

## **Tracing evidence, guarantees and epistemic harm in literacy policy in Australia**

**Natalie Thompson**

In 2024, the Grattan Institute released *The Reading Guarantee*, a report that has significantly shaped literacy policy in Australia and influenced public and professional understandings of how reading should be taught. The report positions its recommendations as grounded in “settled science” and presents structured literacy as the most evidence-informed pathway to improving reading outcomes. However, as others have noted, the movement of research into policy is never straightforward. This paper examines how *The Reading Guarantee* configures the evidence it cites and considers whether the patterning produced can sustain the certainty it declares.

Through citation mapping and close reading of research claims, I analyse the nature and use of references in the report. Then, thinking with Haraway’s (2016) string-figuring, I trace how research is threaded, relayed and ultimately stabilised. This analysis examines the distribution and type of sources cited, the alignment between referenced studies and conclusions, and the patterns through which particular strands of research are strengthened while others are loosened or omitted.

This analysis identifies recurring evidentiary patterns, including misalignment between evidence type and claim type, descriptive-to-prescriptive slippage, implicit causal loading, asymmetric epistemic scrutiny, and instances where sources are mobilised in ways that exceed or contradict their empirical conclusions. Together, these patterns suggest that the authority of “science” in the report functions not only as a commitment to rigour, but as a device that stabilises select interpretations.

The purpose of this paper is not to dispute the importance of research in literacy education but to dispute how research becomes policy certainty. In a field characterised by complexity and ongoing inquiry, this paper calls for renewed critical attention to how evidence is woven into authority, whose voices are empowered or marginalised and to the ways governments and intermediary institutions mobilise selected forms of research to shape policy and practice.