Rights Respecting Schools – the emerging evidence about impact and implications for teacher education

Jonathan Hart
UNICEF UK, London EC1V 0DU, Email: jonh@rrsa.org.uk

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On 20th November 2009, the global community celebrated the 20th 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. This paper 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. (2009)

In response, this paper highlights the successful programmes developing at London Metropolitan University in collaboration with UNICEF UK, Amnesty UK and others. At London Met, ‘rights’ provides the framework through which the whole secondary teacher education programme is taught from professionalism to pedagogy. The student evaluations show that they experience this as a powerful and practical approach to preparing them for a teaching career. This model is being repeated and adapted at Winchester University with the primary education programme and ways are now being sought to spread the approach throughout the teacher training sector. This paper sets out the case for rights education as an essential component of global citizenship which impacts on the well-being of beginner teachers and on young people.

Introduction

Using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a framework of universally-agreed moral benchmarks against which cultural values, beliefs and practices can be evaluated. Difficulties faced by children can be seen as rights issues rather than individual weaknesses or failures. Teaching directly about rights can focus on and appeal to pupils’ self interest, linking work to current realities and enabling work to have a positive tone. Evidence for its value is quoted and the positive outcomes for schools in terms of child well-being as well as other recent reports and initiatives are cited. It also anticipates the way that schools might function in the 21st Century by providing a ‘values framework’ which, having been experienced by students in training, will become a vital component in changing the focus of schools. This paper recommends that student teachers need to experience such an approach in their training if
they are to carry it with them into schools and throughout their teaching career. The programmes adopted at London Metropolitan and Winchester Universities attest to how this is working. They were designed with the help of UNICEF UK and Amnesty International to not only inform students about children’s rights but also, through rights, to adopt a rights-respecting approach within the institution and crucially be concerned for the rights of others. This exploration of a values-based approach has resonance with the recommendations of the Cambridge Review, which considers children’s present and future needs and the concept of childhood:

**Childhood should be understood in terms of children’s present as well as future needs and capabilities, and their right to a rich array of experiences which will lay the foundations for lifelong learning ...** Children should be actively engaged in decisions which affect their education ... Children are now viewed as competent and capable learners, given the right linguistic and social environment and teaching which engages, stimulates, challenges and scaffolds their understanding ...

**Principles of procedure ... focus attention not on some vague point in the distant future but on the ethical basis on which schools, teachers and pupils (and for that matter governments) act now ...** We need to spell out the values and principles by which our everyday conduct will be guided and against which it may be judged. If we succeed in acting in accordance with these principles, the aims are more likely to be achieved than if we merely state them and hope for the best...

(Alexander, 2009 Cambridge Primary Review)

They therefore recommend a fundamental shift in initial teacher education to take account of these values and principles:

**Refocus initial training on childhood, learning, teaching, curriculum and domain knowledge, together with open exploration of fundamental questions of value and purpose.**

(Alexander, 2009 Cambridge Primary Review)

However, the Guardian newspaper roundtable discussion in association with the Equality and Human Rights Commission on human rights in schools (Guardian newspaper, 27 Jan 2010) pointed to the need for more effective teacher training on human rights:

**Initial teacher education manifestly fails to engage trainees and get the rights of the child into their consciousness**

Teacher educators have a vital role to play in these changes to inspire their students to become leaders in the learning revolution, transforming people’s lives within the values framework of a rights-respecting guide to living. Furthermore considering this within a global dimension, we live in a world where, at the start of the second decade of the 21st century:

- 9 million children die before reaching their 5th 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.

**Rights respecting schools**

In rights-respecting schools, children learn that they have rights – now, solely because they are children. They are not earned or awarded at a certain age. This is of much greater interest to them than being prepared for what they may acquire later in life. In learning about rights they learn that
all children have these same rights, unconditionally. This develops a sense of being connected
with other children globally and supports children in their development of becoming, and sense of
being, ‘global citizens’. In learning about their rights children also learn about the importance of
respecting the rights of others. This helps to maintain a positive tone to any work. It contributes to
developing a positive and socially responsible identity, which is more likely when children
believe in, and feel good about themselves. Children come to realise that they have a
responsibility to themselves to ensure that they take the opportunities that their rights offer. The
Convention on the Rights of the Child gives adults and children a language which they can use
regularly and consistently in relation to a wide range of moral issues, from behaviour issues in the
classroom and playground to all aspects of the curriculum for global citizenship, e.g. fair trade,
sustainability and equalities issues. It supports them in thinking about and forming moral
judgements and in expressing moral and political arguments. The language and concepts of
Rights can be continuously reinforced through classroom and corridor displays, assemblies and
the regular and consistent use of the language of rights and responsibilities by all members of the
school community. Questions can arise in a variety of school situations, such as:

What rights of the child are involved here?
How can the words ‘Wants’ and ‘Needs’ help us understand what’s happening here?
Who has responsibilities in this situation? What are they?
Whose rights are/are not being respected here?
What examples of people enjoying their rights can you see in this situation?
Are there any examples of rights being denied?

The realisation that there are many situations where rights appear to conflict promotes the
development of higher-order thinking and reasoning skills. Where this approach has been taken –
as in several schools in Hampshire in the UK and in Cape Breton in Canada – the evidence of its
value has been convincing. For example:

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’. (Covell and Howe, 2008)

Children become more committed global citizens, showing a concern to engage with issues of
rights-abuse to try to make a difference. This approach is given support from the Cambridge
Review:

Childhood should be understood in terms of children’s present as well as future needs and capabilities,
and their right to a rich array of experiences which will lay the foundations for lifelong learning ...
Children should be actively engaged in decisions which affect their education ...
We need to spell out the values and principles by which our everyday conduct will be guided and against
which it may be judged. If we succeed in acting in accordance with these principles, the aims are more
likely to be achieved than if we merely state them and hope for the best...
(Alexander, 2009 Cambridge Primary Review)

Research findings of the impact of the rights-respecting award scheme, conducted by Sussex
University 2009, show that the scheme provides the underlying values that increase coherence
and progression. In all of the schools studied in the Sussex research, increases in a sense of
belonging and well-being were reported among pupils, staff and parents:
In all schools pupils, staff and parents reported feeling a sense of belonging to the school community which they attributed to the scheme. They saw it as tackling the culture and ethos of the school leading to higher levels of well-being as evidenced by satisfaction, being respected and feeling valued. (Sebba and Robinson, 2009)

Furthermore the Sussex research team found that in all the schools that they studied there was some strong evidence of improved behaviour, engagement in learning and relationships:

There was strong evidence from all sources of positive engagement and relationships between pupils, staff, and between pupils and staff. Pupils reported feeling safe (absence of bullying), resolving conflicts without adult intervention and enjoying work and play. Improved attendance in four schools and reduced fixed term exclusions in six of the schools are evident. These improvements were attributed to the many schemes introduced such as peer mediators and playground pals which were seen as emanating from the values based framework provided by the RRSA. (Sebba and Robinson, 2009)

Such positive effects may also be seen as having an impact on teacher well-being: the following extract, for example, is taken from the research by Covell and Howe:

The level of pupil participation was a very strong predictor of teacher depersonalization, and of a teacher’s sense of personal achievement. In addition, students’ respect for the rights of others predicted a sense of personal achievement among teachers. In essence, when children are behaving in a socially responsible, rights-respecting way in the classroom, and particularly when they are actively involved in their classroom and school activities, teachers have improved relationships with the pupils and a greater sense that their teaching is effective. In the words of one teacher, “Teaching RRR has reminded me why I went into teaching – to make a difference.” (Covell and Howe, 2008)

Improving schooling, and more generally the education process as a whole, is addressed further in the study:

RRR has demonstrated to be a very effective means not only of children’s rights education, but also of education. The schools that are rights-consistent and rights-respecting are functioning optimally and in the words of the overarching principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in “the child’s best interests.” Overall, RRR demonstrates a model of successful school reform. Although we must be somewhat cautious generalizing from our sample of schools, it is possible that our findings actually underestimate the capacity of RRR to improve schooling. (Covell and Howe, 2008)

UNICEF UK’s own school impact reports show similar results. Schools are asked to complete these after achieving Level 1 of the award. The eight main indicators are:

1. Pupils know about the UNCRC and can relate it to their own lives
2. Improvements in self esteem
3. Pupils enhanced moral development
4. Behaviour and relationships are good/improved
5. Pupils feel empowered to respect the rights of others locally, nationally & globally
6. Positive attitudes towards diversity in society
7. Pupils actively participate in decision-making in the school community
8. Improved learning & standards
(UNICEF UK, 2009)

The conclusions from the review of 2009 are as follows:

1. The UNICEF RRSA is having considerable impact in schools. Although some schools often report an early impact of the RRSA, it would appear that the greatest impact may take between two and three years. This reflects the length of time needed to embed the work in the curriculum, school policies and practices as well as work with parents.

2. About 54% of schools consider the RRSA is already having some or a significant impact on learning and standards. Teachers sometimes refer to higher levels of motivation.

3. Children and young people are reported to have a firm understanding of rights in the Convention and can apply them to their own contexts at school and at home. This language of rights is enabling them to have a confidence in talking about relationship difficulties and to deal with conflict situations. Schools frequently talk of pupils being empowered by their understanding of rights and responsibilities.

4. Schools are embedding their RRSA to work in various aspects of the curriculum such as Literacy and History and developing a global dimension incorporating rights denials and social justice. Some of this is motivated by and led by pupils themselves.

5. Teachers value the difference this has already made to the quality of relationships in the school.

6. Schools are often seeking further advice on teaching and learning examples incorporating a rights perspective and further developing the global dimension.

7. Many schools report that the RRSA brings greater coherence to aspects of schooling and initiatives, such as the curriculum, schools councils, between well being and attainment, the aims of the school and ethos, pupil voice and community cohesion. This includes already high performing secondary schools (UNICEF UK 2009)

Specific impact quotes from case studies illustrate the findings and are useful in determining the construct validity of the indicators:

The children are more aware of the different rights of UNCRC. They are starting to explain how they can be upheld for each other and themselves. They can identify when the rights are being infringed in daily life and in stories. Hants Primary

The children have been empowered by the rights respecting language and it has given them the tools and vocabulary to be able to articulate their feelings and give opinions in class discussions. This has dramatically improved the self-esteem of some more hesitant and shy children. They feel safe and listened to, by their own admission. Primary school Bracknell Forest

They can discuss rights with some maturity and show respect for each other. They can apply the ethos of rights to many personal situations and understand the impact of rights denial both in school and in a global context Hampshire Infant school

This has been demonstrated in the children’s clear sense of right and wrong when dealing with playground disputes. Our ‘peer mediators’ have been trained using rights respecting language and use the concept of rights and responsibilities to resolve arguments. Classroom “issues” are often resolved by peers referring to “rights”, should disruptive incidents occur.
The children now use this language to give reasons for their behaviour and reflect on how to improve their behaviour so not to infringe on others rights in our school. When questioned, children say they feel happy and safe under the RRS umbrella at our school. Bracknell Forest Primary

Through class work, the children have discovered that others in the world need people to support and defend their rights. Children are now suggesting ideas to do this through the school council. Infant school Hampshire

The introduction of the lunchtime charter, especially the inclusion of the right to be called by one’s name has enhanced the status of the lunchtime staff. They have reported that they feel the children have a greater respect for them and what they do for our children. They have also stated that children are more often trying to sort squabbles out themselves without asking for intervention from adults. Bracknell Forest Primary

Children are also more willing to tell each other when an action is affecting them rather than get angry or upset about it. Hampshire Primary

Adults in school are recognising positive behaviours and achievements and children are being rewarded for these where as previously the system was punitive and negative behaviour was recognised and sanctioned. Consequently relationships between students and adults in school have improved as students know that their personal qualities and opinions are recognised and respected. Durham Primary

There is an increasing understanding that children’s Rights apply to all children, and teaching has included learning about how some children do not always have these Rights. Locally the children have been involved in designing the new playground area. Rochdale Primary

Children are involved in Community Cohesion work with Children’s Society. Children have started own shop in school to raise money for charity.
School was already very involved with Fair-trade projects, conservation and twinning with other schools in other countries but the UNRC has given this an added richness and dimension. Our older children have begun to question the work of government in decision making and policy. Rochdale Primary

Children are able to say that all children in the world should have the same rights and are able to identify where this does not happen in some cases. Through work such as Day for Change, they have learned to challenge stereotypes and are beginning to recognise that they are able to have an influence on the rights of others. Hampshire Primary

The school is a very culturally diverse community and the vast majority of pupils accept and value each other as individuals and part of the school community. They are genuinely interested in learning about different lifestyles and cultures. They share their own knowledge confidently and support each other in this. Rochdale Primary

This is a multi cultural school (26 languages spoken) where diversity is celebrated and where we have very few incidents of racial bullying or racist remarks. The school is well known locally for its success with both inclusion and cultural diversity... there is a very cohesive feel to the school and children are very supportive of each other. Hampshire Primary

The School Council has achieved the Rochdale Effective School Council award and lead the RRSA project in school. The School Council have played an instrumental role in amending the School Mission Statement, Code of Conduct, lunchtime menu. There has been a significant increase in the number of pupils who wish to be involved in the School Council. Rochdale Secondary

Even my 5 year old son, who is a member of a School Action Group has a voice in school and knows his opinions and ideas are valued and acted upon. Parent – Durham
We are a Rights Respecting Church of England School and I’d expect that to be in any job advert. School governor - Bracknell Forest

It has enabled the whole school community to work together with a common purpose. Hants Primary (UNICEF UK 2009)

From these case studies, it may be seen that other aspects of change are taking place in terms of attitudes in the community and in the ethos of the school and beyond. As an assessor for the award, I recently interviewed a community police officer in a troubled area of a northern city. He spoke passionately about the impact locally of the large community school becoming rights respecting, and was able to give specific examples of how rights and responsibilities were being discussed on the street, with positive results. Preparing student teachers to engage with this course of action whilst training would therefore seem to be an obvious step in the process.

Rights-respecting ITE

There is a clear imperative upon educationalists to provide alternative arguments and visions to those occupying the global mainstream. It was our intention to introduce a rights respecting culture as a means of informing education policy and to make it an integral part of the training of new teachers. UNICEF UK received a grant from the DCSF for a joint agency project to explore using the rights respecting schools model and approach into ITE:

"Some of the grant will enable UNICEF, together with British Institute of Human Rights and Amnesty International to continue discussions with partners in Schools of Education to create and trial an ITE module on the theme of Rights and Responsibilities in the community. This would show how the ideas behind the RRSA can be applied throughout primary, secondary and higher education and on into parenthood “ (Original grant application, 2007)

The purpose of the partnership was to combine capacity, expertise and resources to achieve the following goals: Create a model for bringing a rights respecting approach into both primary and secondary ITE; Pilot this model with at least one primary and one secondary ITE provider. This was a three-year project, which was broken down into three phases:

*Phase 1 (2007-8): Planning and development phase.*
*Phase 3 (2009-10): Continuation of support for London Metropolitan University. Pilot of rights respecting Primary ITE at Winchester University. Dissemination of work to other relevant parties. Evaluation and research.*

The training programmes were developed in partnership with both participating universities and were tailored to the course provider’s specific needs and interests. Training programmes included the following elements:

- Staff development for curriculum and professional studies tutors to identify where rights are already embedded, and to make new links across the curriculum.
- Introductory lecture and activities/workshops on child rights for whole ITE cohort
- Consistent reference to rights respecting pedagogy in Professional Studies lectures (Using Child rights and HRE as an integrating framework)
- Workshops on RRS and Rights Respecting Classrooms
- Subject specific workshops exploring opportunities for HRE across the curriculum
- Support offered to individual students interested in focusing on an aspect of HRE in their research project
- End of year professional studies workshop for students to reflect upon the impact a rights respecting course has had on their teaching

The goal was to enable new teachers to support the Rights Respecting Schools approach. Once they have grasped the value of taking a human rights based approach to teaching and learning, it was hoped that they will eventually champion the approach throughout their careers. It also anticipated the way that schools might function in the 21st Century by providing a ‘values framework’, which, having been experienced by students in training, will become a vital component in changing the focus of schools to ‘person-centred’ learning communities.

**Process**

A steering group was created which consisted of representatives from UNICEF, Amnesty International and the British Institute of Human Rights, as well as ITE course leaders from both primary and secondary education. The following steps are as a result of six meetings which took place throughout 2007:

**Step One: Preparatory discussions** focused on exploring opportunities to incorporate a rights respecting approach within the institutions, and the training courses they provide. This included a consideration of how all departments could be involved in incorporating child and human rights content and pedagogy into their work. The opportunities discussed were designed to increase student and staff knowledge of the requirements made of them under the UNCRC and the UK Human Rights Act. This then supports school based experience for the students enabling them to use a human rights framework to integrate current strategies relating to classroom practice and school policies, for example ‘every child matters’ The discussions also considered what is already happening within the institution in the area of child and human rights, and where it may be referred to in vision and mission statements. The point was to ensure that good practice is intentional rather than accidental, and therefore becomes sustainable throughout the institution and repeatable for each new cohort of students.

**Step Two: Staff development** was informed by discussions and individual situations – and included participation in staff development days, or sessions. This took the form of INSET, similar to training offered to teachers in schools by the agencies involved, to introduce the tutors to human rights education. Interactive feedback from departments showed where a rights respecting approach was either already in place, or where there was scope for inclusion/alteration of current practice. A shared vision and action plan was generated at this, and further sessions.

**Step Three: Student sessions** varied according to sector and availability, but consisted of an introduction to the core values of a rights respecting culture, at the start of the training, on the student induction day, with workshops on how to teach about, for and through human rights. Input from a Headteacher of RRSA schools also took place, to show the impact that a rights respecting approach can have in practice. Rather than including additional lectures for the students into an already overcrowded curriculum, the rights themes and approaches were integrated into existing sessions.

**Step Four: Further opportunities for student development:** Whilst on school based experience, student teachers modelled rights respecting behaviour in their relationships with pupils and school staff. Some were in a position to introduce class charters of agreed rights and responsibilities. Some were able to incorporate learning about human rights into their lessons.
Some were able to experiment with involving children in the assessment of their own learning, and having participation in their learning and aspects of classroom organization. Some had opportunities to use display to reinforce awareness of rights and responsibilities, locally and globally. Some were able to incorporate human rights into active citizenship or other community projects. Opportunities for action research arose from introducing a CR/HRE element into their teaching practice. This involved pupil voice and sprang from conducting pupil focus groups. Some students made it a basis for special study.

### Pilot ITE providers

There are currently two Rights respecting ITE courses involved – one Secondary PGCE (London Metropolitan University) and the other Primary BA (QTS) and PGCE (Winchester University). The London Met course is now completed and is now into the second year cohort of students. Several papers have been produced, identifying the impact of this approach in terms of reflections on the process of planning and implementing this programme from the perspectives of the Programme Director, the English, Science and Citizenship Course Leaders, at the university. They also drew on feedback from the student teachers on their perception of children’s rights and the relevance to their teacher training. The results of an online evaluation showed that 70% of the students found this a useful component of the course and 78% stated that they would have a rights respecting focus to their teaching.

Both London Metropolitan and Winchester universities drew on evaluation and outcome data from their respective institutions to construct evaluative case studies. The data for each institutional case study has been collected through student questionnaires and interviews / focus groups with staff and students. Each case study considers how the RRITE project articulates with the policy context (secondary and primary respectively), evaluates the process of reviewing and implementing the courses (staff experiences), and discusses the impact on the student teachers. The main impact of the evaluation is theoretical in that the aim was to bring together a clear articulation of the nature of children’s rights for teacher education, and explore the implications for this in theory and practice. This is the first step in phase 2 of the RRITE project, which is to synthesise theory and practice to produce a model, to support the wider development of this approach.

In the PGCE secondary course at London Metropolitan University, there is a growing belief that teachers should embrace teaching as a moral activity and see themselves as agents of change. In order to realise this model in their courses they have embraced children’s rights as the framework for their model of professionalism. The RRITE programme at London Met indicates the small ways in which the course tutors have attempted to develop experiences which support the rights-respecting theme that they have identified as important. Feedback from students after the first year of these developments show that they appreciate this focus and can identify ways in which this will impact on their own practice once they have qualified. The main point to emerge from student evaluations is that they should continue to develop this dimension and to embed it even more thoroughly in the different elements of the programme. Through staying true to the overall vision, through collaboration and through critical inquiry they aim to continue to develop their provision and in doing so to act in some small way as change agents, to promote the kinds of rights-respecting education outlined above.

A similar venture has started this academic year with the primary education courses at Winchester University and it is already proving to have significant influence with student and tutor perceptions. UNICEF and Amnesty teams recently ran evaluation workshops with the students, after a period of school experience, using forum theatre and other techniques. The findings were
quite shocking in terms of the reporting of current practice in some of the schools. The students had spotted several abuses of children’s rights which horrified them and through the technique of forum theatre were able to show how a teacher with a rights-respecting focus might have changed the situation.

Conclusion

The global picture of children’s rights is a matter which should concern all of us in the developed world. The simple fact that 90 million children still have no access to education is an issue which can be addressed at all levels of education. But there is also an issue in the UK where child well-being is the lowest in the list of the world’s 21 richest nations (UNICEF, 2007). Relative poverty and inequality similarly present challenges for new teachers (Stewart, 2009). It is therefore incumbent on teacher educators to give a picture of hope that new teachers can become change agents throughout their career. This is not pure ‘pie in the sky’ but powerful knowledge that provides a positive motivating factor that appeals to many teachers starting their careers and reinforces the meaning and purpose of education, which is based on a set of values based on human rights. RRITE enables ITE providers to incorporate the national frameworks for initial teacher education into the framework we are developing and it therefore has potential applications throughout the country. There is clearly also an international relevance to our work as the UNCRC is ratified by 194 countries and public education in these countries should reflect a commitment to Children’s Rights.

This paper has shown where employing such an approach has impact in schools around the country. The introduction of programmes of rights-respecting ITE courses is bearing fruit. One student who left the course at London Met University last year has introduced the scheme to the secondary school where she now teaches. She presented it to the senior management team who have incorporated the ideas and set up a working group that has produced an action plan for the introduction of a rights-respecting approach in the school. This is now spreading to other schools in the area – after the school held a dissemination event. This is a powerful and hopeful model which does not depend on legislation or imposed initiatives, but requires a personal vision which ties belief and values to theory and practice in the classroom, in the school and beyond.

References


Sussex University School of Education (2009) Second year interim report