
EVALUATION OF UNICEF UK'S RIGHTS RESPECTING SCHOOLS AWARD

Executive Summary, September 2010

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INTRODUCTION

UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) started in 2004 and more than 1,600 primary and secondary schools are registered for the award in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It helps schools to use the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as their values framework. In order to become rights-respecting, a school works through two levels, self-evaluating their progress. When they believe they have met the standards, an external assessment takes place and, if standards are met, a certificate is awarded. This report comes at the end of the three-year evaluation of the RRSA. It is based on:

- findings from annual visits to 12 schools across five local authorities (LAs) over the three years from 2007 to 2010;
- single visits to a further 19 schools across 10 additional LAs in spring 2010.

In 2007, UNICEF UK set out its objectives for extending the group of schools it was working with on the RRSA. It then went on to develop indicators for success that have provided the key criteria for this evaluation. It originally selected eight indicators of success. However, following the first and second years' evaluations, some indicators were combined, leaving six final success indicators (see main findings below).

When the report refers to the 12 schools, this draws on longitudinal data gathered over three years. References to the 19 schools, on the other hand, are essentially cross-sectional (one-off) data from the additional school visits in 2010. When reference is made to the 31 schools, this includes both groups.

The aim of the evaluation was to assess the impact of the RRSA on the well-being and achievement of children and young people (CYP) in the participating schools (including measures of academic attainment and gains in emotional and social skills, knowledge and understanding).

MAIN FINDINGS

The RRSA has had a profound effect on the majority of the schools involved in the programme. For some school communities, there is strong evidence that it has been a life-changing experience. In the documentation from one infant school, the head said, “After 16 years as head teacher at [...] school, I cannot think of anything else we have introduced that has had such an impact.”

Given the multitude of initiatives introduced in the last 16 years, including several major national primary strategies, this speaks volumes. As the evidence will show, not every school makes this claim. However, for the majority, the values based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and ‘guide to life’ provided by the RRSA has had a significant and positive influence on the school ethos, relationships, inclusivity, understanding of the wider world and the well-being of the school community, according to the adults and young people in the evaluation schools.

The main findings relating to each of the six indicators are outlined below:

1. See www.unicef.org/crc/ for more information on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1. Knowledge and understanding of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)¹

Children and young people (CYP), staff, governors and some parents in all but one of the 31 schools had extensive knowledge and understanding of the CRC and this was reflected in their use of rights respecting language, attitudes and relationships.

- In 11 of the 12 schools, there was a major shift in attitudes and behaviours from focusing mainly on rights to focusing on responsibilities and rights.
- Staff reported an understanding that the RRSA is a “way of being” rather than a body of knowledge and that the award created a major impetus to implement this “way of being”.
- In the majority of schools, all staff were engaged in the RRSA. In some schools, however, midday supervisors, supply teachers and visitors sometimes needed further support to recognize what it means to be in a rights respecting (RR) school. Some schools have addressed this in positive ways. For example, some have produced guides and RR charters for lunch times or briefings are given by school leaders.
- In a few schools, the rights and responsibilities language was still used inconsistently and the underlying values of the RRSA appeared not to have been fully embedded. This raised questions about how far pupils adopted the values because they understood and believed in them, or because they were offered tangible incentives such as ‘reward points’ for doing so.

MAIN FINDINGS cont.

2. Relationships and behaviour

All 31 schools were characterised by very positive relationships between pupils, between staff, and between pupils and staff. Listening, respect and empathy were evident and there was little or no bullying or shouting. Staff and pupils reported experiencing a strong sense of belonging.

- Relationships and behaviour were considered to have improved due to better understanding by pupils and staff of how to be rights respecting, using the CRC as a guide. There was little or no shouting, and pupils and staff both considered incidents of bullying to be minimal.
- Where conflicts did arise, pupils were more likely than previously to resolve these for themselves.

3. Pupils feel empowered to respect the environment and rights of others locally, nationally and globally

Across almost all the schools, pupils made a positive contribution on local and global issues as a result of their increased awareness of the universality of children's rights and the extent to which these are denied.

- Pupils became actively involved in campaigns that they understood in terms of upholding or defending the rights of others and living sustainably.
- Pupils' respect for the rights of others globally was addressed mainly through the international context rather than the national one. In some communities, pupils were less aware of national rights issues, beyond their own immediate community. Nevertheless, they were aware of international issues.

4. Pupils demonstrate positive attitudes towards inclusivity and diversity in society

Across all schools, uniformly positive attitudes to diversity were reported and this was reported to have improved over the three years.

- Uniformly positive attitudes to diversity were reported towards peers and staff with disabilities, and towards those with behavioural or emotional problems. This was reported to have improved.
- Pupils from a range of ethnic, race and religious backgrounds, and English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, reported very positive attitudes of inclusivity.
- There were many examples in the interviews of pupils challenging externally imposed stereotypes or prejudice, including that experienced by families of pupils in the school from minority ethnic groups or with disabilities.

5. Pupils actively participate in decision-making in the school community

There was evidence in 11 of the 12 schools that children and young people knew how to go about making informed decisions and being active citizens. There was also widespread evidence of this in the additional 19 schools, though to varying degrees.

- Pupils reported that they take responsibility for their own decisions, though a few still gave examples of where teachers and school leaders make decisions for them.
- Schools were supporting the youngest children and those with learning disabilities to engage in decision-making at the simplest level.
- Pupils recognized and understood the mechanisms by which they can influence decisions in the school, such as school and class councils and RRSA ambassadors. In RR schools, opportunities for pupils to raise issues with these groups and to get the feedback from them were much better established than in schools generally (see Whitty and Wisby, 2007).
- Decisions influenced by pupils mainly focused on important but not central issues, such as playground equipment, lunchtime arrangements and toilets.
- In the majority of the 31 schools, pupils were involved in either governing bodies or staff appointments, or evaluating teaching and learning. However, only a few schools involved pupils in all three of these activities. There were some outstanding examples of sensitivity in terms of undertaking these activities and in terms of the training and support given to pupils.

6. Pupils show improved learning and standards

Engagement in learning was reported to have improved in the majority of schools, with an understanding of the responsibilities that this entailed to both the self and others.

- Adults and young people reported that the positive rights respecting relationships in classrooms created a climate conducive to learning.
- Nearly two thirds of the 31 schools raised their attainment over the period 2007–2010, and just under half of the schools increased their contextual value-added scores, though typical fluctuations in these scores year-on-year make interpretation difficult.
- Fixed-term exclusions decreased in 13 schools and stabilized in a further three of the 26 schools for which data were available. Five schools had no fixed-term exclusions throughout the period.
- From 2007 to 2010, eight of the 14 schools that had more than 20 per cent of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) improved their attainment; seven improved their attendance and six reduced their fixed-term exclusions. Three of the four schools with over 50 per cent FSM increased attendance and attainment and reduced their fixed-term exclusions. RRSA may mediate the influence of poor socio-economic circumstances on outcomes.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

School leadership

- School leaders used the framework of the RRSA to provide cohesion to existing initiatives, such as citizenship, the Social, Emotional and Affective Learning initiative (SEAL), Healthy Schools and Eco Schools.
- School leaders modelled rights and responsibilities in the way they treated other staff, pupils and parents.
- Being 'registered' on the RRSA provided levers for school leaders to 'push' forward the development of an RRSA ethos, for example, through action plans and impact reports. It also provided contacts with other schools pursuing similar aims.

Impact on pupils of transfer to another school

- The impact on pupils of transferring from an RR primary school to a secondary school not involved in the RRSA was mixed. However, in general, pupils reported that less rights respecting behaviour was shown by, and to, teachers and fellow pupils, than they had experienced in their primary school. However, this may reflect the difference in behaviour at this age rather than prior experiences.

Costs of implementation

- Schools regarded the RRSA as good value for money, as minimal financial outlay was required. Until very recently, LAs and UNICEF UK both offered support that was free of charge. This support was key to schools' progress. In particular:
 - UNICEF UK worked with the LAs to provide a framework in which schools could document their progress and identify future actions.
 - The requirements for impact reports and action plans created an 'accountability' that was critical in keeping them motivated. The majority of staff we spoke to who were involved in completing these reports considered them to be non-onerous.
 - Staff development opportunities provided by UNICEF UK and LAs were valued and influential. They have helped to improve understanding and provided contacts with other schools.
 - UNICEF resources were used extensively by some schools while others seemed largely unaware of their existence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. *It is acknowledged that the CRC committee for the UK recommends the RRSA in its implementation plan in relation to duties under Article 42.*

1. Given the positive outcomes and low costs associated with the RRSA, UNICEF UK and DfE to discuss how it should be publicized to schools and LAs as a way of encouraging take up². In particular, consideration should be given to how schools in the same geographical area can work together on the RRSA in order to maximize the sustainability of effects on children transferring from one school to another.
2. UNICEF UK and RR schools to promote greater precision in the use of language insofar as it reflects the values of the CRC, in order to increase consistency in language use within and across schools and to ensure that attitudes and behaviour reflect the language of the CRC precisely. This might address the few instances of pupils apparently adopting the values because they were offered tangible incentives such as reward points to do so, rather than because they had understood and believed the CRC values. Encouraging schools to undertake regular evaluation of the impact of the RRSA through pupil feedback should elicit this and allow it to be addressed.
3. Within UNICEF UK's efforts to promote action for long-term social justice, UNICEF UK should reconsider how to extend current support for the development of better understanding of the process of fundraising – what happens to donations, how they are used and some of the issues involved in this process. This needs to strengthen the messages in current UNICEF UK training about the similarities, as well as the differences, between countries and confront attitudes of “helping others who are poor in order to make us feel better”.
4. LAs and UNICEF UK to explore further how some schools may be supported by other schools in order to:
 - Extend the involvement of midday supervisors in the RRSA, for example, by extending their contracts to cover some ‘training’ time or by giving them input during contracted hours.
 - Develop short and accessible guidance for supply teachers and visitors to ensure that they understand the core values as soon as they come into school.
 - Make information about resources more widely available, for example, on respecting rights globally, linking to schools in other countries and addressing complex concepts with very young children or those with learning difficulties. This should address sensitivities around developing citizenship without children experiencing despair through the feeling that they should take responsibility for the whole world's problems.
 - Involve pupils meaningfully in the core decisions relating to the school, such as staff appointments, governance and evaluating teaching and learning, accepting that this requires support and training for the pupils and sensitivity in how it is done.
5. UNICEF UK to consider further the role of schools (nine in this study) that have achieved Level 2 (see introduction and footnote 2). Currently, these schools understand that they should act as ambassadors for the RRSA, which results in some schools being overloaded with visitors. This leads to staff and students being out of school for what school leaders and governors regard as too many days. Furthermore, these schools want more clarity and guidance on how they can develop themselves further.

UNICEF is the world's leading organisation working for children and their rights. All children have rights which guarantee them what they need to survive, grow, participate and fulfil their potential. UNICEF has more than 60 years' experience working for children and we are the only organisation specifically named in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a source of expert assistance and advice. In the UK, our education team provides expertise on children's rights and global citizenship for young people and teachers, through staff training, high-quality resources, and the Rights Respecting Schools Award.

For more information, please contact:

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“After 16 years as head teacher at [...] school, I cannot think of anything else we have introduced that has had such an impact.”
Head teacher, infant school

“Relationships are fabulous, absolutely amazing.”
Governor/parent, secondary school

“[Without Rights Respecting Schools] I don't think you'd get a good education. It affects your learning.”
Year 7 pupil, secondary school

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Cover image: Students at Turton High School, Bolton, learn about UNICEF's work to protect child rights.
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