



The impact of a Rights Respecting Schools approach on feelings of belonging and inclusion experienced by pupils in school

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Our Question

We wanted to know whether a UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools approach makes a difference to how children* feel in school, and if it helps them to feel they belong and are included in school.

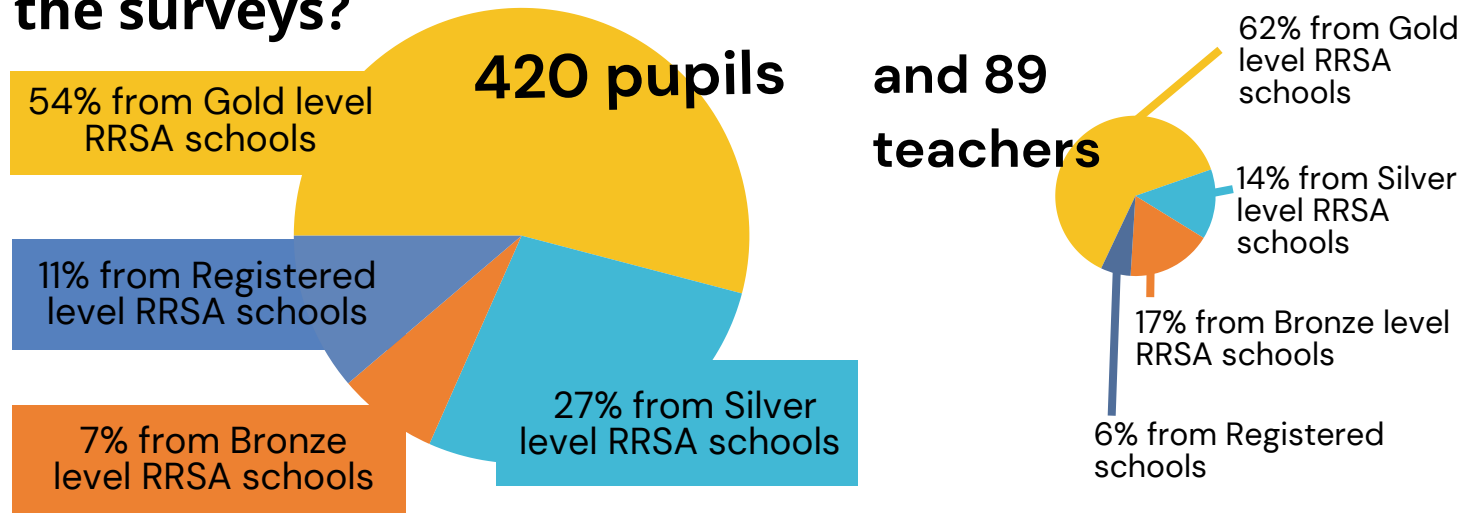
UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) support schools to teach children about children's rights and to understand how these apply to themselves and other children. When schools want to become a Rights Respecting School (RRS) they register with UNICEF UK and work through Registration, Bronze, Silver and Gold levels as they introduce and embed a rights respecting schools approach. There are 5,200 primary, secondary and special schools registered for the RRSA in the UK, reaching over 1.75 million children, and around 2,500 schools have achieved the Silver or Gold award.

* The word 'children' refers to the definition in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that is, to children and young people up to the age of 18.

How did we find out what we wanted to know?

We spoke to pupils and teachers in UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools. We also spoke to adults who advise schools about the RRS approach, and we invited pupils (aged 9-16 years) and teachers to answer questions on surveys that were sent to schools across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and the Channel Islands.

Who answered the surveys?



What did we find out?



We learned what pupils experience when they have a sense of belonging at school, what they feel like when they have a sense of inclusion and how learning about rights helps pupils to feel they belong and are included.

What does school belonging feel like?

Pupils described school belonging as something they felt emotionally

When teachers want to listen to you and you have a say in things; like they really listen and want to hear what you think.

(Pupil aged 8-11)

Having friends you can trust.

(Pupil aged 12-15)

Where you feel like it is made for you, like you fit right in and the people are bothered about you.

(Pupil aged 8-11)

62% of pupils in the survey felt that they belonged at school, and 28% said they did so sometimes.

When pupils felt a sense of school belonging they felt:

- They fit into and were a part of the school community.
- Valued and had good relationships with adults and pupils in school.
- Listened to and respected by adults and pupils in school.
- Unjudged and safe to be themselves.

What does *not* belonging in school feel like?

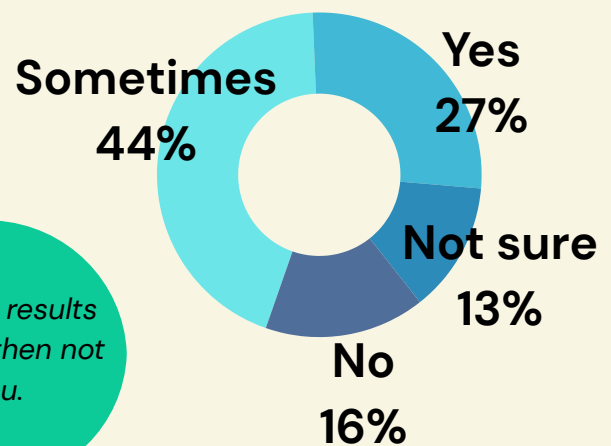
Feeling nervous around people because you're frightened in case people laugh at you if you say something they don't agree with.

(Pupil aged 8-11)

Teachers judging you on results or first impressions and then not bothering about you.

(Pupil aged 12-15)

Survey responses to the question: "Some pupils feel left out in school"



When pupils did not feel a sense of belonging school, this was often because:

- They did not have good friendships in school.
- They felt judged by other pupils.
- They felt adults in school were not always kind to them.
- They felt adults in school did not listen to them.

What does school inclusion feel like?

Pupils described school inclusion as the measures taken by adults in school to try to include all pupils.

Different nationalities and cultures are celebrated... Every child is included through lessons, assemblies and rewards.

(RRS Teacher)

[We use] adaptive teaching ... so children feel part of the collective.

(RRS Teacher)

We help friends if they are lonely... we have Play Buddies and Bench Buddies.

(Pupil aged 8-11)

Some pupils said that they did not feel a sense of belonging or inclusion in school. Instead, they felt left out in school. For example, pupils said they felt left out when they felt that they were different to others, or when they felt not good enough. Some pupils also felt left out when they had experienced being bullied or when they felt left out of play.

We found that children can feel left out for a lot of reasons, and many of those are not visible or obvious. This means it is important for adults in school to learn about the needs of every child and do what they can to address their needs.

When pupils felt a sense of school inclusion they felt:

- Adults in school recognise, accept and support pupils' needs and preferences.
- Adults in school help pupils to mix with each other.
- Adults in school treat all pupils fairly and help all pupils to take part in school activities.
- Pupils helped each other to join in with activities during lessons and at break times.



What difference does learning about rights make?

Pupils attending schools with a Gold RRS Award were more likely than pupils in other schools to agree that:

- They belong in school and are proud of who they are.
- Teachers are interested in them and treat pupils fairly.
- Pupils respect each other.
- Differences are celebrated in their school.
- They enjoy school.

Learning about rights affects the whole school

Learning about rights affects individual pupils

When schools follow an RRS approach:

The whole school has a shared understanding of what rights are, and a culture of respect runs through the school.

Everyone is welcome in our school, and we don't judge people just because they might be different in some ways.

(Pupil aged 9–11)

Pupils feel empowered to stand up for their rights and those of others. Knowing that all pupils have rights increases pupils' self-respect and self-confidence, and pupils have an increased understanding of the rights and needs of others.

I feel like I have meaning when I have rights.

(Pupil aged 9–11)



So what did we conclude?

Based on our findings, we developed a list of recommendations to support pupils to feel a sense of school belonging and inclusion.

We recommend that adults in school should make sure:

1. The views of all pupils are listened to and respected.
2. Each pupil feels they 'fit into' the school, and adults in school take steps to provide for their needs and preferences.
3. The school environment supports all pupils to feel proud of their identities by celebrating diversity and respecting pupils' backgrounds, cultures, abilities and characteristics.
4. Adults help to build trusting adult-pupil relationships so that pupils feel valued and cared for.
5. Pupils are supported to mix with others and join in school activities, especially if they are at risk of feeling left out.

