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## **Rights Respecting Schools - the emerging evidence about impact and implications for teacher education**

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### **Background**

On 20<sup>th</sup> November 2009, the global community celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Convention is a far reaching document on the care and protection of children in practical and moral terms. This paper explores the underpinnings of these core principles and how they may be applied to promote and protect the rights of all children.

UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) teaches children and young people that they have rights under the UNCRC. They also learn to be responsible for respecting others' rights. The ethos created demonstrates to children the inclusiveness of a rights-respecting school and paves the way to participation in the life of the community. This in turn helps them to learn how to formulate, express and listen to opinions, helping to raise their achievement. In this way, UNICEF argues, the UNCRC provides the framework of values and principles which enhance the realisation of the Government's Every Child Matters policy

At the start of the second decade of the 21st century:

- 9 million children die before reaching their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday
- 90 million children receive no education
- 150 million children aged 5 - 14 are engaged in child labour (UNICEF 2009)

Accepting this as inevitable is failing our responsibility to the world's children. Teachers are uniquely placed to provide opportunities to develop values of fairness and justice in the world, with appropriate education about children's rights.

### **Research Questions**

Two key questions arise from the imperative of accepting the principles of the UNCRC:

*What can I do in my role as a teacher to help children realize their rights?*

And therefore:

*What guidance can be offered to trainee teachers to embed the values and principles of the UNCRC in their training?*

These are explored with reference to the findings from research into rights respecting schools. This is not only in terms of teaching about rights, but through a rights respecting approach and crucially for the rights of others. This paper focuses on empowering student teachers with the knowledge and skills that they need to make the best interests of the child the primary test of teaching within a framework that respects the rights of others and recognizes children as the holders of rights.

### **Methods**

The first question is answered by considering the literature and evaluation evidence available in this area. A review is made of current initiatives which are complemented by a rights respecting approach,

such as ECM, SEAL, anti-bullying, equality duties, the global dimension and sustainability to identify opportunities for teachers to develop rights respecting practice. It considers evidence from UNICEF Report Card 7 which placed the UK bottom out of 21 of the world's richest nations when looking at child well-being. Reference is also made to the Children's Plan (2008) and recent reports such as the Cambridge Review (2009).

The substantive evidence about the impact of Rights Respecting Schools (RRS) is drawn from three main sources: first an external evaluation of the RRSA scheme in five Local Authorities, conducted by a team from Sussex University School of Education (2009); second from Covell and Howe's (2008) research of the Hampshire programme; and third, UNICEF's own impact reports. This evidence indicates that RRS schools have the following outcomes:

- children have raised self-esteem;
- teachers find their role more professionally satisfying;
- children have more positive attitudes towards diversity and difference;
- behaviour and relationships improve, including teacher/pupil relationships;
- pupils make better progress in their learning, including progress in language and literacy;
- there is less bullying;
- children become more confident and articulate when engaging with moral issues, including issues of global justice, reaching higher levels of understanding as 'global citizens'.

Children also become more committed global citizens, showing a concern to engage with issues of rights-abuse to try to make a difference - justifying the symposium title that rights can function as powerful knowledge.

## **Frame**

In light of the achievements of the RRS programme and its positive impact on schools, in 2007 UNICEF UK initiated a pilot Rights Respecting ITE programme. This work was funded for three years by the DCSF and is a partnership project with Amnesty International UK and the British Institute of Human Rights. The pilot has involved supporting ITE providers to embed opportunities for trainee teachers to learn about the UNCRC and its relevance to schools. The evidence about the success of RRS has been used to develop a model of teacher education to promote rights in school, which is outlined in this paper. The project also contributes to the Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2008 recommendation that the UK "strengthen its efforts, to ensure that all of the provisions of the Convention are widely known and understood by adults and children alike...It also recommends the reinforcement of adequate and systematic training of all professional groups working for and with children."

## **Research findings**

Both survey and case study data will be used to consider the title of the paper. There is a wealth of such findings both internal and external which point to the benefits of a rights respecting approach, gathered from schools. This will show that when the values of the UNCRC underpin the ethos and curriculum of a school, they have a significant, positive impact on important aspects of child well-being and school improvement. They also have a positive effect on the relationships, teaching approaches, attitudes and behaviour of everyone involved.