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The role of teachers in supporting students' mental health

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THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

This literature review investigates the perception of secondary teachers about their role of supporting and promoting students' mental health and whether teachers feel equipped to fulfil the requirements of this role. Analysis of 13 research articles published between 2008–2022 indicated that most secondary teachers, across five countries, understand the role they play in their students' lives and that supporting students' mental health is an aspect of their role. However, it was also found that many teachers do not feel well-prepared to adequately support students' mental health due to a lack of adequate mental health training. Implications for practice, training, and future research within an Aotearoa New Zealand context are discussed in relation to schools and teachers providing support to students with mental health concerns and the promotion of positive mental health.

Keywords

Teacher perception; student mental health; mental health training; secondary education

Introduction

As a beginning secondary science teacher, having completed a one-year Master of Teaching and Learning degree, I was left questioning my own role in supporting students' mental health, as well as wondering whether my training and limited experience had prepared me to do so. As a young woman, not long out of the New Zealand education system and not a lot older than many of my students, I wondered whether I was alone in feeling ill-prepared to support the emotional and mental health needs of my students. This literature review has highlighted that a perception shared by many teachers about students' mental health is a desire to support students but being unable to do so effectively for many reasons.

During adolescence, the prevalence of mental illness increases, impacting the ability to learn and other aspects of life (Borntrager & Lyon, 2015). Globally, one in seven 10–19-year-olds experience a mental disorder, the most common being depression, anxiety, or behavioural disorders (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2021). In Aotearoa New Zealand, one in five adolescents is likely to experience a mental health issue (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2014). However, these often remain undiagnosed and untreated. This does not account for adolescents with subclinical symptoms and other mental health concerns that do not meet diagnostic requirements (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). Failure to address these mental health conditions in adolescents has consequences for physical and mental health, extending into adulthood and impacting the ability to lead a fulfilling life (WHO, 2021).

Schools and educators have been identified as having the opportunity to recognise and support the mental health concerns of students (Graham et al., 2011). Due to this, the role of teachers in this context is constantly expanding. They are in a critical position to assess and respond to the traditional academic needs of students, and their emotional and social well-being needs (Kidger et al., 2010). Most secondary teachers accept and acknowledge the significant role they play in supporting the emotional development and mental health of their students (Rothì et al., 2008). Nevertheless, concerns have been raised around role conflict and insufficient training, leaving teachers unsure whether they are equipped to effectively support students' mental health (Graham et al., 2011).

The literature that informed this review provided insight into how secondary teachers perceive their role in supporting students' mental health. However, the answers provided were partial and could not offer comprehensive insight when considered as individual pieces of literature. To provide comprehensive insight, the posed research question, "How do secondary teachers perceive their role and preparation in supporting students' mental health?", was formed and broken down into two smaller research questions:

- What perceptions do secondary teachers have about supporting students' mental health?
- Do secondary teachers feel well-equipped to support the mental health of students?

This review explored the perception that teachers have regarding their role in supporting students' mental health and their preparedness and self-efficacy in supporting students' mental health.

Background

Due to the many interpretations of mental health and its societal connection with "mental disorder" and "well-being", it was important to clarify what is meant by mental health in this review. To gain an understanding of the current field of mental health in schools, I used relevant existing literature reviews. These also helped to form the rationale for this current literature review.

Definitions

Mental health, as defined by Brunton (2011), is a process that allows individuals to recognise their potential and abilities, work productively while coping with the stresses and challenges of life, and participate in their community. Brunton (2011) also emphasised the importance of mental health being a positive sense of spiritual and emotional contentedness. However, the terms "mental illness" and "mental disorder" are often used interchangeably with mental health due to the negative connotation and stigma surrounding mental health, which stems from a lack of awareness. In contrast, these are defined as health problems that severely impact an individual's thoughts, behaviours, and feelings and should only be viewed as an aspect of mental health (Brunton, 2011).

For this review, "mental health" was used to encompass perceived qualities of mental health, both positive and negative. This includes mental health concerns (issues that are not formally diagnosed as disorders due to lack of severity), as well as positive mental health (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018) in accordance with the definition proposed by Brunton (2011). Supporting mental health is inclusive of both responding to and preventing mental illness, as well as promotion of positive aspects of mental health (Mælan et al., 2018).

Related work and the case for review

To provide insight into the field of student mental health in schools, I searched for published literature reviews with relevance to this topic. Four relevant and informative literature reviews were located, and their findings were summarised in Table 1. The reviews identified have evaluated school mental health interventions and secondary teacher involvement in these interventions (Franklin et al., 2012), teacher training in mental health and mental literacy (Ohrt et al., 2020; Yamaguchi et al., 2018), and teachers' perceptions of barriers to the assessment of mental health in schools (O'Farrell et al., 2023).

Table 1.   *Findings of Relevant Existing Literature Reviews About Teacher Engagement in Student Mental Health*

Existing literature review title (Citation)	Relevant findings
Teacher involvement in school mental health interventions: A systematic review. (Franklin et al., 2012)	5. Reported on school mental health interventions 6. Variation among teachers in their involvement in school mental health interventions
Mental health literacy programmes for school teachers: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. (Yamaguchi et al., 2018)	7. Reported on teacher training in mental health literacy 8. Significant improvement in the knowledge and confidence of teachers from mental health literacy training
Teacher training in K-12 student mental health: A systematic review. (Ohrt et al., 2020)	9. Reported on teacher training in mental health literacy 10. Variation in the content discussed and taught during the mental health training of teachers
Teachers' perceptions of the barriers to the assessment of mental health in schools with implications for educational policy: A systematic review. (O'Farrell et al., 2023)	11. Reported on a lack of teacher training in mental health assessment 12. Role conflict was a barrier to supporting students' mental health

To further understand students' mental health at secondary school, I incorporated areas of the above literature reviews by considering secondary teachers' perceptions of their role in supporting students' mental health and their preparedness to do so. The above reviews of literature focused primarily on the mental health training of teachers, linked to their confidence in supporting students' mental health. As the above literature reviews have not done so, this review has sought to address secondary teachers' perceptions of supporting students' mental health and their ability to do so, prior to the incorporation of mental health training.

Method

Due to time constraints and specific inclusion criteria, this review does not claim to be comprehensive, but rather provides the foundation necessary to gain an overall understanding of the perceptions of secondary teachers in their role of supporting students' mental health.

Research methods

To search for relevant literature, I used an initial keyword search in Taylor & Francis Online with the following terms: "student mental health OR student well-being AND teacher AND secondary OR high school". This yielded 625 results. To further narrow this down, the publication date range of 2008–2022 was applied to the search and returned 517 results. I read the title of each article and scanned for keywords and appropriateness to the research question. After this scan of the 517 articles, the abstracts of 43 articles were read, during which I looked for suitability in the abstract and the method used. I then scanned the introduction, major headings, and conclusion of 20 articles. With consideration of specific inclusion criteria, this yielded 13 appropriate research articles.

Inclusion criteria

Specific criteria were used to inform the findings to the overarching research question. To be included, the article had to be an accessible peer-reviewed research article published between 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2022.

The research methods used in the literature also informed the inclusion of research articles. Appropriate qualitative data with descriptive methodology was a requirement for inclusion of the articles. In cases where both qualitative and quantitative data were presented, only findings relevant to the qualitative data were considered.

Another requirement of the research articles was that they had to investigate secondary teachers at secondary schools. Articles that collected data from both primary and secondary schools were included as long as over 50% of the participants were from the secondary sector. Articles that collected data from school counsellors, administration staff, principals, and other school staff were included if they had direct contact with students.

As this literature review considered the overall mental health of students, the articles had to address general mental health and well-being concerns. While many of the included articles did mention specific mental health disorders, general mental health and well-being were maintained as the core focus of the article.

Analysis methods

I analysed the 13 research articles thoroughly by reading the entirety of each article twice to familiarise myself and further analyse the findings and their significance. In accordance with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), two common themes were generated based on the information presented in the findings sections of the 13 research articles. These two themes were teachers' perception of their role and mental health training for teachers or a lack thereof. A third theme of the ways teachers are currently supporting students' mental health was also generated; however, after further consideration, there was not enough evidence to support this theme. After the generation of these common themes, further analysis was conducted to review and develop each theme, and smaller sub-themes for the second theme were also identified, with links to the main themes. The themes and sub-themes were further defined as

- the perception of teachers on their role in supporting students' mental health
- teacher preparedness for supporting students' mental health
    - self-efficacy
    - mental health training

It was found that all 13 of the articles reported findings relating to teacher preparedness for supporting students' mental health, and 12 of the articles (all except Ekornes et al., 2013), reported findings relating to the perception of teachers on their role in supporting students' mental health.

Findings

The themes identified during analysis were the perception of teacher participants on their role in supporting students' mental health and teacher preparedness for supporting students' mental health. The relevant attributes of the literature have been provided to inform the reader of the context of the studies that have been included in this literature review.

Attributes of the literature

Of the 13 research articles analysed, four reported on studies that were conducted in Australia; four reported on studies from across the United Kingdom; three articles detailed studies in Norway; one

article detailed a study in America; and one reported on a study in Canada. These studies were selected based on similarities of the secondary schooling system to that of Aotearoa New Zealand (e.g., similar age range of 13–18 years old, multiple subject teachers, students progressing towards national level qualifications). The articles in this report prove valuable in providing a foundation for educators in Aotearoa New Zealand to learn from.

As detailed above, both qualitative and mixed method approaches to the research conducted were considered. When considering mixed methods research, only the qualitative findings were useful to this literature review due to the nature of the research question. Of the 13 articles, 10 used various qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, online surveys with open-answer questions, and focus groups. The three remaining research articles took a mixed methods approach, with similar qualitative methods as above.

The research question driving this literature review specifies the perception of teacher participants in the secondary sector. Of the 13 articles, nine reported on studies primarily conducted on secondary teacher participants, and four reported on studies conducted on both primary and secondary teacher participants.

The perception of teachers about their role in supporting students' mental health

The perception of teachers about their role in supporting students' mental health was identified early as a significant theme across many of the research articles selected. This section will discuss the general perception that teacher and school staff participants have towards their role in supporting students' mental health. All of the articles included in this review had findings related to the identified themes and the common and significant findings will be reported.

Of the 13 research articles, 12 of them explicitly reported findings relating to teachers' perceptions of mental health. Across these 12 articles, many participants accepted that supporting students' mental health was a part of their role and responsibility as teachers. Five of these articles linked students' mental health to their responsibility in ensuring a safe and positive environment for learning (Beames et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2016; Mælan et al., 2018; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; Rothì et al., 2008). Mælan et al. (2018) and Beames et al. (2022) linked this to providing a holistic model of care for students; prioritising both the academic and emotional needs of students (Beames et al., 2022) and fostering the growth and development of the whole student, not only their academic needs (Mælan et al., 2018). In their study of 14 participants, Kidger et al. (2010) reported on the inevitable link between teaching and emotional health and well-being, stating that "teachers cannot ignore emotional health in their day-to-day interactions with pupils" (p. 925). Incorporating mental health promotion into the classroom was seen as a necessity for tackling problematic behaviour as well as academic learning needs.

Teacher participants across five articles perceived their role to include encouraging students to seek support for their mental health when necessary (Beames et al., 2022; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Ekornes, 2015; Graham et al., 2011; Shelemy et al., 2019). Although some teacher participants reported feeling uncomfortable providing support to students with mental health concerns personally, they did acknowledge that they would be comfortable with referring students to internal or external support systems (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). Teacher participants also perceived their role to include advocating for students both academically and for their mental health, to obtain special provisions, additional support, and resources (Beames et al., 2022). Ekornes et al. (2015) suggested that teachers saw themselves as "gatekeepers" (p. 199) with an obligation to observe the mental health of their students. Teachers also recognised they were not psychologists and highlighted the importance of making referrals to mental health services if necessary. In their study of nine focus groups, across nine secondary schools in the UK, Shelemy et al. (2019) reported similar findings, as teacher participants did not see themselves as therapists, nor did they want to be, and would prefer that students with mental health issues received support from "experts" who have undergone the appropriate training.

Building positive relationships with students was considered to be part of a teacher's role across three articles (Graham et al., 2016; Kidger et al., 2010; Littlecott et al., 2018). Graham et al. (2016) reported that principal and teacher participants recognised the importance of relationships with students when supporting their mental health and ensuring students were cared for, respected, and valued in the school environment. Kidger et al. (2010) reported that several teacher participants commented on their relationships with their students having an inevitable impact on their emotional health through their communication and response to their actions. In their exploratory case studies across four schools in South Wales, Littlecott et al. (2018) also identified that teacher participants perceived their relationships with students to be of importance when observing behavioural changes and potential mental health changes as they knew their students personally and were aware of their backgrounds.

However, six articles found that teacher participants felt supporting students' mental health was not a core aspect of their role, and that while it was important, it was outside the scope of their capabilities (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Ekornes, 2015; Graham et al., 2011; Kidger et al., 2010; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; Shelemy et al., 2019). Graham et al. (2011) found that a minority of teacher participants felt their role was more strictly a teaching role, not a welfare role. In their study of 48 staff across two participating schools, Dimitropoulos et al. (2022) reported that teachers felt they were being required to do things outside of what they had been trained to do. Furthermore, a small number of teacher participants argued against being responsible for identifying and intervening in mental health issues in their students (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). Reluctance to take on the role of supporting students' mental health was not always due to the perception that it was not part of a teacher's role. It was also due to a lack of confidence, fear of saying the wrong thing, doing more harm than good, and a lack of training (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022).

The findings of the 12 research articles suggest that the majority of teacher participants felt it was their responsibility to support their students in their mental health, through referral to additional services, fostering of positive relationships, and support of emotional well-being. However, teachers were conflicted due to role ambiguity, lack of confidence, and insufficient training.

Teacher preparedness for supporting students' mental health

Teacher preparedness, or a lack thereof, was another significant theme identified across all 13 research articles. Common findings relating to the self-efficacy of secondary teachers and their perception of their abilities in supporting students' mental health, as well as the need for in-depth mental health training, are presented below. Of the 13 articles, seven articles reported findings on both self-efficacy and mental health training (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Ekornes et al., 2013; Ekornes, 2015; Graham et al., 2011; Kidger et al., 2010; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; Rothì et al., 2008), while two articles (Graham et al., 2016; Littlecott et al., 2018) and four articles (Beames et al., 2022; Mælan et al., 2018; Moon et al., 2017; Shelemy et al., 2019) commented either on teacher self-efficacy or mental health training respectively.

Self-efficacy among teacher participants

Across the nine articles that reported findings on teacher self-efficacy towards supporting students' mental health, a recurring finding was that many teacher participants felt somewhat confident providing basic mental health support. However, they felt ill-prepared and less confident in their abilities to address the more dire mental health concerns of their students. Graham et al. (2011) reported that most teacher participants felt confident implementing mental health programmes (80%); however, fewer teacher participants felt confident when dealing with minor mental health issues in their classrooms (70%). It was also reported that teacher participants felt powerless due to inadequate knowledge.

Teacher participants expressed a fear of saying the wrong thing resulting in low self-efficacy in supporting students' mental health and a reluctance to do so (Ekornes et al., 2013; Ekornes, 2015; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; Rothì et al., 2008). Rothì et al. (2008) found that teacher participants feared

intervening in a student's mental health without adequate knowledge could make things worse for the student. Additionally, teacher participants had concerns about the level of support they could provide. They worried they were not doing enough to support students and could not provide suitable and effective support (Graham et al., 2011).

With regard to self-efficacy, it is apparent from the 13 research articles that many secondary teacher participants felt less confident when faced with more serious mental health concerns of students, which appeared to stem from feelings of fear and inadequacy.

Mental health training

Across 11 research articles, the lack of confidence towards supporting students' mental health was suggested to be due to a lack of mental health training and professional development for teacher participants. The need for increased and refined mental health training has been alluded to above but will be further reported on here, including areas in which teacher participants have identified they would like further training.

Moon et al. (2017) reported that almost half of the respondents (N=341) in their anonymous online survey either disagreed that they had received any form of mental health training or disagreed that they felt their mental health training was adequate. Similar findings were reported by Dimitropoulos et al. (2022). Mazzer and Rickwood (2015) found that most teacher participants reported an awareness of, or involvement in, mental health training, which led to them having foundational knowledge and skills. However, teacher participants felt these skills were not adequate to meet the mental health needs of their students. It was reported that teacher participants wanted mental health training to help them identify and recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, as well as how they should respond to several different scenarios (Graham et al., 2011; Kidger et al., 2010). Teacher participants felt that advanced mental health training would provide them with the correct knowledge, and experience would then provide them with competence (Ekornes et al., 2013).

Teacher participants identified various training topics they felt would better prepare them to support their students. These topics included mental health literacy (Beames et al., 2022), promoting positive mental health, supporting students without taking on the role of a therapist (Shelemy et al., 2019), mental health disorders, behavioural management techniques, specialised skill training, trauma training (Moon et al., 2017), and mental health training in the context of a classroom (Ekornes, 2015; Rothì et al., 2008).

The delivery and accessibility of suggested training were also considered in six of the articles (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Ekornes et al., 2013; Ekornes, 2015; Mælan et al., 2018; Rothì et al., 2008; Shelemy et al., 2019). Teacher participants were enthusiastic about the prospect of professional development courses for mental health training as it would allow them to apply what they have learnt directly in their classrooms (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Rothì et al., 2008). It was also found that few teacher participants, especially more experienced teachers, received any form of mental health training in their initial teacher education training (Ekornes et al., 2013). In some studies, teacher participants identified a need for mental health training to prepare beginning teachers for supporting their students' mental health (Mælan et al., 2018). Shelemy et al. (2019) reported extensive ideas from teacher participants regarding the style and accessibility of mental health training. Teacher participants wanted mental health training with links to the classroom context and practical strategies, as well as adaptable resources and incorporation of case studies. Teacher participants also expressed a desire for interactive mental health training with a professional and evidence-based approach.

Discussion

The purpose of this literature review was to investigate the perception of secondary teachers on their role in supporting students' mental health and their preparedness to do so. This literature review identified 13 articles that had findings relevant to the research question and that met the inclusion criteria as determined by the researcher.

This discussion section explores the implications of the findings stated as they relate to teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, limitations and considerations of this review, and recommendations for mental health training and further research.

Implications

Across the 13 articles, most teacher participants viewed supporting students' mental health to be a part of their role; however, the level of importance placed on this part of a teacher's role varied. Some teacher participants perceived supporting students' mental health to be a large part of their role due to the inevitable link between a student's academic performance and mental health, as well as their duty of care to students (Beames et al., 2022). However, an unexpected number of teacher participants identified academic instruction to be their main priority and they were reluctant to place equal importance on supporting students' mental health, as it was not a core component of their role (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015). It is thought that this response was more prominent than expected due to the lack of self-efficacy teacher participants experienced, as they had not received adequate training, as opposed to teacher participants fully disregarding the importance of their students' mental health (Ekornes et al., 2013). O'Farrell et al. (2023) found similar findings in their review on barriers identified by teachers to the assessment of mental health in school. It was identified that a contributing factor to these barriers was a lack of confidence. A minority of teacher participants across some articles argued against being responsible for students' mental health in any form; however, this is also thought to be due to a lack of mental health training and confidence, as well as a lack of time and emotional capacity due to the role conflict teachers are experiencing (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015). It is likely that these varying perceptions would be mirrored in Aotearoa New Zealand; however, further research is needed to confirm this and to determine whether there are any opposing views amongst Aotearoa New Zealand secondary teachers.

Teacher participants who perceived their role as including supporting students' mental health contributed practical ideas and ways that mental health could be supported in the classroom and within the school. Building effective and positive relationships with students appeared to be the most recurring idea. While building relationships is crucial in providing mental health support, it also provides a sense of belonging and respect for the student. This is likely to enhance all areas of their school lives, academically, emotionally, and socially (Noble & McGrath, 2012). This is an important finding for all teachers, regardless of their stance on supporting students' mental health. Building positive relationships with students is an idea that is echoed across Aotearoa New Zealand schools as the Ministry of Education recognises the importance of putting student relationships first and creating positive relationships to support the academic and emotional aspects of students (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Teacher participants also mentioned the desire to support students more. However, they were unable to do so due to time constraints, being unaware of how to help, or being afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. Therefore, teacher participants who wanted to further support students, and felt that it was encompassed within their role, were unable to do so. This is likely the result of a lack of mental health training for teachers, as well as the stigmatisation of mental health and the negative connotations associated with it (Bowers et al., 2013). This suggests the importance of increased and effective mental health training for educators and implies the likelihood of the advancement of mental health support for students in schools, as emphasised by findings in Yamaguchi et al. (2018) and Ohrt et al. (2020). As a teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand, having recently completed my initial teacher education, I do not feel as though I have received adequate mental health training to support the needs of my students. This brings into question whether experienced and beginning teachers across Aotearoa feel as though they have received sufficient mental health training. As discussed in the recommendations section, I feel as though further training and support is required for me to feel confident in supporting my students' mental health. Further research may also highlight the need for more robust mental health training for many teachers in Aotearoa.

The implications above indicate a need for more effective mental health training, to provide teachers with the skills and capability of supporting students' mental health. An increase in the mental health literacy of teachers would likely transfer to an increase in the mental health literacy of students. This is likely to occur through open discussions around mental health, both proactively and reactively, as well as the destigmatisation of mental health among both adolescents and adults.

Recommendations

Both the implications of the findings of this literature review, and the selected articles themselves, provide grounds for future recommendations. This includes recommendations towards teacher education and training.

The findings of this literature review clearly show that many teacher participants lack confidence when addressing the mental health issues of their students. This is indicative of a lack of mental health training and education in both initial teacher education and ongoing professional development. This highlights the need for more robust and practical training to better equip teachers in supporting students' mental health, considering the prevalence of students experiencing mental health issues (Ohrt et al., 2020). An increase in mental health training is likely to provide more resources for teachers and their students, as well as increased mental health literacy. Additional training considerations could include the use of field professionals contextualising adolescent mental health in a school and classroom setting, as well as practical skills and activities, and follow-up training (Ohrt et al., 2020).

It is likely that these recommendations mentioned will require future research as outlined in the following section.

Future research

This literature review has highlighted the need for further research to better understand the role of teachers and schools in supporting students' mental health and how to better prepare teachers to support students. In order to provide more effective and informative mental health training to teachers, it would be beneficial if secondary students could provide insight directly into what they want in terms of support from their teachers and schools. This would provide a more holistic foundation for mental health training and is likely to provide teachers with more confidence. Teachers and policymakers may also benefit from additional research into the different roles that teachers hold within schools to provide a more transparent role description for teachers, and potentially distribute their responsibilities among other or additional staff. This could prevent teachers from feeling as though they are taking on more than they have the capacity for and the identified role conflict.

As a New Zealand secondary science teacher, I would also recommend further research into the perception and preparedness of New Zealand teachers specifically regarding the mental health needs of students in Aotearoa. While the findings of this review are relevant globally, localised research would provide specific and useful information for teachers supporting the mental health of students at school.

Conclusion

Many teachers understand the role they play in supporting students' mental health; however, they feel inadequately prepared to do so. This perspective is reported in the 13 research articles that this literature review has analysed and is likely to be reported by many secondary teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand as well. The rise in the expectations and responsibilities of teachers, a lack of time, and insufficient training prevents teachers from being able to effectively support students' mental health needs. Both teachers and students are likely to benefit from the implementation of more robust and prioritised mental health training. This training will enable teachers to better support their students and work alongside them to decrease the stigma associated with mental health and promote positive mental health. To design the training required, further empirical research as outlined above is required. This will provide insight into the support students want from their teachers and schools. Student voice and perspectives

are missing in the current literature and are needed to shape the insights of researchers and the skills and capabilities of teachers.

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