

# Riroriro Pilot Evaluation

## Outcomes Summary Report

A transition model for new entrants with dysregulated classroom behaviours



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## Conflict of Interest Declaration

Presbyterian Support Northern was a stakeholder and financial contributor to the Riroriro pilot.

## References

A full reference list can be found in the Riroriro Full Evaluation Report located on the PSN website:  
[psn.org.nz](http://psn.org.nz)

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# Trauma and the School Environment

As a single event or repeated pattern, trauma refers to situations which directly threaten one's life or those of others and overwhelms one's resources to cope. Examples of trauma include experiencing of or witnessing abuse (physical, sexual, emotional) or neglect (Herman, 2015). There is a wealth of research concerning the negative impact of childhood trauma on the physical, behavioural, cognitive, social, and emotional functioning of children (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010).

The connection between trauma and difficult classroom behaviours is well established in psychological and neurological literature. The effects of trauma make it difficult for children to engage meaningfully in the classroom, which can lead to poor academic performance and poor relations with peers and staff (Brunzell et al, 2015). The long-term impacts of historic or ongoing trauma for students in an educational environment can include truancy, disengagement, suspensions, expulsions and in some cases dropout from the education system altogether (National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee, 2008).

Despite the adverse effects that trauma can have on a child's ability to meaningfully engage in a mainstream environment, there is good reason to believe that children who have experienced trauma can be taught to regulate their emotions and form healthy and meaningful attachments, making mainstream engagement possible. Research in the field of neuroscience has demonstrated that the brain has "plasticity" and can be trained or re-trained to self-regulate emotions and behaviours (Smith, 2016; CWIG, 2011).



# Riroriro: A Transition Model

Fruitvale Primary School in partnership with Presbyterian Support Northern has developed and piloted Riroriro: a response to the significant needs of a growing cohort of children with extremely dysregulated classroom behaviours – often resulting from sustained exposure to traumatic, high-stress and high-deprivation environments from pre-birth to school age. The pilot brought together classroom interventions, teacher training, therapy, counselling and wrap around support to build each child's capability and readiness to transition successfully into the mainstream classroom.

Fruitvale School constructed a purpose-built classroom on the school site for Riroriro and this was staffed by an experienced teacher from the junior school. The seven target students were removed from their home-classrooms and placed in the Riroriro classroom full-time with the intention of slowly transitioning them back into their mainstream classrooms as their skills and capacities improved.

Initial teaching emphasis was placed on supporting the target children's introduction to Riroriro, providing consistency and affection, and developing basic social awareness. A strong emphasis was also placed on developing clear, consistent language strategies to help support behaviour. As the target children became more comfortable in the Riroriro environment, the teacher's role expanded to intentional activities to develop the ability to self-regulate, including; cognitive skills, social skills, fine motor skills and gross motor skills – before also adding activities to support foundation level academic skills.

Presbyterian Support Northern provided a full-time therapist on-site for the duration of the pilot. The children attended multiple one-hour sessions with the therapist each week. The therapist also provided advice and guidance, particularly around trauma and attachment, to the Riroriro teacher as well as other staff members within the school.

The transition of the children from Riroriro back into their home classrooms was flexible and took place in steps spaced out over the year.





# The Evaluation

A series of one-hour interviews were held with key informants who were involved in the Riroriro pilot including the Riroriro teacher, Fruitvale senior leadership, Fruitvale mainstream teachers and relevant PSN stakeholders such as the therapist and site manager. In addition to qualitative interviews, this evaluation also considered a series of diary entries written by the Riroriro teacher throughout the pilot period.

This summary report describes the outcomes of the Riroriro pilot, specifically in relation to its goals of preparing the target group of children with the emotional regulation and interpersonal skills needed to participate meaningfully in the mainstream environment. There were seven children initially placed in the unit, however one child changed schools during the pilot and is therefore not included in the scope of this evaluation.

Of the six children that took part in the Riroriro intervention, all demonstrated an improvement in emotional regulation and interpersonal skills. Five of the six children were able to use these skills to successfully transition back into their mainstream classrooms.

The full-report, which includes an evaluation of the pilots success factors and recommended improvements is available on the Presbyterian Support Northern website.



# Emotional Regulation

## Prior to Riroriro

Prior to Riroriro all six target children were identified as being unable to participate meaningfully in the mainstream educational environment. The key cause that staff identified was the target children's issues with emotional regulation. Emotional regulation refers to a child's ability to regulate their emotions and behaviours in accordance with the demands of a situation. It is a set of skills that enables children, as they mature, to direct their behaviour toward a goal despite the unpredictability of the world and their own feelings.

Prior to the Riroriro pilot the target children displayed dysregulation in emotional experiences, such as short tempers, impulsivity and dissociation. This presented in different ways among the target children, but often manifested in aggressive or violent behaviour toward others, including young peers. A beginner teacher recounted an example from her first year teaching:

*I came in [...] as a beginning teacher [...] and we had a school outing and we went to the zoo. And there was [my student] [...] he couldn't express himself and he was so young that there was a situation in the middle of the zoo with all the parents. He just turned around, and I've never seen anything like it. He just started — for want of a better word — hitting like a man. A little boy. And it was just terrifying being in front of the parents and seeing how frustrated he was. And that situation where he just couldn't manage himself.*

Violent outbursts toward peers could be hard to predict with the triggers often being unusual and difficult to identify:

*[Child] could be explosive and could be very violent — randomly — and against certain characters in the class. He'd leap across the room and try to take [them] out and it will be because "I didn't like the way his lips looked". You know, strange sort of stuff like that.*

The children were not only violent toward their peers. A member of teaching staff recounted a time when a fellow teacher became the target of a violent outburst:

*[...] One time, I remember when he was in with [another teacher] he wouldn't sit down and nearly pushed [her] through the glass cabinet. So that's how strong he [could] get when he's in his rage.*

Emotional regulation problems were not always violent. Often they would result from an inability to identify, communicate and effectively process emotional experiences. This could result in the children becoming disproportionately sad, angry or withdrawn when an experience became overwhelming for them:

*When [child] flipped his lid or went into his trance he would start to go black in the eyes [...] and you see it switch and he gets a look about him. Then he will start hissing. And then he will lie down on the ground and you have to move all the furniture away from him because he goes round on his side in circles. And he would kick and — not punch — but just move his arms and he'd just be hissing that whole time.*



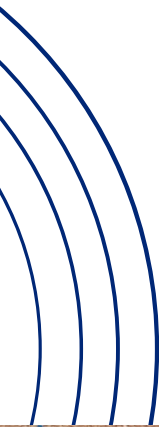
*[Child] would — if things didn't go his way no matter how big or how small — he would scream and shout and run away and lock himself away. The other thing that he would do would be to hide into a little ball and scream and shout and carry on and make lots of noise.*

When experiences became overwhelming for some of the other target children they would remove themselves from the situation, often hiding under desks or leaving the learning environment:

*He would hide under the tables if he could. Or he would go up and hide in the little tunnel if he got angry or frustrated.*



*I remember meeting [one child], and this kid like if you said boo, he would be under a table, you know?*





## During & After Riroriro

Riroriro primarily focused on these challenges with emotional regulation. A key issue was the children's challenges identifying their emotions in order to respond appropriately to situations that made them feel sad, upset, or angry. If the children could be taught to identify and label their own emotions then they would be better prepared to respond in a proportionate and socially acceptable way. The majority of teaching staff spoke about the children's ability to identify and verbalise emotions in the mainstream classroom following their time in Riroriro:

*He's willing to stand up for himself and tell someone when they're doing stuff that he doesn't like, but it's not just a "NO" anymore. It's "oh, you're making me feel so and so", "you're making me feel frustrated", or like "my brain's getting hot". He just expresses himself so much more.*



*I definitely saw a growing confidence, especially in verbalising. [The Riroriro teacher] was really good at helping them verbalise and identify their feelings and their thoughts so that they could actually speak them out loud. With their increased ability to be able to verbalise and express their feelings, I noticed a decrease in aggressive behaviours and the level of frustration was able to be diminished.*

The Riroriro teacher, in her diary entries, spoke about how the children's ability to identify emotions after having spent some time in the Riroriro unit helped them make choices about how they reacted in stressful or upsetting situations. The children are now able to take the time to think about the responses available to them and use tools such as breathing or timeout to calm themselves down if their immediate response is undesirable (e.g. violence, anger, or withdrawal):

*Diary Entry: [Child] said he was so excited that he wanted to punch his tower over but didn't want it to break so he would just breathe instead.*



*Diary Entry: The first day he told me he was scared he was a bit funny in the morning and so I sat close to him and we played. Then he asked me if I had ever seen Freddy Fright Night — or something like that — I had never heard of it. He said it was scary and he felt scared. I asked him what he wanted to do and he said lie down and breathe. This was huge. He lay down on the floor on his back with his eyes closed and held my hands and began breathing. He did ten really big deep breaths with his eyes closed then he opened then, did five deep breaths, let go of hands, sat up and said I feel better now. Can we do a puzzle?*



*Diary Entry: He has gone from throwing tantrums and sulking about everything — and I mean everything — to taking deep breaths when things don't go his way [...]. He is now able to tell me he is angry and instead of running away to the playground and climbing up the slide he will stand in front of me with his head down and shout “I am angry”.*

The ability to take time and consider possible reactions in a stressful or upsetting situation transferred back into the mainstream classroom setting as well. A number of the target children’s current mainstream teachers talked about the ways that the boys were moderating their behaviours so that they were appropriate for the classroom setting, often using techniques that they had learnt in Riroriro such as breathing:

*So it used to look like... throw yourself on the ground, rip up your work... sometimes hit. That really hasn't happened in our class luckily. But I know that had happened in the past. [...] So now he tries to find resolution, or a way out of the situation before reacting. So there's a think time now. And there's a processing time of emotions, which has never been there before.*



*And he had learned to remove himself from the classroom, to go walk it off. Or to go sit in a corner quietly by himself until he had calmed down. I know that you learned that in Riroriro. Those were specific strategies that they worked on with their breathing. How to calm down how to move away from the problem. And I watched them do it [...].*

In addition to being able to avoid meltdowns and complete withdrawals, the tendency toward violence in emotionally heightened or tense situations has now been reduced or eliminated. The principal reflected on the journey of one child, who he described as being the “most violent” of the six target children:

*They're feeling safe enough to actually make choices. So that's one thing. That's one level. Then out of the range of choices they have, they make a good choice. So I guess I always come back to [child] because he was the worst of them all. He was the one that was going to be the murderer [as described by his guardian]. [...] He didn't give a s\*\*t about anybody or anything. Particularly if he was upset. His brain went offline. So now if he gets into a situation where another child is upsetting him, even hitting him, he will not hit back. I haven't seen him hit back. He's got enough self-control to understand that this other child is out of control and he's not.*

# Interpersonal Skills

## Prior to Riroriro

The target group of children also exhibited under-developed interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills are ways of dealing with others that create healthy and positive interactions. Children who have strong interpersonal skills can communicate clearly, calmly, and respectfully. They show consideration for the feelings and the interests of their peers.

For the target children, their inability to regulate their emotions would often produce disproportionate reactions to situations, leaving no time to consider subtler emotions such as empathy or remorse. As a result the children were often reluctant to take responsibility for situations or apologise when they were at fault:


*Yeah, [prior to the Riroriro pilot] you just knew, you know that sort reluctance to say sorry the non-eye contact and [you] really had to get them to do those reconciliation type moves. [...] Apologies and [...] that kind of thing [were] really hard because for them [...] they've gone through it they don't want to relive it again. To them they're just reliving it again having to show remorse. But in our society, that's what we expect when somebody does something wrong to you. You expect them to come back and be apologetic and be humble.*

Several members of staff described the negative interpersonal skills that a number of the children would deploy with their peers, using tactics such as intimidation and manipulation to control social situations:

*I think it was very evident at that time that [child] liked to control and manipulated and he could do that. Yeah, you know, they were like his boys and he could get them do whatever he wanted them to do.*







.....

*He also used a lot of intimidation. He used a lot of control and he would use his body very subtly to annoy the kids, and he wasn't scared of anyone, all the other boys were scared of [another child]. [Child] wasn't. He was like come on let's take it on. Yeah, what? You want it? I'll give it!*

.....

*Diary Entry: At some stage during the week [some of the target children] actually told me that they were very frightened of [target child]. They then went on to say that he was mean, he says bad words to them in the playground, he bossed them about, one of them even said that he made him feel nervous and made his tummy feel funny.*

The target group were described as struggling to interact positively with other children, particularly during play. Their inability to regulate their emotions made it difficult for them to focus on a single play activity for an extended period of time on their own, let alone negotiate play with other children.

*He didn't know how to play with people, but he didn't know how to play with stuff either. Everything he did was just zoom crash zoom, crash, zoom crash. So quite [...] disruptive. Groups of other children that are making stuff he didn't know how to play alongside and how to build things and all that sort of thing.*

.....

*So when they first started [in Riroriro], they would either absolutely fight or play alongside each other, they never played with each other. So the more I watched them, I was like, these kids can't even play on their own, let alone alongside or with each other.*

An inability to play alongside other children and forge positive peer relationships was observed by teachers on the playground as well. A number of staff members spoke about the way that the children's negative behaviours ostracised them from the other children on the playground:

*[Child] never had friends, never had someone that he could call a friend, he would walk around the playground by himself every lunchtime. And he would see things that would upset him and lash out [...] and then get in trouble and have really negative relationships with people because he had no positive [interactions] with them.*

## During & After Riroriro

Developing a skillset to support positive interpersonal interactions was a key focus of the Riroriro programme. Prior to Riroriro the target children had difficulty with interpersonal skills, for example, the ability to admit fault and apologise during or after conflicts. A number of teachers talked about the children's ability to admit fault and apologise in their mainstream environments, a skill that was almost impossible for them prior to Riroriro:

*Diary Entry: I noticed today that [Riroriro Child] was so much more engaged in the process of working out a squabble in the playground with [Mainstream Child]. When I asked him about what went down he talked about having the ball taken from him and then getting into a fight. He started crying with tears streaming down his cheeks. He was comfortable with this and wiped them away when he felt calmer. I just listened and mirrored as best I could and at the end said "how about we talk to [mainstream child] about this and work it out". He was happy to do this and entered into the conversation well and listened and eventually said sorry recognising that he was part of the problem.*



*You know, but then we noticed that if a reliever went in then his behaviour went straight back to "I don't trust you, I don't know you". He knew that when I came back the next day, the reliever was going to write me a note and I'd know what happened. [...] This one time I got back the next morning, and this was on my table [gestures to drawing] and he said to me, could you please give it to [reliever teacher]? So that was you have to own a behaviour. And you have to come up with a strategy to be able to deal with it.*



Note from target student to his reliever teacher

In addition to the new skill of slowing down and considering fault in an emotionally heightened situation, teaching staff reported that the children were, after Riroriro, displaying empathy and concern for the wellbeing of other students:

*Diary Entry: There was one nice moment when [child one] hit [child two] on the face with one of the disks they sit on because he “didn’t like him” and all the boys turned away from [child one] and made [child two] feel better. They got him an icepack from the fridge, they rubbed his back, and they got tissues for his tears and sat with him until he was okay. It was really nice to see how much they cared for each other and they sent a strong message to [child one] that it wasn’t okay to do that to [child two]. They even asked him why he did it, scowled at him and let him know it wasn’t very nice.*



*It was [the Riroriro boys] that were also very supportive of [the children in our mainstream classroom]. Because they’re very caring, the two of them, they’re quite sensitive boys and they so wanted to be part of us that often they would take the initiative and if someone was upset, they’d be the ones with their arms around them saying ...you know... “Are you okay?”*

During their time in Riroriro, the children built strong and supportive interpersonal relationships amongst themselves, which lasted through their transition into the mainstream environment. Most of the boys used the interpersonal skills that they learnt in Riroriro to form bonds and relationships with the children outside of the programme as well:

*In the playground, they still gravitated instantly to each other. [Two of the children] would always go off together. And often when I was on duty, I’d look around and they’d always be playing together. Or [one] would be doing his sport on the court and [the other] might be doing something else, but it was nearly always with another Riroriro boy. So they are super tight.*



*And at that stage, the boys in the playground started to not play together quite so much. And they started to make friends with the kids in the class. And I think they got that extra feeling of belonging.*





*And now I see him out there, running around with other kids. Sometimes it's sort of his brother. Sometimes it's with people in the class. Just before we went into lockdown, [he] said something we never thought he would say, he went 'Oh [mainstream child] is my friend', and it was just like, oh my god did I hear that right. And he started making friendships and he started setting boundaries with people and talking to people. And he has his core people that he really loves and cares about. But he can play with anyone in the classroom now. I never would have expected that from him before.*

The target children are now capable of using interpersonal skills to build and maintain positive relationships. Beyond this, other children in the school are beginning to reciprocate, not because they have been coached or told to treat the boys any differently but because they have a genuine interest in spending time with the target children. This was demonstrated through two of the children's interactions with girls in their classrooms.

*Well, [one of the boys] found himself a girlfriend after about one week. Oh, that lasted the whole the rest of the year. We were amazed. We sort of waited for it to die down but it didn't. He was thrilled to be in there with her.*



*And to just see [another Riroriro child] be able to make friendships and decide on relationships and make connections is just so wonderful. And he loves it. One of the girls brought in a necklace for him that she had made at home and you see it just affected his soul. Yeah. And it just feels so... it's so wonderful to be around them. He adds a lot of light to that classroom.*



# Academic Performance

## Prior to Riroriro

Prior to the Riroriro pilot, all of the children were in mainstream classes attempting to keep up with the same curriculum and academic activities that the other children engaged in. The academic level of the children was tested upon entering the unit, as the Riroriro teacher recalls:

*I did a lot of testing on a Barbara Bran program, which is building blocks to literacy. And when I did the testing, I realised that they were — so that's for three to five year olds — and they were below that.*

The target children's lack of emotional regulation abilities paired with their poor interpersonal skills made it extremely difficult for them to sit for long periods of time or engage in tasks demanding sustained mental effort, which meant that they found it very difficult to keep up academically:

*They were the kids that... didn't engage on the mat at all [and] they were distracting to everybody else around them. They couldn't just sit and gaze out the window like some kids might and just maybe listen with half an ear. They had to be poking and fiddling and [...] just really doing something to annoy. And [...] it was because they were disengaged. They couldn't concentrate, they couldn't hold focus.*



A number of teachers acknowledged that, without first working on social and emotional skills that the children lacked, there could not have been any academic progress:

*Really it was vital to sort out the social and emotional first, because without that you weren't going to get anything academic.*



*If [...] you just carried on trying to bang away at the academics, they would have just gotten lost and lost all spark and interest in school anyway because they weren't able or ready for it.*

## **During & After Riroriro**

Many of the Fruitvale staff members interviewed for this evaluation acknowledged that of the six target children, five were “not where they should be academically”. For some of the children in the unit, learning difficulties such as ADHD and ASD still make it very difficult to concentrate on and/or retain information they learn in the classroom. Although the children’s progress has been immensely improved by the work done in the Riroriro unit, they continue to face challenges with mainstream academic achievement:

*So this is still really, really affected by his ADHD, he's still currently unmedicated. And [...] that really hinders his ability to maintain things in the academic sphere. But when he is focused, and when he has control over his ADHD, he's able to produce work that I never would have expected from him at the start of the year. And I never would have expected from him full stop when he arrived. So he's still quite far behind in his academics. [...]But he's tracking better than I was expecting him to track. [...] He functions relatively well in what is an environment that is far above his academic ability, and he copes in that classroom now and really thrives.*





Many of the teaching staff talked about celebrating small victories for the children. They were fully aware that the children were not going to re-enter their mainstream classrooms perfectly primed to learn and retain information. The teachers were very considerate and measured in talking about the children's achievements (such as using punctuation and attending reading recovery):

*Diary Entry: [During Riroriro] when we did a writing sample they were able to write a sentence with a full stop! It was the first time in a long time I actually felt really proud of the work I am doing with them. I need to stop measuring the progress I am making with them academically, and look at how far they have come socially and to be classroom ready ... This is the part that is hard to measure so I guess that's why I measure the progress through academics.*



*Academically we have now got to a stage where [child] can attend Reading Recovery. There is no way that he could have done that before. He just never would have concentrated or built a relationship, I think, because the reading recovery teacher is pretty firm.*



*So in terms of academics, I say that we got them all from being pre-kindy to being curriculum ready. And to, this year, starting to work with level one of the curriculum.*

Despite most of the children being behind academically, the teaching staff were hopeful that the students' stronger emotional regulation and interpersonal skills (which had led to better engagement) would allow them to remain engaged in classroom activities going forward. Prior to the Riroriro intervention, the students spent very little time in the classrooms because of upsets and disengagement:

*[...] just being able to function in a classroom setting and follow the routines and structures of the day and engage with the program alongside everybody else has been really amazing. [...] they're actually able to access the curriculum. Before Riroriro they weren't even able to access the curriculum.*



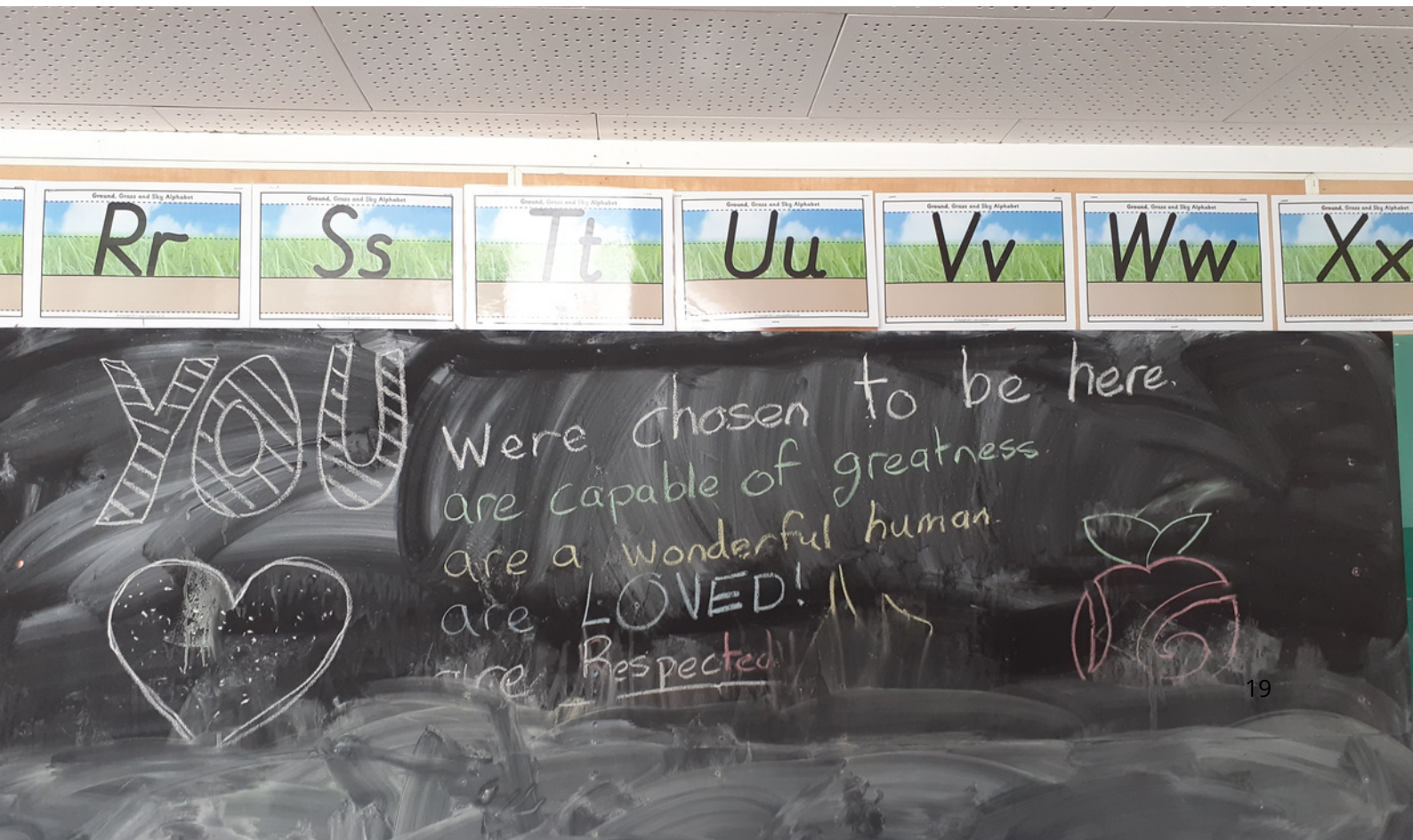
*[...] There's something to say about just being in the classroom environment – it's a lot better than being out of the classroom environment. Because even if you're not learning academically, you're still learning.*

One of the Riroriro children is currently considered to be performing above where he 'should' be academically. The teaching staff noted that he is a naturally bright child, but that prior to Riroriro he was not engaged in classes and was considered to be the most violent of all six of the target children:

*He's a bright kid. So he was [...] able to fit into the program really quickly.*



*[Child] is above where he should be. So that's interesting to me. Because he's probably the one that had the worst journey in terms of the abuse that he's suffered.*



# Unintended Outcomes

## Calmer School, Calmer Playground

The impact of the Riroriro pilot reached beyond the target children. A number of teaching staff talked about the change in the “vibe” or “feeling” of the school now that the target children have been through the Riroriro intervention:

*You can feel the change in the playground. This year, the playground is just so much calmer than it ever has been before. And I think it's because the other kids know that there aren't ticking time bombs out there.*



*I think [...] it settled 150 children. [...] for example, none of the children trusted [a Riroriro child], they were all so scared of him. He was unpredictable. Whereas now he's out there. He's playing games, he's actually got friends. And I think a bit of the same for the teachers, like the kids aren't as unpredictable as what they were [...] so they're not on high alert all the time about the behaviour. They're probably a little bit more settled.*

The teachers also talked about the impact on their classrooms now that the children have been through the Riroriro pilot:

*Those kids being part of the class [...] not interrupting the other children's learning. The teachers have really benefited too by the fact that those kids now are not the bane of their lives [...] maybe they're still difficult kids to handle. But they're not the kids that they were. It's now [...] a much more peaceful class, [...] so all duties are much easier.*

Teachers also talked about the stress that having the target children in their classrooms prior to Riroriro caused for themselves and their colleagues. A number of teachers mentioned giving consideration to resigning. Following the intervention, they feel better equipped to deal with the —now manageable— challenge of having the target children in their classrooms.

*I think everyone knew it was going to be hard. But it would have been way harder had they just been allowed to continue in the original classes. I don't know how many people would have resigned [...] it wasn't working, them staying in their original classes.*





*I don't know how I would have coped if I'd had them [prior to Riroriro]. I might have resigned. That's the reality. [...] it was so hard having them [after Riroriro] anyway. And that was slowly integrating them.*



*But without Riro, I think I wouldn't have grown from those challenges because they would have just been too difficult. And so it enabled me [...] to actually learn from those kids as opposed to survive those kids. You never want to feel like you're just surviving your class. You want to be thriving in [it].*

## **Growth in Teachers & Practice**

A positive outcome beyond the planned scope of the Riroriro pilot was the growth that the teachers experienced in themselves and their teaching practices. A number of teaching staff talked about how the programme forced them to consider their own pedagogy and approach to children that were challenging in the classroom. A number of teachers discussed the difficulty of adjusting to having the target children back in their classes, and how they had to rise to the challenge and adapt their approaches:

*I was stretched to my limits [when the boys first transitioned from Riroriro into my classroom]. Certainly, for any other students that I have in the future, I learned a whole load of strategies: things that worked and didn't work.*



*[...] the impact it had on the wider teacher group [...] it took away all the anxiety and the challenge around meeting that child's needs versus the needs of others. They were able to lift their practice to how they wanted to be operating. It grew our own capacity and capabilities across the school, not just [the Riroriro teacher's].*



*This was [the] children's first... [...] foray into school life and you want it to be really positive and enjoyable. To have tricky characters in your class just makes it so much harder and more stressful. So having ideas [and] having a better understanding about those kids and what's behind behaviour is definitely helpful. You stop thinking about what they're doing as "they're being naughty", and you can start thinking about, "they're doing this because they don't know", "they're doing this because they don't understand", "they haven't had respect modelled to them". [...] it changes the way that you approach the behaviour.*

## Pride in Colleagues & School

Something that was clear through the interviews was that the Riroriro pilot served to strengthen the ties between the teaching staff, who felt proud of each other for the work that they had done to make it possible. Riroriro was a significant undertaking for the teachers and senior management of the school and a number of staff members expressed their admiration and respect for colleagues who had worked hard to make the programme a success for the target group of children:

*[...] each year we do a little presentation, every teacher does, about something [...] we were focused on for the year or whatever. Our own choice. There was another teacher in particular who did her thing on her student as well. And it was just so moving and inspiring and I kind of thought — now I feel emotional — I kind of want to be like her. So I guess there's almost mentoring between the teachers as well [...] she was incredible and she and her partner [...] went as far as supporting that child in the weekends for his sports games. [...] that's the kind of people that have put their heart and soul into those children, I guess. And into the programme.*

.....

*So I suppose I would have benefitted from the discussions that we had and watching [the Riroriro teacher's] growth and confidence in herself as a teacher. She went from somebody, I think, that didn't have a lot of belief in herself. [...] And I think she [...] got recognised [...] for the qualities and the teacher that she is and person that she is. [...] Seeing her growth, and [...] what she did for those boys. [...] it just fills me with pride. So I think I just get that wonderful feeling that I was lucky enough to work alongside somebody and watch somebody grow these children to where they are now. And to know that she has changed their trajectory in life. She really has changed it.*



A number of staff also talked about feeling proud to be part of a school that seeks its own solutions to problems. The pride and respect that the teachers expressed has no doubt benefitted the overall culture of the school with teachers feeling a connection to their workplace and a pride in the work that their school does:

*I love that we... we don't look at those kids and go... you know, we don't want you here. We don't expel them [...] I love that we're doing something about the issues that we've had and that we're seeing.*



*Well, I think that in a school, you could only probably do a programme like that successfully if you had passionate teachers who are committed to seeing [it] through.[...] If you didn't it wouldn't work, because everybody kind of has to be part of it. [...] that's the kind of school I want to be at for that reason. To me, students should always be first and not every school is like that. So that's what I see demonstrated here.*





# Conclusion

The full evaluation of the Riroriro pilot has found the programme has succeeded in meeting both its short-term and medium-term outcomes. The target group of children, while in the Riroriro classroom, learned the skills necessary to regulate their emotions, form healthy interpersonal relationships, and ultimately, for five of the six target children, be ready to move into the mainstream educational environment. Their newly-developed skills have been demonstrated both within Riroriro and in mainstream classes.

The trauma these children have experienced will make it difficult for many of them to ever operate at the 'expected level' of academic achievement for their age. This challenge is amplified by the learning disabilities and the complex home-lives that continue for several Riroriro target children. However, this pilot has demonstrated the positive impact a school can have on the educational future of children who have and do experience these challenges, and illustrated ways that the mainstream education system can be made more accessible for children facing problems with integrating into the learning environment.

The benefits of a programme like Riroriro reach further than just the children involved directly in the unit. The teachers and Fruitvale School as a whole have benefited from the programme. The school has built and demonstrated its capacity to follow through with innovative solutions, and has invested in its people to create change and inspire teachers to seek the best possible outcomes for their students. The innovativeness and aroha exemplified by the Riroriro pilot has given Fruitvale's teaching staff a sense of pride in their place of work and in the work they do, and this will have flow-on effects for the culture of the school as a whole.

The issue Fruitvale School took on with the Riroriro pilot is not unique to Fruitvale. Extreme statistics around childhood trauma and abuse are the norm across New Zealand. New Zealand schools are seeing high numbers of children entering the mainstream education system having had experienced extreme trauma. These children may not have the emotional regulation, interpersonal or academic skills needed to engage meaningfully in a mainstream environment and therefore innovative and creative ways of supporting these children are needed to avoid adverse outcomes for these children. The Riroriro classroom has been shown to be effective at helping children gain and maintain these skills one year after the intervention.

The Full Evaluation Report includes a review of the success factors of the project and recommendations for improving the model. The full Evaluation report can be accessed through the Presbyterian Support Northern Website.

