

# THEORY OF CHANGE

Rights Respecting Schools Award

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Rights  
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# UNICEF UK RIGHTS RESPECTING SCHOOLS AWARD

## THEORY OF CHANGE

The Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) is a UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK or UUK) programme that works with schools across England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands. Our Theory of Change explains how this Award intends to achieve change in schools, for children. This is supported by a review of available evidence. More information about the RRSA, and our latest report measuring our impact for children, is available on our [website](#).

As a well-established programme, RRSA has a Theory of Change which was developed in 2017 to articulate our vision for achieving change in schools, for children. We have undertaken a process to update this, drawing on the wider Child Rights Schools context within the global UNICEF community, our evolving understanding of the programme, pupil consultations and feedback from other stakeholders such as headteachers and a range of UUK staff.



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# Context

## Global

UNICEF is named within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to provide expert advice and assistance on children's rights (Article 45). UNICEF UK has a mandate to advocate for and promote the rights of children.

RRSA is part of a wider Child Rights Schools Framework being implemented across predominately higher income countries by UNICEF supporting partners to realise the rights of children in schools by explicitly using a child rights education approach. RRSA also aligns to aspects of UNICEF's global agenda, particularly to support children and adolescents to learn and acquire skills for the future and to achieve quality education (UN Sustainable Development Goal 4) [1].

## National

RRSA is one of three UUK initiatives which work in partnership with public services to achieve change for children in the UK. UUK programmes work towards our goal to achieve impact for children by influencing and supporting the transformation of systems and services for children across health, education, and local communities that directly improve the outcomes and life chances of children in the UK. This work supports our strategic outcome to champion children's rights in the UK and around the world, elevate children's voices and support their active participation [2].

UUK envisions an education system throughout the UK in which child rights knowledge and practice is fully embedded. Knowledge of the CRC among the UK education workforce is low, and practice in all areas, including around child protection, online safety, pedagogy, and pupil voice is rarely framed in the context of children's rights. The curriculum for most children in England and Northern Ireland has no meaningful provision for them to learn about and understand their rights, in contrast the curriculum in Scotland and in Wales is explicit about the CRC. Awareness of rights amongst children as rights holders is also relatively low. The Concluding Observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland raised concerns on levels of child rights knowledge and meaningful participation in education settings. It recommended systematic training on children's rights for professionals working for and with children, in particular those in education, social work, law enforcement, immigration and justice. It also called for strengthening children's meaningful participation and strengthening training to do so [3].

## What do we do?

RRSA offers a change programme for schools based on child rights expertise, knowledge, and experience of what works to implement the CRC in school settings. This means any setting that provides learning for children and young people up to the age of 18 as part of its primary function. This includes primary and secondary schools, nurseries, special schools, and pupil referral units.

The UNICEF UK RRSA membership offer centres around three main types of activities:

1. **A framework to implement child rights in school settings**, including an RRSA outcomes framework for child rights implementation and a staged journey through the change process with Bronze, Silver, and Gold Awards as milestones to introduce, embed and sustain the change process.
2. **Provision of specialist expertise and dissemination of good practice** for child rights in schools to enable the realisation of the framework. This includes activities such as training courses and e-learning, resources, guidance, and specialist support, practice-sharing and communications.
3. **An accreditation process** involving self-review and collating evidence, an assessment by a UUK professional advisor and the provision of feedback and recommendations for continuous improvement.

For a school to receive accreditation, it must evidence that it has achieved the expected outcomes for the [three RRSA Strands](#) based on the concepts of teaching and learning ABOUT, THROUGH and FOR rights [4]. These are defined distinctly at Silver and Gold.



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## Understanding change at a Rights Respecting School

Rights Respecting Schools take a whole school approach to embedding the CRC at the centre of their ethos, learning, relationships, decision making and policies. Our theory of change outlines three levels of change that take place:

### 1. Building child rights capacity

Rights Respecting Schools build the capacity of children and adults to **know about children's rights** and the nature of rights. For example, they understand the origins of the Convention and the articles it contains. They learn that rights are universal (for all children), inherent (there at birth), inalienable (cannot be taken away), unconditional (do not have to be earned) and indivisible (equally important).

Children gain an **understanding of what rights mean for them and for children around the world** – exploring and understanding how rights may not always be accessed in different contexts and for different groups of children. Children and adults become **aware of the principles** inherent in upholding children's rights such as: dignity, respect, non-discrimination and equity, participation and that adults should act in children's best interests. Skills, such as communication and team working, that help children claim their rights and



respect and advocate for the rights of others are developed during the school experience. RRSAs provides new contexts to apply and strengthen these skills.

Adults learn about their **responsibilities as duty bearers** to uphold the rights of children and school staff also learn **how to implement a child rights approach**. Awareness of children's rights also grows in the wider school community – beyond staff and governors to families and, depending on the local context, local community organisations.

## 2. Putting rights into action

Communicating about the Convention in a variety of ways is an important aspect of putting rights into action. Children and adults **communicate using accurate rights concepts and language**. The **CRC is included in teaching and learning**, such as in the curriculum, assemblies and visual displays in the school environment. Schools **articulate their commitment to rights through their vision and values**.

Positive relationships are fundamental to Rights Respecting Schools. Through understanding their own and other children's rights and the principles of dignity, respect and non-discrimination, **children respect each other**. They are more likely to engage in positive relationships between peers, less likely to take part in or experience, bullying and discriminatory behaviours. The **practice and approach of adults is rights respecting**, and together they experience **relationships based on dignity and respect**.

Meaningful participation is also a key feature at Rights Respecting Schools. Adults value the views of children and **give due weight to their views** across the range of learning opportunities and activities, and more formally, the **school strategy, decision-making and policies are based on child rights**. Emphasis on participation and the value placed on the voice of children in school decision making, empowers children and encourages further development of their skills in this area. Children **get involved in shaping their school community** and play an **active role in their own learning**. Together, this leads to a **greater sharing of power** within the school.

Children in Rights Respecting Schools are enabled to act when rights are not being met on an individual level, and on behalf of other children locally and globally. When their rights are violated, **children raise concerns with adults at school** without fear, for example by speaking to a trusted adult if they are not feeling safe. **Schools monitor and respond to non rights respecting situations** in a child-friendly way and the language of rights supports discussion and understanding which is important in fostering confidence to disclose concerns. For rights violations on a wider scale, children and adults **take action together to support local and global communities** in a variety of ways such as fundraising and campaigning. **Adults encourage and support**

**children to advocate for children’s rights and children promote and advocate for the rights of others.**

Through the joint behaviours and actions of children and adults, and by prioritising children’s best interests in the decisions, policies and practice of the school, the school’s culture, ethos, and environment become rights respecting. **An ethos and culture that has the child at the centre and is informed by child rights** is fundamental to a Rights Respecting School. The environment is **nurturing, safe and supportive. Inclusion and diversity are actively promoted and celebrated.** In this space, all children learn *through* their rights and **enjoy their rights at school.**

The RRSA framework encompasses all aspects of **school improvement**, supporting leaders at all levels to reframe their vision and practice in the light of the CRC and their role as duty bearers. The child rights language and framework can add value whether a school requires significant improvement or is striving to build on excellence.



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### **3. Impact: Changes for children**

RRSA takes a whole school approach to embedding children’s rights. There is a complex web of internal connections linking changes to capacity, performance and impacts for children. The different impacts are also highly interrelated, and can take place at different time points, from during a child’s time at school, to the longer term. We appreciate that RRSA is only one part of a range of factors, both within a school and in children’s lives, that can impact on children and

contribute towards these changes for children. Evaluating impact is therefore complex.

Our Theory of Change explains how becoming a Rights Respecting School can contribute to a range of impacts for children. This includes **how children feel at school – safe, included and a sense of belonging, feeling valued and listened to**. Our theory suggests that children are more likely to **enjoy school** and be more **engaged in their learning and school life** and so more likely to make **greater progress** towards **fulfilling their individual potential in the broadest sense**. We also believe that RRSA influences how children feel about themselves and their life – improving their **sense of agency, confidence and self-esteem** and **wellbeing**. Our theory suggests that RRSA intends to increase children’s involvement as **active citizens and rights champions**, which may lead to a **commitment to social justice** in the longer term.

## RRSA impact: What does existing evidence tell us?

This section summarises evaluation evidence about the impact of RRSA for children. It also outlines wider evidence around child rights and education that supports the links we make in our Theory of Change between tangible changes made in a Rights Respecting School and the impact on children that it can contribute to.

Existing evidence shows that RRSA can have a number of **positive impacts on how children feel at school**. The RRSA impact report shows that most pupils **feel safe** at school and that they could tell someone if they felt unsafe [5]. Wider literature has offered explanations for how human rights education within school settings can provide a framework for better safeguarding for children [6]. By knowing rights and seeing rights in practice, children can potentially be better at recognising and responding to violations of rights in their lived experience [6]. In addition, equipping teachers with an understanding of children’s rights and the mechanisms for their protection encourages them to empower children to recognise and act on rights violations in their own lives [6]. When adults are perceived as willing and able to intervene in situations of maltreatment, children feel more empowered to speak out about their lived experience of rights violation [7].

External research on RRSA schools shows that when children have a say in decisions which affect them, they feel valued, empowered, and have a greater sense of ownership of their school experience [8]. In line with this, our report shows that the majority of pupils agree that teachers listen to them and that pupils at their schools can influence decisions affecting them [5].



RRSA also contributes to children **feeling included and a sense of belonging** at schools through creating an **inclusive and non-discriminatory environment**. Evaluation shows that students attending RRSA schools talk positively about their school lives and social relations in schools [5,9,10]. Specifically, the programme contributes to improved relationships between pupils, between staff, and between pupils and staff. Our impact report shows that the majority of headteachers report some noticeable or significant impact of the programme on reducing bullying or exclusions in the school [5]. Similarly, other research observes reduced prejudice and discriminatory attitudes in RRSA schools, with those with diverse populations reporting a more integrated and cohesive pupil body and reductions in racist incidents and homophobic language [11]. A recent study further illustrates how RRSA facilitates an inclusive environment for children with special educational needs and disabilities [12].

RRSA can contribute to the degree to which **children enjoy school and are more engaged in their learning and school life**. Adopting restorative approaches to conflict and increasing pupil input into the creation of school rules has been shown to have an impact on children's attitudes and behaviours at RRSA schools [11]. In line with this, evaluation shows that headteachers report noticeable or significant impact on the proportion of children who "like school" and their engagement with their own learning [5]. Most pupils also agree that they know how to make progress in school [5]. The same report shows that pupils agree that other pupils are kind, and helpful and they are treated with respect by both adults and pupils [5]. Participation, a key aspect of the RRSA approach, has also been consistently linked to improved school engagement and improved wellbeing [13,14].

By improving the school environment and creating a rights respecting ethos, RRSA has been linked to pupils' **improved attainment and attendance**, and **increased engagement** [11]. In line with this, an independent local evaluation highlighted how RRSA fostered positive attitudes and aspirations, which benefited wider learning [15]. Wider literature shows that from children's perspectives, a rights-based education is closely related to a good education and that it is integral to their achievement and attainment [16]. Studies have also shown that whole school approaches can help to improve attainment and reduce the attainment gaps between the most and least disadvantaged [17,18]. This is particularly important given that the attainment gaps widened across the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic [19].

It is evident that RRSA can influence **how children feel about themselves and their life**: namely their sense of **agency, confidence and self-esteem and improved wellbeing**. Child rights education provides a promising framework for the development of children's agency. Children can nurture and develop their agency through the opportunities to engage, building positive habits, being able to access appropriate information, being supported to

develop informed opinions, and understanding how they can have an impact, all of which can be facilitated by school staff and policies [20].

Pupils in RRSA schools have been reported to show improved self-esteem, sense of their own worth and well-being [5,11]. Wider literature further supports our assumptions that various aspects of a Rights Respecting School can improve children's wellbeing. Specifically, pupil participation in school, a positive school climate, school safety, positive relationships, and participation in youth activism activities have all been linked to children's improved wellbeing [21,22,23].

When children do not fully access their rights, they identify a negative impact on their psychosocial development [24]. One study also found that children's realisation of rights is linked to their perception of a good life [25]. Specifically, feeling safe and being cared for were found to be the leading factors of a good life from children's perspective while being heard and listened to and being treated fairly were the most consistent factors of a good life across countries [25]. In addition, seeing adults respecting children's rights and knowing that such trusted adults can be approached also has a large impact on children's subjective wellbeing [26].



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RRSA aims to impact on children's involvement as **active citizens and rights champions** and **commitment to social justice in the longer term**. In RRSA schools, children are actively involved in community events and campaigns that uphold or defend the rights of others and in trying to live more sustainably [9].

Campaigns led by children in RRSA schools have covered a range of themes, including climate change, and inclusion and equality.

Teachers in RRSA schools talk about preparing students to be active and critical citizens in a democracy, who can truly listen to other people's points of view, empathise, act accordingly and discuss and deal with issues critically [8]. Evaluation shows that children in Rights Respecting Schools consider their role as citizens not only in school but in their local community and globally [5,11]. Our impact report shows that many children believe that they could change the world for the better [5].

When rights-based education is well integrated into schools, children acquire the knowledge and skills to promote and protect the rights of others [27]. This has the potential to contribute to their long-term involvement as active citizens and commitment to social justice. In line with this, school-based political activities were shown to have a positive and independent effect on electoral and expressive political engagement among young people, even after they had left school and had become young adults [28]. All forms of civic engagement during late adolescence and early adulthood have also been shown to be positively associated with subsequent income and education level [29].

Considered together, all the areas of impact presented in this section make a strong case for how RRSA can contribute to children making greater progress towards fulfilling their individual potential in the broadest sense.

The implementation of RRSA in the UK has also been shown to **have an impact on the adults involved**, particularly teachers who have previously been identified as important change agents for the successful implementation of children's rights education [30,31]. In a review on research on RRSA, teachers consistently report to have expanded their knowledge on the Convention and rights for children, and that their understanding and commitment have grown [10]. In addition, the RRSA impact report shows that teachers feel more respected by both pupils and other adults in the schools, and that they enjoy working at their school [5].

## Reading our Theory of Change diagram

The Theory of Change diagram visually explains and communicates our vision for change in a Rights Respecting School setting. Although closely aligned, it does not directly mirror the accreditation outcomes framework that schools are assessed against to achieve Silver and Gold Awards.

It is best read from bottom to top.

- The first level of changes at the bottom of the diagram are the **outputs** that the programme intends to achieve, through building children and adults' **capacities in children's rights**.
- The middle stage of the diagram shows **outcomes**. These are **changes in performance** that create a Rights Respecting school. RRSA is a whole school approach and many of the activities shown in these separate boxes are interrelated.
- The top level of the diagram shows the **impacts** on children that RRSA intends to contribute to. We recognise RRSA is one part of a wide range of factors within a school and in children's lives that impact on children and support these changes for children.

The outputs and outcomes are shown for children as **rights holders** on the left-hand side of the diagram and adults as **duty bearers** on the right-hand side (both as individuals and collectively as a school). Duty bearers can be primary (those employed by or acting on behalf of the state to directly deliver or oversee provision for children and young people) and secondary (those adults with a non-statutory role in children's lives including volunteers, extended family members and, to an extent parents and carers although these are also rights holders under the Convention).

The central box of the middle stage shows outcomes that are changes in both child and adult performance together, such as relationships, culture, ethos, and environment.

In the diagram, each of the outputs and outcomes align with one of the three strands that underpin the change process in a Rights Respecting School. Rights holders and duty bearers learn: ABOUT rights (learning and communicating children's rights); THROUGH rights (children experience their rights at school, and with adults, they develop and maintain a school community/environment with child rights at the centre) and FOR rights (promoting and advocating for children's rights, and adults monitoring and responding to rights violations).

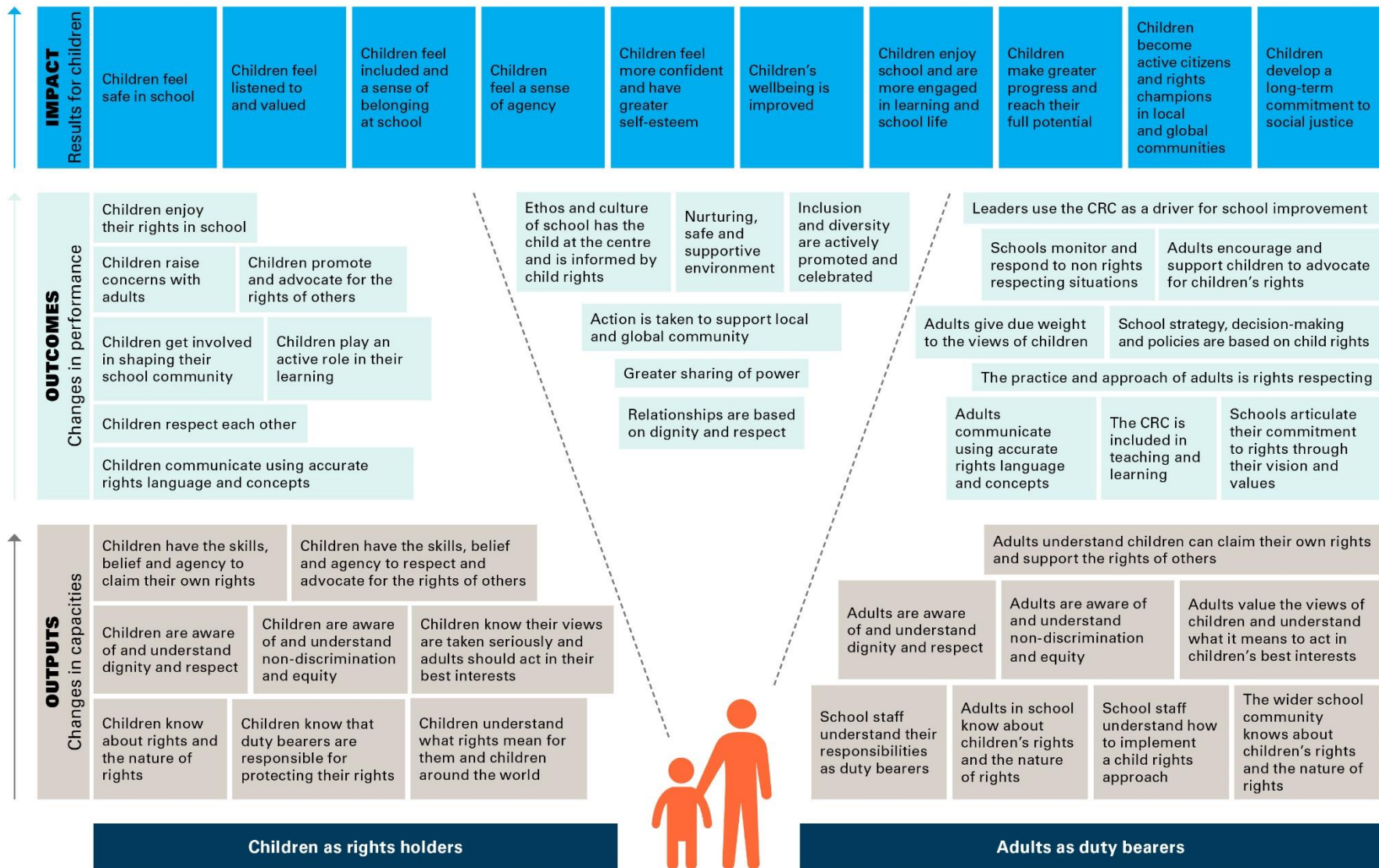
The Theory of Change relates to a **school setting** –we use this term to mean any provision that provides learning for children and young people up to the age of 18 as part of its primary function. This includes primary and secondary schools, nurseries, special schools and pupil referral units.

UNICEF UK aims to support every child and young person from 0-18 years old, especially the most excluded. The changes for children that we present in our Theory of Change can reflect the **different and evolving capacities of children**. Each of the changes can apply at different levels depending on individual children's needs and evolving capacities.

Our Theory of Change uses UNICEF definitions for outputs, outcomes and impact from the Results Based Management Handbook: Working together for children (UNICEF 2017). It builds on our previous RRSA theory of change (UUK, 2017) draws on concepts of change within child rights education in the Child Rights Education Theory of Change (UNICEF 2021, updated 2022) and the rights-holder / duty bearer format of Child Rights Schools Theory of Change (UNICEF 2022).



# RIGHTS RESPECTING SCHOOLS AWARD THEORY OF CHANGE



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