

Trauma-informed, culturally responsive education for refugee-background students: An evaluation of the RASNZ Welcoming Schools initiative in Aotearoa New Zealand



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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the Refugees as Survivors New Zealand (RASNZ) Welcoming Schools Programme, a trauma-informed, culturally responsive professional development initiative that was designed to enhance educational support for refugee-background students. Between January and October 2025, the programme delivered 15 workshops across resettlement regions in Aotearoa New Zealand which reached 516 participants from 67 Early Childhood Education centres, 193 primary, intermediate, secondary schools, and multiple support services. Using a mixed-methods evaluation design that incorporated participant feedback, structured observations, and outcome tracking, this study examines the programme's impact on educator knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Findings demonstrate significant improvements in participants' understanding of refugee trauma, implementation of trauma-informed pedagogical approaches, and development of culturally responsive teaching strategies. The programme successfully shifted educator perspectives from deficit-based to strengths-based approaches while establishing critical interagency support networks. Analysis of quantitative feedback revealed consistently high satisfaction rates (95%+ positive responses) and strong intentions to implement learned strategies. These findings contribute to growing evidence that support trauma-informed educational interventions and provide a replicable model for refugee education support in resettlement contexts.

KEYWORDS

Refugee education, trauma-informed pedagogy, cultural responsiveness, professional development

Introduction

New Zealand's commitment to refugee resettlement has intensified in recent years, with the annual refugee quota increasing from 1,000 to 1,500 in 2022, and resettlement regions, expanding from eight to thirteen regions nationwide (New Zealand Parliament, 2020). This growth has placed unprecedented demands on educational systems to support students from refugee backgrounds, many of whom arrive with complex trauma histories and have significant educational disadvantages (Perry, 2003; Wong et al., 2019). Despite this increasing need, research consistently identifies substantial gaps in educator preparedness and systemic support for refugee-background preschoolers and school-aged students in New Zealand Early Childhood Centres and schools (Barrie, 2024; Mitchell & Kamenarac, 2021).

The educational experiences of refugee-background students are characterised by unique challenges that extend beyond typical English language learning support. These students often present with interrupted or absent formal education, complex trauma responses, cultural adjustment difficulties, and ongoing family stressors related to resettlement (Lembke et al., 2024). Traditional educational approaches that were developed for students with continuous schooling experiences frequently prove inadequate for addressing these multifaceted needs (STARTTS, 2021). Consequently, refugee-background students remain at risk of academic underachievement, social marginalisation, and long-term educational disadvantage (Momartin et al., 2019).

Educational attainment represents a critical pathway for intergenerational change within refugee communities (Anderson et al., 2023; Kindon & Willette, 2023). Conversely, educational failure perpetuates cycles of disadvantage, limiting opportunities for social mobility and successful resettlement. This context underscores the urgent need for systematic approaches to enhancing educator capacity and institutional responsiveness to the needs of refugee-background students.

The concept of trauma-informed education has emerged as a promising framework for supporting students with adverse childhood experiences, including those from refugee backgrounds (Barrie, 2024; Park & Katsiaficas, 2019). Trauma-informed approaches recognise that traditional behavioural interventions may inadvertently re-traumatise students, and instead emphasise safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (Desautels, 2023). However, the application of trauma-informed principles specifically within refugee-specific educational contexts remains under-researched, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand settings.

Cultural responsiveness represents another critical dimension of effective refugee education, particularly within the Aotearoa New Zealand context where Te Tiriti o Waitangi establishes a foundational commitment to equity and partnership (Came et al., 2020; Waitoki et al., 2024). Students from refugee backgrounds bring diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational experiences that both enrich classroom environments and challenge conventional pedagogical approaches (Momartin et al., 2019). Culturally responsive education acknowledges these assets while adapting teaching practices to better align with students' cultural reference points and learning preferences. In Aotearoa, Te Tiriti-based principles – including tino rangatiratanga, equity, and active protection of all peoples' wellbeing – compel educational institutions to address systemic barriers faced by

marginalised groups, including refugee communities (Came et al., 2023; Education and Training Act 2020). This obligation extends beyond surface-level cultural inclusion to structural transformation that genuinely centres the voices, values, and rights of those who have historically been underserved by mainstream education systems (Waitoki et al., 2024). The integration of trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches are grounded in Te Tiriti obligations to extend equity for marginalised groups (Came et al., 2020), offers potential for more holistic and effective refugee education support (Miri, 2024).

The RASNZ (Refugees as Survivors New Zealand) Welcoming Schools Programme was developed to address these identified gaps through systematic professional development by targeting the educational workforce. The programme's design reflects evidence-based principles from trauma-informed care, cultural competency frameworks, and refugee education research (Desautels, 2023; Momartin et al., 2019; STARTTS, 2021). By focusing on educator capacity and building alongside systems-level change the initiative aimed to create sustainable improvements in educational support for refugee-background students across Aotearoa New Zealand's resettlement regions.

Despite growing recognition of the need for trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches in refugee education, three significant gaps remain in the existing literature and practice landscape. First, while trauma-informed education has attracted increasing scholarly attention, its application within refugee-specific educational contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand remains under-researched (Barrie, 2024; Lembke et al., 2024). Second, there is limited evaluative evidence examining the benefits of structured professional development programmes designed to shift educator knowledge, attitudes, and practice in relation to refugee-background students (Momartin et al., 2019; STARTTS, 2021). Third, the integration of Te Tiriti-based principles with trauma-informed pedagogy as a framework for refugee education support has received little empirical attention, despite the obligations that are placed on educational institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand (Came et al., 2020; Education and Training Act 2020). The RASNZ Welcoming Schools Programme was designed to address these gaps precisely by providing a theoretically grounded, culturally situated professional development intervention that builds educator capacity across Aotearoa New Zealand's refugee resettlement regions.

This study aims to evaluate the benefits of the RASNZ Welcoming Schools Programme in enhancing educator knowledge, attitudes, and intended practice in relation to supporting refugee-background students and their whānau. To achieve this aim, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent does participation in the RASNZ Welcoming Schools Programme improve educators' knowledge and understanding of refugee trauma and its impact on learning and behaviour?
- (2) What changes in educator attitudes and approaches to supporting refugee-background students are associated with programme participation?
- (3) What barriers and enablers do educators identify in relation to implementing trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices following programme participation?

- (4) How does the programme contribute to interagency collaboration and systemic support for refugee-background students across Aotearoa New Zealand's resettlement regions?

Refugee trauma

Understanding the nature and impact of refugee trauma represents a foundational element in developing effective educational responses (Delahooke, 2019; Desautels, 2020; Herman, 1992). Refugee-background students typically experience multiple forms of trauma across three distinct phases: pre-migration experiences in countries of origin, transit experiences during flight, and post-migration stressors during resettlement (Mayor, 2019). This sequential trauma and cumulative exposure create complex presentations that require sophisticated understanding from educational practitioners (Desautels, 2020, 2023).

Pre-migration trauma encompasses exposure to war, conflict, persecution, and human rights violations that precipitate refugee flight. Students may have witnessed violence, experienced separation from family members, endured imprisonment or torture, or lived under conditions of chronic threat and deprivation. Such experiences profoundly impact neurological development, attachment patterns, and fundamental assumptions about safety and trustworthiness (Perry, 2001, 2003; van der Kolk, 2014). The pervasive nature of conflict-related trauma means that entire communities – including extended family networks and social structures – may be affected, limiting traditional sources of cultural and emotional support.

Transit trauma occurs during refugee flight and includes experiences in refugee camps, detention centres, or precarious living situations while seeking asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Students may have spent years living illegally in countries under conditions of constant uncertainty, limited resources, and ongoing threats to safety (Dryden-Peterson, 2024). Educational opportunities are frequently absent or severely limited during transit periods, resulting in significant academic gaps that compound upon arrival in resettlement countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). The prolonged nature of refugee situations means that many students have spent formative developmental years in environments that prioritise survival over learning (UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], 2024).

Post-migration trauma encompasses the ongoing stressors associated with resettlement in Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite achieving physical safety, refugee whānau encounter numerous challenges, including language barriers, cultural adjustment difficulties, discrimination, economic hardship, and complex navigation of unfamiliar systems. For students, these stressors are compounded by academic pressures, peer relationship difficulties, and often there are conflicting cultural expectations between home and school environments. The phenomenon of 'acculturative stress' describes the psychological impact of adapting to new cultural contexts while maintaining connections to heritage cultures (Sam & Berry, 2010).

The neurobiological impact of trauma exposure is particularly significant for understanding refugee student presentations in educational settings (Lisi et al., 2025). Chronic trauma exposure affects

brain development, particularly in regions responsible for executive functioning, emotional regulation, and memory consolidation (van der Kolk, 2014). Students may present with hypervigilance, difficulty concentrating, emotional dysregulation, or dissociative responses that are adaptive survival mechanisms, but they interfere with classroom learning (Delahooke, 2019). Traditional disciplinary approaches often misinterpret these trauma responses as behavioural problems, and potentially exacerbate students' distress and disengagement (Desautels, 2020).

Complex trauma is characterised by multiple and prolonged exposures to traumatic events; it is common among refugee-background students and requires specialised understanding (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Unlike single-incident trauma, complex trauma affects core developmental processes, including attachment formation, self-regulation, and identity development (Murray, 2019; Shahimi et al., 2024). Students with complex trauma histories may struggle with trust, including difficulty forming relationships with educators, and experience challenges with emotional and behavioural self-regulation that persist long after achieving physical safety (Lyons et al., 2020).

Cultural considerations in trauma expression and recovery add additional layers of complexity. Western conceptualisations of trauma and mental health may not align with refugee communities' understanding of distress and healing (Brannelly et al, 2025). Some cultures emphasise collective rather than individual recovery processes, spiritual dimensions of healing, or different expressions of psychological distress. Educational practitioners must navigate these cultural differences while providing appropriate support, requiring cultural competence alongside trauma-informed approaches (Sansom, 2025).

The concept of post-traumatic growth offers an important counterbalance to deficit-focused understandings of refugee experiences (Chan et al., 2016). Research demonstrates that many people who experience trauma can also experience post-traumatic growth (Miller et al., 2019). Refugee-background students often display remarkable strength, adaptability, and resourcefulness that can be leveraged as educational assets when properly recognised and supported (Willette, 2020).

Intergenerational trauma transmission represents another critical consideration in refugee education (Flanagan et al., 2020). Parents who have experienced trauma may struggle with their own adjustment while simultaneously supporting their children's educational and social integration (Khraisha et al., 2024). Family stress, parental mental health challenges, and disrupted parenting practices can compound student difficulties. However, family connections also represent crucial protective factors and cultural resources that can support student resilience when appropriately engaged (Arakelyan & Ager, 2021).

Methodology

The Welcoming Schools Programme was delivered as a single full-day workshop that ran from 9.00am to 2.30pm and it was offered on multiple dates throughout the year to maximise access. The Welcoming ECE Programme followed the same format. Both programmes were offered face-to-face.

Additionally, online versions of the Welcoming Schools training developed for ESOL teachers and schools extended national reach.

The workshops were designed to be didactic, interactive and engaging; they drew on multimedia presentations, guided exercises, and structured group activities. The content covered the refugee journey, their resettlement experience in Aotearoa New Zealand, and worked effectively with collective cultures, and the impact of trauma on children and young people's brains, bodies, memories, emotions, relationships, behaviour and capacity to learn. It also explored trauma-responsive practice within education settings, activities and strategies that supported recovery and improved behavioural and cognitive capacity, and case scenarios drawn from real educational contexts. Group work sessions focused on management of difficult situations, reflective practice, and hopes and aspirations for refugee students and their whānau. Participants also received information about services and supports available to ECE and schools in regional centres.

The workshops were facilitated by a team of experienced professionals with specialist expertise in refugee health, education, and mental health, and included an educational psychologist, a clinical psychologist, the head teacher of the AUT Refugee Education Centre at the Mangere Refugee Education Centre and the RASNZ Training and Development Manager.

Evaluation design

This study employed a mixed-methods evaluation design to comprehensively assess the benefits and impact of the RASNZ Welcoming Schools Programme. The programme consisted of a single 5.5-hour trauma-informed training session, that included reading materials and online support and advice for educators. The evaluation framework was designed to capture both quantitative indicators of programme reach and participant satisfaction, alongside qualitative insights into the programme's impact on educator knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Central to this framework was an outcome-tracking component, that involved post-test measurement administered after every session to monitor participant progress and assess immediate learning gains. This approach recognised that meaningful educational change occurs across multiple levels and timeframes, and required diverse data collection strategies. It included a repeated post-session assessment that adequately captured programme effects.

The evaluation design incorporated principles of participatory evaluation, and it emphasised the importance of participant voice in determining programme effectiveness and areas for improvement (Gujt, 2000). This approach aligned with trauma-informed principles of collaboration and empowerment, to ensure that findings reflect the experiences and perspectives of those directly engaged in the programme. The design also incorporated process-evaluation elements to understand programme implementation factors that contributed to observed outcomes (Bamberger, 2012).

The evaluation was guided by RASNZ's established Impact Framework which provides systematic approaches to monitoring, evaluation, and learning across the organisation's community development work (Catapult Consulting, 2021). This framework emphasises outcome-focused data collection, regular incorporation of feedback, and the utilisation of findings for programme

improvement and development. Alignment with existing organisational evaluation practices ensured consistency with RASNZ's broader accountability and learning commitments.

Data collection

Data collection occurred across the entire programme delivery period from January to October 2025, employing multiple methods to capture comprehensive information about programme implementation, participant experiences, and observed outcomes. The primary data source consisted of structured feedback forms completed by all workshop participants immediately following each session, to ensure high response rates and to capture immediate reactions and learning. This was supplemented by observational data and follow-up communications.

The structured feedback forms included a combination of four Likert-type items and five open-ended questions (Colosi & Dunifon, 2006). The Likert-type items asked participants to rate their satisfaction with four specific areas of workshop content on a five-point scale ranging from *Strongly Dissatisfied* to *Strongly Satisfied*: (1) receiving refugees in Aotearoa terminology; (2) the refugee journey; (3) the impact of trauma on students; and (4) practical skills to support students. The five open-ended questions invited participants to list five things they had learned during the workshop; to describe strategies they intended to use in their classroom or school setting; to indicate whether they would recommend the training to others; to identify any topics they felt should be included in future workshops; and to share any additional reflections on their experience at the workshop.

Workshop observation data provided additional insights into programme delivery benefits and participant engagement. Observational notes captured participant interactions, engagement levels, and informal feedback during workshop sessions, to supplement formal feedback forms by providing contextual information about workshop dynamics and implementation factors that affected programme delivery.

Follow-up communications with participants that occurred weeks to months after workshop attendance provided insights into actual implementation of programme strategies and the longer-term impact on practice. These communications enabled examination of the sustainability of programme effects and identification of factors that supported or hindered strategy implementation.

Participants

The study population comprised of participants in the Welcoming Early Childhood Education and Welcoming Schools workshops delivered between January and October 2025 in Auckland, Christchurch, and Manawatū regions. A total of 516 participants attended 15 workshops, representing diverse roles within the education sector serving refugee-background pre-schoolers and school-age students. This broad participation enabled examination of programme impact across different professional contexts and responsibilities.

Participants represented diverse roles across the education and community sector. The 67 ECE centres contributed centre managers, curriculum specialists, teachers, learning support assistants, and education support workers from a range of settings; they included community-based centres, privately-owned services, Māori language immersion programmes, and specialist services, such as

Safari Multicultural Playgroups and Barnardos Early Learning Centres. The 193 primary, intermediate, and secondary schools across Auckland, Christchurch, Palmerston North, and Levin were represented by principals, deputy principals, associate principals, classroom teachers, ESOL specialists, learning support coordinators, SENCos, teacher aides, and pastoral care leaders. Additional participants included Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLb) from multiple clusters; school-based health and social service professionals (school nurses, social workers, counsellors, educational psychologists, and youth wellbeing practitioners); Ministry of Education senior advisors, staff from refugee resettlement agencies, multicultural centres, and community support programmes.

Participant recruitment was purposive and based on an open invitation extended to schools and early childhood services across Auckland, Christchurch, Levin, and Palmerston North regions. Communication occurred through direct contact, professional networks, and Ministry of Education advisors. Participation in the evaluation was voluntary. The high level of repeat institutional participation with many schools sending multiple staff members across different workshops, suggested strong institutional engagement with the programme.

Ethical considerations

The conduct of this evaluation was guided by recognised principles of ethical research practice, and included respect for persons, the minimisation of harm, and a commitment to honesty and transparency in the use of data (National Ethics Advisory Committee [NEAC], 2019). Although formal ethical approval from a Human Ethics Committee was not required for this evaluation, this determination was based on several key considerations consistent with established guidance for low-risk programme evaluations in educational and community health settings.

Formal ethical review was not deemed necessary for several reasons. First, participation in the evaluation was entirely voluntary. All participants were clearly informed that completion of the post-workshop feedback form was optional and would not affect their participation in the professional development programme. Second, the primary purpose of data collection was explicitly communicated to participants as informing ongoing improvements in programme delivery, content relevance, and the development of knowledge and skills within the session, rather than generating new academic knowledge or testing hypotheses about participants as research subjects. This was consistent with the distinction commonly drawn between research and service evaluation, where the latter is conducted to assess or improve the quality of an existing programme rather than to produce generalisable knowledge (NEAC, 2022).

Third, the risk of harm to participants was minimal. The evaluation did not involve the collection of sensitive personal information, clinical data, or details that could expose participants to psychological distress or adverse consequences. Feedback forms were completed anonymously, with no identifying information recorded, thereby protecting participant confidentiality and reducing any potential for coercion or reputational risk. Anonymity also served to mitigate social desirability bias and supported the honesty and candour of responses.

Fourth, the evaluation was conducted in alignment with RASNZ's established Impact Framework and organisational accountability practices, which incorporate principles of transparency, participant

respect, and responsible data governance (Catapult Consulting, 2021). Data were stored securely, accessed only by authorised members of the evaluation team, and used solely for the purposes of programme improvement and reporting to relevant stakeholders.

Formal ethical approval was not sought, yet the evaluation team remained attentive to the ethical dimensions of working with a professional cohort that included individuals who may have had personal connections to refugee experiences. The trauma-informed nature of the programme heightened awareness of participant wellbeing during workshops, and facilitators were mindful of the potential for emotionally activating content. Debriefing opportunities and access to support were embedded within the programme design, consistent with best practice for trauma-informed professional development (Desautels, 2023). These considerations extended to the evaluation process, ensuring that data collection activities did not add to participant burden or distress.

The presentation of qualitative data in this report was handled with care. While participant responses were quoted to illustrate key themes, all quotations were presented in ways that avoided the identification of individual participants, and no personally identifiable information was retained or published. In the context of a professional development setting where participants may know one another, particular care was taken to select quotations that were representative of broader patterns rather than uniquely attributable to specific individuals.

In summary, the evaluation was conducted in a manner consistent with ethical principles appropriate to its nature and scope as a programme evaluation, and all reasonable steps were taken to ensure participant wellbeing, confidentiality, and the responsible use of data throughout the process.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from the Likert-type items were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequency counts and percentages were calculated for each response category across all four content areas, enabling assessment of overall participant satisfaction and identification of variation in ratings across workshop topics. Ratings were aggregated across all 15 workshop sessions to produce summary figures for the evaluation period as a whole (January to October 2025). The evaluation design acknowledged the complex, multi-level nature of educational change by incorporating immediate and longer-term outcome indicators (Palmer et al., 2016). Immediate outcomes focused on participant satisfaction, knowledge acquisition, and intentions to implement learned strategies. Intermediate outcomes examined the actual implementation of trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices, and longer-term outcomes considered impacts on student experience and educational outcomes.

Qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analysed using Bingham's (2023) *five-phase process of qualitative data analysis*: organising and preparing the data; reading and memoing; describing and classifying codes into themes; developing and assessing interpretations; and representing and visualising the data. Open-ended responses were coded systematically to identify key themes related to programme impact, learning outcomes, implementation intentions, and suggestions for improvement. The analysis incorporated both deductive coding based on programme objectives and inductive coding to capture unexpected or emergent themes.

Data triangulation across multiple sources – feedback forms, observational data, and follow-up communications – enhanced the validity and reliability of findings (Bamberger et al., 2010). Convergence of evidence across sources strengthened confidence in programme impact assessments, while divergent findings were examined to understand contextual factors influencing programme benefits.

The analysis process incorporated reflexivity and consideration of researcher positionality, acknowledging that evaluation findings were influenced by the evaluator’s perspectives and relationship with the programme (Ide & Beddoe, 2023). Regular discussion with programme facilitators and participant validation of findings helped to mitigate potential bias and enhance the credibility of evaluation conclusions.

Findings and discussion

Programme reach and engagement

The RASNZ Welcoming Schools Programme achieved substantial reach across the educational landscapes in Auckland, Christchurch, Levin and Palmerston North during the evaluation period; 15 workshops delivered training to 516 participants which represented 67 ECE centres and 193 schools. This level of engagement demonstrates significant sectoral interest in trauma-informed approaches to refugee education and suggests that the programme addressed a previously unmet professional development need.

Patterns of participation revealed strong institutional commitment, as many schools and centres sent multiple staff members to different workshops. This multi-staff engagement indicates organisational recognition of the programme’s value and suggests potential for institutional culture change beyond individual practitioner development. The high level of repeat institutional participation also facilitated peer support and shared implementation of learned strategies within educational settings.

The diversity of participant roles reflects the programme’s success, as the full education sector engaged and supported refugee-background students. Beyond classroom teachers, participation included senior leaders, specialised support staff, health professionals, and community service providers. This comprehensive engagement created opportunities for systemic change and enhanced coordination of support services across different professional domains.

The participation of Regional RTLB clusters was particularly significant, given their specialised role in supporting students with additional learning needs. The engagement of seven RTLB clusters across Auckland indicates that specialised learning support services recognised refugee-background students as a priority population requiring enhanced professional development and support strategies.

Knowledge and attitude transformation

Participant feedback revealed significant shifts in the understanding of refugee experiences and the impacts of trauma on learning and behaviour. Prior to programme participation, many educators

reported limited knowledge of the refugee journey and its psychological consequences. One participant reflected that:

Although hard-hitting, the videos were very crucial to the learning today. Unless we have seen with our own eyes or experienced it ourselves, we cannot understand what these students and whānau have been through. I plan to make opportunities to connect better with our ELL (English language learners) whānau and to share learning with other staff at a staff meeting.

Post-workshop feedback consistently indicated enhanced appreciation for the complexity and severity of trauma experienced by refugee-background students and whānau. Another participant noted:

Thoroughly enjoyed the learning. Appreciate the stories, insights and discussions shared today. I don't have all the answers to the many questions I had prior to a today's session. However, I've gained enough to make a start into a new direction.

A critical finding was the transformation in how participants conceptualised challenging student behaviours. Prior to the programme, some educators interpreted difficulties such as withdrawal, aggression, or academic struggles as behavioural problems requiring disciplinary responses. Post-workshop feedback demonstrated an understanding that these presentations often reflected trauma responses requiring therapeutic rather than punitive approaches. As one teacher said, "It's a fantastic and practical workshop. It's important to look at the why of the behaviour and to make sure that is not used as a punishment". This paradigm shift from behavioural management to trauma-informed support represents a fundamental change in educational philosophy with significant implications for student experience and outcomes (Desautels, 2020).

The concept of the "window of tolerance" (Siegel & Drulis, 2023) emerged as particularly influential in transforming participants' understanding. "The window of tolerance has increased my knowledge. I have learned to recognise trauma responses and to be more culturally sensitive". This neurobiological framework for understanding stress responses resonated strongly with educators, providing a scientific basis for comprehending why trauma-affected students might struggle with attention, emotional regulation, and learning (Lyons et al., 2020). Participants frequently referenced this concept in feedback, indicating its utility for reframing student difficulties and developing appropriate support responses. One participant noted:

I learned that trauma is not only about what has happened to a child, but also about what didn't happen – what wasn't provided is also trauma, and to have a more trauma-focused lens, and to be more mindful that a lot of kids may be misunderstood or misdiagnosed and labelled without having a trauma-informed assessment.

Post-traumatic growth emerged as another transformative concept, and one participant reflected, "A key learning was that just because students have trauma, it doesn't mean they can't thrive. It was hopeful and reminded me of the importance of our job". The recognition that trauma survivors can experience post-traumatic growth challenged assumptions about refugee students as permanently

damaged or disadvantaged (Sultani et al., 2024). This strengths-based perspective provided hope and optimism for educators while validating the remarkable survival and adaptive achievements of refugee whānau (Chan et al., 2016).

Implementation of trauma-informed practices

Participant feedback revealed strong intentions to implement trauma-informed strategies learned through the programme, and over 95% of participants indicated plans to modify their practice based on the programme's content. Teachers emphasised the importance of maintaining an inclusive focus in curriculum design. As one educator noted, "Young people leave everything behind but keep the trauma within. Creating a safe and inclusive environment is important – for example, including refugee stories in lessons to build empathy". Specific strategies frequently mentioned included creating calm-down spaces, implementing co-regulation techniques, establishing predictable routines, and developing sensory support options for dysregulated students (Delahooke, 2019; Desautels, 2023). One educator noted:

Excellent presentation – the trauma section contained very valuable learning. I have a better understanding of how hard it is for young people and whānau to settle and ways to support this. I'll use the resources available and information shared to support students.

The emphasis on adult self-regulation as prerequisite for supporting student regulation was particularly well-received by one educator who reflected, "In my classroom setting I plan to model co-regulation strategies constantly and consistently, to continue to be a safe and approachable Kaiako, and I will explicitly teach social and emotional learning, and regulation". Participants recognised that their own emotional state directly influenced their capacity to provide effective support to trauma-affected students, and one commented, "I learned about the importance of co-regulation and the adult remaining calm and recognising their own triggers". This understanding led many to commit to personal mindfulness practices, stress management strategies, and reflective approaches to their interactions with challenging student behaviours.

Environmental modifications were commonly planned implementations, with participants describing intentions to create physical spaces that promote felt safety (Gobbel, 2020). As one educator explained, "I now have a toolbox of strategies including a calm down centre, breathing and relaxation exercises, brain stem calming activities for students who have experienced trauma". These changes included establishing quiet retreat areas, incorporating sensory tools, such as fidget items and textured materials, and modifying classroom arrangements to reduce overstimulation and provide clear sight lines for hypervigilant students (Desautels, 2023).

Participants focused on pedagogical adaptations – inclusive of trauma-sensitive teaching practices – that accommodate the learning difficulties often associated with trauma exposure. These included implementing strategies such as breaking tasks into smaller components, providing multiple opportunities for success, incorporating movement and sensory breaks, and offering choices to enhance student agency and control (Desautels, 2020, 2023). One participant reflected:

I will go away with a lot more knowledge around refugee students and whānau in my kete! As a social worker making children feel safe, being heard is crucial. Providing a calming space isn't the only option, but always give the student another option (e.g. bouncing a ball) to give them control.

Assessment and behaviour management approaches were identified as priority areas for modification. Participants planned to move away from punitive responses toward collaborative problem-solving approaches that addressed underlying trauma responses. This included implementing restorative practices, developing individual support plans, and focusing on relationship repair rather than punishment following difficult incidents (Delahooke, 2019).

Development of cultural responsiveness

The programme successfully enhanced participants' understanding of culturally responsive teaching principles, and their application to supporting refugee-background students. Participants reported increased appreciation for the importance of validating students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds while supporting their acquisition cultural knowledge of Aotearoa New Zealand and English language proficiency. As one participant explained, "It's important to show love and respect to parents. Learning a few words from the languages our whānau speak helps communicate with parents and children".

Language support strategies were identified as crucial areas for development, with participants planning to incorporate visual supports, peer translation opportunities, and home language validation into their teaching practice. As one participant explained, "It's important to allow children and parents to speak their mother tongue at home and to preserve their own language". The recognition that maintaining heritage languages supports rather than hinders English acquisition represented a significant acknowledgement.

Family engagement emerged as a priority area requiring cultural responsiveness. One participant noted:

I have a better understanding of how to support a refugee family and tamariki in my centre and any other child who may be dysregulated. It's about connecting with whānau at a different level, working with interpreters and working in a more holistic manner with all tamariki.

Participants developed a deeper understanding of the barriers that can prevent refugee whānau from engaging in traditional participation-based school activities and planned to implement more inclusive approaches to family communication and involvement (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc, 2015), and one participant shared, "I understand that trauma can feel worse when arriving in NZ and making sure that support is a whānau centred approach – taking the pressure/stress off the kids". This included utilising interpreters more effectively, adapting communication styles to cultural norms, and recognising that limited English proficiency does not indicate lack of interest in children's education.

Cultural celebration and representation were identified as important strategies for creating inclusive learning environments. Participants planned to incorporate refugee students' cultural knowledge and experiences into curriculum content and celebrate cultural diversity in their educational settings.

Interagency network development

A significant programme outcome was the strengthening of connections between educational institutions and community support services. Many participants reported being previously unaware of the range of services available to support refugee whānau and students. The programme's emphasis on service mapping and referral pathways created enhanced capacity to provide holistic support addressing educational, social, health, and welfare needs. A participant reflected:

I truly appreciated learning about the profound impact of trauma on refugee children and whānau and how we can effectively support them within our school environment. It is also wonderful that you provided a range of community services offered for refugee whānau and students. Together we can make a real difference.

RTLB emerged as crucial linking agents between schools and specialised services. Workshop feedback forms indicated that RTLB participants gained both content knowledge and practical confidence in supporting refugee-background students with complex needs. Feedback also highlighted the value of closer coordination between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and RTLB services in distributing resources and funding information to schools, as one educator pointed out, "MoE and RTLB should work more closely to help distribute information about the resources and funding available to our schools. I'll take away all the strategies you talked about today to use with my classes". Another RTLB participant shared about the direct applicability of programme content and noted, "The question of practical skills to support students when they are at an escalated level was well answered during the workshop. A lot of very useful content". The development of RTLB expertise in refugee trauma and cultural responsiveness created sustainable capacity for ongoing support across multiple school communities.

School-based health and social service professionals attended the programme as participants, including school nurses, social workers, counsellors, educational psychologists, and youth wellbeing practitioners; they reported that it strengthened their understanding of how to integrate their roles into educational support planning for refugee-background students. Their feedback indicated an enhanced capacity to provide holistic, coordinated support, which addressed both educational and wellbeing needs alongside classroom teachers and school leaders. As one participant noted, "I now know about who to ask for help if I need it e.g. interpreters, education funding and supports for refugee students, transitional help for older students, community hubs, and Sir Robert Jones Refugee Daughters".

Challenges and implementation barriers

Despite overwhelmingly positive feedback, participants identified several challenges to implementing programme learning. A recurring theme in feedback forms was the recognition that trauma-informed support for refugee-background students requires dedicated structures, key personnel, and whole-

school systems – resources that individual practitioners cannot create alone. Participants shared that while they had gained knowledge and strategies, translating these into sustained practice depended on having appropriate support roles and systems in place by stating, “The workshop made me realise that schools need to be safe places and they need to have key people to support the student daily”. Others highlighted the importance of adult self-regulation capacity as a prerequisite for supporting students, noting that “if you’re outside your own window of tolerance, you can’t help someone else” – implying that institutional conditions that enable staff wellbeing are as important as individual skill development.

Institutional resistance was identified by some participants as a potential barrier to implementation. While individual practitioners felt equipped to modify their practice, broader institutional change required leadership support and whole-school commitment to implement trauma-informed approaches. Some participants expressed uncertainty about their capacity to influence systemic change within their schools. One teacher explained, “We need buy-in from SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Coordinators) and senior management – by targeting those specific people at schools, we can make a greater impact for refugee students”.

Professional isolation was highlighted as a challenge for sustaining implementation, particularly for participants who attended workshops individually rather than as part of school teams. Without collegial support and shared understanding, some participants worried about their capacity to maintain trauma-informed approaches when faced with competing demands and expectations.

Programme sustainability and scalability

The programme’s design demonstrated strong potential for sustainability and scalability across Aotearoa New Zealand’s refugee resettlement regions. The comprehensive resource provision, including detailed workbooks and ongoing service connections, created foundations for continued implementation beyond initial workshop participation.

The train-the-trainer potential was evident in participant feedback, and many expressed interest in sharing programme learning with colleagues who had not attended the workshops. Many participants requested additional resources to support internal professional development sessions, indicating an organic spread of programme content within institutions, as many stated, “The resources that were shared will be taken back and gifted to other teachers”.

The engagement of senior educational leadership, including Ministry of Education advisors and school principals, created conditions for policy-level implementation and systemic support for trauma-informed refugee education approaches (Ministry of Education, 2020). This leadership engagement suggests potential for integrating programme approaches into broader educational policy and practice frameworks.

Regional adaptation appeared feasible, based on programme delivery across a number of resettlement locations. The core programme content remained relevant across different school types and community demographics, while specific service-provider presentations could be adapted to reflect local support networks and resources.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

While the evaluation yielded largely positive outcomes, a number of less favourable findings and methodological limitations warrant acknowledgement. Participant feedback indicated that the programme content was at times perceived as too extensive, with insufficient time allocated for discussion and processing. This suggests that future iterations may benefit from a more measured pacing of content delivery or multiple sessions to allow for deeper participant engagement.

From a methodological standpoint, the evaluation was subject to several limitations inherent to its design. The use of post-test measurement alone, without a pre-test comparison or control group, limits the extent to which observed outcomes can be attributed directly to programme participation. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, and the relatively short follow-up period means that the durability of knowledge and attitudinal changes over time remains unclear.

Further research is recommended to address these gaps, particularly longitudinal studies that track participant outcomes over an extended period. Long-term impact monitoring would provide valuable insight into whether the knowledge, attitudes, and practice changes observed following programme participation are sustained, and would strengthen the evidence base for the RASNZ Welcoming Schools Programme more broadly.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the RASNZ Welcoming Schools Programme demonstrates significant potential for trauma-informed, culturally responsive professional development to enhance educational support for refugee-background students. Through comprehensive engagement with 516 participants across the education sector, the programme achieved meaningful transformation in educator knowledge, attitudes, and intended practice, which addresses critical gaps in refugee education support.

The programme's success lies in its integration of evidence-based trauma-informed principles with cultural responsiveness and practical implementation strategies. By providing educators with both theoretical understanding and concrete tools for supporting refugee-background students, the programme created foundations for sustainable change in practice. The emphasis on strengths-based approaches challenged deficit narratives while providing hope and optimism for educators working with students who present with complex needs.

The transformation in how educators conceptualise challenging student behaviours represents a paradigm shift with profound implications for refugee-background student experiences and outcomes. The movement from behaviour management to trauma-informed support approaches suggests potential for reduced school exclusions, enhanced student engagement, and improved educational outcomes for this vulnerable population.

The programme's comprehensive approach to professional development – incorporating knowledge transfer, skill development, resource provision, and network building – created multiple pathways for

impact and sustainability. The engagement of diverse professional roles within the education sector enhanced the potential for systemic change beyond individual practitioner development. However, the evaluation also identified implementation challenges that require ongoing attention: resource constraints, time limitations, and institutional resistance represent barriers that must be addressed through continued professional development, policy support, and institutional commitment to trauma-informed approaches. The sustainability of programme impacts depends on continued reinforcement and support for participating educators.

The programme's contribution to interagency network development represents a significant achievement that extends beyond immediate educational impacts. By connecting educators with community support services and enhancing coordination of wraparound support, the programme addressed the complex, multifaceted needs of refugee whānau that extend beyond educational settings.

Several methodological limitations of this evaluation should be acknowledged. The use of post-test measurement without a pre-test comparison or control group limits the extent to which observed outcomes can be attributed directly to programme participation. Reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have been inclined to report positive outcomes consistent with social desirability. Because the follow-up period was relatively short, it is unclear whether changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practice will change over time. Additionally, participant feedback indicated that the programme content was at times perceived as too extensive, with insufficient time to fully discuss and process the material presented. Despite these limitations, the consistency and strength of positive findings across multiple data sources provide reasonable confidence in the programme's immediate impact. Future iterations would benefit from incorporating pre-test measures, control or comparison groups, and longer-term follow-up to strengthen the evidence base.

Future research should examine longer-term impacts of the programme on student outcomes, including academic achievement, school engagement, and wellbeing indicators. Longitudinal studies would provide valuable evidence about the sustainability of practice changes and their effects on refugee student experiences. Additionally, research examining programme adaptation and implementation in other resettlement contexts would contribute to understanding scalability and transferability.

The evaluation findings support continued investment in trauma-informed professional development for educators working with refugee-background students. The programme provides a replicable model for enhancing educational support that could be adapted for implementation across New Zealand's expanding network of refugee resettlement regions. As the country continues to fulfil its international resettlement commitments, programmes like this become essential infrastructure for successful integration and improved outcomes for refugee whānau.

The RASNZ Welcoming Schools Programme represents a significant contribution to evidence-based refugee education support in New Zealand. The evaluation findings provide strong evidence for the benefits of trauma-informed, culturally responsive professional development in transforming

educator capacity and creating more inclusive and supportive educational environments for refugee-background students. The programme stands as a model for comprehensive, systems-focused approaches to refugee education that address both individual practitioner development and broader institutional change.

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Annette has worked for over 25 years to improve health, education and employment outcomes for Asian, refugee and migrant groups in New Zealand in a number of roles including as a public health nurse, project manager, researcher and educator. From 2000, Annette had the position of Refugee Health Coordinator for the Auckland Regional Public Health Service. In 2007, Annette took up the position of Refugee and Migrant Project Manager for the NRA (Northern Regional Alliance) where she commissioned a number of studies including the Asian and MELAA (Middle Eastern, Latin American and African) Health Needs Assessments of people living in the Auckland region and the Asian Health in Aotearoa trend studies. In 2009, she received a doctorate from Massey University. The subject of her thesis was 'Refugees as 'Others': Social and Cultural Citizenship Rights for Refugees in New Zealand Health Services'. Annette currently works for Refugees as Survivors NZ (RASNZ) as the manager of Training and Development.

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