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TWO YEARS ON

**RIGHTS RESPECTING SCHOOLS
& COVID-19
RESEARCH FINDINGS**



**RIGHTS
RESPECTING
SCHOOLS**

unicef 
UNITED KINGDOM

TWO YEARS ON: RIGHTS RESPECTING SCHOOLS & COVID-19 RESEARCH FINDINGS

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INTRODUCTION

Two years on from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, we captured school voices and experiences to understand the impact of the pandemic for children and their education, to reflect on the role and relevance of child rights and the Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) through the pandemic and learn from pandemic delivery experiences. This report summarises the key results from

qualitative research with a diverse range of Rights Respecting Schools in June and July 2022. The interviews were analysed alongside the wider context of perspectives from The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) RRSA staff working across the UK, and a review of emerging external evidence.



More than two years on from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Rights Respecting Schools were still feeling the impact. Despite seeing progress, in June and July 2022 schools had ongoing concerns for pupils around education gaps, social and emotional development and mental health and wider wellbeing.

Inequalities in impact were a concern, particularly for younger ages, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable groups. For this report we spoke to 8 primary schools and 1 secondary school. Our findings reflect a similar picture to the emerging external evidence on educational impacts for primary school pupils (for 2021). More research is needed for secondary schools.

There was a mix of experiences reported by school leadership respondents in the 2022 summer term, and the Covid-19 situation continued to change during our research. Positivity sat alongside uncertainty, concern and fatigue.

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on children's rights in Rights Respecting School communities. Lived experiences of lockdowns including the actions of school staff as duty bearers and the way schools have applied rights across their ways of responding have helped strengthen and clarify views of child rights as real, important and valuable. This greater understanding of child rights and RRSA has been a key enabler in some schools' progress through the Award due to increased passion and engagement from staff and pupils.

RRSA provided a vehicle to help schools navigate the different challenges and situations that arose during the pandemic from school closures to the return to school. Wellbeing has been at the forefront of school activities over this time. Whilst the way in which RRSA has been delivered varied according to individual school contexts, RRSA provided schools with a tool to apply child rights to the way in which they addressed the impacts of the

pandemic on pupils and support recovery across the school community.

We identified four, interrelated roles RRSA played:

1. A framework to link up, prioritise and give meaning to the different activities for children across the school in response to the pandemic.
2. A language to discuss difficult topics, to explain and frame their support and articulate their ethos.
3. A mechanism for pupil voice for schools to listen to and collaborate with pupils in rebuilding school life.
4. A basis for positive relationships at a time when relationships were challenged.

"The Rights Respecting journey really helped us highlight what was most important for the children, and the pandemic helped highlight what the children need most. Together we got through it."

RRSA Lead

"I think Rights Respecting frames everything. It's the vehicle that we are on to promote everything that we believe in school. And so, it just supports us completely and it gives us that frame or that vehicle that we need on our journey and so we're very grateful to have this opportunity to be part of the Rights Respecting movement and I think our children are too."

Headteacher

This research draws on interviews with 16 school leaders (headteachers and deputy headteachers) and RRSA Leads (teachers) in nine Rights Respecting Schools.

These were set within the wider RRSA context with an interview with senior RRSA Leads, and RRSA Professional Adviser reflections. We also reviewed external research on the impact of Covid-19 on education.

IMPACT ON PUPILS: EDUCATION

Rights Respecting primary schools were still feeling the impact of the pandemic in June and July 2022. The pandemic affected different children in different ways. Despite progress being seen over the year, schools voiced ongoing concerns for pupils.

The gap in education continued for pupils and was affecting children differently.

Inequalities in home learning environments (digital access, parental input, and space to learn) have widened inequalities between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers.

"The situations for home learning were very different for all our children and when they've come back you now see the difference in the children that have had different experiences at home. I don't quite know how long it's going to take for us to get back on to some level pegging again. I don't know if that will ever happen to be honest."

Headteacher

Year 3 was the most reported year of concern. Older primary years (Years 5 and 6) were less of a concern and recovering well, with some clear exceptions.

Schools were also concerned about social and emotional development. Communication, social and emotional skills

were below expectations for some pupils, particularly for younger ages (Reception, Year 1 and Year 2).

"The most significant challenge of the pandemic – and there's been quite a few – is that children's social interaction was hugely hindered... For children it's part of their development, growing and working alongside your peers. You develop skills of collaboration, skills of opinion and knowing friendships, knowing what's right and what isn't. I think that was huge. We underestimate how much of an impact the pandemic has had on children."

RRSA Lead

Some schools with disadvantaged pupils expressed concern about the time it will take for some children to recover.

These observations reflected a similar picture to the emerging external evidence on educational impacts for primary schools (for the previous year, 2021). However further research is needed, particularly for secondary schools.



IMPACT ON PUPILS: WIDER WELLBEING

There was widespread recognition of children having greater wellbeing and mental health needs when they returned to school after the lockdown periods.

Schools were working to support these challenges, making referrals and starting to see progress over the year. The pandemic was perceived to have amplified challenges for vulnerable groups of children.

Some schools had seen increases in disclosures of harm and risks to safety since the pandemic began.

“There’s definite gaps and a definite change in social interactions between children, especially in our younger children who have missed out on a lot of the experiences of their preschool placements before they’ve come in. We felt that we’ve almost had to go back and do that job with them... do all the things about sharing and turn taking.”

Headteacher

At the end of the first full school year in two years, some pupils were perceived to be more tired, and their resilience was dipping.

The wider role that schools play in children’s lives has been highlighted through the impact of school closures. In addition to education loss, children experienced a loss of a safe place, routine and social opportunities and some lost a main source of nutrition. In place, many children faced increasingly challenging family and home situations with rising poverty, increased vulnerability and risk of harm from a range of factors.

Many schools have seen an impact of the pandemic on parents such as anxiety around Covid-19, mental health and wellbeing challenges, lower engagement with the school and/or support for school attendance.

IMPACT ON LEADING & WORKING IN SCHOOLS

In June and July 2022, schools continued to work with uncertainty around Covid-19 in the running of their schools.

There was a mixed picture of school experiences. The mix of views and experiences of headteachers and teachers we spoke to reflects diversity in school contexts and rapidly changing numbers of Covid-19 cases during the research period.

Schools faced sudden large staff absences as a new wave of Covid-19 hit. This followed challenges of staff absence, supply teacher costs and availability earlier in the year. The main positive impact for staff reflected on by schools has been a growth in skills in using technology for learning.

Most schools were resuming their calendar of events, with increased planning. Others were considering virtual events as cases rose in their community.

Whilst not the focus of this study, some schools raised the rising cost of living as a current and future challenge. Rising energy and food costs present risks for pupil and staff wellbeing and financial pressure for schools.

SUMMER TERM 2020: A MIX OF SCHOOL FEELINGS

Uncertainty around the logistical challenges of planning and managing a return to a full calendar of school activities and events when Covid-19 was still present and changing.

Optimism, joy and positivity at resuming social interaction activities and events for pupils and parents and at moving towards 'normal'.

Fatigue and tiredness for some staff members from a challenging and 'long' year - adjusting to the first full school year physically at the school building.

Concern at rising Covid-19 cases and the implications for upcoming school events for pupils at the end of term, and the future, with certain schools in high Covid-19 hotspots having to resume virtual end of term events for pupils.



Schools views of children's rights

Two years into the pandemic, children's rights felt more real, relevant and important for many of the schools we spoke to. Rights Respecting Schools already placed a high value on child rights to be engaged in the programme.

However, their views became stronger or clearer through the pandemic. Rights Respecting Schools observed that child rights:

- Felt more real and meaningful for children's lives.
- Felt more important and their value to children was clearer.
- Were better understood, as shown by the maturity and depth of children's discussions.

In turn, staff and pupils felt more invested in RRSA. Greater motivation and engagement were key enablers in schools' delivery of the programme after pupils returned to school. School leaders who felt their views hadn't changed during the pandemic said this was because they already felt child rights were relevant and important.

We heard the views of headteachers, deputy headteachers and RRSA Leads, and their perceptions of pupils and wider staff views.

"[RRSA] is actually more relevant than it's ever been because it's become something real to the children, for example, through not feeling safe during the lockdown, not having the routine and chance to come to school."

Headteacher

"I think the children and myself, we feel like we're more invested in it than we would have been previously."

Headteacher

"We felt strongly about it before, and we feel strongly about it now"

Headteacher

"[Pupils have] come back quite confident in being able to talk about [rights] and then wanting to empower them to move things forward... Because they've been through it, they understand it more."

RRSA Lead

Although not directly hearing from children, the messages from school leaders were very similar across schools.

Why have the views of child rights evolved?

The pandemic sharpened views on children's rights in Rights Respecting Schools due to a range of reasons given by headteachers and RRSA Leads:

- The experiences of children who lived through lockdowns where their rights were not met or were at risk.
- Increased awareness of the challenging circumstances of more vulnerable groups during the pandemic.
- Rights were showcased through school staff's activities as duty bearers supporting access to rights during lockdowns and when back at school.
- Schools applied a child rights lens to the way they responded to different situations over the stages of the pandemic.

"I think it's [the pandemic] for us embedded more of the values and further instilled in us the importance of Rights Respecting. We've used it as a tool to drive through the pandemic and to come out the other side."

RRSA Lead

"The children will tell you too that there are occasions that they were aware they didn't get the right to education when there was a lockdown. They maybe didn't have the same right to food or to feel safe because they were in a lockdown situation. They weren't able to be at school. So, I think for some children that really strengthened their understanding of it all." "

Headteachers

RRSA provided a vehicle to help schools navigate the different challenges and situations that arose during the pandemic from school closures to the return to school.

Schools have applied child rights to their pandemic responses throughout the different stages of the pandemic. Some aspects have been difficult to deliver, other aspects have underpinned their support to children.

The extent and way in which RRSA was used as a tool varied by the individual contexts of the schools.

During the pandemic, schools placed a strong focus on supporting children's wellbeing and the realisation of their rights.

This context has been an enabling factor in bringing child rights to the forefront of their work.

Schools were highly aware of the challenges and risks children and families faced during the school closures, particularly the most vulnerable.

Schools undertook various activities as duty bearers to support the rights and wellbeing of children, such as the provision of remote learning, providing technology where possible, welfare calls to vulnerable children, distributing food and vouchers.

On the return to face-to-face schooling, the focus on wellbeing continued as schools sought to address the harmful impacts of the pandemic on children's social and emotional development, wellbeing and learning. Supporting wellbeing provided an essential foundation to address gaps in learning.

The wellbeing agenda and related activities are not unique to Rights Respecting Schools. However, RRSA provided schools with a tool to apply a child rights-based approach to the way in which they delivered these activities.

We identified four, interrelated roles RRSA played within schools through the pandemic.

1. Framework

Rights provided a framework and a focus for school's activities through the lockdowns and recovery period. Rights underpin the way schools work and are not seen as separate. In the pandemic, the rights framework:

- Linked together the multiple different activities for pupils in lockdown and during recovery.
- Gave a child-centred focus on the wider wellbeing of children and a spotlight on the most vulnerable children, at a time when schools needed to support children's wellbeing as a whole child beyond their academic needs.
- Gave purpose and explicit meaning for support to children and communities.
- Provided a driving force for change and to share a common vision and ethos.

"The rights journey has allowed us to do away with all the frilly stuff on the outside and focus on what the children need to be well-rounded human beings. Anything we do, anything that's in our school development plan, anything we put in ... we always link it to a right."

RRSA Lead

"At the heart of everything that we do, we know we think about the rights of the child. That framework is enabling us to be very clear about what our vision is, what our values are, what our ethos is as well. It's like a driving force."

RRSA Lead

"[During the pandemic] it was nice to know that we were still a Rights Respecting School and that this was a driving force, and a framework that enabled all of us to operate and to feel safe."

RRSA Lead

2. Language

RRSA provided a language for schools to discuss difficult topics, to explain and frame their support and articulate their ethos. In the pandemic, rights equipped schools with a language to:

- Talk to children about difficult issues they may be facing, when children's mental health, risk of harm and other issues were escalating.
- Discuss and explain difficult wider events to children such as challenges faced by vulnerable communities in the pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, conflict in Afghanistan and Ukraine.
- Frame actions to contact families and support children with their rights during lockdowns and at school.
- Articulate the school ethos and values in relationships with each other, including when addressing the social and emotional challenges pupils now face back at school.

"I think [RRSA] has enabled us to make those links across our whole curriculum and much, much better we've got something to hook it on with the different rights to be able to explain it and put it in real language or the real world for them. They give us that hook to be able to explain what are sometimes quite difficult things, like the children in war."

RRSA Lead

"I don't think it's made us do different things. It's giving us a framework to articulate what we do."

Headteacher

3. Pupil Voice

During lockdowns, pupil voice mechanisms were often difficult to establish or maintain.

When pupils returned to the building, and especially when they could socially mix again, schools revived or set up their voice mechanisms.

Some schools found pupils were more confident and motivated to engage in rights and give their voice following their lockdown experiences – their greater understanding and appreciation of rights has better enabled their involvement in the programme.

After the return to school, voice mechanisms provided:

- A way for schools to listen to what mattered most to pupils when they came back to school.
- A way for pupils to be more involved in how the school was coming together

"[RRSA] has given the children more involvement and investment in what we are as a school since we've come back."

RRSA Lead

"Children are coming forward to talk about the things they would like at the school... It's the children's school as well, and the children's voices are coming through."

Headteacher

"It's empowered [pupils] with their voice... They're able to talk about how they feel, what's affecting them and what they would like to see change, which is so powerful."

Headteacher

and recovering from the pandemic.

4. Relationships

RRSA provided a basis for schools to build positive relationships across the school community through challenging times in lockdowns and once schools resumed face-to-face learning.

The Rights Respecting approach has enabled:

- Respectful positive relationships between staff and pupils as school communities came back together.
- Open dialogue that helped schools to listen and respond to pupils changing needs throughout the pandemic.

Relationships with parents can also be supported through the RRSA approach,

although this has varied between different school contexts. During lockdowns, schools tried different ways to keep in contact with parents. Some felt relationships grew stronger. For others, this was a key challenge that the schools are addressing now.

"The Rights Respecting School Award has enabled the school to articulate the value of each other and why we respect each other... Rights Respecting Schools enables us to talk about ... how we value one another, how we relate to each other and how we respect one another. That's helpful in rebuilding fractured communities."

Headteacher

"I believe had Rights Respecting not been in our dialogue we may not have perhaps been so successful, to bounce back so robustly and quickly. The dialogue that we have - that open honesty, the fact that pupils can question. We listen to them."

Headteacher

"I think the thing with Covid-19 and being a Rights Respecting school is about relationships and we worked really hard as a school to maintain our relationship with their families and keep the communication lines open."

Headteacher

CONCLUSION

Over two years on from the start of the pandemic, schools continued to see its impact on their pupils in June and July 2022.

The education disruption of the pandemic has had an unequal impact across children and goes beyond education gaps, to their social and emotional development, mental health and wellbeing. There was a diverse range of experiences across schools. Schools have worked to address challenges where they can and are seeing progress.

The value and importance of children's rights have been underlined and exemplified through the pandemic experiences of the school community. This greater understanding and appreciation of child rights in Rights Respecting Schools has further supported the delivery of the programme in schools, and has the potential to continue doing so.

Child rights, through RRSA, have been a tool for schools as they responded to the different stages of the pandemic and the harmful impacts on children's wellbeing and personal development. As schools faced changes and challenges, RRSA provided a useful framework and language and a basis for strengthening pupil voice and positive relationships.

Looking to the future, whilst the harm of the pandemic remains clear, child rights can play an important role in how schools and their pupils recover and move forward together.

Methodology

Qualitative interviews with 16 headteachers, deputy headteachers and RRSA Leads (teachers) from a range of nine Rights Respecting Schools in England and Scotland. All schools interviewed had been accredited at Silver or Gold RRSA in 2022. To protect individual interviewee confidentiality, we refer to all school leadership roles as Headteachers.

Interview with UNICEF UK RRSA senior staff and notes from a RRSA Professional Advisor team discussion on pandemic practice and success, drawing on their experience from high volumes of schools.

Light touch review of key evidence in 2022, to contextualise research and build on our 'One Year On' Report.

School sample

Qualitative interviews with 16 headteachers and deputy and RRSA Leads (teachers) from a range nine Rights Respecting Schools in England and Scotland.

The sample includes 8 primary schools, 1 secondary (we do not draw out secondary-specific findings). Our sample reflects a mix of school communities: rural and urban areas, ethnic diversity and socioeconomic

backgrounds, different stages in the RRSA programme (Silver, Gold and re-accredited schools) and includes both relatively recently joined schools and longer standing schools.

Our sampling aimed to reach a diverse range of schools across award stages, school levels and UK countries. However due to timing challenges late in the summer term, we have been unable to explore the views of schools in Wales (0 interviews) and secondary schools (1 interview).

Sample is based on practical considerations of schools that the RRSA team felt could be open to participating at short notice. This research does not reflect views of schools who have disengaged from the programme, and this would be an interesting avenue to explore in the future.

What is the Rights Respecting Schools Award?

The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) works with schools in the UK to create safe and inspiring places to learn, where children are respected, their talents are nurtured and they are able to thrive. Our Rights Respecting Schools Award embeds these values in daily school life. For more information visit: unicef.org.uk/rrsa

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