

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

## Executive Summary

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March 2026

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## Acknowledgements

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The research detailed in this end of project report was funded by the University of Strathclyde.

The authors would like to acknowledge the support from the United Kingdom's Committee for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF UK) in providing access to a wide range of UNICEF UK Rights Respecting Schools across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and the Channel Islands.

We would also like to thank all pupils and staff from the schools we visited for welcoming us into their schools. Particular thanks go to:

Cleeves Primary School, Glasgow

Hope Wood Academy, Peterlee, County Durham

Nettleworth Primary School, Chester-le-Street, County Durham

Saint Paul's RC High School, Glasgow

Shawlands Academy, Glasgow

Stranton Primary School, Hartlepool, County Durham

Our thanks also extend to all pupils and teachers who completed the online surveys.

While UNICEF UK supported us in accessing schools, the research was developed, conducted and analysed by the authors and the views expressed in the report remain the responsibility of the authors.

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March 2026

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# Executive summary<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Background to the project

UNICEF UK's Right Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) supports schools to promote knowledge and understanding about children's rights and aims to ensure children<sup>2</sup> and adults in schools can recognise and respond to children's rights violations. When schools register for the RRSA they are guided by UNICEF UK about how to build a school-wide rights respecting ethos as they work through from Registered to Bronze, Silver and Gold RRSA levels.

- Registration level indicates a school's interest in the RRSA.
- Bronze RRSA is awarded when schools demonstrate they are Rights Committed.
- Silver RRSA is achieved when a school is Rights Aware.
- Gold RRSA is achieved when a school is Rights Respecting.

There are over 5,200 UK primary, secondary and special schools registered for the RRSA, reaching over 1.75 million children; around 2,500 of these schools have achieved a Silver or Gold RRSA. Large scale research conducted by UNICEF UK has been drawn on to enhance understandings about the impact of the award and inform future practice (UNICEF UK, 2020). However, research focusing on how an RRS approach supports children to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school remains underexplored. It is this area on which this study focuses.

## 2. Aims of the study

The project aimed to address the current gap in knowledge and develop new insights into:

- (i) the impact of UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools (RRS) approach to support children to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school<sup>3</sup>.
- (ii) challenges associated with ensuring all pupils, including those identified as marginalised, develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school.

## 3. Methodology

The research took place between October 2024 and November 2025. Data was collected through focus groups, semi-structured interviews and surveys with a purposive sample of pupils, teachers and school leaders in schools registered for UNICEF UK's RRSA. Semi-structured interviews were also held with UNICEF UK's RRS Professional Advisers who support schools to develop and embed an RRS approach. All participants were, therefore, well-placed to offer their perspectives on the impact of implementing UNICEF UK's RRS approach in practice.

As a starting point to the research focus groups were held with two pupil adviser groups. The aim was to:

- (i) Determine pupils' understandings of the terms belonging, inclusion and marginalisation, in the context of schools.
- (ii) Ascertain their views on whether an RRS approach supports developing a sense of school belonging and inclusion.
- (iii) Determine areas to explore in the pupil and teacher surveys.

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<sup>1</sup> See full report for further details of the research and research findings.

<sup>2</sup> The word 'children' refers to the definition in Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), that is, children and young people up to the age of 18.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'school' includes mainstream schools and all other educational provision.

Findings from these focus groups, coupled with findings from interviews with RRS school leaders and UNICEF UK Professional Advisers, were used as a basis from which to develop two surveys, one for pupils and one for teachers. All teachers and pupils who participated in interviews and focus groups were from Gold RRSA schools, however, survey data was collected from pupils and teachers across a mix of schools at Registration, Bronze, Silver and Gold RRSA levels.

Of the 420 pupils and 89 teachers who responded to the surveys, just over half (53%) of the pupils and almost two thirds (62%) of teachers were from Gold RRSA schools. There was an equal mix of male and female pupils and a good mix of pupils from primary and secondary schools, however, just over half the pupils were aged 9-10 years and from primary schools. Additionally, almost three quarters of teachers taught in a primary or first schools, 13% taught in secondary or high schools and the remaining teachers taught in pre-schools, nurseries or all-through schools. Thus, the research findings draw on the views of a small proportion pupils and teachers with lived experiences of an RRS approach and a high proportion of teacher and pupil participants were from primary schools, however, findings provide valuable insights into participants' views about the impact of the RRSA on pupils and on the school culture.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Strathclyde's Institute of Education Ethics Committee.

#### 4. Findings: Understanding relating to the concepts school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation

To provide a context for how the concepts belonging, inclusion and marginalisation were understood by pupils who participated in the research, findings relating to factors they perceived as integral to each of these concepts are outlined below.

##### 4.1 Factors integral to school belonging

Pupils identified the following four factors as integral to feeling a sense of school belonging:

1. A feeling of fitting into and being an established member of the school community.
2. Feeling wanted, valued, liked, cared for and having mutually trusting relationships with adults and peers.
3. Having a voice, feeling safe to voice opinions, and feeling listened to and respected by adults and peers.
4. Feeling unjudged and safe to be oneself.

##### 4.2 Factors integral to school inclusion

Pupils felt included in school when the following four factors were in place:

1. Adults in school demonstrate recognition, acceptance and accommodation of pupils' needs, preferences and values.
2. School strategies encourage pupils to connect and communicate with each other.
3. Adults in school treat all pupils fairly and ensure pupils have equal access to opportunities.
4. Pupils support each other to participate in activities inside and outside of the classroom.

##### 4.3 Factors that contribute to feelings of marginalisation

Pupils identified the following three factors as contributing to feelings of marginalisation in school:

1. Feeling different to others.
2. Feeling unrepresented, victimised or discriminated against.
3. Feeling socially excluded, left out, unaccepted or not good enough.

## 5. Findings: The impact of UNICEF UK's RRSA on pupils' feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation

Findings relating to the impact of UNICEF UK's RRSA on pupils' feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation are considered under two headings, as follows:

- (i) The relationship between a school's RRS level and pupils' feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation: findings from the survey data.
- (ii) The impact of an RRS approach on pupils' feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation: findings from the qualitative data.

### 5.1 The relationship between a school's RRS level and pupils' feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation: findings from the survey data

Survey data was analysed to explore whether there were differences in responses according to the RRS level of a pupil's school. Findings illustrated that pupils in Gold RRS schools were more likely than those in Registered, Bronze or Silver RRS schools to report positive feelings associated with school belonging and inclusion.

Pupils in Gold RRS schools were the most likely to report:

- Feeling like they belong in school.
- Teachers are interested in them.
- Pupils respect each other.
- Feeling proud of who they are.
- Their needs are met in school.
- Their school makes an effort to include all pupils.
- Different abilities and talents are celebrated.
- Pupils are treated fairly by adults in school.

Pupils in Gold RRS schools were also the least likely to report:

- Pupil-pupil bullying happens/sometimes happens.

The Teachers' survey also invited teachers to rate how effectively their school supported pupils in relation to different aspects of school belonging and inclusion. In all cases, teachers' responses were more positive than those of pupils, indicating that teachers were more likely than pupils to view pupils as having a strong sense of school belonging and inclusion.

Of note, pupils in Gold RRS schools were the most likely to report that they enjoyed school; similarly, teachers in Gold RRS schools were the most likely to strongly agree that they enjoy working at their school.

### 5.2 The impact of an RRS approach on pupils' feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation: findings from the qualitative data

Findings from interviews with pupils, teachers, school leaders and other professionals working in or with Rights Respecting schools, and from data collected from the open text questions in the pupil and teacher surveys, indicated that an RRS approach supports pupils' feelings of school belonging and inclusion, and minimises feelings of marginalisation. These findings are outlined in terms of:

- (i) School-wide impact.
- (ii) The impact on pupils individually.

#### 5.2.1 School-wide impact

The following four factors were identified as outcomes of an RRS approach that have a school-wide impact:

1. The whole school community is unified through having shared knowledge and understanding of children's rights and rights values.

2. School policies and practices create an inclusive environment through reflecting pupils' diverse backgrounds, characteristics and experiences.
3. A school-wide ethos is grounded in Rights Respecting values and fosters a cohesive school culture in which all unique characteristics are accepted, and pupils feel unjudged and proud of their identity.
4. A shared Rights Respecting language is developed that enables behaviour management, conflict resolution and issues of a controversial nature to be dealt with through a Rights Respecting lens.

#### 5.2.2 The impact on pupils individually

A strong theme that emerged from the data was the positive impact that learning about children's rights has on pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion. The following seven factors were identified as outcomes of an RRS approach, particularly learning about rights, that impact on pupils individually:

1. Pupils feel connected to and united with other pupils through knowing children's rights are universal and all pupils in school learn about and share the same rights.
2. Pupils recognise that education is an inherent right for themselves and others and, as an outcome, place value on their education.
3. Pupils have increased self-respect and self-confidence and feel intrinsically valued in school through knowing that all children, including themselves, have rights that are unconditional and cannot be taken away, *and* through knowing that adults in school are duty bearers who will respect their rights.
4. Pupils have increased understanding of the rights and needs of others, with the outcome that they act more respectfully towards others.
5. Pupils feel empowered to express themselves and advocate for themselves and others through knowing about their rights *and* through having access to a school-wide shared vocabulary and language as a conduit for expressing themselves in a Rights Respecting way.
6. Pupils have an enhanced sense of agency through knowing they have a right to have a say in matters affecting them. Feeling listened to and knowing their views matter was one of the most significant factors in supporting pupils to feel a sense of belonging.
7. Pupils feel safe, feel proud of who they are and have an enhanced sense of personal reassurance through knowing they are valued in school and that their rights will be respected.

Pupils and teachers in Rights Respecting schools also cited that pupils see evidence of adults in school demonstrating recognition, acceptance and accommodation of pupils' needs, preferences and values. Pupils also experience, firsthand, themselves and others being treated fairly by adults in school.

## 6. Challenges associated with ensuring an RRS approach supports all pupils to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school

Challenges associated with ensuring an RRS approach supports all pupils to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school were categorised as follows:

- (i) Factors that hinder the development of pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion.
- (ii) Challenges associated with ensuring an RRS approach reaches all pupils.

### 6.1 Factors identified as hindering the development of pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion

The following factors were identified as hindering the development of pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion:

1. Pupils with high rates of absenteeism.
2. Influences outside of school negatively impacting on pupils' acceptance of diversity.
3. Adults and pupils in school lacking awareness of the needs of some pupils, leading to unintentionally excluding or marginalising these pupils.
4. A lack of resources or staffing to support the participation and inclusion of all pupils.
5. Unconscious bias from adults and pupils leading to the marginalisation of some individuals or groups.

## 6.2 Challenges associated with ensuring an RRS approach reaches all pupils

1. The most difficult pupils to reach were those who do not attend school regularly, who frequently change schools, and pupils who have English as an Additional Language.
2. An RRS approach was considered by teachers and school leaders to reach, but have a limited positive impact, on pupils who were perceived to have low life aspirations or perceived to place little value on education.

Although there are challenges in ensuring an RRS approach reaches some pupils classified as marginalised or at risk of marginalisation, evidence from this and previous research indicates that adopting an RRS approach impacts positively on the vast majority of pupils, including pupils who felt left out, excluded, unrepresented, isolated or different to others<sup>4</sup>. Teachers reported that, based on their experience, there was a high risk of these pupils either stopping attending school or displaying negative attitudes towards school. However, they cited that adopting an RRS approach played a significant role in preventing these outcomes through: adults and pupils being understanding, accepting and respectful of diverse characteristics; school policies and practices accommodating pupils' needs and preferences; and, crucially, pupils having a trusted adult in school they felt able to speak to.

## 7. Recommendations

### 7.1 Recommendations to support the development of pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion

To support pupils to develop a sense of school belonging and inclusion the following measures, associated with a Rights Respecting school approach, should be prioritised. Adults in school should ensure:

1. **The views of all pupils are listened to and respected.** Pupils should know and feel their views matter and feel emotionally safe to voice their opinions, and they should have at least one adult in school whom they trust and can approach to voice any concerns.
2. **Each pupil feels they have a place and 'fit into' the school environment.** Measures should be in place to accommodate the needs and preferences of pupils, and adults in school should have the knowledge, experience and skills to support the diverse and often complex needs of pupils.
3. **The school environment supports *all* pupils to feel proud of their identities through celebrating diversity and being respectful of pupils' backgrounds, cultures, abilities and characteristics.**
4. ***All* pupils feel valued, cared for and form mutually trusting adult-pupil relationships.**
5. **Pupils are supported to mix with others and to participate jointly in school activities, particularly when pupils are at risk of feeling socially excluded.**

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<sup>4</sup> See full report for more detail.

## 7.2 Recommendations for further research

There is also a need for further research to explore more deeply:

1. Factors that support (i) the development of trusting adult-pupil relationships in school; and (ii) pupils to feel valued and cared for in school.
2. Whether the reduction in pupils' positive feelings associated with school belonging and inclusion as schools progress from Registered through to Silver RRSAs levels is evident when a larger sample of schools is considered and, if so, the reason(s) for this temporary reduction.