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**Competing Discourses: A genealogy of adolescent literacy discourses in  
New Zealand secondary education, 1870-2008**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Education,  
At Massey University,  
Palmerston North,  
New Zealand.

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2013

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**Candidate's statement**

I certify that this report is the result of my own work except where otherwise acknowledged and has not been submitted, in part or in full, for any other papers or degrees for which credit qualifications have been granted.

Kenneth Gordon Kilpin

## Abstract

The thesis is a Foucauldian genealogy of adolescent, or secondary school, literacy discourses within Aotearoa New Zealand. It links cycles of competitive tension between local discourses of adolescent literacy to larger conflicts between national and international socio-economic discourses. Using Foucault's view of discourse as epistemic formations that reflect the material contingencies of their time and place, I analyse why certain historical conditions generated particular taken-for-granted truths, knowledge and beliefs about literacy education and schooling for adolescent New Zealanders between the years 1870 and 2008. I apply Foucault's analytic tools of discipline and control, biopower and governmentality to explore the complex relationship within New Zealand between adolescent literacy and early discourses of colonial economic development and social control (1870-1935), mid-twentieth century Keynesian national economic reconstruction and socially progressive education reform (1930s-1970s), and recent neo-liberal market and globalisation reforms of education (1980s-2008). In particular I examine the effect of international neo-liberal economic rationalist discourses advocated by the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) since the late 1960s, on contemporary conceptualisations of adolescent literacy and secondary schooling. I explain how the OECD's international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests reflect the OECD's deeper discursive advocacy of managerial rationalist principles to frame an international policy consensus for national education policy making and reforms. Since 2000, PISA has emerged as a powerful global instrument of neo-liberal education policy standardisation that aims to comparatively measure the effectiveness of national secondary schooling systems and their teachers to generate literate adolescents as privatised human capital necessary to service the demands of the neo-liberal global economy. I conclude that New Zealand adolescent literacy education discourses have been continuously shaped by *a priori* positivist principles of post-Enlightenment scientific rationalism. These have variously emerged within subsequent discourses of classical, social and neo-liberal forms of economic rationalisation, policies of curriculum or syllabus reform, and historical conceptions of teacher identity. Notwithstanding their particular socio-cultural aspirations or intentions, all reflect the hegemonic dominance of the laws of market capitalism, and the need for schooling systems to satisfy its demands for trained, literate and credentialed human capital.

## Acknowledgements

The adage that good things take time is most apt to the completion of this thesis and the fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters in Education degree, begun as far back as 2005. In this sense, completion is as much about resilience and perseverance as it is about inspiration and insight. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues and family, without whose committed support and encouragement, this thesis would not have been attempted, let alone completed.

My thanks firstly go to my supervisors: to Professor Howard Lee whose 2008 Education Policy paper set my research direction, and who in what I thought then to be a leap of faith, insisted I undertake a research thesis into adolescent literacy policy; to Anne-Marie O'Neill whose knowledge, expertise, sharp critique and enthusiastic collegiality consistently challenged me to 'up my game' as a researcher, analyst and writer; and to Dr. Brian Finch whose steady and reassuring hand helped guide the thesis to its completion, especially at times this year when it appeared just a little too big.

My wife Nora has identified a new presence in our relationship – Ken's 'thesis head'. She has tolerated, stepped around and compensated for times when writing this thesis distanced me from her and from the important minutiae of day-to-day living. Her reliable, consistent and stubborn encouragement allowed me the space and time to wear my thesis head, no matter how annoying and frustrating it must have been. My thanks also go to our daughters Hanna and Caitlin whose determination to succeed academically and vocationally, in very competitive environments, helped push their dad to knuckle down and stick with it.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the gift our late son Alexander left our family when his cancer finally took him on October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010, after a brave seven-year battle. The gift was two-fold: don't give up even if the odds are against you, for in perseverance and resilience lie possibilities for success and happiness. Second, 'just do it' because our hold on life is too fragile to waste time not having a go, wondering what might have been, and then later regretting not doing it! This thesis is in memory of our dear Xand, his stubborn refusal to give up, and his determination to do all he could to live a full, if sadly shortened, life.

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