction of alternative approaches as insufficiently grounded, overly subjective, or lacking in measurable outcomes. These differential exclusions maintain the coherence of the dominant chain: structured phonics can be framed as scientific only as long as dialogic or multimodal literacy can be framed as its opposite. The differential logic here is subtle but powerful, operating not through direct polemic but through systematic framing.

5.4 Antagonism, Dislocation, and the Emergence of a Hegemonic Project

Once the equivalential and differential logics become sufficiently sedimented, antagonistic boundaries emerge. Antagonism, for Laclau and Mouffe, is not simple opposition but structural impossibility – the moment when one discourse prevents another from fully constituting itself (REF). In the inquiries, antagonism takes shape around the opposition between "scientific" and "non-scientific" literacy. This frontier is strengthened by the simultaneous construction of dislocation: recurrent references to declining reading results, fragmented teacher education, and

unstable curricular knowledge create the sense of a system in crisis. Dislocation destabilises existing structures and opens space for new hegemonic articulations (REF).

By presenting the literacy field as dislocated – a space marked by failure, inconsistency, or risk – the inquiries generate the conditions under which "science" can be offered as the solution. The hegemonic project becomes visible: to restore stability, coherence, and legitimacy to literacy through a scientised reordering of assessment, pedagogy, and curriculum. The antagonistic frontier thus serves both diagnostic and prescriptive functions: it identifies the sources of failure (insufficient scientificity) and prescribes their remedy (increased scientificity).

5.5 The Scientised Literacy Regime as a Hegemonic Formation

What emerges across the inquiries is a classic case of hegemonic construction as described by Laclau and Mouffe. A formerly open field of literacy practices is progressively reorganised around a single nodal point, "science," whose meaning is constructed through equivalential chains that link governance, pedagogy, and curriculum into a coherent formation. At the same time, difference and antagonism are mobilised to exclude or marginalise alternative literacy understandings. The result is not simply a reform programme but the consolidation of a new hegemonic order – one that presents its own partial, contingent articulation of literacy as natural, necessary, and universally grounded in science.

The scientised literacy regime that emerges is thus not merely descriptive or technocratic. It is deeply political in the Laclau–Mouffe sense: it redefines what literacy is, how it should be taught, and who has the authority to speak about it. The very possibility of pedagogical plurality, interpretative practice, or multimodal meaning-making becomes increasingly constrained by the hegemonic saturation of scientificity as the constitutive logic of literacy reform.

To clarify the cumulative pattern that emerges across the three inquiries, the three partial fixations of "science" may be summarised schematically. In SOU 2021:33, scientificity becomes a procedural logic that structures early assessment and intervention; in SOU 2024:81, scientificity functions as a methodological authority that defines legitimate literacy instruction; and in SOU 2025:19, scientificity is elevated to an epistemological principle governing what counts as curricular knowledge. Although analytically distinct, these fixations reinforce one another, producing a scientised literacy regime that links governance, pedagogy, and curriculum. Figure 1 provides an overview of how these three forms of scientificity operate and accumulate across the reforms

Policy arena (SOU)	Form of scientificity	Discursive function	Key signifiers	Effect on literacy
1. SOU 2021:33				
(10-year compulsory school reform)	**Procedural scientificity**	Constructs literacy as a measurable, governable domain administered through standardised routines and early diagnostic systems.	*bedömningsstöd*; *kartläggningsmaterial*; *likvärdighet*; *systematiskt arbete*; *tidiga stödinsatser*	Literacy becomes a diagnostic–administrative object; scientificity is equated with systematics, uniformity, and early detection.
2. SOU 2024:81				
(Teacher education reform)	**Methodological scientificity**	Fixes legitimate literacy teaching to specific evidence-based methods, privileging cognitive-scientific research and meta-analyses.	*evidens*; *evidensbaserad*; *vetenskapligt stöd*; *forskning*; *explicit* and *systematisk undervisning*	Literacy becomes tied to validated instructional methods; scientificity is equated with method authority and evidence hierarchies.
3. SOU 2025:19				
(Curriculum reform)	**Epistemological scientificity**	Anchors curriculum knowledge in science and proven experience; constructs literacy knowledge as stable, objective, and non-relativist.	*vetenskap och beprövad erfarenhet*; *stabil kunskapsgrund*; *vetenskaplig grund*; *PIRLS/PISA*	Literacy becomes an epistemically fixed domain; scientificity is equated with the foundations of curricular truth and legitimacy.

Figure 1. Three Partial Fixations of "Science" in Contemporary Swedish Literacy Reforms

6. Discussion

The findings show that across the three SOUs, "science" is repeatedly articulated as the principle that determines legitimate pedagogy, appropriate methods, and even what counts as valid curricular knowledge. This has important consequences for how the role of the teacher is constructed. Popkewitz's analyses offer a valuable lens for understanding these consequences. His argument that educational reforms mobilise scientific rationalities to classify teachers and students (Popkewitz, 2008) helps illuminate how Swedish literacy policy constructs a specific professional identity: the teacher who implements research-backed methods, produces measurable outcomes, and aligns with state-defined systems of reason. Such constructions are not neutral. They shape the moral and political terrain of teaching by privileging certain interpretations of literacy and excluding others, thereby limiting the range of pedagogical practices that can legitimately be enacted. When "science" is fixed as a nodal point that links together early assessment tools, evidence hierarchies, and research-derived instructional sequences, the professional judgment of teachers risks being recast in instrumental terms: to be scientific is to implement the methods that research has shown to be effective.

Such a framing resonates strongly with what Biesta (2007) describes as the "what works" logic of evidence-based education, in which the task of the teacher is understood as selecting and applying interventions that reliably produce predetermined outcomes. Yet, as Biesta argues, educational practice is not a causal technology but a moral and interpretive activity in which decisions about what ought to be taught and how depend on value judgments situated within particular contexts. From this perspective, the scientisation of literacy policy observed in the SOUs can be seen as overextending the relevance of positivist research by using it to define not only *how* teaching should be conducted but also *what* should count as desirable educational aims.

The discursive fixation of "science" as the arbiter of legitimate literacy teaching thus contributes to narrowing the space in which teachers can exercise practical judgment. At the same time, policy documents increasingly demand standardisation, documentation, evaluation, and traceability – practices that further delimit the scope for professional autonomy. In Laclau and Mouffe's terms, the emerging hegemonic formation sutures "science" to a technocratic model of teaching that marginalises alternative pedagogical and epistemic traditions, including those that foreground meaning-making, multimodality, or the dialogic nature of literacy. The result is a discursive configuration where scientificity appears not only as the foundation of pedagogical legitimacy but as the condition under which teaching itself becomes thinkable.

The emergence of a scientised literacy regime is also politically consequential because it unfolds under conditions of visible contestation from the academic field it claims to represent. The consultation critiques show that the reforms' attempted fixation of "science" has not been met with consensual recognition but with objections concerning epistemic monism, increased detail steering, and the narrowing of professional judgment in both teacher education and school practice. From a discourse-theoretical perspective, this is not an external footnote to implementation but part of the hegemonic terrain itself: the more "science" is mobilised as the nodal point that sutures governance, pedagogy, and curriculum, the more the exclusions and closures required by that suturing become politically legible. The fact that universities simultaneously criticise the reforms for weak scientific grounding in problem descriptions, for privileging cognitive science, and for prescribing instructional strategies at steering level suggests that what is being established is not "science" as such but a particular political articulation of science. The critical reception thus underlines a central implication of the

analysis: hegemonic formation here is not the achievement of epistemic stability, but the attempted organisation of a field through a selective and consequential definition of what counts as legitimate knowledge about literacy.

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[i] The analysis of consultation responses (remissyttranden) 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.

For the reform *Ämneskunskaper och lärarskicklighet – en reformerad lärarutbildning* (SOU 2024:81), the reviewed responses include those from Uppsala University, Luleå University of Technology, Dalarna University, University West, and Umeå University.

[ii] 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.