

Riroriro Pilot Evaluation Full 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.

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About Presbyterian Support Northern

At Presbyterian Support Northern we aim to help create a better life and support everyone, especially those who are most vulnerable. We are a charitable social services provider that's brought practical, compassionate support to New Zealanders and their communities for more than 130 years. With over 1000 staff in 25 service centres, we work with communities right across the upper North Island, from Turangi to Whangarei. We partner with Presbyterian parishes, schools and other groups to find ways to enhance the lives of individuals and whole communities, regardless of age, race, or beliefs.

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Abstract

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 programme brings 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.

This report evaluates the effectiveness of the Riroriro pilot programme at supporting the target group of children in developing readiness to transition into mainstream classrooms as well as capturing lessons learned and identifying ways in which the operation and targeting of the programme can be improved. A series of one-hour interviews were held with key informants who were involved in the Riroriro project. In addition to the qualitative interviews, this evaluation also considered a series of diary entries written by the Riroriro teacher throughout the pilot period.

The key findings from the qualitative analysis of this data have been presented in this report. 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. One of the six children changed schools prior to the evaluation taking place, but was not as successful in transitioning prior to this occurring.

The factors that contributed to Riroriro successfully achieving its intended outcomes have been explored in the report. These include, among other things, buy-in and support that was attained from the entire school community, utilisation of a trauma-informed theoretical framework and collaboration with a trained and experienced therapeutic specialist. This evaluation has also touched on a number of recommendations for future iterations of the Riroriro model within Fruitvale School as well as other schools looking to implement this model in their own education environments.

New Zealand schools are seeing high numbers of children entering the mainstream education system having 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 in order to avoid adverse outcomes for these children. The Riroriro model has been shown to be effective at helping children gain and maintain these skills one year after the intervention.

A Short Literature Review

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 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). Chronic abuse and/or neglect in childhood impacts, among other things, a child's cognitive abilities, language skills, impulse control, attention span and sense of self-identity (McLean, 2016; Downey, 2007; Cross et al, 2017).

The long-term outlook for children who have experienced severe trauma in their formative years is far more likely to be marred with negative health and social outcomes such as neuropsychiatric problems, mental health problems and dissociation. Traumatic experiences in childhood have been linked to the increased likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system, drug and alcohol use, antisocial and high-risk behaviours (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; Twardosz & Lutzker, 2009; Price-Robertson, Higgins, & Vassallo, 2013).

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 dropping out 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).

Understanding triggers, identifying responses and mitigating stress levels are paramount to helping children learn to regulate their emotions and impulses (Smith, 2016; Perry, 2006). Teachers working with these children must be able to understand the effects of trauma on children's education and be flexible in developing their teaching practices to help them (Downey, 2007, see also: Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; Chen, Miller, Kobor, & Cole, 2011; Downey, 2007).

Oversight from a mental health professional can aide in this understanding of trauma and its effects in the classroom. Additionally, treatment from a mental health professional who has training and experience working with traumatised children can reduce child traumatic stress and minimise the physical, social and emotional issues that these children face (National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee).

In her paper addressing design, delivery and evaluation of early interventions for children exposed to acute trauma, Nancy Kassam-Adams describes the need to have a firm theoretical grounding that guides the design of trauma-intervention components. Riroriro has been developed utilising a trauma-informed framework.

Riroriro: a Transition Model

The Riroriro pilot brought together classroom interventions, teacher training, therapy and wraparound support to build each child's capability and readiness to transition successfully into the mainstream classroom. Six children, all boys, were removed from their home classrooms and placed in the Riroriro classroom during the pilot. This group is referenced throughout this evaluation as the "target group", "target children" or individually as "target child". The target children remained on the roll of their original, mainstream classrooms (their "home rooms") because Riroriro was a transitional support rather than a permanent classroom – the goal of the programme was that the target children would eventually return to mainstream classes.

The target children who were placed in the Riroriro classroom all displayed dysregulated behaviours. Each of the six children were known to have experienced trauma at some stage in their lives, including but not limited to either witnessing or having experienced abuse. Many of these children were, at the time of the pilot, living with extended family rather than their parents. It is important to note that beyond the realms of the pilot and the school, the lived reality for some of these children at home was still complex and unstable.

Fruitvale School constructed a purpose-built classroom on the school site for Riroriro. The Riroriro classroom was 30m² and opened onto a small covered outdoor play area of approximately 64m². The classroom accommodates approximately seven students, plus a teacher and teacher-aide, and is equipped with a small kitchen, couch, table, book shelf and a variety of learning resources. To enable learning through play and sensory play, the Riroriro classroom contains some equipment more commonly found in ECE environments (including water troughs and sand trays for messy play), with a broad range of toys/activities for children aged between 1 – 5 years of age.

Riroriro was staffed by an experienced teacher from the junior school. Initial teaching emphasis was placed on supporting the target children's introduction to Riroriro, providing consistency and affection, and developing basic social awareness – including mirroring and describing their behaviours, setting expectations and boundaries. 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. The teacher also played a central role in communicating with whānau, external support agencies, and home room teachers (especially where transitions are concerned), senior management team, the board and other Fruitvale staff. The Riroriro teacher was supported by a teacher aide whose roles included; assisting with classroom activities and assisting with transitions from Riroriro to home rooms.

All teaching and senior management staff involved in the Riroriro project were sent on workshops and professional development training and encouraged to read literature and books in this area to expand their knowledge around trauma-informed practice and attachment theory. In the playroom, the Riroriro teacher deployed a number of tools common in the field such as mirroring behaviours, role play, maintaining routines, Kichido mindfulness and breathing activities and implementing safe spaces such as 'caves'. These tools were also used to aid transitions back into mainstream classrooms.

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

primarily used 'play therapy' modality, which is a psychotherapeutic approach primarily used to help children ages 3 to 12 explore their lives and freely express thoughts and emotions through play. The therapist provided advice and guidance, particularly around trauma and attachment, to the Riroriro teacher as well as other staff members within the school. In addition to this, the school sought out a Research and Practice Interpreter - Gary Simpson from the Workplace Wellbeing Institute - who provided additional therapeutic supervision, guidance and advice.

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

Term	Transition
Term Four, 2018	Students full-time in the Riroriro classroom.
Term One, 2019	Students begin to attend home rooms on Fridays.
Term Two, 2019	Students begin to attend home rooms on Thursdays and Fridays.
Term Three, 2019	Students initially attend home rooms each morning of the week from 9am - 11am, and then progress to attending full days, but remaining in Riroriro on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday's from 2pm – 3pm.

The Evaluation

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this evaluation was to:

1. Determine the effectiveness of the Riroriro pilot programme at supporting the target group of children in developing readiness to transition into mainstream classrooms.
2. Capture lessons learned and identify ways in which the operation and targeting of the programme can be improved.

The evaluation covers the 'pilot period' which ran from the beginning of Term Four 2018 to the end of Term Three 2019. The evaluation explored the short-term outcomes (students prepared to enter mainstream classrooms) as well as the medium-term outcomes (students are able to use their skills to engage in mainstream classrooms) by capturing the experiences of teaching staff now that the Riroriro pilot is complete and the target children have fully transitioned into mainstream environments. For an overview of pilot outcomes, see *Attachment Two: Logic Model*.

The evaluation considers all four aspects of the Riroriro programme: the classroom unit, the role of the therapeutic specialist, the role of the mainstream teachers and teacher aides. The evaluation focuses on the six students who were placed in the Riroriro classroom and supported throughout the school year. There were, at the beginning of the pilot, seven children in the classroom. One child left Fruitvale School part way through 2019 and has not been included for consideration in this evaluation.

Data Collection

A series of one-hour interviews were held with key informants who were involved in the Riroriro project. The interviews were one-on-one except for an interview which two participants attended together. Participants were asked to share their personal experiences of the Riroriro project.

The participants in no particular order were:

- The Riroriro Teacher
- The Principal of Fruitvale School
- The Vice-Principal/SENCO of Fruitvale School
- The Teacher Aide placed with the Riroriro classroom
- Six Mainstream Teachers at Fruitvale School
- The PSN Social Worker at Fruitvale School
- The PSN Site Manager
- The PSN Counsellor/Play Therapist placed with the Riroriro classroom

In addition to the qualitative interviews, this evaluation also considered a series of diary entries written by the Riroriro teacher throughout the pilot period. The diary entries were personal reflections covering a range of topics from the activities completed with children in the Riroriro classroom to the challenges and rewards of the time spent in the classroom with the target children. Diary entries were a secondary source of data. Wherever a diary entry has been included as evidence in this evaluation it is noted at the beginning of the quote.

Data Analysis

The oral narratives from the interviews were transcribed verbatim using an AI transcription service. Qualitative data from transcribed interviews and diary entries was analysed using an inductive, thematic content analysis. Common patterns in the data were coded and organised using Microsoft Excel and data segments were further analysed to demonstrate connections and discrepancies between interviewees' opinions. The opinions and views expressed by interviewees were then triangulated with diary entries from the Riroriro teacher to test the validity of interviewee information, ensure consistency in recall of events and sentiments and help develop a comprehensive understanding of the pilot.

Ethics

Participation in research and evaluation must be completely voluntary and it is important that participants are able to give informed consent before participating. Participants were informed of:

- How the evaluation was to be carried out
- What topics and questions would be covered in the interviews
- Potential risks and harms of participation in the evaluation
- Potential benefits of participation in the evaluation
- How their information was going to be used
- How their privacy and confidentiality would be protected

To ensure that these requirements were met, all adult participants were provided with a participant information sheet and consent form. These were signed and returned to the researcher prior to any interviews taking place. All the children's parents/caregivers were asked to complete a similar form, tailored to the interview/evaluation process for child participants.

This evaluation has been conducted in line with the Presbyterian Support Northern Research and Evaluation Ethics Policy.

Bias

The interviewer/evaluator is employed by Presbyterian Support Northern (PSN), a stakeholder in the Riroriro pilot. As a part of the pilot intervention, PSN provided a councillor and therefore has an interest in the outcome of this evaluation. However, the interviewer/evaluator has not been involved in the pilot directly (outside of evaluating it) and had not met any of the individuals involved in the project or visited the site of the pilot, prior to involvement in the evaluation.

The evaluator recognises that this has introduced a level of bias into the evaluation process at both the participant and the evaluator level, but is confident that all necessary steps have been taken to reduce this bias and produce an evaluation that is a fair and representative description of both the strengths and challenges of this pilot.

At the study design phase, the researcher has sought feedback on the study design and reduced selection bias by ensuring that all individuals who were directly involved in the project were invited to participate in interviews. All interview questions follow qualitative best practice and were designed to reduce acquiescence bias and social desirability bias so far as is reasonable.

During data collection, the interviewer gained permission to audio record all interviews and these were later transcribed to reduce recall and chronology bias. Interview best practice was followed and the interviewer did not lead conversations and spoke only when asking questions or clarifying points that were unclear.

All data was triangulated, using two data sources to check for consistency, regularity and validity, whilst helping to reduce confirmation bias. A comprehensive coding process was carried out only after the data had been engaged with twice and the researcher was cognisant of alternative explanations for data patterns when drawing conclusions and completing the final report.

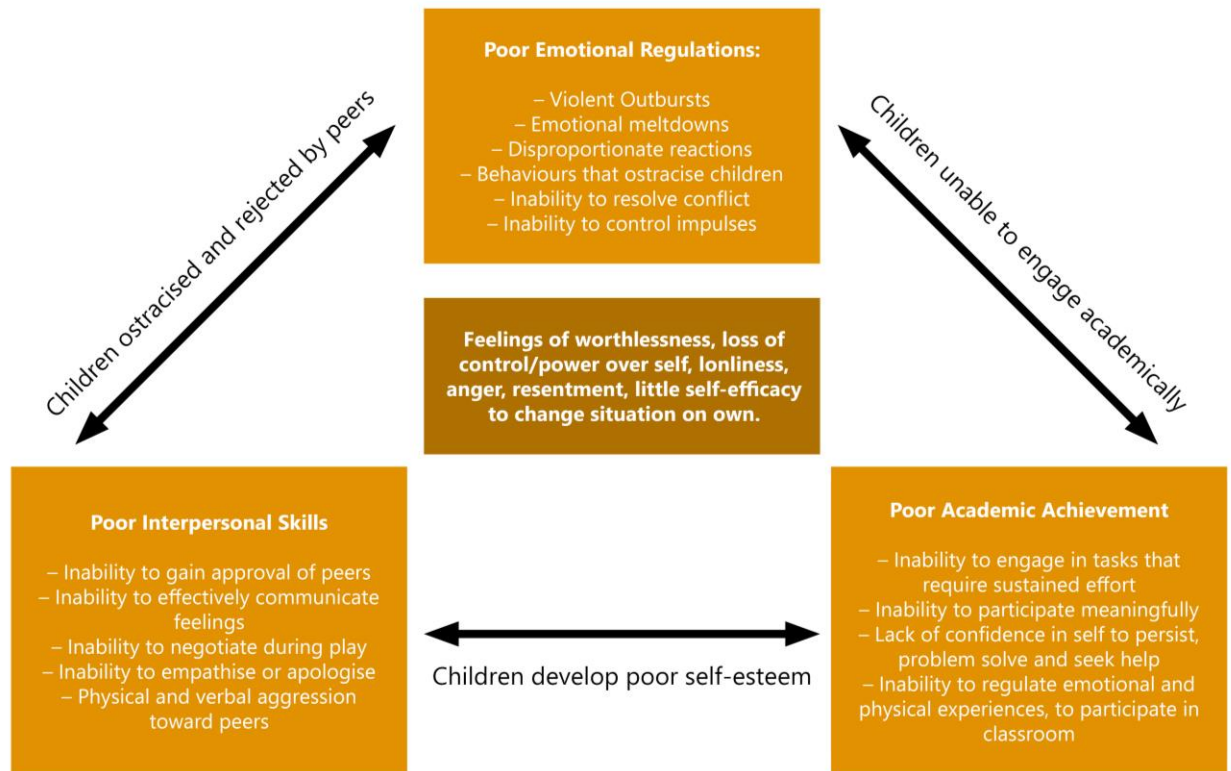
Use of Symbols and Acronyms in Quotes

This report contains interview quotes that have been kept close to their verbatim state. Throughout this report some quotes have been edited (for brevity, to demonstrate language features, or to protect individuals' identities). The symbols used to demonstrate these, along with common acronyms are outlined below:

Symbol	Meaning
Diary Entry	At the start of a quote – the quote has been taken from the Riroriro teacher's personal reflections rather than an interview.
[...]	A section of text has been removed from the quote for brevity but does not impact the meaning or interpretation of the overall quote.
[Conjunction]	A section of text has been edited for brevity or to protect an identity and a conjunction or other device has been used to give the sentence meaning.
...	Denotes a pause in speech.
[Role]	A role in square brackets indicates that a personal name has been removed and replaced with that individual's role title, e.g. [Riroriro Teacher].
ELC	Early Learning Centre.
PD	Professional Development.

A Necessary Alternative

There were three key areas of dysregulation among the target children that the Riroriro pilot looked to address: emotional regulation, interpersonal skills and academic achievement. The relationship between these three factors is summarised below:



Emotional Regulation

Prior to Riroriro all six target children were identified by the school 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?

Interpersonal Skills

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:

And 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 to 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.

Academic Performance

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 classroom, 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:

Like 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. They didn't know what was going on.

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.

The Outlook

All the Fruitvale staff members acknowledge in their interviews that the outlook for the target children before Riroriro was not good. Their inability to regulate their emotions was impacting both their interpersonal skills and academic performance; the children were falling behind academically and their outbursts were making it difficult for teachers to maintain order within their classrooms.

Asked what might have happened if an intervention had not been introduced to support the target children, one member of teaching staff acknowledged the impact that these children would have continued to have on the mainstream classrooms:

[Without the Riroriro programme] I think it would be diabolical. Sitting there thinking why did I come to school today? What do I do with that child? I think there would be a lot of kids out there kicking the ball and not learning. A lot of angry kids running around climbing fences, you know? But you wouldn't be dealing with one, you'd be dealing with the whole... you know, [a Riroriro child] might have done something but you've got this many that are upset by it and having to deal with so much more.

Another teacher talked about the implications for some of the target children if an intervention had not been introduced with reference to the “school to prison pipeline”, a phenomenon in which youth from disadvantaged and traumatic backgrounds are more likely to end up in the justice system in later life because of the long-term effects of their inability to fit into the requirements of a mainstream classroom and engage in education in a meaningful way:

[He] was a kid who was just on the school to prison pipeline, and you could see it, it was so painful to watch. Because you know that he just had no control over it. And I feel so much for [his guardian] because she loved that kid to pieces, but he was tearing her apart [...]. And you could just see it, like, you know, she talked to me about... she would see the school's phone number and just start crying because she was like, oh my god. Who has he beaten up today?

The school staff generally agreed that without some kind of intervention the target group of children would have been unable to keep up in their mainstream environments or would have moved to different schools in search of a “fresh start”:

Like we [would] probably have three or four of them that have had a meltdown and they're at the office and you've got [Senior Staff] run off their feet just dealing with behaviour issues. [...]. And so I could see a lot of these kids being very transient and moving between schools. And having six months here and six months there, so the parents wouldn't have to... Yeah, it would be a fresh start all the time.

I am absolutely positive that these children had the trajectory to be what I call "drifters". They would have been probably — not necessarily in this school because we don't like stand downs and we don't like putting children out — but they would have been, I think, stood down. They would have been with the ministry. They would have been kids who would have then just drifted around schools to see what school would take them. I don't think they had a very good trajectory at all. They were kids that were doomed to fail. The system was going to fail them.

Senior members of staff spoke about the lack of resources available to them for managing children with behavioural problems of this level. They spoke about the alternative that was available to them — shunting the children onto different schools — and how this was not desirable. Instead, they opted to develop an intervention enabling these children to learn the skills that they needed to meaningfully engage in the mainstream environment:

The solution we had was that we could expel them all. And thereby get rid of the problem for us and actually ensure the problem continued for them, the boys and somebody else. So that wasn't really a solution that was ever considered.

This particular type of learner, there was nothing available for them. For a child who suffered trauma and huge neglect, there is really [...] nothing to access support for these students. And so [...] why don't we just look to ourselves. Your most important person who can make a difference for these children is the teacher in front of them.

Programme Outcomes

The Riroriro programme aimed to improve the target children's emotional regulation and interpersonal skills so that they could integrate into and engage in the mainstream environment in a meaningful way. This section examines some of the outcomes of the pilot programme approximately one year after the children transitioned from the Riroriro classroom into their mainstream classrooms.

Emotional Regulation

Riroriro primarily focused on the target children's 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 classroom 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 them, 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 target children 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

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 a 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 ok. 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 target children 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 target children 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

All 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 classroom, 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 classroom, 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.

Calmer Playground, Calmer School

The impact of the Riroriro programme 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 programme:

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 having considered 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 Mainstream Teachers and in Practice

A positive outcome beyond the planned scope of the Riroriro programme 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 programme 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, senior management and board 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 undoubtedly 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 compassionate 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.

This section has addressed the outcomes for the target children themselves as well as the school as a whole. All of the children were reported as having improved their emotional regulation and interpersonal skills to some degree during the pilot. Overall, five of the six children were able to successfully transition into their mainstream classrooms and use their new emotional regulation and interpersonal skills to engage meaningfully in the mainstream environment. One child has changed schools, but prior to this was struggling with issues which were a barrier to his successful reintegration. Riroriro, in isolation, was unable to meet the complex needs of this particular target child and this will be addressed in coming sections.

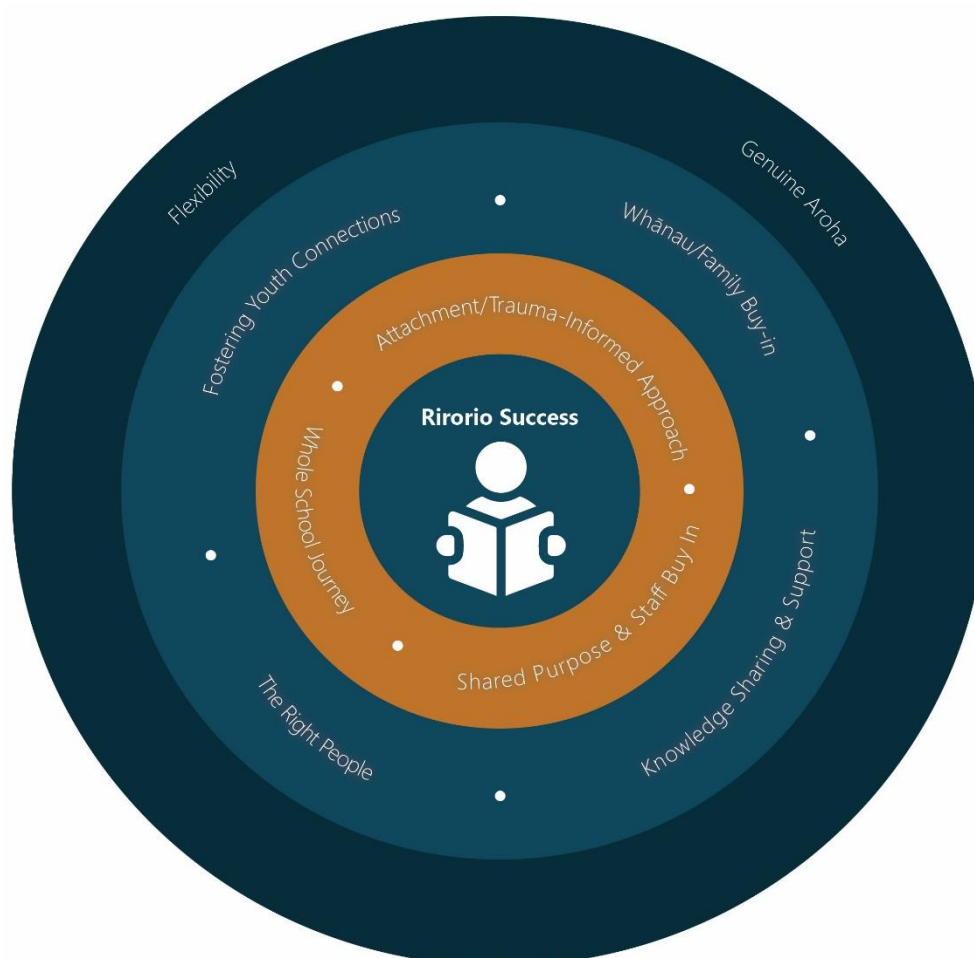
Programme Success Factors

The following section outlines the elements of the Riroriro Project which led to the outcomes we have explored. This evaluation identified three core elements of the programme that were integral to its success: its attachment/trauma-informed approach, a whole-school journey, and the shared sense of purpose it gave staff across the school. These factors made up the foundations of success for the Riroriro programme.

The programme was strengthened by a number of factors including the knowledge sharing & support that was fostered within the school, hiring and utilising the right people for the job, getting buy-in from the whānau and family of the target children. And fostering connection between the target children and other youth within the school. These administrative, resourcing and communications factors were critical to the success of the programme.

Finally, Fruitvale School itself had qualities which contributed to the success of the programme. There are attributes of the programme which perhaps could not be achieved by every school implementing the Riroriro model: Fruitvale as a school community demonstrated genuine care and aroha for the target group of children and a huge amount of flexibility in administering the programme.

This section examines the factors in Riroriro's success, as described by teaching staff and senior management at Fruitvale.



Shared Purpose & Staff Buy-In

A key requirement for the success of the programme was that the Fruitvale staff felt a shared sense of purpose with respect to Riroriro. A shared purpose was vital to ensure that all teachers, not just the Riroriro teacher, were clear on the goal of returning the children to their mainstream environments. This ensured that Riroriro was seen to be a 'whole school project' rather than an undertaking that was exclusive to the Riroriro classroom or the mainstream classrooms.

Every individual interviewed in this evaluation identified the same purpose in their own words, demonstrating that although the teachers were not sure what exactly the pilot programme would look like or whether it would work, they all knew the goals of the programme and what they wanted to achieve for the target children:

[...] Riro was to actually help the children. Really help them with emotional and social regulation. [...] to build I suppose their executive functions [...] to help them to manage the trauma that they've had from the past and to be able to cope with everyday school life. I don't think it was set up to get them [...] caught up with the curriculum. It was to sort out everything that you need in order to be able to engage with the curriculum.

The purpose of Riroriro was to [...] have a specialised learning environment where they could grow their self-regulation skills, and improve and get their own learning up to a level where they will function, could function positively in the mainstream classroom. Basically change the trajectory of their experience at school, from heading to expulsion, to actually being able to function well in a mainstream classroom.

In addition to the teachers across the school understanding and agreeing on a shared purpose, it was vital that all of them were on board with the programme. The target children would eventually go through many different classrooms throughout their school journey, and so Riroriro needed to be understood as a 'whole of school project' rather than a distinct classroom unrelated to the mainstream classrooms. To emphasise this, the children were kept on their home class rolls:

[...] one of the key things we did when we started Riroriro was that child remained on a class teacher's roll. So we didn't take them completely out of a classroom. That teacher still had that connection with that child, they knew that their goal was to have that child back in their room. [...] We hoped it would create a continued and vested interest in that child rather than "phewph, don't have to deal with that anymore". So we kept all those children on a class list roll to keep that connection going with that teacher and that expectation for that teacher to actually have that child back in their classroom.

In addition to keeping the students on their home class rolls, the principal focused on sharing messaging about the programme and maintaining clear communication with staff about the goals and expected outcomes of the intervention. He felt that he had a responsibility to the staff, who had put a lot of faith in a new and untested programme with unknown results:

I asked them at three different stages, you know, are they prepared to continue with this? Because in the earlier days it didn't seem to be making a whole lot of change. I mean the boys were out of their classrooms, that was for sure, but they weren't completely comfortable [that] the specialised teaching and learning situation was going to be able to be replicated in their classroom, so how is this going to translate? [...] There were times when they just had to have that reassertion of their willingness to continue as a group. [...] The idea that the whole staff are on board with it was really important to the both to the integrity of the program, but also to its success.

We did try and get feedback from teachers at various points, to determine that, you know, when they're in the staff room and they're saying yes, that's quite different to when they've got an opportunity to say 'yes' on a piece of paper that's anonymous. So both of those were in line with each other. So we were confident that we had their backing and I think they were comfortable that they had ours.

An important step in winning support and buy-in from staff across the school was ensuring that the expectations of the programme were realistic. A number of staff members discussed the understanding that the programme would expect all staff to receive the target children back into their mainstream classrooms, and understanding that the children would likely never operate at the social, emotional or academic level that is generally expected of a child their age:

I think it's really important that, and [the principal] said it to us all the time, 'are you guys all on board, because these children are never going to be "fixed"'. But what they are is more supported than they ever were.

These kids are not going to be magically fixed overnight. And they're not going to go back into class and just go "Yeah, I'm ready to learn, I can just do everything now". They're always going to be a challenge. They're just never gonna be as challenging as they were. So it's getting that buy-in and acceptance from teachers.

Trauma-Informed Practice Model

A Trauma-informed Practice model that focussed on building secure attachments was integral to the success of the Riroriro pilot. The principal identified early on that these theories would inform

the practice that went on in the Riroriro classroom and ensured that key staff were upskilled in this area:

...attachment was really important in my head. The brain research was really important. So us understanding [...] that [the brain is] a flexible muscle, not a set piece. So I went looking for [Personal Development] and we came across the attachment workshop which Joseph Driessen runs. And so we initially [...] went to that. There were about nine [of us]. That was quite pivotal for the teachers to understand the trauma the kids were going through and how attachment was really pivotal to connecting with the boys and also making change for the boys.

Many of the teaching staff spoke about the ways that attending personal development seminars and workshops on trauma and attachment has impacted how they view students with challenging behaviours and allowed them to modify their actions for the benefit of the child:

I think another thing that's not just benefitted me personally, but I think the whole school is that we're trauma-informed now. [...] I think everything that we do, everything, all our values, are underpinned [...] with the trauma practice. [...] when we are talking to children, it's about your tone, it's about what you're saying and it's about always taking into account where they've come from as well. [...] So I think that's come from being more trauma-informed.

We sort of had come from a space of relationship-based pedagogy, which was a really good foundation. And then we tailored more towards trauma-based and then brain development. [...] And it was helping us differentiate between behaviour and need. And I think that once we were able to differentiate between those things, you grow a more compassionate approach to those children.

The trauma-informed approach to working with the children in Riroriro provided a framework for working with the children on problematic behaviours and allowed the children to build the trust and attachment that they needed to begin regulating their emotions and forming positive relationships. This framework informed the approach that the Riroriro teacher took in working with the target children, but also the specific tools that were employed. Kichido was one tool that the Riroriro program used extensively. Kichido is a compassion-based, trauma-sensitive and mindfulness-focused slow, rhythmic and integrated breathing, movement and relaxation technique:

I said to [a Riroriro child], when you start feeling angry instead of running away, let's do Kichido, let's do our breathing. [...] You can go over there and do it, but I need to be able to see you. So instead of running away, self-

regulating [...]. He kind of stopped and you could see him with his fist. He would make fists and then he'd stand there and do his breathing. And then he'd slowly let go of his fists. And then he'd kind of calmed himself down and he'd tell me why he was angry.

To build on the tools used within a trauma informed model the school also linked in with the ELC's in the community. Because of the trauma that the target children had experienced in their lives, most were operating at an educational level closer to pre-schoolers, the ELCs were able to provide feedback and insight into how to best work with children in this age group and ultimately informed some of the practice that was employed in Riroriro:

...it was with that early childhood centre that we learned some of the ways we were going to work with these kids because they managed [one of the target children] quite differently to how he had been managed [at Fruitvale School]. So we copied initially the way that they managed, and then grew some of our practice from that.

Therapeutic Oversight & Intervention

While the work that the school did to become trauma-informed through professional development, reviewing literature and seeking advice from ELC's was important, it was vital that there was professional therapeutic oversight for the work with the target children. To ensure that this supervision was available for the Riroriro teacher, the school sought out a Research and Practice Interpreter who the Riroriro teacher and principal would connect with regularly to discuss the development of the target children. The Research and Practice Interpreter was able to provide supervision for the Riroriro teacher and make sense of some of the behaviours that the children were exhibiting. He was also able to provide guidance and advice for the Riroriro teacher to apply in the classroom. In the following entry the Riroriro teacher talks about the boys being unsettled in their mainstream classrooms after the Riroriro teacher had taken sick leave for two days:

Diary Entry: *Two academic days in the mainstream seemed to put a strain on the boys. [...] After talking to [the Research and Practice Interpreter] on Friday via zoom, it put into perspective why the boys were so unsettled in their home rooms. It was probably a variety of things but the one that stood out the most to me was the fact that what I perceive as sick is completely different to what a traumatised child perceives as sickness. [He] talked about how sickness to traumatised children can range from their parents being hungover, high, needing their next fix, really sick where it means months in hospital or the sick person just never comes back. So now knowing that it explained the boy's behaviour in their home rooms and they were actually high on anxiety wondering if the one constant thing in their lives was actually coming back.*

The primary therapeutic oversight was provided by the on-site therapist who also worked alongside the Riroriro teacher to ensure that links were able to be made between behaviours and therapeutic intervention:

[...] I came from this perspective that – because teachers are smart – I thought they knew, it's like this understanding like you know what trauma is right? But actually they don't. They didn't know what trauma was doing. They know the behaviour, they see it all the time. But there was not a clear link with trauma and why. Why trauma is doing that to a child. And so being able to explain that, demonstrating with examples and talking about what we saw, together [the Riroriro teacher] and I was just really profound.

[The Riroriro teacher], doing her play therapy training, she got some understanding. Even though play therapy is a modality, you have to learn and do some placement and understand how to work with the children. She knows how to work with the children but to understand the therapeutic aspect, what is underneath, that is not something that you do in a 6-month online course. So I think having a therapist who understands those underneath connections and weavings that makes us who we are – to make those links has been really helpful and she has said that herself.

In addition to providing a level of oversight that only an experienced professional could do, the therapist placed in the school was also able to provide therapy for the children to help them work through their trauma and improve aspects such as self-esteem and self-image. The therapist spoke about the importance of being able to understand the trauma experienced by the target children and how it changed their behaviour in order to effect change in the play-therapy room, the Riroriro classroom and beyond:

With Riroriro what we have seen is that the impact in the short amount of time... working with younger children, purely with child centred therapy - play therapy – we've seen things evolving from the playroom into the Riroriro class. [...] From my perspective, the establishment of that play therapy room and that play therapy service and engaging with children with that service was a success – absolutely. And that is the importance for me, I think if we don't understand what we are dealing with then we are just tackling the problem from the wrong end.

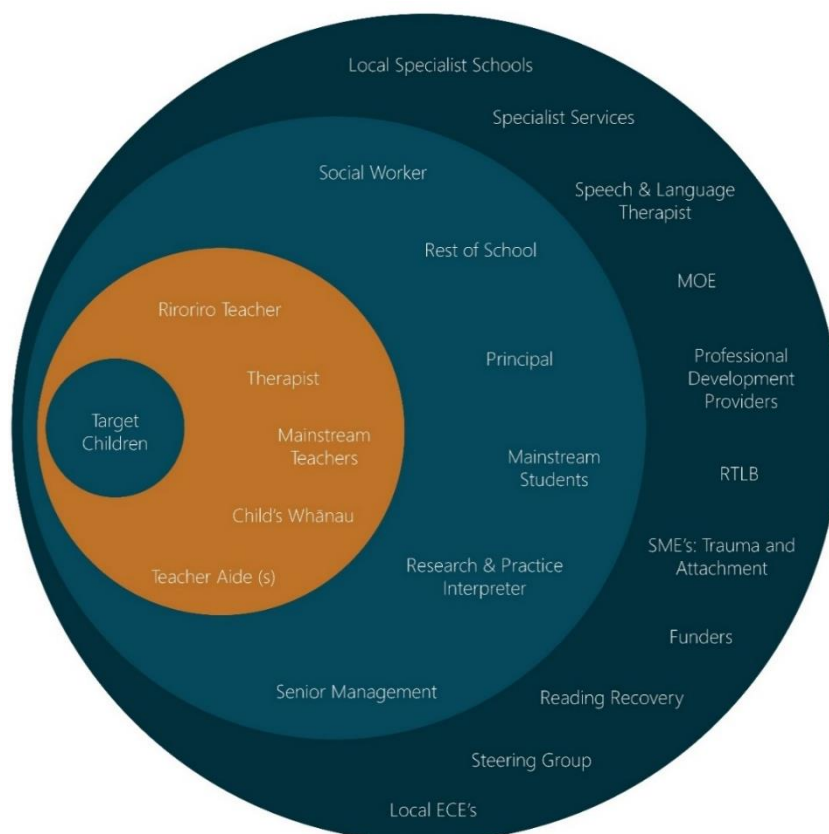
A unique element of the Riroriro programme was that the therapist was based on site full-time. A number of individuals involved in the programme spoke about the benefits of this. The therapist was able to work with the target children one-on-one several times a week as well as working with the Riroriro teacher to support trauma-informed methodology and practice. A number of staff talked about the value of the therapist being located on-site to ensure that they were part of the target children's environment:

So, I think that the therapist, being involved with the kids is really important. I think that is essential in that there is therapy, there is teacher, there is child, and there is an ecosystem inside the school.

So she was here all day, every day, over the week. She worked with the boys but she was also available for the teachers and for the other children in the classrooms. So as a therapist, she got quite a unique view of her client. Because [...] normally you drive to the therapist, every therapy session and you drive back. That wasn't the situation for these kids. The therapist was on-site, the therapist knew the context of these children, understood the way the school worked [...] so she knew what she was feeding into and what these kids are coming to her from.

The relationship between the therapist and the school deepened the therapist's understanding of the target children and their challenges, helping to foster a truly holistic relationship between therapeutic intervention and education:

[The therapist] and [Riroriro teacher] would talk every day and often during the day. She mentioned often that her as a clinician coming into a school that welcomed her, she had a community herself. It wasn't a therapy community, but she got a lot out of that. It really strengthened her as a therapist.



Whānau-School Alignment

A number of teachers noted the importance of parents and caregivers of the target children being on board with the intervention. It was critical to ensure that relationships were formed between the Riroriro teacher and the target children's whānau in order to ensure that their learnings at school were not being lost or compromised at home:

[The Riroriro teacher] spent hours and hours and hours speaking to the parents and talking to them about how they could do things at home and what she was doing in here and why she was doing it. And the effect that she hoped to have through doing that.

[Riroriro teacher] took over the relationship forming with the families. And I've got to say... the relationships that she formed with the families [...] has actually been an integral part of the success of the program as well, because without having her really get the families onside [...] you would never have had the support from home to be able to get the boys to do things.

Without that buy in [...] they'd be hearing one thing at school and they'd be going home and they'd be getting another thing. The kids would be compromised in their thinking and in their behaviour the whole time. It would be really hard for the kids without that support from home.

This had an impact on the parents and caregivers of the target children, helping to bring them into the conversation and become an active part of the children's educational experiences. Many of the target children lived with non-parental guardians such as grandparents who, the teaching staff felt, appreciated the support of the Riroriro programme in working with the child:

I don't think I'd see him at school every day if it wasn't for Riro because it created an environment where [his grandmother] was sure that [target child] would be cared for at school, and she knew she could trust school and that school was the safe place for him where we would support him and his needs.

[Riroriro teacher] was exceptionally supportive of especially [target child's] family. And to the extent that she would go out and pick up grandma and take her to the Marinoto meetings [...] and explain everything to her. Nana still wants to keep doing it now, so we still allow it to be done.

So when [the Riroriro teacher] was able to say "look, he can do this now" or the kid goes home from school and says "I had a great day and I want to go back to school and I love my teacher"... When the whānau starts hearing

those positive things you're more likely to keep getting engagement from them. As opposed to a child going home who's been told off basically all day, rejected by their peers most of the day: "I hate school. Everyone's mean to me, I've got no friends". You know, it's just going to make the whole family want to distance themselves from that.

Of the six students who were engaged in the Riroriro programme there was one child whose whānau were completely disengaged. This student had the greatest difficulty transitioning back into a mainstream environment at the end of the programme, and several teaching staff noted the lack of family buy-in as a contributing factor in his ongoing challenges:

For example, [target child] never really was able to develop friendships beyond the Riroriro boys and he just never reached that level of confidence in himself [...] we didn't have the buy-in from his whānau. So he was sort of missing some of the other elements that the other boys had.

Now the one family that didn't engage was the one child that didn't — I think — benefit from it [...] I could probably say that there was very little to nothing that changed about his behaviour. Mums really... I think Mum would probably love to engage but there are all sorts of issues at home that just don't allow it.

Whānau buy-in and alignment was one of the most crucial factors to the success of the programme and this was further highlighted after the COVID-19 lockdown in May 2020, when issues arose around absences and the children returning to school. A number of teachers spoke about seeing strides in the behaviours of one child in particular, but then seeing the child revert to old behaviours and patterns because of low attendance. If the child's whānau or caregivers were not able to ensure that the child was attending school, then the school could not continue to reinforce learnings from Riroriro and support the child on a daily basis:

So he can manage himself quite well and has been really good in our class, but then lately has reverted back to old behaviours of hiding under tables and stuff like that. But that's stuff outside of our jurisdiction - that's what's happening at home. He's barely been at school since lockdown.

[Riroriro child] - I don't know what his attendance ratio is but... I know the school was in touch with him over lock down. He didn't engage in any online learning that we did. He didn't come back for maybe three-weeks after we all came back to school. And then it was visits from senior management to home to get him back. And since he's been back, he's probably I don't know if he would have done a full week. Sometimes he shows up at midday and yeah, and he's just not he's not in the in the rhythm of school life, you know, it's too... too random.

The Right People

Another factor that contributed to the success of the programme was filling the various roles with staff who possessed the right combination of passion, adaptability and requisite skill. At the very top, Riroriro demanded leadership with a passion for helping children succeed in school and flexibility around the approach that would be taken.

I liked the way [the principal] thought about things and some of the stuff that he did in a very creative way [...] I remember talking to him about a chess club that he was setting up or running [...] he looked at other ways to engage children, not just through academia, you know, he was very creative, and very child focused and [...] committed to that school and his community, not just the children, the wider community. [...] And also [...] 100% committed to finding solutions to help those children.

Just as important as strong leadership, the success of the Riroriro programme relied on finding the right person to fill the Riroriro teacher's role. The teacher in the Riroriro classroom needed to be experienced in order to understand the mainstream environment that the children would be transitioning back into and to adequately prepare them for it:

A very important part of Riroriro was to have a very experienced teacher with sound pedagogical practice, who knew what the mainstream environment for the child would be like... what pedagogies, what rooms, routines and systems would be happening for that child in a mainstream classroom, so that she could have that end-goal vision of where she has to get that child to.

A number of teaching staff talked about the personal characteristics that a teacher in the classroom would need to possess: compassion, patience and a genuine desire to be in the role:

So [the Riroriro teacher] entered into that role with a huge amount of passion, and [...] understanding of the challenges and problems and how those kids got to be where they are, And a lot of compassion and empathy for the children and their whānau.

To be a transformational teacher, you have to get to the heart of that child. And honestly [the Riroriro children are] the hardest to love. [...] you have to be really striving and have great belief in [Riroriro], which [the Riroriro teacher] did.

In addition to finding the right person to fill the Riroriro teacher role, it was also important to get the right person for the therapist role as well. The therapist would need not only to be skilled in

their profession, but also be able to navigate working in the school environment and to build strong relationships across the school community — particularly the Riroriro teacher:

We needed someone that could work with the [principal] and [the teacher] and [...] have that flexibility but also be grounded in what [they] did as a professional and stick to that [...] I felt [it] was really important to have somebody that was strong enough to say “No, this is what we need to do”. I’m really pleased that [they] took [the role].

Fostering Links Youth Connections

The Riroriro pilot applied a holistic “community” approach to the intervention which treated Fruitvale School as one community with many different working parts, rather than the Riroriro classroom as adjacent to the school, operating in a bubble. This was a key contributor to the success of the pilot. Even though the programme involved temporarily removing students from the mainstream environment, a number of teaching staff members talked about the links between Riroriro and the rest of the school and how they helped to ensure a smooth transition for the target children when they re-entered mainstream classes:

Having those kids feel like they’re part of our environment, and they’re not this segregated group, was such an important part of what Riroriro was. It was never “...oh, those are that Riroriro kids we’re not going to do this with them or that with them”. So they were going to be at assemblies and they were going to come to sport and they were going to do the things every other kid in the school has to do.

The model we did not want to happen was the model where these children are put together and left to the outside of the school community. [...] We wanted to put Riroriro in the heart of our school...

Ensuring that the children were able to smoothly transition from the Riroriro classroom into the mainstream environment was a challenge that went beyond the adults in the school community. It was important that children in the mainstream classrooms where the Riroriro students were intended to return were able to understand that the target children needed extra patience and support. The “mainstream” students would come to be peers, friends and role models for the target children, so it was important that they were also able to demonstrate empathy, composure and care in response to challenging behaviours. Fruitvale teachers developed targeted strategies to encourage mainstream students in spending time with and building friendships with the target children in their classes:

I initially... I had sort of a bit of a thing going where if they got however many smiley faces or whatever then they could have five minutes on the playground [...] I'd always say choose a buddy... [The target children] weren't allowed to choose each other... choose someone else, and that was a deliberate thing, to be building up relationships between them and the other students.

The same teacher recalls speaking with her mainstream students when the target children were in the Riroriro classroom about values like respect, inclusion and support. She also used role playing as a tool to teach those values and what they look like in practice.

Some of the kids got really annoyed with them when they would, you know, sort of ruin the game or whatever. But we did a lot of talking as a class with them. And when they weren't there as well, talking about how do we help each other? How are we going to help them to get to know us? How can we help them to look after things? How can we show them?

[...] It helps the whole class to be on board. It wasn't "we don't like them", you know, it was "no, we're all [mainstream classroom] kids, and we're all in here to help each other". And you might struggle with this and they might struggle with that. [...] just constantly talking about supporting each other and how to do that.

Any school looking to implement the Riroriro model would benefit from considering the ways in which mainstream classrooms and children can be brought into the programme as well. It is vital that the whole school be involved in supporting target students, including the mainstream students who serve as peers, friends and role models to children taking part in a programme like Riroriro.

A number of teachers during the interviews spoke about the target group's ethnic makeup, pointing to the fact that all of the target children were from non-European backgrounds with the majority being either Pacifica or Māori. It was acknowledged by these individuals that it would have been good to include a cultural element in the programme. One of the teachers suggested that perhaps other children in the school could be used to provide mentoring and leadership for the target children and in doing so, introduce the children to positive peer relationships and help them build connections to their own cultures:

I would [...] have tuakana/teina program set up as part of my daily work with the children. I would have mentors from the senior school trained in a particular [...] afternoon program. [...] And then I would have them come in every afternoon and run the program. [...] And then the other bird you're hitting with that stone is you're getting that cultural diversity coming in as well. Because some of those mentors will be Pacific and Māori as well.

Knowledge Sharing and Support

The ability to seek support, information, and advice from others in the school, particularly the Riroriro teacher, was key to the success of the programme. Many of the mainstream teachers who welcomed the target students into their classrooms throughout the Riroriro pilot saw the Riroriro teacher as a “wealth of knowledge” and appreciated the advice and tools that she shared with them:

I could check in with [the Riroriro teacher] about my kids whenever. Like, I'll go, “oh my gosh [target student] is doing so and so this morning”. And then she'll go, “Ah, he used to do that in [Riroriro]. And that was why he would do it”. And then when I go back into the classroom, I can see that. [...] This is the reason why he's not participating and why he's having a meltdown [...] those little triggers are things that [the Riroriro teacher] was able to really intimately find out about those kids through the experience. And now it's like a wealth of knowledge.

In addition to helping mainstream teachers identify triggers and target challenging behaviours, the Riroriro teacher also provided advice to mainstream teachers about adapting the structure of their classes or activities to support the target children's integration.

[Riroriro teacher] was wonderful [...] One thing she picked up on was... [In my] reading rotation I taught my class to sort of choose independently what order they did things. And she said, “I think he should just do a really basic, you're in this group... You go from number one to number two to number three. Number four, keep it really simple”. [...] I thought well, okay, I'll give it a try. Instant improvement. Much better for both of them.

Accepting advice from the Riroriro teacher and adapting classrooms and learning environments to better suit the target group of children and support them in their transitions is not an easy task, and this was identified as a challenge by a number of staff members within the school:

And, and I think the other challenge too, is with some teachers just accepting that the [Riroriro teacher] was really quite an expert in those children. [...] She knew them inside out, she knew. Like if they breathe this way, they're gonna do that. She just knew everything about them. So to get [all of the mainstream teachers] to take that advice, you know really take on that advice and try and fit it into their teaching practice as well.

Almost all of the mainstream teachers talked about the challenges that came with transitioning the target children from Riroriro into their mainstream environments, but also the support and value they got from their colleagues:

Early on it was like, Oh my God, this kid hates me because I'm being firm with him and I'm, you know, giving him all those things that he actually needs that he might not like. And I ended up having, like a bit of a moment, a couple of weeks in and [the Riroriro teacher] and [another teacher] really supported me through that moment. We talked about strategies, and I had a good vent.

Flexibility

Another key element of the programme was flexibility from everyone involved — from the board and senior management to funders and the teachers themselves. There was great deal of planning that went into developing the classroom, but ultimately the teaching staff had to be flexible and adapt to the needs of the children that they were working with:

I remember [the Riroriro teacher] was saying, you know, she had all these ideas about what she'd be doing and a timetable and all that went to the wall when she first met the kids, and they were there. [...] I think that was the same for [the therapist] as well. [...] you just went with what happened there and then at the time, so they worked with that, and did some really great stuff as well. And I think that's what made it more exciting.

Diary Entry: *Monday I spent the day setting up the Barbara Brann testing kit and planning how the week was going to go. Tuesday I started to test the kids and realised that the testing was going to take a lot longer than I had anticipated and that the results I was getting from the children were a lot lower than I had imagined. The children I was testing were finding it difficult to sit still for long enough to even complete one section of each test. [...] By Wednesday I was becoming frustrated with the testing I was doing and beginning to realise that in actual fact the children in my class will probably functioning at a level below kindy. This then turned all my planning upside down and I needed to rethink how, why and what I was going to do during the day in the class.*

In addition to demanding flexibility of teachers in their approach to working with the children, Riroriro also required flexibility from senior management and the board of the school in the way that the programme was run and overseen. Because the nature of the project was not set in stone and shifted as and when the needs of the target children (and the staff) changed, being “agile” was a principle requirement:

What I think I [the principal of Fruitvale] did most usefully is create a situation that [the Riroriro teacher knew] that at each stage where things needed to change, I was open to those things changing. [...] there was quite a collaboration between [the Riroriro teacher] and I and the steering group

[group made up of experts who oversaw the project and provided advice and troubleshooting where necessary] around what was and wasn't going to work and where things could go and couldn't go.

At the outset, the programme was designed as a full-immersion concept in which the target children would be completely removed from their mainstream classrooms and placed in the Riroriro classroom full time for five days a week with the intention of slowly transitioning back into their mainstream classrooms later in the year. However, as the principal recalls, this did not work and he, the children and the mainstream teachers needed to adapt their approach to ensure the best outcome for everyone:

[Riroriro teacher] was coming in and saying "look, I've had it", "I'm toast" you know, "can't do it tomorrow". And so [...] initially, it was going to be five days, but now all of a sudden, because of that situation, it became four days and because [taking Friday off from Riroriro] was successful, or successful enough, [Riroriro teacher] was able [...] to debrief with me and the others. Then we got a much clearer picture of what was happening. And she got supported and she got enough rest to understand that she could go on again.

Genuine Aroha

The final factor which added to the success of the Riroriro pilot programme was the genuine care and love that many of the staff members had for the target children involved in the programme. One member of the teaching staff recalled showing his support for [a Riroriro child] at his outside-of-school sports games. The staff member linked this connection to the child being able to form a secure attachment:

After he got to respect [...] me and [teacher] [...] I asked him about his life. If his Dad — because he said to me, he played rugby league — I asked him "who goes and watches you play?" And he said, oh, no one. So I said, can I come and watch you play? And he lit up and was like, "Oh, yeah". And that changed him a bit towards us and towards me. One day he said to me, "Oh my best friend is [name]. And I said, "Oh, I thought I was your best friend?" And he said, "No you're my brother." So I was like "woah". That was pretty cool. I think it changed a bit from there. But more of a family sort of connection... [After that] It was easier to talk to him and, and it was easier for him to talk to me and he showed a bit more respect and responsibility towards us.

It was clear through conversations with the teachers that many of them truly cared about the target children that they are now teaching. When asked about the personal benefits of being involved in the Riroriro pilot, the Riroriro teacher was caught off guard:

I don't know, I never really thought about it. [...] I think I probably benefitted from watching the boys go into mainstream. [...] I don't know because it wasn't ever really about me. [...] I guess I got a sense of satisfaction when I saw them be perhaps who I thought they could be or who they were trying to show me when it was just us in there. [...] I never really thought, what am I going to get out of it? I don't care. It's about the boys so...

Several days later the teacher emailed a further list of ways in which she had benefitted from the experience:

1. I was able to watch 5 out of [6] boys that suffered from trauma unfold and become the person I could see underneath their tough exterior. I helped them to become respected and seen as I always saw them.
2. It has grown me as a teacher. I am now able to use what I learnt and apply it to better understand children that silently suffer from trauma in mainstream. I see little 'cues' that I recognised from the boys and so with the knowledge I have gained from working with the boys I am able to support more children.
3. I am able to support teachers with working with children that have experienced trauma and give them strategies that they can apply to children in mainstream.
4. I formed relationships with [6] children that were deemed to be unlovable or unlikeable. I used that relationship to pass how I felt about them on to others and other people also managed to change their perspective about these children.

Although these answers are framed as personal benefits from working in Riroriro, they generally refer to supporting the wellbeing of others. This, as well as the teacher's bewilderment when asked about the personal benefits of the Riroriro programme for her, illustrates the selfless character of the Riroriro teacher and the genuine aroha that underpinned her work on the programme.

Improving Riroriro

Teacher Burnout

The role of the Riroriro teacher was challenging, and should not be taken lightly by any school looking to implement the Riroriro model. Mainstream teachers noted the challenge of having one of the target children in a classroom, and how much more difficult it would be to have more than one in a small classroom, full time:

What a challenging role. You know, a lot of us have one of those children in our class and we know how much it is. [...] [Target child] is like 10 people in my classroom.

There was a belief that there may have been a lack of understanding among some of the mainstream staff about the emotional and physical toll that the role took on the teacher in the Riroriro classroom. The work done in the Riroriro classroom was extremely challenging and in light of this, a number of staff invested a great deal of their own time in supporting the Riroriro teacher throughout the year:

That first-term I just sort of followed [Riroriro teacher] quite closely and sort of watched her mental health quite a lot really. I don't think that a lot of the other staff — I think [the principal] did — but a lot of the other staff realised how difficult it was for her. They saw a class of seven children and they thought, "Oh, yeah, it's pretty easy". No way. It was really difficult.

So I would talk to [Riroriro teacher] every day about her experiences in the classroom and try and give her as much support and advice and just use my experience as much as I could to support her [...] I could see that [she] was getting really bombarded by a lot of professional development that we were doing as a school and that she was doing personally to understand the boys [...] Plus [...] there was a lot of [...] meeting with a lot of people and getting people on board and getting buy in and all that sort of thing. And I think that took a really, that was really hard for [the Riroriro teacher] to be doing this new role and also have all the other pressure of talking about what she's doing to people outside of our school.

The Riroriro teacher noted burnout herself in one of her personal reflections, especially being exhausted by the nature of the programme itself:

Diary Entry: *In about week 7 or 8 I was just about at breaking point. [...] It was getting increasingly difficult to come to school. [...] I went to school and I*

said [...] I think the boys need to go to their home rooms today because I am either going to have a day at home or just working out of the staffroom. It was the first time I felt defeated. [...] [senior member of staff] came to the conclusion [...] that perhaps in term-one the boys go to home class every Friday. A huge weight suddenly lifted from my shoulders. My class became sustainable and I could see myself continuing with the high energy and calm needed to be in my class.

The students attended their homerooms on Fridays and the Riroriro teacher used the time to catch up on administrative work and attend both internal and external meetings about the programme. The Riroriro teacher referred to this time as vital to the wellbeing of any teacher in a role like this:

That was when we decided that, for teacher wellbeing, if this model went on that they have to have a homeroom that they go to every Friday. So you have that one day to recharge your batteries. And then for them to work on the skills that you've been working on in [the Riroriro classroom].

Any school looking to implement the Riroriro model should develop a timetable that allows the classroom teacher time away from the class each week. The role is demanding with limited space for downtime to complete administrative work or decompress. A full school week dedicated entirely to the classroom is not recommended.

In addition to the demanding nature of the role itself, the impact of the work on the Riroriro teacher was also compounded by the multifaceted nature of the role. The Riroriro teacher, beyond her role in the classroom, managed relationships with families and whānau, advocated for the pilot and attended meetings about its use and managed social issues that were occurring outside of the scope of education:

It was really hard on her. [...] it would have been really good if she could have just focused on the practice and the boys and have [...] a link person between maybe the management and her that could actually speak on her behalf to those other people [referring to meetings to seek funding and advocate for the programme].

I [Riroriro teacher] said to [the principal] [...] I may have done it at my own demise... stupidity. [...] I don't want any RTLB help, I don't want [social worker] help. Because these kids are so used to having so many people come into their lives that as soon as someone came near our room, they were like, what are they here for what do they want me for? [...] And I also said that I didn't want principals and everyone coming in because they're not a sideshow circus, these boys are traumatised and they need to just have one person working with them.

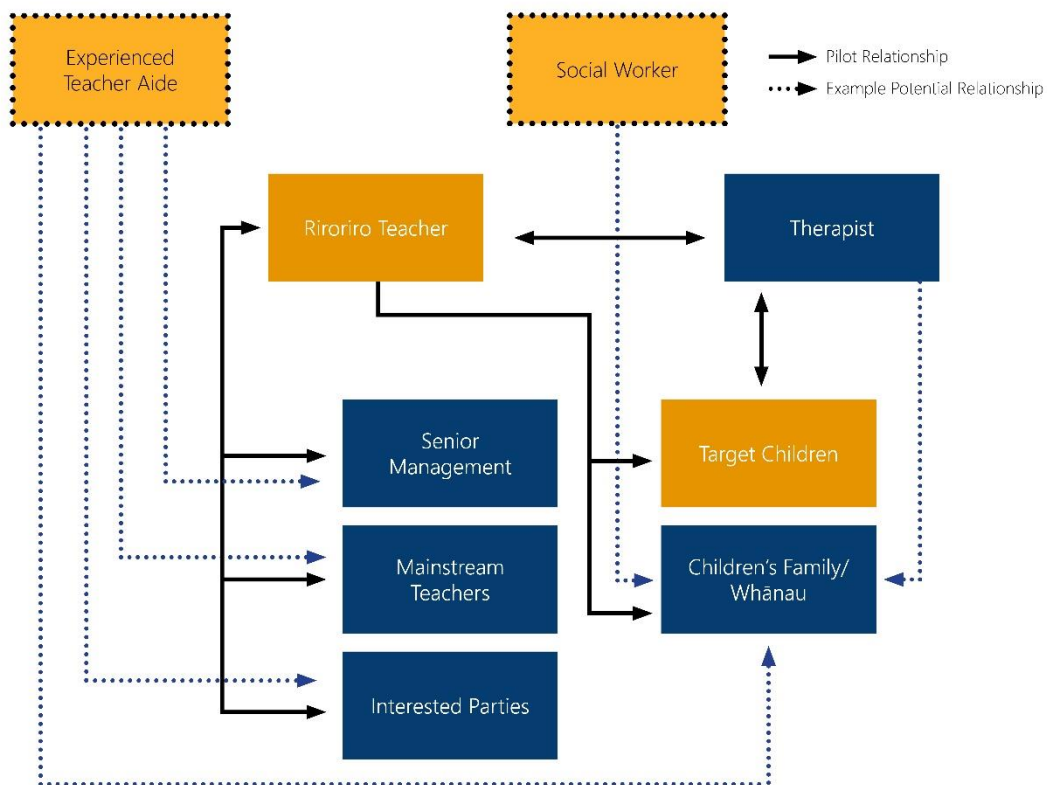
Future iterations of the Riroriro model could consider narrowing the scope of the Riroriro teacher role to reduce the likelihood of teacher burnout. This can be done without needing to introduce “additional people into the children’s lives”. For example, the programme could consider using a teacher aide with several years of experience to help reduce the Riroriro teacher’s workload. The teacher aide utilised on the Riroriro project was inexperienced and this may have hindered his ability to be as involved in the administrative side of the Riroriro project as may have been useful.

But I feel that [the teacher aide] was really helpful. But, he wasn't working alongside [The Riroriro teacher] at the level, I think the level I hoped he would. [...] So it was really hard for her to know [...] how [the teacher aide] could work with her. She was still thinking about 'how am I going to work myself with these children'. Never mind instructing somebody else on how to do it as well.

[...]

I would like to have a properly trained teacher aide and have a really solid, expert, teacher and teacher aide working really side by side with it.

Taking all of this into consideration, the following diagram shows the way that communication was conducted on the pilot and how it could potentially work with the inclusion of additional actors such as a social worker and an experienced teacher aide in a way that still ensures that the Riroriro teacher and the therapist are the only people working directly with the target children. In this example an experienced teacher aide could manage the communications with interested parties as well as the communication with mainstream teachers about the children’s transitions and be directly involved in the process. A social worker could be utilised to take on tasks such as helping caregivers attend specialised meetings, or addressing issues around things such as basic needs, e.g. clothing, school lunches. The therapist could be further utilised to communicate tools and resources to parents/caregivers and whanau.



The Gang

Despite the school-wide efforts to ensure that the target children were not ostracised from the rest of the student body after being placed in Riroriro a number of teachers mentioned the fact that the Riroriro children at one point had become known among mainstream students as “the Gang”; “the naughty kids in [Riroriro]”. This presented a challenge to transitioning the children into mainstream classes. Being seen as outsiders or a “gang” could also impact their ability to practice their newly-developed interpersonal skills in the mainstream environment and, as one member of staff acknowledged, could impact on their sense of identity:

There's always going to be challenges when you group a particular type of child together. And I was really worried about that because I've worked in bilingual units and [...] that can create isolation from the rest of the community. It can also impact on [...] the child's perceptions, of themselves. So [...] their sense of identity is like “I'm with this group”. So what does it mean? What does it say about me?

While staff did praise the work done to try to ensure that links were fostered between Riroriro and the rest of the school, it was generally acknowledged that more work needed to be done to ensure that target children are not perceived as a separate and distinct community from the mainstream school. Some discussed ways that the programme could support the target children

being seen by their mainstream peers as part of the school rather than a separate classroom. A number of teaching staff members suggested a stronger focus on building and facilitating positive peer relationships with children outside of the classroom prior to the transitions beginning:

*From my perspective what was missing for those boys were positive peers.
Because children actually look to each other a lot for support, and for role
modelling and for learning.*

*If I was to do Riroriro I would grow that, that link to the home class from the
start.*

Moving forward, schools looking to implement the Riroriro model should consider the necessity of mainstream connections to grow socially and pay attention to the importance of building peer relationships between target and mainstream children prior to their transition back into the mainstream environment.

The work needed to grow the links between Riroriro and beyond extends further than the mainstream children to the parents of children who are being considered for the Riroriro pilot. A member of the teaching staff talked about the perception that some parents had about the classroom because of its exclusive nature. The information provided to parents was limited and this may have had an impact on their perception of the class and the children in it:

*I don't know that [parents] paid much attention to [Riroriro] really unless they
were asked if their child should be in. I know one of our parents [...] identified
the kids as being quite physical and violent... And there was a thought that
[...] her son might be chosen to go in. His challenge wasn't anger, [...] his
challenge was something totally different. She was afraid that if he went in
there [...] he might actually come out violent. [...] they were judging the pilot,
but then there wasn't a lot of information that went out to give them a bit of a
picture.*

Information for parents whose children were potential candidates for Riroriro was an area where the programme could have been improved. Understandably, providing definitive information at the beginning of the pilot was challenging because of the uncertain and experimental nature the programme. Moving forward, schools looking to implement the programme should provide clear and informative information for parents whose children are being considered for time in the Riroriro classroom. This could help to avoid or minimise adverse reactions from parents who may view the classroom as dangerous or having a negative influence on other students.

Student Selection

At the time of the pilot, there were seven students who were deemed to be high-needs and exhibited dysregulated behaviour that could be improved by time spent in the Riroriro classroom. This is not to say that there will always be such a high number of students who need this level of full-time exclusive support. Most of the teaching staff spoken to expressed having trouble conceptualising how an ongoing Riroriro model might work and this is in part because the need for a full-time Riroriro classroom is predicated on having a minimum number of students who require the intervention.

One teacher talked about the complexity of the 'minimum-requirement' predicament and emphasised the importance of not cherry-picking students who may not necessarily need to be in the classroom. The teacher spoke about ensuring that a child from her mainstream class was not placed in the Riroriro classroom because it would not be suitable for his learning style:

So I think about the little boy that I talked about before who had autism and was just like a sponge. And so they talked about putting him into Riroriro, and I fought for him not to go. And I'm really glad I did, because he just soaks up the behavior that's around them. So for him coming to a mainstream school, he's looking and learning from all these kids around him who are doing the right thing.

Several teachers talked about the concern that in order to meet numbers, or even simply because of the widely communicated success of the programme, the school could become a magnet for children with problem behaviours. Staff felt that this would be undesirable because Fruitvale is not a specialist school, but rather a mainstream school looking to implement solutions to their own challenges:

What I did feel a little bit stressed about, at one point was the fact that we might be inviting more of those kids in to keep this program going, because while I support the fact that we don't turn these kids away, I also don't want to be a magnet for everyone's problem kids throughout the region, you know?

Well, one of the worries [...] and fear that we had about Riroriro, was that word got around that we had Riroriro. And then it got to the point where we're having whānau turning up wanting to take the kids out of the school they were in and bringing them here. Because they heard that we're good with working with kids like that and that was very scary for all of us. [...] So [the principal] was going around talking to other schools about what we were doing. And we even had other principals say to their own families, "oh maybe you should look at Fruitvale". So nobody wants to be the expert school with hard kids because... you know, we're no Westbridge (specialist school).

The consensus was that the school did not want to become known in the wider community as a 'specialist-school'. However, if the classroom is to be set up as a permanent fixture, then minimum numbers would need to be achieved to ensure a social-return on the high-fiscal cost of

the programme. Schools looking to implement the Riroriro model should consider this at the outset. The flexibility of assembling and disassembling the classroom based on need could be an option. However, schools should be mindful of being honest with themselves about what students would and would not benefit from the programme and ensuring that placement in the programme is based purely on need and suitability, rather than meeting minimum number requirements to keep the classroom running.

The Transitions: Placing Students

A key challenge for the school, raised by almost every individual who participated in the evaluation, was the transition of the target children from Riroriro back into their homerooms and the mainstream environment. Many of the teachers spoke about the challenges they faced when the target children first joined their classrooms on Fridays and how this impacted their teaching and their classrooms:

We weren't quite sure what to make of him, because we were quite settled. We had all of that first-term to just get to know each other and be calm and get to know the rules and the routines, and then BOOM all of a sudden, we had [Riroriro child] come and join us. So it was hugely disruptive. On a Friday, generally we have a slightly more relaxed programme. Because we'll have assembly in the afternoon and sometimes buddy reading we just sort of try make Fridays quite a nice easy day. But it wasn't an easy day anymore.

It was a big shock to the system. In saying that, because it was only once and then twice a week, you felt like at least you had the other days to kind of recover. Get everyone's learning sort of almost out of the way for the week and embrace yourself for what was coming Thursday, Friday. Yeah, that's how it felt.

A key issue for the teachers was transitioning the children into a Modern Learning Environment (MLE). An MLE (in the context of Fruitvale School) is an open plan classroom which can accommodate two classes. It provides flexibility in learning as teachers can adjust their style to suit larger and smaller groups of children and share the use of different spaces. The disadvantage of MLEs is the potential for noise, which can be distracting or overwhelming for some children. It also means that teachers are less able to work with children one-on-one. Both of these disadvantages posed significant challenges for the target children, who were moving from an intimate class of 6–7 into a classroom containing eight times as many children as they were used to:

I had [Riroriro child] last year come into a class. So I started in an MLE which is two classes, two teachers, forty-plus kids. And [child] was transitioned through [...] I think it was one or two days. One day, maybe. And that was hard. Because, one, it was the wrong environment. You know, they've come

*from this little hub of seven kids, and all of a sudden there's forty-plus children.
So it was baptism by fire for operating within a classroom.*

It's the disadvantage of being in a small school is that there's not many other places for children to go. But when the children came out from Riroriro into a modern learning environment, like a really big environment, I think it was quite hard for them because it was such a big space.

The challenges with placing the children in an MLE environment were compounded by the small-size of the school and limited classrooms for the children to go based on their age and academic abilities. It was especially difficult when a child was not able to transition well into an MLE environment, but also could not be placed with another target child because of the behavioural problems that would ensue if they were together:

...Then I found out that I was having [another target child] join our classroom as well. And at this stage, we had really got into quite a good place with [the first child] where he was a lot calmer. [...] So they began together [...] it was a thousand times worse. [...] But there were no other options. We're a small school so it was either my class or the MLE so there was nowhere else really.

A key takeaway from the pilot was that the transition from Riroriro into the mainstream environment requires both planning and flexibility. Schools considering the Riroriro programme should take stock of the spaces available for children to transition into as they progress out of the Riroriro classroom. Schools should consider the suitability of the learning environment, for example class size, academic abilities and age and they should also take stock of characters that may not work well together under transition conditions. Changing the routines of children who have experienced trauma and exhibit dysregulated behaviours as these children have will never be simple and so good planning and thoughtful placement should be considered and well-planned prior to a Riroriro programme commencing. School staff should also be prepared to be flexible during transitions, as placement plans may need to be adapted.

The Transitions: Linking Mainstream & Riroriro

A common theme throughout this evaluation is the importance of a holistic approach that involves all the school's staff working together to support the target children. It was generally agreed that this was managed well, however some of the mainstream teachers felt that at times the Riroriro classroom was quite unknown and a lack of visibility and transparency into what was happening in the classroom impacted their ability to help the children transition back into the mainstream environment. Some teachers felt that it would have helped with the transition into the mainstream classrooms if the mainstream teachers were able to observe the children's

behaviours to inform how they could integrate them into their own mainstream learning environments:

It would have been better for him to have more familiarity with it from the get-go. So yeah, I like the idea of what they're doing. But I feel like it needs to be woven into the mainstream setting more.

Before he came to us, I asked if I could go and observe him in Riroriro to see what he was like there. So I used some of my classroom release time to just go and watch. And that was really helpful. [...] it would have been good to have more opportunity to just be in there, [...] on a regular basis so that they got to know me better and... Yeah, just so I could see more of their behaviour and what they were like in class already.

I think I would like to see it more integrated. So that they had, they had time and the hub that was special time to focus on specific things, but they also alongside that had time in the classroom, where they were still working and getting to know the expectations of being amongst 30-40 kids working in, you know, in just doing what everyone else is doing.

Another concern was that mainstream teachers could sometimes feel left out of decisions concerning target children after the child had begun to transition into their classroom. One teacher reflected on the role confusion that could occur when there was an issue with a child who was halfway between the Riroriro classroom and the mainstream classroom:

Even after the transition of [target child] whenever there were meetings or things, we weren't involved, you know, so that was very difficult. We tried to set up programs to make things work in the classroom and then we've got Speech Language therapist and RTLB's and somebody else having a meeting without us and making decisions, [...] but you haven't come to have a look at his books. So how would you know whether or not the plan you're coming up with is actually going to work now because he's changed. [...] and if you're constantly trying to read behaviours and come up with strategies, if that's being talked about in the room, it would be very helpful to know. I mean there would be times where [target child's caregiver] would ring me... "What happened today? This kids telling me..." "Oh, no, it's been pretty good in class". So he would have been dealt with on this side. Yeah. And I never got the information.

Teachers also talked about the need for reassurance and positive feedback during the transition process. While the children were far easier to manage than before Riroriro, they still had high needs and the mainstream teachers needed feedback into how the transition was going:

Teachers taking on these children need a bit of feedback. [...] you just need ... have I made a change? You know, or is he getting worse? Am I making him worse? So it's just confirmation that you're doing you're doing okay. Or you're doing the right thing.

Schools that are considering implementing the Riroriro model should focus on the link between the mainstream classrooms and Riroriro. Building in activities like observations – both the mainstream teacher observing students in Riroriro and vice versa – could help to bridge the gap between the mainstream environments and Riroriro, strengthen the relationships between the mainstream teachers and the Riroriro teacher and help students feel more comfortable when it comes time to transition.

The Transitions: Scheduling

Another challenge for mainstream teachers was the uncertainty around the target children's transitions and how they were going to work in practice. A number of teachers talked about the uncertainty that surrounded the target children's transitions back into the mainstream environment:

The biggest problem was that there was no clear vision for us, even as teachers, what the process was going to be [...] and how we would follow up afterwards, in the classroom.

For some of these teachers, the initial approach, which was thought to be fluid and flexible was not going to be workable with their own classrooms and so an approach that saw the children transitioning on an ad-hoc basis had to be re-thought:

It posed challenges, couldn't really work that way. The [mainstream] teachers really needed to know [when the child would be in their classroom and when they would leave]. It wasn't able to be as flexible as I had first envisaged, but I understand why. [...] They sort of ended up having to all transition back to their home classes at once. So we thought maybe, the way we initially thought it could be would be like "oh these two kids actually need longer in Riroriro, but this kids ready to transition back". And we thought we could have kids transitioning back to their home rooms while still keeping the hub of Riroriro going. But that didn't really work either for similar reasons.

The transitional model that was used involved the students going to their home rooms for full-days on Fridays and then later in the programme full days on Thursdays and Fridays. Toward the end of the programme, the target children spent most of their time in their home rooms with short sessions in Riroriro at the end of the day on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Many teachers talked about the challenges of having the children for full-days, particularly at the beginning when the mainstream classroom environments felt foreign to the target children. For

some, the transition would have been aided by re-thinking the scheduling to help ease the children into their home-rooms more slowly:

The one thing that I would have changed as far as the transition would have been that initially they were coming just a Friday, and then it was Thursday, Friday. [...] I just didn't really find that it was that great. So someone else suggested, could we instead change to maybe every morning block? But then we had to keep the two days so that was even more of a more "oh my gosh". But if I was re-doing it, I would have started the transition with every morning block. Or even half the morning block, then a full morning block, then two periods a day, and then the whole day, because having every day like that is much better and then they could go back and they could relax and so could we[...]. The other way was too much change.

For any school looking to implement the Riroriro model, transitions from the Riroriro classroom back into mainstream classrooms will be one of the largest challenges. For many of the teachers spoken to, the transitions could have been eased by well-thought out classrooms placements, fostering a stronger connection between the mainstream classrooms and Riroriro from the very beginning of the project and re-thinking the timing of transitions. It is out of the scope of this evaluation to suggest a new transition model, but it is clear that the transition model used could be considered for re-design.

Conclusion

This evaluation has demonstrated that the Riroriro programme designed and run by Fruitvale School, with support from Presbyterian Support Northern 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 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 classroom. 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 programme has given Fruitvale's teaching staff a sense of pride in their place of work and in the work they do, and this will undoubtedly have flow-on effects for the culture of the school as a whole.

Riroriro's success relied on a number of factors. The foundations for success included the buy-in and support that was attained from the entire school community, which helped to ensure that Riroriro was understood as a temporary transitional classroom – a support system *within* rather than something separate from the school. Secondly, a trauma-informed theoretical framework allowed the school to work with the children in a way that was relevant and appropriate given their lived experiences and specific needs. Finally, the work with a trained and experienced therapeutic specialist ensured that work with the children was done ethically and aligned with the children's needs.

Riroriro also relied on the families and caregivers of the target children being supportive of the goals of the programme. This was a protective factor for most of the children and helped to ensure that learnings at school were not being undermined at home. The importance of family support was reinforced by the results obtained by the one child whose family were not committed to the Riroriro programme, as well as the impact on another child's progress after his attendance suffered due to COVID-19. Future iterations may look to firm-up work in this area if they want to see the positive outcomes from this intervention sustained in the long-term.

Ensuring that Riroriro had the right people in key roles was vital to the programme. The leadership role required flexibility and passion, the Riroriro teacher role required patience, genuine care and extensive teaching experience. The therapist/counsellor role required an individual that could work well in the educational environment and who had the ability to form strong relationships with very young children who had experienced trauma as well as the teaching staff within the school.

Fostering links between the target children and the mainstream children was also important, to support the development of positive peer relations and help the target children easily transition back into their mainstream classes, feeling like they were a part of the class already.

Knowledge-sharing and teachers supporting each other was also an important factor in the success of the Riroriro programme. It was important that the Riroriro teacher's learnings were shared and that mainstream teachers felt comfortable asking for and taking her advice during the mainstream transitions.

Finally, flexibility in development and delivery of the programme and the genuine aroha that the members of the school felt for the target children were important elements of Riroriro. The pilot itself was flexible and adapted to the needs of the teachers and the children, and this approach helped to ensure the wellbeing of everybody involved was supported. The staff of Fruitvale School demonstrated a caring and passionate approach to working with a group of target children whose behaviours and actions were not always endearing. The warmth and care of the staff helped the target children to form healthy attachments, specifically to the Riroriro teacher herself and to other teachers in the school. Healthy attachments are a key ingredient in a trauma-informed approach to working with children.

This evaluation has touched on a number of recommendations for other schools implementing a programme similar to Riroriro. The key recommendations for improvement centre on firming up the pilot framework in general, specifically around role requirements, information for parents and teachers, and the method for determining which children need Riroriro-style support. It is recommended that future schools review the transition model carefully and consider alternative approaches to transitioning the children, which support the link between Riroriro and mainstream classrooms while also allowing time for the Riroriro teacher to be away from the high-demands of the classroom.

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. There are 14,000 substantiated findings of child abuse each year across the country, and police respond to a domestic call-out every seven minutes (Tulloch, 2020, Scoop). New Zealand schools are seeing high numbers of children entering the mainstream education system having 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 model has been shown to be effective at helping children gain and maintain these skills one year after the intervention.

Determining the efficacy of this model if it is to be transferred and applied in a new school environment is beyond the scope of this evaluation. However, the challenges and success factors that were identified in the evaluation process are not unique to Fruitvale School and could realistically be achieved by any school or education provider. A strong programme overview document should be able to demonstrate how these success factors and the model itself can be replicated in other school environments whilst ensuring the programme's positive outcomes are achieved.

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