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# “Fallen through the cracks”: Teachers’ perceptions of barriers faced by struggling literacy learners in secondary school

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## ABSTRACT

Struggling literacy learners are typically low achievers with poor engagement in literacy learning, and the gap between struggling and capable students widens as children move through the years of schooling. Literacy research and interventions for struggling literacy learners typically focus on the primary school years. The 2019 Supporting Struggling Secondary Literacy Learners mixed-methods project collected qualitative data on teacher perceptions of the barriers experienced by their struggling literacy learners in Australian mainstream secondary English classrooms. Recurring barriers included literacy skill gaps and English as an additional language status, absenteeism, home factors, student attitudes and engagement, school and systems factors, and learning difficulties and disabilities influencing learning. This project found high agreement with diverse individual and group level barriers, and diverse learner barriers were negatively associated with perceived adequacy of time to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners.

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Struggling literacy learners; reading difficulty; literacy skills; absenteeism; learner diversity

## Introduction

Struggling literacy learners (SLLs) are typically low achievers with poor engagement in literacy learning (Guthrie and Davis 2003). Their limited literacy skills diminish their capacity to advance their reading comprehension and vocabulary skills and to develop efficient and effective reading strategies (Roberts et al. 2008). The poor independent reading skills of SLLs pose a challenge for reading comprehension, making it difficult for them to make meaning of text. SLLs have their disadvantage exacerbated by a Matthew Effect, whereby capable students who read frequently develop “richer” skills through continued exposure to reading, which confers skill benefit, and the gap between capable students and struggling readers widens as children move through the years of schooling (Stanovich 1986). An analysis of trends in the Australian high-stakes testing data from the National Assessment programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) found that learning gaps are dramatically exacerbated as students move through the years of schooling, so that “by Year 9, the spread of achievement spans eight years” (Goss and Sonnemann 2016, 1). This remarkable diversity in achievement can pose a substantial challenge for teachers in mainstream classes seeking to provide learning experiences that meet the skills and abilities of all of their students. The limited extant research focusing on how

teachers in mainstream secondary classrooms support SLLs beyond the early years of schooling suggests that, for Australian secondary English teachers, range of student capabilities is the most common factor influencing curriculum implementation (Albright, Knezevic & Farrell, 2013).

The issue of how to support struggling readers is a current concern in Australia and other nations. The number of Australian secondary students who struggle with literacy proficiency is growing over time, with nearly one in five adolescents in the low performer category according to the most recent available figures from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Thomson, De Bortoli, and Underwood 2016). While many young Australians struggle with their reading skills in adolescence, little is known about the teaching adjustments and interventions initiated for these older SLLs (in Year 7 and beyond) in Australia, though educators may employ diverse strategies to promote literacy skill development and engagement in SLLs (Merga 2019a). There are also concerns in the US and England about meeting the needs of SLLs, with research suggesting that, in the US, contemporary students “are less efficient readers than their 1960 counterparts”, with data on reading rate and eye movement patterns suggesting a decline in word recognition automaticity (Spichtig et al. 2016, 252). A quarter of English students at Key Stage 2 (around eleven years of age) did not reach the expected standard in reading in 2018 (Department for Education 2018). While early years literacy initiatives remain essential to develop core literacy foundations upon which subsequent learning is built, the secondary school years cannot be neglected. A focus on “early literacy instruction and the so-called reading wars between advocates of direct skills instruction and those who favour more holistic approaches to teaching young children to read print text” (Alvermann 2002, 189) has deflected interest from the pressing issue of how the needs of SLLs can be met in middle childhood and adolescence. As a result, the needs of this demographic may be disregarded (Alvermann 2002).

Literacy skill level is closely related to an individual’s academic, social and vocational prospects in life beyond school (Merga 2019bb), with OECD (2018) analysis finding that Australian students who scored in the highest quarter for “reading performance at age 15 were 34 percentage points more likely than students in the bottom quarter of performance to be working in a skilled job (i.e. a job that requires tertiary education) by the age of 25” (p. 3). Similarly, international research has found a significant positive relationship between literacy attainment and employment in adulthood (OECD and Statistics Canada 2000). UK research has found that, even controlling for socioeconomic circumstances, higher literacy skills are associated with higher earning potential (McIntosh & Vignoles, 2001). As such, it is imperative that the *wicked problem* of SLLs literacy attainment beyond the early years receive greater attention. It can be contended that the challenge of meeting the needs of SLLs beyond the early years of schooling can be deemed a *wicked problem*, as there is no definitive solution, the problem has multi-faceted causation, including an array or complex variables, and the range of potential solutions is incredibly diverse (Rittel and Webber 1973). These variables may also be “contextually-bound, and interdependent” (Borko, Whitcomb, and Liston 2009, 3). While a wicked problem may not be easily resolved due to this complex nature, this should not discourage researchers from grappling with such problems. In relation to the wicked problem of meeting the needs of

SLLs beyond the early years of schooling, this problem simply cannot be ignored, as young people's life opportunities are shaped by literacy attainment.

While numerous practices offer benefit for SLLs, the extant research suggests that there may be no one solution that meets the needs of all SLLs in middle childhood and adolescence, as the gaps in skills and knowledge are diverse. For example, Buly and Valencia (2002) explored the needs of struggling readers who failed a high-stakes reading assessment, finding that scores on these tests "mask distinctive and multifaceted patterns of students' reading abilities that require dramatically different instructional emphases" (p. 219). The heterogeneity of adolescent struggling readers has also been noted in additional studies; for example, within a relatively small sample ( $N = 94$ ), Dennis (2013) created four diverse "clusters" of struggling adolescent readers, with varying abilities and issues. Likewise, within a sample of  $N = 195$  adolescents who were below average in reading comprehension, Brasseur-Hock et al. (2011) found five subgroups of struggling readers "with specific instructional needs", noting that "this finding supports the notion that it is unlikely there is a single underlying source of poor comprehension" (p. 448). In addition, there is often an interaction between the issues that struggling readers face (Cirino et al. 2013). As such, schools need to be able to identify and support diverse and often collocated issues at the root cause of struggles in literacy learning. We know little about their capacity to do so.

With such varied causation at the root of students' struggles, unsurprisingly the research-supported practices devised to support SLLs in the secondary learning context do not typically have universal success. Impacts of many proposed interventions have been modest (Edmonds et al. 2009; Kim et al. 2017), or they may yield motivational benefits that do not rapidly translate to improved performance (Cantrell et al. 2016). For example, while few studies focus on improving outcomes for struggling readers beyond the early years of schooling, Wanzek et al.'s (2010) analysis of extant research with children in the upper primary years found that fluency interventions delivered mixed results, and with limited evidence for the benefits of vocabulary instruction. The study also found some support for a positive influence of "comprehension interventions on improving students' understanding of text" (p. 909). However, a number of strategies may show promise, including but not limited to reading aloud to struggling readers (Westbrook et al. 2018) and explicitly addressing aspects of skilled reading while scaffolding meaning-making approaches (e.g. Kim et al. 2017).

In the absence of a single broadly applicable and successful intervention that can be applied with universal success, more needs to be known about teacher perceptions of struggling learner barriers and their implications for curriculum delivery. While streaming students by ability may not be associated with learning benefits, and "in highly stratified systems, education is less equitable" (OECD 2013b, 72), teaching students with a wide range of abilities and difficulties in a mainstream (unstreamed) classroom offers notable challenges. In these contexts, teachers must meet the needs of students requiring diverse teaching and learning adjustments within the mainstream classroom to ensure that students experiencing intrinsic and extrinsic issues, difficulties and disabilities that can impact upon learning all enjoy an inclusive learning experience. However, research suggests that this mainstream inclusion may not always be supported by adequate resourcing to optimise learning. For example, in the Canadian context, Lindsay et al. (2013) suggest that

teachers who work with children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) in mainstream classes encounter several challenges in including them as full members of the class. These challenges include understanding and managing behaviour; socio-structural barriers (training, resources, policies); and creating an inclusive environment within the classroom. More resources, supports and training are needed for teachers so they can provide an inclusive environment for students with ASD. (p. 361)

Research exploring ease of mainstream inclusion of students experiencing learning difficulties and disabilities typically focuses on one barrier (e.g. ASD). In reality, teachers may be catering to multiple learning barriers in their classroom, and while SLLs are often students with diagnosed learning difficulties such as dyslexia, or students acquiring English as an Additional Language (EALD), they may not fall into either category. More needs to be known about the prevalence of EALD students and students with diagnosed learning disabilities within the population of SLLs, to determine how common it is for SLLs to not fall within either category, leaving teachers to look beyond recommended pedagogy for EALD and learning difficulty and disability support to plan and teach to meet their needs. Also, while drawing out students acquiring EALD for exploration in research as separate from the body of SLLs in a classroom is commonplace, in classroom realities, EALD students may more typically be supported alongside SLLs with other diverse causation, and therefore the research explored in this paper focuses on such diverse groupings, rather than classes composed solely of EALD students.

The 2019 *Supporting Struggling Secondary Literacy Learners (SSSLL)* project sought to expand knowledge in this area, exploring teacher perceptions of the barriers experienced by SLLs in their Australian mainstream secondary English classrooms, and determining if diverse learner barriers are associated with perceived adequacy of time to meet the needs of SLLs. This paper supports previous research contending that SLLs in the secondary context face barriers inclusive of diverse and often collocated intrinsic and extrinsic factors, suggesting that approaches to this issue that focus on mitigating just one factor are unlikely to be successful. To this end, this project adopted a socialecological model as its theoretical frame, “a theory-based framework for understanding the multifaceted and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that determine behaviors” (UNICEF 2013). This approach assumes that factors at individual, interpersonal, community and organisational levels can contribute to the limitations faced by SLLs in contemporary secondary schooling contexts, and one of the strengths of the model is that it can locate avenues for intervention to enhance behaviours and practices at multiple levels. This approach “is directed towards understanding the dynamic complexity and full contextual reality” (Lounsbury and Mitchell 2009, 213) of the issues being investigated. It is the basis of the method detailed herein, and it is a pragmatic lens through which to explore the issue.

## Methods

A mixed methods approach was employed to enable the research to test generalisability around known elements of the research, while also allowing for exploratory purpose. Data from the SSSLL project were collected from current Australian secondary English teachers using a survey tool that could be accessed via a hyperlink. The survey collected quantitative data primarily on Likert-type scales as well as qualitative data through open fields. Concurrent timing was used, as both the quantitative and qualitative components were collected in a single stage of the study (Stentz, Clark, and Matkin 2012), and in this

instance, using a single survey tool. The data report on diverse areas of research interest in relation to supporting struggling secondary literacy learners. These include the barriers they face, teacher preparedness to support them, adequacy of resourcing at classroom level, and whole school support and culture. This paper reports on the data related to the barriers that teachers perceive that SLLs face, with a focus on whether these are perceived to be diverse or heterogenous, the nature of specific barriers, and how diverse learner barriers are associated with adequacy of time to meet their needs.

Prior to data collection, the survey was subject to cognitive piloting by an experienced and current secondary English teacher, who provided feedback about the wording of the survey. The survey was then opened, and data collection ran from February 28 until May 27. Survey recruitment was managed through professional networks and social networks, and on-sharing by participants was encouraged. A link to the survey was included in social networking posts, and the survey included a hyperlink to the information letter in the preamble (pre-consent material). Limitations to these data include self-report, and that the barriers to students are collected from teachers in this instance, rather than the students themselves.

The purpose of the study was not to ascertain the perceived prevalence of SLLs in Australian secondary schools, as data on their prevalence are already available (e.g. Thomson, De Bortoli, and Underwood 2016). Rather, it sought to collect data from current secondary teachers who work in mainstream classrooms which include SLLs to learn more about the experience of teaching SLLs in mainstream contexts beyond the early years of schooling. As such, it was important to specify that questions pertained to the delivery of English learning in the *mainstream context*, as ability grouping may be relatively common in Australian secondary schools (OECD 2013b; Perry and Lamb 2016), and the challenges of literacy instruction in the mainstream classroom context could not be conflated with those experienced where students are streamed by ability. As such, the preamble content of the survey was quite specific to dissuade those falling outside the eligibility criteria from continuing, including the following statement.

Please only continue to take the survey if you are *currently* teaching secondary students, and if you teach mainstream classrooms. Teachers who only teach in extension (Gifted and Talented or School-based Academic Extension) classrooms should not proceed. If you teach in both mainstream and extension classrooms, please respond in relation to your mainstream classrooms only.

In addition to the initial consent item, admission into the survey was also dependent on respondents indicating agreement on the following eligibility criteria filter items:

- (1) Are you a current teacher of secondary students (in any of the years 7–12)?
- (2) Do you currently teach at least one mainstream (not extension) English class?
- (3) The mainstream English classrooms that I teach typically include at least some SLLs.

Failure to indicate agreement on any of these items resulted in a skip logic being triggered, which took respondents to the end of the survey. While 392 responses were collected, partial responses and filtered responses were removed from the final data set. A total of  $N = 315$  complete surveys were added to the final data set after this process was enacted.

The number of secondary teachers who teach SLLs in the mainstream classroom context is not known. In the absence of a definite population size, this study uses

GPower (Faul et al. 2009) version 3.1.9.2 to estimate the minimum sample size required. Using Cohen's convention of a medium effect size threshold of .30 (Cohen 2013), with a 95% confidence interval, the minimum sample size required is  $N = 138$ . Therefore, using a sample size of  $N = 315$  provides more stable parameter estimates for the statistical analysis.

As per Table 1, respondents were typically female, older than 30, and with a variety of years of teaching experience. As per Table 2, all states and territories were represented in this study, inclusive of South Australia (SA), Tasmania, the Northern Territory (NT), New South Wales (NSW), Western Australia (WA), Queensland, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). While schools where respondents worked were typically in the metropolitan area, 30% were teaching in rural or remote contexts. Australian schools are ranked in relation to an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), which provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015). Where the ICSEA was known by the respondent, schools were more likely to be below than above the average ICSEA, suggesting that teachers who fit the criteria of teaching SLLs in mainstream classrooms may be more likely to be teaching in a lower SES context. More than 60% of respondents were from a public schooling context, and respondents taught classes across a range of years, from Year 7 to 12.

**Table 1.** Respondent characteristics.

Characteristic	in sample ( $N = 315$ )	in sample (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	270	85.71
Male	42	13.33
Other	3	0.95
<i>Age Group</i>		
<20	0	0.00
21-30	51	16.19
31-40	92	29.21
41-50	90	28.57
51-60	65	20.63
61-70	16	5.08
>71	1	0.32
<i>Years teaching experience</i>		
<3	32	10.16
3-6	55	17.46
7-10	49	15.56
11-14	58	18.41
15-18	32	10.16
19-22	21	6.67
23-26	22	6.98
27-30	22	6.98
>30	24	7.62
<i>Years post teacher training</i>		
<3	27	8.57
3-6	58	18.41
7-10	43	13.65
11-14	51	16.19
15-18	41	13.02
19-22	21	6.67
23-26	18	5.71
27-30	25	7.94
>30	31	9.84



**Table 2.** School characteristics.

Characteristic	in sample (N = 315)	in sample (%)
<i>Location</i>		
Metropolitan	220	69.84
Rural	90	28.57
Remote	5	1.59
<i>State/territory of school location</i>		
SA	41	13.02
Tasmania	12	3.81
NT	14	4.44
NSW	82	26.03
WA	56	17.78
Queensland	50	15.87
Victoria	45	14.29
ACT	15	4.76
<i>School type</i>		
Government (public)	195	61.90
Private	120	38.10
<i>ICSEA<sup>a</sup></i>		
Above average ICSEA	67	21.27
Average ICSEA (1000)	79	25.08
Below average ICSEA	106	33.65
Unsure	63	20.00
<i>Year groups being taught<sup>a</sup></i>		
Year 7	140	
Year 8	147	
Year 9	158	
Year 10	176	
Year 11	175	
Year 12	153	

<sup>a</sup> multiple selections permitted, so percentage not relevant

This paper reports on all data from the survey with relevance to the following research questions:

RQ 1. Are SLLs in mainstream secondary English classrooms perceived to experience diverse barriers?

RQ 2. What are the perceived barriers that SLLs face?

RQ 3. Are diverse learner barriers associated with perceived adequacy of time to meet the needs of SLLs?

These research questions were addressed through data collected on the following survey items. These are also labelled quantitative (QUANT) and qualitative (QUAL), so that readers can see how the qualitative data allow for elucidation around quantitative questioning, where further exploratory data need to be collected. As a mixed methods approach, this is an embedded design, with the supplemental qualitative strand added to the quantitative tool to enhance the efficacy and appropriateness of the overall design (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011). Qualitative data may be subject to edited verbatim rendering for ease of readability, with meaning unaltered. The author used the preferred term “Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples” in all instances, replacing the less acceptable term “indigenous” in the externally sourced data for Table 6 (ACT Council of

Social Services (ATCOSS) 2016). The survey questions focus on variables of interests such as learner barriers and the adequacy of time to meet the student needs. They are anchored on a five-point Likert scale, with “1” being *strongly agree*, and “5” being *strongly disagree*. These response anchors were consistently used through the survey instrument alleviating the need to reverse code the recorded responses for quantitative analysis.

#### **RQ1.**

- (1) As a group, the SLLs in my classroom experience diverse barriers. (QUANT)
- (2) As individuals, the SLLs in my classroom are typically struggling with more than one issue (e.g. poor reading comprehension AND limited vocabulary) (QUANT)
- (3) The SLLs in my classroom typically have a diagnosed learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia). (QUANT)
- (4) The SLLs in my classroom typically speak English as an additional language. (QUANT)
- (5) The SLLs in my classroom have a positive attitude towards literacy learning. (QUANT)
- (6) I believe that the SLLs in my classroom have home support to build their literacy skills. (QUANT)
- (7) My school has effective strategies to identify students with specific learning disorders and difficulties (e.g. dyslexia) that can impact upon literacy learning. (QUANT)

#### **RQ2.**

- (1) If you disagree, what are the common barriers that your students face? (QUAL)
- (2) If you agree, what are some of the diverse barriers that your students face? (QUAL)

#### **RQ3.**

- (1) It is easy to find time to support SLLs in the mainstream classroom. (QUANT)
- (2) The SLLs in my classroom typically have a diagnosed learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia). (QUANT)
- (3) The SLLs in my classroom typically speak English as an additional language (EALD). (QUANT)
- (4) The SLLs in my classroom have a positive attitude towards literacy learning. (QUANT)
- (5) I believe that the SLLs in my classroom have home support to build their literacy skills. (QUANT)

The qualitative data were subject to a “flexible coding” approach described by Deterding and Waters (2018), designed to meet the requirements of large qualitative data sets using qualitative data analysis (QDA) software. In this instance, NVivo was used as a tool for the thematic coding of the data. With such a large number of qualitative responses to the question explored in this paper ( $n = 207$ ), code and meaning saturation were attained (Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi 2017). The data

were subject to iterative thematic coding (Rice and Ezzy 1999) to discover the recurring themes explored in this paper, and care was taken to avoid allowing prior knowledge, research and reading in this area to shape the findings. This study uses SPSS version 25 to analyse the quantitative data using non-parametric statistical tests for correlation. These methods were chosen because of the nature of the data that does not conform to a normal distribution which is required by parametric statistical tests (Mat Roni, Merga, and Morris 2019).

## Results & discussion

While results include both quantitative and qualitative data, the results and discussion are herein presented concurrently, as is more typical in the reporting of qualitative findings, to allow readers to examine where the findings are positioned in relation to the extant research and interpretation (Doumont 2010).

### *Do SLLs in mainstream secondary English classrooms experience diverse barriers?*

As per Table 3, agreement with a diversity of perceived barriers at group (92.06%) and individual (96.82%) levels was high. Less than half (48.89%) of respondents agreed that the SLLs in their classroom typically have a diagnosed learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia), and around a quarter of respondents agreed that the SLLs in their classroom were typically of EALD status (24.76%), suggesting that while students may be undiagnosed, SLLs at secondary level may not necessarily be EALD or have a learning difficulty. It is also notable that data on level of agreement that their school is effective at identifying students with learning difficulties found that only 55% of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed. These findings suggest that in many cases, SLLs face heterogenous barriers at group and individual levels.

As per Table 5, teachers did not generally perceive positive attitudes towards literacy learning in their secondary students, and they did not typically perceive that these students had home support to build these skills, with nearly a quarter strongly disagreeing that this support was available.

**Table 3.** Plurality of perceived barriers and group and individual level.

Agreement	in sample (N = 315)	in sample (%)
<i>Agreement with diverse barriers at group level (Group).</i>		
Strongly agree	185	58.73
Somewhat agree	105	33.33
Neither agree nor disagree	17	5.40
Somewhat disagree	5	1.59
Strongly disagree	3	0.95
<i>Agreement with diverse barriers at individual level (Individual).</i>		
Strongly agree	212	67.30
Somewhat agree	93	29.52
Neither agree nor disagree	5	1.59
Somewhat disagree	3	0.95
Strongly disagree	2	0.63

### ***What are the barriers that SLLs face?***

With so few respondents disagreeing with the statement “as a group, the SLLs in my classroom experience diverse barriers” ( $n = 8$ , 2.54%), data collected on these *common* barriers were limited and heterogeneous. A total of 58.73% strongly agreed and 33.33% somewhat agreed that “as a group, the SLLs in my classroom experience diverse barriers”, suggesting a very strong positive skew to the results in this instance. A total of  $n = 207$  of the  $N = 315$  respondents provided insights into the diverse barriers that they felt that their students faced in an optional open field. Where these responses have been recurrent, they are discussed below as key thematic codes.

Many of the issues explored below are clearly interrelated, and therefore their sectioning into related to codes needs to be considered in relation to the reality in which as per the aforementioned findings, these issues are more typically collocated at both group and individual level. As anticipated by the data in [Table 3](#), teachers observed struggling students grappling with a diversity of barriers to literacy attainment. For example, this respondent details a range of complex issues:

EAL/D, Intellectual impairment, Speech language impairment, low attendance, multiple primary schools, ADD, ODD, ADHD, dyslexia, inability to sound out words, low comprehension, poor verbal expression, difficulty understanding verbal and/or written instructions, bullying, disengagement, difficulty spelling, limited vocabulary, gaps in education, health issues (e.g. spent significant time in hospital), low stamina for writing and reading, illegible handwriting, low expectations of themselves due to failing every semester for YEARS, lack of early intervention, working at different year levels significantly below the grade they're in

This response shows the complex array of barriers perceived. While the subsequent analysis acknowledges and makes explicit some of the interplay between the identified codes, they were presented as discreet for the purposes of generating findings. However, as aforementioned, it is essential that these findings be read with the artificiality of this partitioning acknowledged.

### ***Literacy skill gaps and English as an additional language status***

When asked about the barriers that teachers perceived that SLLs contend with, a range of literacy skill gaps were listed. A teacher in urban NSW noted that

some struggle in engagement as the work seems impossible, others are unable to express their written work clearly enough to demonstrate their knowledge of the content, some struggle to read and this impedes both reading for learning and reading instructions

Others listed “reading and comprehension; writing including spelling” and “understanding of simple sentence construction” as notable barriers. Supporting students who did not have functional reading skills was a common comment, and these included students who were perceived to “read so slowly they forget what they read”. Teachers also reported “inability to sound out words” and “inability to express ideas verbally” as well as “difficulty understanding verbal and/or written instructions”, “difficulty spelling” and “limited vocabulary”, which could clearly impact on student literacy performance beyond subject English.

Some of these skill gaps were attributed to deficiencies in decoding skills, or other key foundational skills, though causation appeared often diverse or difficult to ascertain. For

instance, a respondent noted that the “writing difficulties” observed can be related to “fine motor and/or dyslexia type encoding problems”. The common recurrence of cognitive retention and “attention span” and “problem solving abilities” were felt to pose a barrier to resolution of literacy skill gaps in some cases. At a practical level, this precluded SLLs’ participation in staple class activities in the English secondary classroom context such as the novel or book study, with a respondent noting the barrier in “understanding the content of set texts, such as a novel, as their literacy comprehension level is low”. Where texts use vocabulary beyond common use terms, SLLs with vocabulary barriers are perceived to be excluded due to the comprehension barrier, and a perceived “lack of familiarity with anything other than basic vocabulary”. Students could lack reading comprehension strategies, showing a “lack of familiarity with systems to unpack meaning”.

EALD status was a key reason for literacy skill gaps, as could be anticipated by the quantitative findings from this project (Table 4), with nearly a quarter of respondents showing some agreement that their SLLs were typically EALD learners. As such, reference to students’ ESL/EALD status were numerous. However, teachers also described the collocation of EALD status with other literacy skill issues. For example, a teacher from urban Victoria noted that “some students are EAL with a learning difficulty. Also, some have experienced major trauma such as coming from a war zone, refugee camps which often makes it difficult to know how best to help them”. Schools could struggle to find

**Table 4.** Preponderance of students who have a diagnosed learning difficulty or are EALD learners.

Agreement	in sample (N = 315)	in sample (%)
<i>Agreement with SLLs typically having learning difficulty (Diagnosed).</i>		
Strongly agree	23	7.30
Somewhat agree	131	41.59
Neither agree nor disagree	55	17.46
Somewhat disagree	82	26.03
Strongly disagree	24	7.62
<i>Agreement with SLLs typically being EALD</i>		
Strongly agree	16	5.08
Somewhat agree	62	19.68
Neither agree nor disagree	38	12.06
Somewhat disagree	93	29.52
Strongly disagree	106	33.65

**Table 5.** Levels of perceived positive attitudes and home support.

Agreement	in sample (N = 315)	in sample (%)
<i>Agreement with SLLs holding positive attitudes towards literacy learning (Attitude).</i>		
Strongly agree	10	3.17
Somewhat agree	53	16.83
Neither agree nor disagree	55	17.46
Somewhat disagree	145	46.03
Strongly disagree	52	16.51
<i>Agreement with SLLs having home support (Home support).</i>		
Strongly agree	4	1.27
Somewhat agree	45	14.29
Neither agree nor disagree	54	17.14
Somewhat disagree	135	42.86
Strongly disagree	77	24.44

**Table 6.** Australian student attendance rate (%) Years 1–10 in 2018.

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT
<i>Attendance by school year</i>								
1	93.6	93.2	92.2	92.2	92.6	93.0	82.2	92.8
2	93.7	93.5	92.5	92.7	93.0	93.2	83.2	92.9
3	93.8	93.6	92.7	92.8	93.3	93.1	83.8	93.0
4	93.6	93.5	92.5	92.6	93.2	93.0	83.9	93.0
5	93.5	93.4	92.5	92.6	93.2	92.8	83.9	92.8
6	92.9	93.2	92.3	92.0	93.1	92.7	83.0	92.3
7	92.8	93.5	91.9	91.7	92.1	91.4	80.3	91.9
8	90.7	91.8	90.0	91.3	89.8	89.4	76.7	90.0
9	89.5	91.1	89.0	89.6	89.1	87.8	75.0	88.9
10	88.1	90.9	88.6	89.0	88.0	85.9	73.0	88.1
<i>Attendance by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples status</i>	85.4	86.3	84.4	80.5	76.5	87.8	65.1	83.9
<i>Non-Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples</i>	92.7	92.8	92.1	92.1	93.0	91.7	91.6	91.9
Gap	7.3	6.5	7.7	11.6	16.5	3.9	26.5	8.0
All	92.2	92.7	91.5	91.6	91.8	91.3	80.8	91.6

(adapted from data available at ACARA, 2018)

adequate resources for diverse EALD groups, and first language proficiency could not be assumed, with a teacher noting the “lack of resources for students from refugee backgrounds, i.e. Syria (Arabic speakers), who are often illiterate in their own language”. The challenges of adjustment for recent arrivals, for those lacking first language literacy and those without English resources in their home, were also raised. As such, while EALD comments are pertinent for this literacy skills code, they can also relate to the range of other codes describe herein. Future research could tease out the interactions, causations and frequency of the complex subfactors that are at play within the EALD barrier, with attention to how they might be resolved in a mainstream learning context.

The diversity in literacy skill gaps, primarily located across the reading, speaking and writing aspects of literacy learning, was unsurprising in relation to the aforementioned literature that has found that the gaps in student reading skills and abilities are diverse, requiring equally diverse strategies for intervention (Brasseur-Hock et al. 2011; Buly and Valencia 2002; Cirino et al. 2013; Dennis 2013). Rasinski and Padak (2005) also argue against simplistic determination of the issues facing struggling readers, contending that while “generally, by the intermediate, middle, and secondary grades, the source for low performance in reading is laid at the feet of poor vocabulary and comprehension”, readers may also struggle due to “insufficient mastery of reading competencies from earlier stages in reading development”, including “word decoding and reading fluency” (p. 34).

While Australian literacy performance data is analysed and reported to show the comparative performance of students with language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), concerns have been raised about how this analysis may obscure the performance of EALD students, with criticism of how the LBOTE category does not capture the diversity of opportunity and circumstances in this group. For example, Creagh (2014) has noted that

the variable which most strongly picks up variation within the LBOTE group is that of visa category. There are approximately 90–100 NAPLAN points between the mean scores of the students within the skilled visa category compared to those in the refugee visa category for reading and spelling. (p. 17)

As refugees and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage are presented as EALD amongst wealthy migrant children with far more opportunity, where NAPLAN data shows comparative or even higher performance in the LBOTE group (e.g. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2018b), this is misleading. Creagh's (2014) analysis concludes that "the suggestion that LBOTE students are performing as well as non-LBOTE students is illusory", and "some students who are speakers of language other than English are performing well on NAPLAN, while others are highly disadvantaged" (p. 18). Such analyses that obscure the diversity in opportunity and socioeconomic status within this group could play a role in compounding the inequity experienced by disadvantaged groups such as refugees and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### **Absenteeism**

Teachers attributed absenteeism as a barrier for SLLs, citing "transience, truancy and 'chronic' absenteeism" and "school refusal". However, many did more than simply note the prevalence and impact of absenteeism, also lending insights into the *reasons* for this missed schooling. Health issues and caring responsibilities were raised as recurring perceived factors that contributed to absenteeism. A link was also made between behavioural issues and absenteeism, with a respondent noting the deleterious effect of "behavioural issues that lead to suspensions and time out of school" alongside "truancy".

Others attributed current literacy issues to "gaps in learning due to poor attendance in primary school", making visible the impact of previous absenteeism on later learning. The impact on skill levels could be marked, with a teacher in urban WA noting that "one of my students struggles with writing at all, she is Year 7 and identified as limited schooling. Poor attendance is usually linked to poor literacy". However, a kind of absenteeism was also noted where struggling students were withdrawn from class to attend support sessions, which led to their falling behind: a respondent explained that "they cannot keep up with the 'regular' work, or are missing classes to attend 1:1 sessions, so still need to catch up on work missed". In this instance, an intervention intended to improve students' literacy outcomes was actually felt to have a detrimental influence.

Australian students are expected to attend school regularly in the secondary years, as "since 2010, it has been mandatory in all States and Territories for students to complete Year 10 and participate full time in education, training or employment, until they are at least 17 years old" (Australian Government n.d., 10), but as per Table 6, clearly this policy does not guarantee regular attendance. From 2014 to 2018, Australian schools have shown a decline in attendance over time (ACARA, 2018), and in Table 6, all Australian states and territories show a decline in attendance as students move through the secondary years of schooling, with years 7–10 captured; the primary school years show far more stability in attendance.

Table 6 also shows that as per the responses, absenteeism may be related to complex factors related to the comparative socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians, as well as cultural factors.

Research supports the contention that absenteeism is associated with poor literacy outcomes, and research with both younger and older students suggests that absenteeism is associated with lower scores and achievement in literacy and numeracy (Gottfried 2014; Hancock et al. 2013). It is noted that

the nature of the relationship between absence from school and achievement, across all sub-groups of students, strongly suggests that every day of attendance in school contributes towards a child's learning, and that academic outcomes are enhanced by maximising attendance in school. There is no "safe" threshold. The effects of absence also accumulate over time. We found that absence from school was related to academic achievement in numeracy, reading and writing not only in the current year, but in future years as well. Parents need to be aware of these relationships, and understand that when their child misses school it can have an ongoing impact on their learning. (Hancock et al. 2013, p. v)

With absenteeism worsening in all states and territories in Australia from the early primary to the later secondary years of schooling (Table 6), its impacts on SLLs could potentially determine students' life prospects, considering the aforementioned relationship between literacy attainment and student achievement of academic, vocational and social goals (Merga 2019bb). Schools may struggle to find solutions, as strict truancy policies are not necessarily related to reduced absenteeism (Conry and Richards 2018), and, as with so many of the issues explored in this paper, there is no blanket solution to this problem, as chronic absenteeism remains of diverse causation, as concluded in earlier research (Lauchlan 2003).

### *Home factors*

Teachers discussed a range of home factors that they feel pose notable barriers for SLLs. These barriers were primarily concerned with resourcing, poverty, wellbeing, parental literacy, and parental modelling and encouragement, and they were often collocated, such as where a teacher in urban WA described "infrequent access to books, literacy not valued in the home" amongst other barriers. Respondents focussed on a "lack of parent support; education not valued; no resources (pens, books)" and "parental illiteracy". While resourcing typically focussed on books and stationery, lack of access to the internet was also described. Home resourcing issues were potentially compounded when resourcing at school as limited, with a teacher describing "no books at home, no library at school".

Poverty was identified as a notable limiting factor. A teacher from urban SA described "hunger, inability to focus", and transience was often related to poverty, with a teacher in rural Victoria describing the barriers of "poverty and family issues, attending multiple schools due to travelling or not having had a permanent home or family". Similarly, a respondent teaching in rural SA described observing "so many variants, learning disabilities, poverty, caring responsibilities, 20+ hours side jobs, substance abuse, physical abuse, neglect", when listing the factors constraining her students. A number of teacher mentioned the challenges faced by "ward of the state" or "kids in care" scenarios. Socioeconomic and cultural home factors particularly associated with challenges faced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and refugee students were also described.

An urban teacher in the ACT described the barriers of "lack of exposure to literature now or at earlier stages at home, frequent absences from school due to caring responsibilities or other health issues, lack of home support", illustrating the perceived relationship between home factors and the aforementioned code of absenteeism, with another teacher in urban ACT noting the impacts of "domestic violence, poor nutrition, worries about home, anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns, disengaged family, busy family where school is not a priority, family background also low literacy". Domestic violence and unstable living conditions such as homelessness were recurring challenges, with some students facing "unstable family life and unsure of accommodation". Caring



responsibilities for family members and “having to work to help support family” were also cited, along with “lack of exposure to diverse and enriching language experiences”.

A teacher in urban WA described how home factors could constrain intervention for some students:

... literacy is not a priority in their home, parents either can't afford to get their child diagnosed or they refuse because they are afraid of the stigma associated with learning difficulties, students refuse help in class, parents refuse to have teacher assistants in class with their child because of stigma attached and fear of bullying.

While the Australian government has recently focused on increasing resourcing to students with learning disabilities, and funds are currently allocated in relation to the degree of the disability (Australian Government 2019), where students are undiagnosed due to parental intervention or other factors, this resourcing for support is not allocated to schools.

Home factors around resourcing can exert a notable impact on student literacy attainment, with access to books in the home particularly associated with literacy skills, and related reading frequency and attitudes towards reading in students (Merga 2015). Books in the home “are a force for cultivating positive reading attitudes and, to an extent, promote academic attainment” (Tse et al. 2016, 384), with a book-rich home environment providing children with “tools that are directly useful in learning at school: vocabulary, information, comprehension skills, imagination, broad horizons of history and geography, familiarity with good writing, understanding of the importance of evidence in argument, and many others” (Evans et al. 2010, 192). Access to books in the home was also related to parental modelling and encouragement, as provision of books in the home constitutes a tacit form of encouragement that can be influential (Merga 2017). Parents with a positive attitude towards reading are more likely to provide a positive model of reading than those who do not have this attitude (Ho and Lau 2018), and parents with positive attitudes towards reading “are likely to be willing to provide their children with rich recourses and a fruitful home literacy environment and to stimulate literacy interaction and engagement” (Tse et al. 2016, 384). Parental literacy becomes part of this complex interplay, with literate parents better equipped to model positive independent reading practices. For a relatively prosperous country, Australia has surprisingly high levels of adults below functional literacy attainment (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013), and this parental literacy cannot be taken for granted in the population.

Socioeconomic status (SES) appears to be a powerful determinant of student literacy attainment in Australia. Recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing results indicated that “students in the highest socioeconomic quartile achieved an average score of 551 points, which was 89 points (or around three years of schooling) higher than the average score of 462 points for students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile” (Thomson, De Bortoli, and Underwood 2017, p. xxv). However, the underperformance of students at school due to home factors such as poverty is not a given.

Some 51% of disadvantaged students in Australia attend disadvantaged schools, i.e. schools where other students tend to be disadvantaged as well (OECD average: 48%; in Finland, only 40% of disadvantaged students attend such schools). However, where disadvantaged students attend advantaged schools, they score 86 points higher, or the equivalent of 3 years of school, than those attending disadvantaged schools ... (OECD 2018, 2)

As such, the effect of SES can be mediated by school factors which need to be unpacked and understood.

### *Student attitudes and engagement*

Students' attitudes and level of engagement in literacy learning constituted an intrinsic barrier that was often perceived as shaped by extrinsic factors. Teachers described low levels of engagement as "years of educational disengagement and avoidance", and a "history of failure, lack of motivation". A teacher at an urban Tasmanian school went so far as to describe failed learning as having a traumatic effect, noting the barrier of "learning trauma e.g. cycle of under achieving, fixed mindset etc." The relationship between sense of self and attitudes was also highlighted: teachers related "low self-interest, low interest in learning", and students' lack of a "sense of themselves as capable English students" as barriers. However, the challenge of facing work at a difficulty level that could be viewed as insurmountable was also seen as a barrier, as "some struggle in engage as the work seems impossible", and students bring with them a "history of poor learning experiences", a "disinclination to improve" due to the size of the challenge experienced. "Learned helplessness" was also referenced. In some instances, disengagement as evidenced through poor behaviour was referenced, with respondents describing this as "behavioural challenges (it can be easier to be seen as the bad kid rather than the dumb kid)", and "behavioural issues that cover up illiteracy".

These low attitudes and engagement levels are clearly perceived to be related to low skill acquisition, illustrative of the "Matthew Effect, by which the 'rich get richer' and the 'poor, poorer'", which in the context of literacy learning, is visible as "children with inadequate vocabularies – who read slowly and without enjoyment – read less, and as a result have slower development of vocabulary knowledge, which inhibits further growth in reading ability" (Stanovich 1986, 381). Reading skill is associated with reading enjoyment, which is in turn associated with reading frequency, which compounds reading skill, and the barrier of skill to reading frequency has been noted in the previous research (e.g. Merga 2014). This can be related to the theory of self-efficacy, in which Bandura (1977) notes that

An outcome expectancy is defined as a person's estimate that a given behavior will lead to certain outcomes. An efficacy expectation is the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes. Outcome and efficacy expectations are differentiated, because individuals can believe that a particular course of action will produce certain outcomes, but if they entertain serious doubts about whether they can perform the necessary activities such information does not influence their behavior. (p. 193)

SLLs cannot be motivated by successes in literacy where they have not been encountered, and thus they may typically have low self-efficacy in literacy learning. This is significant because efficacy expectations shape students' expense of effort and persistence in the face of learning challenges, and "the stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts" (Bandura, 1977, p. 194).

### *School and system factors*

Teachers also enumerated an array of school and system factors as contributing to the barriers faced by SLLs, particularly focusing on school resourcing issues, students' prior school learning or lack thereof, limitations of the curriculum and the lack of a supportive

school culture for reading. Considering teachers' situation within schools, these insights are particularly valuable. "Under resourcing" was raised as a key concern. This could be related to under-diagnosis of learning difficulties and disabilities, with a teacher noting that "they don't qualify for funding either because they have never been diagnosed or their learning difficulty does not attract funding". The resource of time was referenced, with "pace of (the) classroom" a noted barrier due to the need for "considerably more time to complete tasks". There was also a "lack of materials at a literacy level they can access", insufficient "specialised/individualised resources" and a "lack of one-on-one help"; lack of additional support in the classroom was a common barrier.

Students were perceived to struggle with time constraints, but so did teachers. "Time-poor teachers" were described, with a teacher from urban Queensland describing the barrier of "not getting enough teacher time due to size of classes, lack of programs to help them catch up, teacher workload impacting teachers' ability to differentiate and create", with the lack of diversification in the curriculum raised as an issue potentially compounding time deficits by others, with a teacher noting that need for differentiation, as the "curriculum doesn't allow for adjustment in high school". Another teacher described the barrier of "being in a classroom of diverse learners the teacher has to focus on all, not just those struggling. In order for all students to meet syllabus assessment requirements, there's limited time to focus on the struggling readers". Some teachers were facing "little funded support" in a context of "larger class sizes", and "effective additional needs support within our school" was also an area that needed further resourcing. Concerns were also raised about the barrier of inappropriate timed writing assessments, with "struggling students unable to complete assessment tasks without extra support".

The failure of previous schooling to equip students with essential foundational literacy skills was highlighted. Teachers described the barrier of students who "can't read, who have fallen through the cracks in primary school", with the image of "falling through the cracks" a recurring motif used by respondents, typically related to "poor quality teaching prior to present time". A teacher in an urban school in the NT described the process whereby "students have been pushed along without achieving standards". The disadvantage of beginning secondary school already behind in literacy skills was noted, described as "beginning college with below average literacy in terms of reading comprehension and writing skills". A Tasmanian respondent described "grade inflation that hides their struggles", and a "lack of institutional accountability and awareness". Others expressed strong concerns about the lack of a whole schooling reading culture and sense of whole school responsibility. This teacher in SA noted that

a long time ago, SA had a Writing Based Literacy Assessment which was used to highlight that literacy is NOT just the responsibility of English teachers. We had "literacy across the curriculum". This has all but disappeared. One class out of seven is not enough. Did this survey go to non-English teachers also? We are better than this.

Whole school literacy concerns were shared by others, such as those who attributed a perceived "lack of reading culture at school" as a barrier. While literacy is situated as a whole school responsibility in the Australian curriculum, this positioning is not always enacted in schools (Merga and Gardiner 2019; Merga and Mason 2019).

Resourcing of Australian schools is not comparatively robust. It has been noted that when subject to international comparison, "Australia has one of the smallest shares of

public expenditure on primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary educational institutions among OECD countries and partner economies with available data" (OECD 2018b, 3). Resourcing should ideally be allocated on the basis of needs analysis in relation to students' intrinsic and extrinsic barriers at individual and group level. However, in Australia "the steep rise in government funding to private schools has left thousands of public schools with less public funding than similar private schools" (Ting, Liu, and Scott 2018), and thus Australia lacks logical and equitable resourcing allocation in schools.

Students' prior learning or lack thereof warrants close consideration, as does the readiness of the Australian Curriculum to meet the learning needs of its diverse students. Research has suggested that "prior achievement typically reduces the effects of demographic and socioeconomic factors on student achievement, often very substantially" (Marks, 2014, p. 242), and thus where children have not "fallen through the cracks", but rather had their foundational literacy skills fostered at primary school level, this can counter the detrimental impact of home factors such as poverty. Australia also falls far behind most international counterparts in relation to investment in pre-primary education in relation to its gross domestic product (OECD 2018b), and greater investment in this area could strengthen students' prior learning. There is limited research exploring how the Australian curriculum meets the needs of SLLs, and the concerns raised by the participants in this study indicate that greater attention needs to be applied to schools' capacity to support students to meet curricular requirements, while bridging the gap in their literacy attainment. Where SLLs in Year 9 may be amongst a group whose literacy achievement ranges across 8 years (Goss and Sonnemann 2016), a curriculum to meet the needs of all of these students would need to be extremely flexible, and this research indicates that the current Australian Curriculum may fall short in this regard.

### *Learning difficulties and disabilities influencing learning*

While a diverse array of learning difficulties and disabilities was described by respondents, it was a common observation that these were both "diagnosed and undiagnosed learning disabilities", which poses issues with funding and resourcing. Learning difficulties and disabilities influencing learning included "some physical disabilities", as well as "dyslexia, verbal-memory processing problems ... poor reading fitness, limited access to optometrist – vision problems". Learning needs such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) were discussed. "Language processing disorders" and issues with "auditory processing" were also raised, along with cognitive issues around "retaining memory of course content". Physical issues around hearing and vision were described. Again, the interaction between some learning difficulties and disabilities and home factors was visible in the description of students described as battling with "neglect, trauma, foetal alcohol syndrome, (and) cognitive deficits".

While the quantitative data presented in this paper explore the preponderance of students with a diagnosed learning difficulty in the sample (Table 4), these qualitative data reveal the complex presentation of diverse learning difficulties and disabilities, and the recurring issue of lack of diagnosis which can hamper allocation of funding and resourcing for these students. Australian data from 2017 found that "18.8% of school students received an adjustment to participate in education because of disability" (Education Council 2018, 2), though the number receiving in-class adjustments related to

literacy learning was not quantified. The aforementioned finding that only 55% of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that their school is effective at identifying students with learning difficulties is notable in relation to these qualitative findings, bringing into doubt some schools' capacity to identify students who need targeted teaching and learning adjustments that align with their learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

However, achieving recognition of a learning difficulty or disability could also be disadvantageous for some students. For example, the difficulty or disability may not fall into a funded category, and Graham and Tancredi (2019) recently explored the "dangers" of diagnosis, described here in the context of ADHD.

The heightened dangers of ADHD diagnosis relate to the stigma and latent assumptions attached to this particular diagnostic category, as well as the dominance of the medical model, which increases dependence on medication as a 'solution', reducing the likelihood that teachers will design and implement appropriate adjustments. (p. 11)

As such, diagnosis is no guarantee of teaching and learning adjustments, and improved educational and well-being outcomes for students.

### ***Are diverse learner barriers associated with perceived adequacy of time to meet the needs of SLLs?***

Bearing in mind the diversity of intrinsic and extrinsic barriers faced by students at an individual and group level, exploring the relationship between quantified diversity measures and teachers' perceptions of adequacy of time to meet SLL needs can give some indication of the impacts of diversity. The results of Spearman's rho bivariate correlation tests show that diverse learner barriers are negatively associated with the adequacy of time to meet the needs of SLLs both at a group level ( $r_s = -.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed,  $N = 315$ ), and individual level ( $r_s = -.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed,  $N = 315$ ). This is not surprising as it supports the contention that the teachers need to allocate extra time to support groups of SLLs facing diverse barriers. This is further compounded when diverse learner barriers are identified at the individual level, as indicated by a larger correlation coefficient.

Further analysis also indicates that perceived student attitude, home support, learning difficulty diagnosis, and EALD status are low but significantly correlated with the adequacy of time as per Table 7 (Taylor 1990). The results indicate that the more positive the perceived students' attitudes towards learning, the more likely that the teachers feel it is easy to find adequate time to support SLLs. This could relate to the qualitative findings around student behaviour and engagement; where student attitudes are positive, it can be surmised that time spent on behaviour management could be minimised, allowing for greater attention on building literacy skills and knowledge.

Similarly, the more home support the teachers' perceived that SLLs received and the higher the EALD concentration, the easier it was for teachers to find time to meet the student needs. The finding around home support was unsurprising, as it also reflects qualitative findings that lack of home support may be a barrier to student learning. The finding around higher EALD concentration was unanticipated, and perhaps related to teachers' dealing with a more homogeneous group of EALD learner students, where teachers have agreement that "the SLLs in my classroom typically speak English as an

**Table 7.** Spearman's rho correlation.

Agreement <i>N</i> = 315	Mean	Standard deviation	Spearman's rho correlation						
			<i>Time</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Diagnosed</i>	<i>EALD</i>	<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Home support</i>
<i>Agreement with easy to find time to support SLLs (Time).</i>	4.32	.981	1	-.148**	-.203**	.111*	.228**	.328**	.289**
<i>Agreement with diverse barriers at group level (Group).</i>	1.53	.754	-.148**	1	.373**	.110	.080	-.077	-.139*
<i>Agreement with diverse barriers at individual level (Individual).</i>	1.38	.634	-.203**	.373**	1	-.045	-.036	-.282**	-.255**
<i>Agreement with SLLs typically having learning difficulty (Diagnosed).</i>	2.85	1.120	.111*	0.11	-.045	1	.202**	.146**	.213**
<i>Agreement with SLLs typically being EALD learners (EALD).</i>	3.67	1.264	.228**	0.08	-.036	.202**	1	.256**	.080
<i>Agreement with SLLs holding positive attitudes towards literacy learning (Attitude).</i>	3.56	1.052	.328**	-.077	-.282**	.146**	.256**	1	.357**
<i>Agreement with SLLs having home support (Home support).</i>	3.75	1.021	.289**	-.139*	-.255**	.213**	.080	.357**	1

\*Significant at  $p < .05$ , \*\* significant at  $p < .001$

additional language"; if this is the case, interventions could potentially be more broadly applicable as they could be based on EALD teaching strategies, perhaps avoiding potential time limitations of catering to multiple adjustments. However, as aforementioned, EALD barriers can be collocated with other issues, so further investigation would be needed to determine if this relationship exists. Table 7 summarises the Spearman's rho correlation results.

We were also interested to note that the strongest finding in relation to perceived student attitude was related to perceived home support, suggesting that, according to teacher perception, greater levels of home support were related to more positive student attitudes towards literacy learning. Again, this is reflective of the qualitative findings.

## Conclusions

This paper suggests that addressing the challenge of meeting the needs of SLLs beyond the early years of schooling is a wicked problem, and "every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem" (Rittel and Webber 1973, 165). According to these data, contemporary secondary teachers working with SLLs in mainstream English classrooms note high levels of diversity in the barriers that their students face at group and individual level, with correlation analysis suggesting that diversity of group and individual barriers can be related to a negative influence on teachers' perception of time available to support the literacy learning of SLLs. The barriers teased out in the analysis and discussion on qualitative data in this paper show how such diverse factors such as poverty and learning difficulties can act as barriers both

individually, but also together, at individual and group levels. With socialecological theory inviting a reading of these findings that acknowledges the interplay between individual, home, school and system factors, the qualitative findings of this paper build on the heterogeneity in the nature of barriers implied by the quantitative data. They suggest that any proposed solutions to this wicked problem will need to consider an array of intrinsic and extrinsic barriers at both individual and group level, that may interact in a complex interplay. These include, but are not necessarily limited to, literacy skill gaps and English as an additional language status, absenteeism, home factors, student attitudes and engagement, school and systems factors, and learning difficulties and disabilities influencing learning. The manner in which this paper makes visible these diverse factors precludes in-depth examination of each one; however, the consideration given herein is sufficient to begin to illustrate the scope of the problem, and allow interested outsiders such as policymakers, researchers and prospective teachers to begin to gauge the complexity of the current barriers perceived.

This is important, as the field of educational practice tends to favour silver bullet solutions for literacy concerns, despite research such as this paper demonstrating the diverse causation behind the issues faced by SLLs. Contemporary policymakers in Australia and England favour increased screening and high-stakes testing as ways of solving literacy issues in schools (Marshall 2017; Swain and Pendergast 2018), though such methods of measurement do not in themselves lead to improvement for students, just as “weighing a pig does not make it fatter”, and such tests can be ineffective in forming appropriate intervention for struggling students (Glazzard 2017). SLLs in the secondary context may not have a learning difficulty or disability, though this diagnosis is essential to secure supportive funding, at least in the public schooling system in Australia (Australian Government 2019). They also may not have EALD status, and therefore confining discussion about the struggles of dealing with diverse student needs in the mainstream classroom that focus on these two areas may fail to adequately capture the full challenge of teaching today. As intimated by the findings, a vast range of other factors is perceived to contribute to SLLs’ barriers to literacy performance, as observed by the teachers who must grapple with these needs on a daily basis. Issues such as absenteeism may themselves have diverse causation that relates to other factors, and proposed solutions for resourcing, such as increasing efficacy of diagnosis of learning difficulties, may not necessarily lead to positive outcomes for students. These findings suggest that, rather than allocating considerable expense to high-stakes testing regimes, such funding would be better invested in beginning to address the barriers faced by SLLs in Australian secondary schools, if the growth in low performing literacy learners is to be arrested in the Australian schooling context (Thomson, De Bortoli, and Underwood 2016). It can also be contended that while many of the complex factors explored here may seem to lie beyond the influence of teachers and schools, nonetheless, future research must focus on the spaces in which teachers and schools can wield influence, and that this may require flexible, responsive and creative thinking. As explored in the introduction, we cannot afford to surrender to the false inevitability of this wicked problem: rather, researchers and schools need to work closely with students and their communities, with strong support and resourcing from governance and policy-makers, to propose innovative solutions for the future.



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