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Do secondary English teachers have adequate time and resourcing to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners?

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ABSTRACT

As struggling Australian students may not typically receive additional support beyond the mainstream English classroom, more needs to be understood about the staffing and resourcing challenges that may impede secondary English teachers seeking to support these students. Data from the 2019 *Supporting Struggling Secondary Literacy Learners* project are explored, presenting views from $N = 315$ Australian secondary English teachers. Respondents disagreed that they have adequate time and resourcing to meet the needs of these students; public schools were perceived to be particularly poorly resourced. Our analysis found perceived deficiency to be compounded; those with insufficient support staff also appeared to have insufficient resources. While efforts to improve students' literacy skills often target teacher education, it may be unrealistic to expect improvement in the performance of Australia's struggling literacy learners without greatly increasing provision of support staff and material resourcing.

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Introduction

One of the goals of contemporary secondary (high school) education is to enable students with diverse needs and abilities to reach their academic, social and vocational goals. It can be argued that the most pertinent skill required to meet these goals is literacy, as it is closely and consistently related to opportunity and life chances beyond school (ABS 2013; Kirsch et al. (2002); McIntosh and Vignoles 2001). Low adolescent literacy is a broad concern internationally (Baye et al. 2019; Lupo, Strong, and Conradi Smith 2019; OECD 2016). In the UK, OECD reports indicate that one-third of students aged 16–19 have low literacy skills and that adolescent students' literacy level is below that of people aged 55 and above (OECD 2016), though there have been improvements in UK students' literacy performance in recent times (McGrane et al. 2017). In the USA, 8th and 12th grade students' poor reading and writing performance over time is also a matter of concern, findings from the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) signalling a growing disparity between the nation's highest and lowest achievers in reading in secondary education (NCES, 2019).

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A growing number of Australian adolescent students underperform according to literacy data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Thomson, De Bortoli, and Underwood 2016). The most recent findings suggest that Australia's mean performance in reading "has been steadily declining, from initially high levels, since the country first participated in PISA in 2000" (OECD 2019, 1), and under-achieving students were observed to have more rapidly declining performance over this time period. The proportion of underperforming Australian students in reading continues to grow over time (OECD 2019, 4). Australian English teachers primarily tasked with supporting secondary students to attain functional literacy may face a daunting task, as by the time a student is in year nine of formal schooling (not including early learning in kindergarten and preprimary), the span of achievement in a single classroom can be as great as 8 years (Goss and Sonneman 2016), and the barriers to attainment faced by students are diverse and complex (Merga 2019). As children move through the years of schooling into high school, their struggles with literacy can be compounded by a Matthew Effect (Stanovich 1986), whereby those with strong literacy skills experience compounded benefit, and those without these skills experience compounded comparative disadvantage.

Similar concerns related to adolescent students' under-performance in the writing dimension of literacy have also been reported. Evidence from national testing between 2011 and 2018 suggests a continued decline in the writing performance of students in Year 7 and 9 across states (ACARA 2018). Despite the lack of studies investigating teachers' pedagogical practices to support students' writing development in Australia, international studies indicate that teachers across the globe spend insufficient time teaching writing in secondary education (see Graham 2019 for a review) and tend to make limited adaptations to meet the needs of less skilled writers (Kiuvara, Graham, and Hawken 2009; Veiga Simão et al. 2016). Developing writing skills is a very complex process that requires time and effective instruction (Kellogg 2008). Hence, it is of critical importance to examine the factors that contribute to how writing is taught (Graham 2019), including factors explaining the challenges teachers face when teaching writing to struggling students in secondary schools.

The term "literacy" encompasses a plurality of literacies reflective of its nature as a multidimensional social practice (McKay 1996). Literacy may be constructed as concerned with the functional and associated skill development to meet competence requirements, but also viewed as connecting individuals within social and cultural contexts (Hodgson 2019). Currently in Australia, the National Curriculum positions literacy as a general capability related to having "the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society" (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2017). In order to align the research with what is expected of the Australian teachers who participated in our study, we draw on this definition of literacy to inform our study while acknowledging that it is limited. Demonstration of this functional literacy attainment can be tied to graduation attainment in some areas within Australia.

Students with literacy skills below those expected for their age can be termed *struggling literacy learners* (Merga, Mat Roni and Mason 2020), and "the classroom teacher is likely the person with the most relevant and extensive expertise to help his

or her struggling students” (Collins and Ferri 2016, 9). However, it cannot be assumed that classrooms receive additional staffing, resourcing or funding to meet the needs of students struggling with literacy. In Australia, additional support for students is linked to certain diagnosed disabilities (Australian Government 2019) or demonstrable English as an Additional Language (EAL) status (e.g. Department of Education and Training (DET) Victoria 2019). This leaves those who fall outside these categories potentially exclusively supported by their classroom teacher without any additional resourcing. In addition, not all schools with students of EAL status will receive additional funding to support these students (e.g. DET Victoria, 2019). However, while struggling literacy learners may include students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and students with diagnosed learning disabilities, most may not fall into either category (Merga 2019), and research suggests that the issues that struggling literacy learners face beyond the early years of schooling are diverse (e.g. Brasseur-Hock et al. 2011; Buly and Valencia 2002; Cirino et al. 2013; Dennis 2013). Teachers report significant challenges in meeting the needs of struggling literacy learners beyond the early years of schooling (Albright et al. 2013; Merga 2019). Having sufficient time to meet the needs of these students is particularly important, given that literacy supportive interventions within the classroom may often require extended time for both performing literacy skills and instruction (Poch, Hamby, and Chen 2019).

More needs to be understood about the magnitude and nature of any staffing and resourcing challenges that impede teaching and learning in schools, and more broadly, the factors that may impede teachers from having adequate time and resourcing to meet the need of students who have fallen behind their peers. “Testing culture and neoliberal priorities” continue “to build velocity” in schools in Australia, the UK and the US, and “accountability movements also reach into teacher preparation” (Rubin and Land 2017, 190). However, increased scrutiny of teachers and teacher education invariably fails to consider how external resourcing factors shape the teaching and learning experience. Attempts to enhance student learning may focus narrowly on initial teacher education with often alarming results such as reported in the UK (Hodgson 2014). The impact of resourcing, which could require changes in the way schools are funded, is often poorly considered. Adequate resourcing in Australian schools cannot be assumed, with comparatively low government investment in schooling in relation to gross domestic product, and with parents contributing an increasing percentage as the percentage of education funding provided by the government declines (Chesters 2018; OECD 2017). School funding and resourcing is also a contentious issue in the UK, where school spending per pupil may be falling rather than increasing over time (Weale 2019). Drawing on the immediate and pragmatic concerns of English teachers currently endeavouring to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners in mainstream secondary classrooms can illustrate the key barriers perceived to finding time to support these students.

Staffing and resourcing challenges experienced may be influenced by school sector, geographic location, and state or territory, and therefore inquiry into resourcing challenges should be considered in relation to these factors. Resourcing in relation to sector is a topic of ongoing and considerable public and research interest. Australian states and territories “are the majority public funder of government schools (with 65.4% of students)”, and the Australian Government is the “majority public funder for non-government schools (with 34.6% of students)” (DoE 2019, 1). Australia’s four richest schools (all private) “spent more on

new facilities and renovations than the poorest 1,800 schools combined” (Ting, Palmer, and Scott 2019), further bringing into question the equity considerations underpinning the government-funded resourcing of Australian public schools. Sector warrants closer consideration in the context of these debates, as an array of factors may influence teachers’ ability to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners. In addition to school sector, geographic location in relation to urban, rural, and remote status, as well as state/territory, could also influence adequacy of resourcing, and student literacy outcomes. While diverse factors may shape student outcomes, this paper focuses on potential shaping influence of these contextual factors. Drawing on survey data from 315 Australian English teacher respondents, this paper investigates teachers’ perceptions of adequate support in relation to time, material resources, and access to support staff.

Methods

This paper reports on findings from the 2019 *Supporting Struggling Secondary Literacy Learners* project (hereafter the Project). The Project addressed a broad base of research questions concerned with supporting struggling secondary literacy learners to achieve functional literacy that were associated with distinct research questions. Specifically, we also explored teachers’ perceptions of barriers faced by struggling literacy learners (Merga 2019), school leadership and whole-school support of struggling literacy learners (Merga, Mat Roni and Malpique 2020), and teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness for supporting struggling literacy learners (Merga, Mat Roni and Mason 2020). This paper explores secondary teachers’ perceptions of adequacy of time and resourcing to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners in mainstream English classrooms. Institutional ethics approval was granted prior to project commencement.

The Project collected data on a survey tool hosted in Qualtrics, with a hyperlink to a detailed introductory letter provided to ensure that consent was informed. Respondents learned about the Project through information posted on professional networks and social networks. Responses from a total of 315 respondents from all states and territories in Australia were featured in the final data set. Participants were not asked to supply any identifying data. In order to have both the currency and relevance of knowledge to be able to provide insights into the status of teaching struggling literacy learners in mainstream contexts, respondents needed to meet the following inclusion criteria.

- Be a current teacher of secondary students (in any of the years 7–12)
- Currently, teach at least one mainstream (not extension) English class
- Currently, teach at least some struggling literacy learners.

Skip and display logics were built into the Qualtrics-hosted survey in relation to filtering items to ensure that teachers who did not meet the criteria would be directed out of the survey.

GPower (Faul et al. 2009) version 3.1.9.2 was employed to ascertain a minimum sample size needed for statistical analysis. Application of Cohen’s convention of a medium effect size threshold of .30 (Cohen 2013), with a 95% confidence interval, suggested $N = 138$, a figure comfortably exceeded by the $N = 315$ sample. Demographic details about the teacher participants are provided in Table 1, with Table 2 outlining characteristics of the schools in which they worked (Table 2).

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

(Merga, 2019)

This paper investigates the following research questions:

- (1) Do mainstream secondary school English teachers have time to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners in the mainstream classroom? Why/why not?
- (2) Do mainstream secondary school English teachers have adequate resources to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners in the mainstream classroom?
- (3) Is there an association between teachers' perception of adequate resourcing and material, and time to meet student needs?
- (4) Is teachers' perception of adequate resourcing (staff and material) related to place, sector, or location?

Data were subject to a range of analytical tests related to the research questions, as further detailed herein. While the data and methods employed are primarily aligned with the quantitative paradigm, RQ1 employs mixed methods, involving qualitative data to begin to understand the reasons for agreement and disagreement around sufficiency of time to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners in contemporary mainstream classrooms. As such, results for RQ1 are also expressed in a joint display (e.g. Guetterman, Fetters, and Creswell 2015), where recurring themes (i.e. featured in 4 or more responses to be deemed salient) from the text are presented with text examples as expressed by the respondents.

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>		
South Australia	41	13.02
Tasmania	12	3.81
Northern Territory	14	4.44
New South Wales	82	26.03
Western Australia	56	17.78
Queensland	50	15.87
Victoria	45	14.29
Australian Capital Territory	15	4.76
<i>School type</i>		
Government (public)	195	61.90
Private	120	38.10
<i>ICSEAA</i>		
Above average ICSEA	67	21.27
Average ICSEA (1000)	79	25.08
Below Average ICSEA	106	33.65
Unsure	63	20.00

^aICSEA relates to the socio-educational backgrounds of students at this school (ACARA 2017)

Our methodological approach reflects a convergent design, with the quantitative and qualitative data collected in the same tool, and closely integrated in relation to RQ1, enhancing the value of the research by showing the factors at play behind the numbers (Fetters, Curry, and Creswell 2013). Qualitative data were analysed using an iterative thematic coding approach (Rice and Ezzy 1999), adopting NVivo as a tool, and themes emerged inductively from the data. Data were closely responsive to the research questions, suggesting that cognitive piloting prior to survey implementation was sufficient. Both code and meaning saturation were comfortably achieved (Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi 2017).

Limitations include the common issues with self-report and recall found in data collection with human participants. All possible influential factors are not accounted for in this study, and thus findings such as a relationship between teachers' perceptions and context may be actually attributed to a factor or factors beyond the scope of this project. It is also a limitation that the project looked at factors such as adequate material resourcing very generally, without breaking this down into the specific kinds of resources available.

Results and discussion

Do mainstream high school English teachers perceive that they have sufficient time to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners in the mainstream classroom?

The results as per Table 3 below suggest that in mainstream high school English classrooms time may be a key barrier in meeting the needs of these students. The vast majority of respondents did not find it easy to find time to support struggling literacy learners in the mainstream classroom.

Table 3. Ease of time to support struggling learners.

Level of agreement	In sample (N = 315)	In sample (%)
Strongly agree	6	1.90
Somewhat agree	22	6.98
Neither agree nor disagree	15	4.76
Somewhat disagree	95	30.16
Strongly disagree	177	56.19
Mean	4.32	
Median	5.00	
Std deviation	.981	

In [Table 4](#), we use a joint display to prioritise the integration of our mixed-methods data that address RQ1. Of the 28 respondents who agreed that it is easy to find time to support struggling literacy learners in the mainstream classroom, $n = 20$ provided open field responses to provide insights into the strategies and/or supports they draw on to find time to support these learners in the mainstream classroom. As per [Table 4](#), those in agreement that they had adequate time to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners in the mainstream classroom explained this position in relation to specific strategies employed (i.e. group work and scaffolding) and focused and externally assisted support provided (i.e. one-to-one support and support staff), as directed by the question. It is important to note that, without knowing more about the specific contexts and students in question, it cannot be assumed from these results that those in agreement simply had better strategies and more support than those in disagreement, and the questions asked to agreeing and disagreeing respondents were not identical, rather tailored to meet their different perspectives. However, future research that explores possible differences in pedagogy employed by these two groups is warranted, though these would need to be interpreted in relation to other factors raised in the study.

Of the 272 respondents who disagreed that it is easy to find time to support struggling literacy learners in the mainstream classroom, $n = 231$ provided open field responses to provide insights into the key barriers they feel they face to finding time to support these learners in the mainstream classroom. As per [Table 4](#), reasons for disagreement were complex and often collocated. The focused and externally assisted support provided to those in agreement (one-to-one support and support staff) was both desired and missing in instances in the disagreement group, as expressed in the themes of class size and individual support, and support staff. With class size clearly related to capacity for individual support, it is important that future research explore how class size impacts specifically on secondary English teachers' capacity to meet the needs of diverse struggling literacy learners. Drawing on their experience, the findings reported in this paper suggest that teachers strongly challenged researchers' contention that class size is not an influential factor (e.g. Hattie 2005), and we note that research that supports this view tends to look at class groups without differentiating struggling learners. In contrast, research suggests that for *struggling* students, class size may be a highly influential factor impacting upon engaged learning, as for struggling students "a larger number of pupils was associated with a decreased occurrence of on task behavior" (Blatchford, Bassett, and Brown 2011, 723). In addition, the possibility of focused support credited by the agreement group with allowing for time to meet struggling students' needs noticeably increases with decrease in class sizes (Blatchford, Bassett, and Brown 2011).

Table 4. Joint display of reasons for agreement/disagreement on sufficient time.

Agreement	In sample (%)	Theme	Text example
Agreement (strong/somewhat)	8.88	Group work	"Group work with rotation"
		One-to-one support	"Have plenty of allocated time to help them specifically"
		Scaffolding Support staff	"Scaffolding and chunking to assist all year levels" "Student support teachers, counsellors, Indigenous support teachers"
Disagreement (strong/somewhat)	86.35	Administrative demands	"Documentation procedures and demands at the College severely limit time to focus on teaching practice and mastery".
		Behaviour management	"Poor behaviour means I can rarely support students on an individual basis".
		Class size and individual support	"Class size- regardless of 'expert' opinions, class size DOES matter, that is, the smaller the class, the easier it is to individually attend to learning issues in the classroom".
		Competing demands	"Abandoning the flock for the lost sheep – difficult to balance how much focus to give them so that it is not at the expense of the majority who are more capable".
		Curriculum	"Pressures of the curriculum. By the time students are in the senior years of secondary school there is very little time to spend on developing literacy skills. The focus has to be on getting through the course which means that many struggle to meet requirements".
		Extent of differentiation needed	"Despite differentiating learning it can be very difficult to meet all the needs of the struggling learners in a class with such diversity. I have one class with two students with reading ages three or more years below their age with a student doing extended studies at a college level".
		Knowledge and training	"Often my colleagues and I don't feel supported in identifying and addressing all literacy problems due to our training being so limited"
		School support	"I'm flat out planning lessons without differentiating across seven achievement levels. And it's all on me to do it, no support from the school"
		Resourcing Support staff	"For students that need proper targeted intervention, a lack of resources is the main issue" "Often it is due to a lack of support staff as I have low level classes and many students with disabilities/learning disabilities and no additional support. I can be in a room with 29 kids and I sit one on one with kids who need the support, and I look over at the others who need support, and I just can't be in two places at once. So lack of support staff (which I think stems from lack of funding)".

These aforementioned support themes of class size and individual support, and support staff, can be grouped with other school and workload themes such as administrative demands, competing demands, school support and resourcing, all of which are ostensibly potentially mitigated at school level. However, these will also be determined by diverse additional factors such as funding and leadership support. Similarly, while curriculum, behaviour management, extent of differentiation needed, and knowledge and training can be grouped as pedagogic/strategic factors, they too are constrained by additional factors beyond the classroom including (but not limited to) a set national curriculum, leadership and school culture.

We also note that factors such as heavy administrative duties and school support feature strongly in the literature concerned with teacher role satisfaction and attrition.

High administrative load on teachers is associated in previous research with teacher burnout (Schaefer, Long, and Clandinin 2012), and it is also a topic of interest in the public discourse, as featured in the media (e.g. Baker 2018). School administration and staff can constitute a risk factor for teacher wellbeing where support is poor, but can also be a protective factor where support is strong (Beltman, Mansfield, and Price 2011). Therefore, proactively addressing these issues can offer benefits for teachers and schools beyond supporting the learning of struggling students, and our findings add to the weight of research highlighting the importance of these issues.

Do mainstream high school English teachers have adequate resources to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners in the mainstream classroom?

As per Table 5, with less than a third of teachers agreeing that they had sufficient access to support staff, this was concerning. A reason could be that many of the struggling literacy learners did not have diagnosed learning disabilities or difficulties that attract funding which would facilitate this support (Merga 2019).

Is there an association between teachers' perception of adequate resourcing and material, and time to meet student needs?

Three Kendall's tau correlation tests were performed on the dataset to investigate if teachers' perceptions of adequate support staff, resources, and time to support the struggling literacy learners are related. The result is summarised in Table 6.

The results in Table 6 show that all pair-wise correlations are positive and statistically significant with $p < .01$, indicating that all variables move in the same direction. For example, the respondents who reported support staff were inadequate also felt the resources and time were insufficient in effort to support the struggling literacy learners. The results also indicate that the strongest correlation was observed between teachers' perceptions of adequate staff and resources, followed by staff and time, and time and resources. According to Cohen's r convention (Cohen 2013), these correlations equate to a medium-to-large effect, a medium effect, and a small-to-medium effect, respectively.

Table 5. Resourcing to meet literacy needs.

Availability of supportive resource/level of agreement	In sample (N = 315)	In sample (%)
<i>Sufficient access to support staff</i>		
Strongly agree	19	6.03
Somewhat agree	70	22.22
Neither agree nor disagree	27	8.57
Somewhat disagree	100	31.75
Strongly disagree	99	31.43
<i>Adequate material resources</i>		
Strongly agree	19	6.03
Somewhat agree	92	29.21
Neither agree nor disagree	45	14.29
Somewhat disagree	109	34.60
Strongly disagree	50	15.87

Table 6. Correlation matrix of resources adequacy.

	Time	Resources	Staff
Time	1	.276**	.304**
Resources	.276**	1	.402**
Staff	.304**	.402**	1

** $p < .01$. Kendall's *tau* correlation matrix.

Is teachers' perception of adequate resourcing (staff and material) related to place, sector, or location?

This study also looks into the possible effect of institutional sector (public or private schools), location (urban, remote, or rural), and state or territory on the sufficiency of support staff and resources. Mann-Whitney *U* and Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to investigate differences in teachers' perceptions of resource adequacy at different institution sectors and locations, including states/territories. These tests were supplemented with *nominal-by-interval eta* and *eta-squared* to estimate variance accounted for by variables.

Sector effect

Out of 315 responses received, 62% of respondents came from teachers in public/government schools and the remaining 38% were from private/independent schools. The mean ranks suggest that English teachers in public schools have fewer resources both in staff and resources to support struggling literacy learners compared to their private school counterparts as perceived by the respondents. A Mann-Whitney *U* test was conducted on the differences and found that these were statistically significant. The results are illustrated in Table 7.

States

The mean ranks indicate that, according to teacher perceptions, there are differences in resource adequacy across states, with schools in Queensland reporting the least sufficiency of supporting resources (*mean rank* = 170.68) and those in Australian Capital Territory (ACT) reported to have the least sufficiency of support staff (*mean rank* = 190.80). However, when these variations across the states and territories were tested using the Kruskal-Wallis procedure, the differences were not statistically different. As such, although the respondents reported they do not have sufficient resources and staff to support struggling literacy learners, the shortages are similar across all states as summarised in Table 8.

Table 7. Sector and resources.

Resources	Sector	<i>N</i>	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> , <i>z</i> -score
Resources	Public/government	195	170.22	33193	9317**, -3.15
	Private/independent	120	138.14	16577	
	Total	315			
Staff	Public/government	195	175.05	34134	8376***, -4.40
	Private/independent	120	130.3	15636	
	Total	315			

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 8. States/territories and resources.

Resources	States/Territories	N	Mean Rank	Kruskal-Wallis, d.f.
Resources	South Australia	41	145.16	5.63 ⁺ , 7
	Tasmania	12	158.29	
	Northern Territory	14	140.32	
	New South Wales	82	156.29	
	Western Australia	56	162.52	
	Queensland	50	170.68	
	Victoria	45	169.62	
	Australian Capital Territory	15	124.73	
	Total	315		
Staff	South Australia	41	136.83	6.53 ⁺ , 7
	Tasmania	12	165.33	
	Northern Territory	14	151.14	
	New South Wales	82	154.76	
	Western Australia	56	156.77	
	Queensland	50	156.89	
	Victoria	45	175.2	
	Australian Capital Territory	15	190.8	
	Total	315		

⁺ $p > .05$, d.f. = degree of freedom.

Location

A Kruskal-Wallis test was also conducted to investigate teachers' perceptions of differences in material resources and support staff (in)adequacies based on school location. As per Table 2, the majority of the respondents were from an urban/metropolitan area, followed by rural, with only 1.59% of the respondents from a remote area. The mean rank in Table 9 suggests that according to teachers' perceptions, the schools in the rural areas had fewer resources and staff compared to urban and remote contexts. However, the differences were not statistically significant based on the Kruskal-Wallis test.

Variance accounted for

Nominal-by-interval variables correlations *eta*, η , were also calculated for sector, location, and state/territory, in relation to teachers' perceptions of the adequacies of resources and support staff. Unlike conventional correlations such as Pearson's *r* and Spearman's *rho*, *eta* measures the strength of bivariate correlations between nominal (i.e. sector, location, and states) and interval (i.e. resources and staff) variables. The squared correlation, η^2 , provides an estimate of variance accounted for of one variable by the other in a bivariate pair. As indicated in Table 10, sector (public/government or private/independent) has the largest correlation strength in relation to both resources and staff. At the bivariate level,

Table 9. Resources and locations.

Resources	Location	N	Mean Rank	Kruskal-Wallis, d.f.
Resources	Urban/metropolitan	220	155.11	1.69 ⁺ , 2
	Rural/country	90	166.69	
	Remote	5	128.5	
	Total	315		
Staff	Urban/metropolitan	220	152.85	2.91 ⁺ , 2
	Rural/country	90	168.62	
	Remote	5	193.6	
	Total	315		

⁺ $p > .05$, d.f. = degree of freedom.

Table 10. Nominal-by-interval correlations, Eta, η .

	Resources	Staff	Time
Sector	.18, $\eta^2 = .03$	0.23, $\eta^2 = .05$	0.07, $\eta^2 = .01$
Location	0.07, $\eta^2 = .01$	0.10, $\eta^2 = .01$	0.04, $\eta^2 < .01$
State/territory	0.13, $\eta^2 = .02$	0.14, $\eta^2 = .02$	0.11, $\eta^2 = .01$

sector independently accounts for 3% and 5% variations in reported resources ($\eta^2 = .03$) and staff adequacies ($\eta^2 = .05$).

Conclusions

Most (86.35%) of the Australian secondary English teacher respondents currently working with struggling literacy learners in mainstream classrooms did not have adequate time and resourcing to meet the needs of these students. As research suggests that streaming by ability does not lead to better outcomes for struggling students (OECD 2013), more attention needs to be given to how teachers can be supported, and schools can be funded, to enhance outcomes for Australia's most vulnerable students. Teachers perceived that a range of factors may enable sufficient time to meet the needs of these students, including use of specific strategies, and focused and externally assisted support. Detracting from teachers' capacity to meet the needs of their struggling literacy learners within the time constraints of schools are burgeoning class sizes; heavy administrative demands; the competing demands of multiple students at different levels; poor school support; inadequate resourcing; inflexible and overloaded curriculum; issues with behaviour management; the sheer extent of differentiation needed at both individual and group level; and knowledge and training gaps experienced by teachers. These recurring, salient themes warrant further research attention, and they are complex and in many cases interrelated, which is why supporting struggling literacy learners in the secondary context is deemed a *wicked problem* (Rittel and Webber 1973). Nonetheless, many of the qualitative themes, should they prove to hold broader generalisability, can be mitigated at teacher, school or governance level. For example, burgeoning class sizes and heavy administrative demands can potentially be mitigated by reducing class sizes and increasing available administrative support staff, which in turn may only be possible with greater funding to schools. Mitigating these factors may also have a positive impact on teacher attrition.

With insufficient resourcing in relation to material and staffing resources raised in the qualitative data, it was unsurprising that most teachers did not feel they had sufficient access to support staff and adequate material resources. Our analysis found perceived deficiency to be compounded; those with insufficient support staff also appeared to have insufficient resources, and both insufficiencies were associated with insufficient time. It may not be realistic to expect improvement in the performance of Australia's struggling literacy learners without greatly increasing provision of support staff and material resourcing.

To produce implications for the direction of future resourcing to support struggling literacy learners, we explored perceived adequacy of resourcing in relation to place, sector, or location. Findings suggest that while state and location did not yield statistically

significant results, public schools may have fewer resources both in staff and resources to support struggling literacy learners compared to their private counterparts, supporting the argument that greater funds need to be invested in the Australian public schooling system from the perspective of supporting struggling literacy learners. It can be contended that “social segregation is part of the history of Australian schooling”, but also that this segregation “is arguably exacerbated by neoliberal commitments to choice and privatization” (Forsey, Proctor, and Stacey 2017, 61), and our findings suggest that the under resourcing of Australian public schools may be exerting a notable limiting factor on the future academic, vocational and social opportunities of struggling literacy learners by constraining their capacity to improve.

As aforementioned, we do not suggest that streaming by ability grouping is a solution to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners. At present, ability grouping in Australia is more concerned with providing extension opportunities for high ability students than support for struggling learners (Perry and Lamb 2016). As highlighted previously, struggling literacy learners in secondary school are a group experiencing diverse literacy skill issues as well as widely varying additional barriers that include, but are not limited to EAL status, “absenteeism, home factors, student attitudes and engagement, school and systems factors, and learning difficulties and disabilities influencing learning” (Merga 2019, 1). Therefore, moving all struggling literacy learners into the same classroom will not result in a homogenous group of learners with common needs and experiences. At this stage, there is little evidence to suggest that streaming leads to better educational outcomes for struggling literacy learners (OECD 2013), and classroom management may be more challenging when there are greater concentrations of struggling students, diminishing learning opportunities and further inhibiting their chances of improving their literacy skills (e.g. McGillicuddy and Devine 2018). Further research on schooling models to optimise outcomes for struggling students is needed.

Enhancing the position of literacy as a whole school priority could yield benefits for struggling literacy learners, as a whole-school approach to literacy has previously been linked with improvements in literacy performance in the primary school context (Hill and Crevola 1999), though there is little research exploring how such approaches specifically impact upon the performance of struggling literacy learners, and students in the secondary school years. While this paper does not explore the role of content area literacy and school-wide literacy initiatives in enhancing outcomes for struggling literacy learners, at this stage, many schools may not broadly support the positioning of literacy as a whole school priority (Merga, Mat Roni and Malpique 2020), despite the fact that this is a curricular expectation (ACARA 2017). This reflects Rennie’s (2016) earlier contention that “the catchcry ‘we are all teachers of literacy’ has been a mantra for several decades, yet seems to be a concept with which many secondary schools struggle” (42). More research is needed to explore the potential of the whole-school approach to literacy for supporting struggling literacy learners, but it could be one way to address the wicked problem of struggling literacy learners beyond the early years.

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