

Research articles

# UNICEF's *Rights Respecting Schools Award* as children's human rights education

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## Abstract

Children's human rights education is a complex area for schools to handle. Therefore, it is not uncommon for schools and teachers to seek guidance from actors outside school. This article examines UNICEF UK's *Rights Respecting Schools Award* with the aim of shedding light on ways in which the programme can support successful work with children's human rights education. The programme's main aims are identified, and research about the programme is examined to determine to what extent the aims seem to be achieved in schools that use it. The analysis shows that the programme holds good potential to support successful work with children's HRE, but that some areas of the programme need to be developed to provide a full HRE. A lack of strong research evidence for a programme effect is also noted.

## Keywords

Rights Respecting Schools Award, RRSA, children's human rights education, HRE, school

## **Introduction**

Children's human rights education is a complex area for schools to handle. Education is a human right in itself—essential for general development and life chances—but it should also support the development of human rights knowledge and values. The responsibility placed on education to respond to children's human rights is complex and includes several elements: equal access, knowledge acquisition, value and capacity development, a human rights culture, respect for children as current rights holders, and a rights-respecting school environment.

Some of these aspects are responsibilities of the state, such as having a national curriculum and teacher education (Parker, 2018). Others are to be fulfilled by the various professional groups that staff schools, for example organising the school day and selecting educational content and methods (Quennerstedt, 2022). Everyday school life should constitute a rights-promoting environment. However, a dearth of national direction leaves school professionals uncertain about what to do (Bron and Thijs, 2011; Gerber, 2008; Phillips, 2016). Teachers also express that they lack the knowledge and training to provide children's human rights education (Leung et al., 2011; Tibbitts and Kirschschläger, 2010). Therefore, it is not uncommon for schools and teachers to seek guidance from actors outside school that are perceived to be experts in human and child rights issues. This article takes an interest in such collaboration between schools and outside actors around children's human rights education.

Cooperation around human rights between schools and organisations, such as UNICEF or Amnesty International, has a long history. About a decade into the new millennium such organisations took a further step towards supporting schools' work with children's and young people's human rights by developing educational programmes with a so-called 'whole school-approach' (Covell et al., 2010). This means that the programmes aim to cover and impact all parts of school life, not only teaching and learning in classrooms.

The contributions from external organisations have been considered to provide valuable support in a situation when, despite being strongly endorsed by most stakeholders, human rights education for children and young people does not seem to take place in schools to any great extent (Lapayese, 2005; Lundy et al., 2012). The programmes can be said to operate as substitutes for weak or absent government direction and inadequate teacher education (Gerber, 2008; Jerome et al., 2015). Some commentators indicate that partnering with organisations might be the only way to initiate children's rights work in schools. Gerber (2008) argues that organisation-supported classroom activities can also function as policy drivers, i.e., they may set in motion a bottom-up process for the implementation of children's rights in education, where the engagement of schools eventually impacts national policy.

Opening schools to outside actors is not without complications, however. One issue raised by

some commentators is that organisations' agendas may not necessarily harmonise with national school policies. The positions of the organisations may, for example, be conceived as overly radical or political if rights education seeks to encourage societal activism (Struthers, 2019). This may be seen as problematic by teachers and policymakers (Jerome et al., 2015; Rinaldi, 2017). It is also unclear whether the programmes draw on both topic expertise (human rights, children's rights) and educational expertise (the design and undertaking of education). Transferring the responsibility for educational content and quality from schools to external, unaccountable organisations can therefore be seen as risky (Quennerstedt, 2019; 2022).

### **Aim and research questions**

This article seeks to extend the current knowledge about whether and how collaboration between schools and outside actors can be an effective model for the provision of children's human rights education. The term 'effective' is here understood in the sense of adequate to accomplish a purpose or produce an intended or expected result. The article examines one school programme as an example of such collaboration, namely UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Award. The article will shed light on *the ways in which UNICEF's programme can be a way to work effectively with children's and young people's human rights education*. The following questions have guided the study:

1. What are the main aims of UNICEF's school programme?
2. To what extent does recent research show that the aims are achieved in schools that use the programme?

In the study, both the programme itself and existing research about it have been analysed, with the aim of connecting the programme's intentions to findings from research. The Rights Respecting Schools Award was chosen, first, because it is a widely used school programme for rights education. In the UK where it originated, over 5000 schools are registered, and it has also spread to other countries. Second, it is the only school programme for rights education that has been sufficiently researched to provide the volume of material necessary for this study.

### **Children's human rights education**

The UN has emphasised that human rights education (HRE) should be provided to children in schools. The first phase of the UN's *World Programme for Human Rights Education* specifically targeted primary and secondary education (UN, 2006). The common understanding of HRE and what it includes has evolved gradually through UN activities and scholarly engagement (Coysh, 2017; Bajaj, 2011). The now widely accepted definition, laid down in the UN

Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UN, 2011), is:

Human rights education and training encompasses:

Education about human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;

Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;

Education for human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.

Despite clear communication from the UN and strong support for HRE in nations around the world, it has only to a limited extent found its way into school discourse and national curricula. Parker (2018) discusses the slow uptake of HRE in curricula and concrete educational practice and argues that a main problem is the lack of a HRE curriculum that elaborates on subject matter and learning goals, and on the details of basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of human rights learning. Further, the range of concepts that are used in educational thinking to approach similar issues—citizenship education, global citizenship education, peace education, education for democracy, anti-racist education, and intercultural education (Bajaj, 2011; Tibbitts, 2017; Rinaldi et al., 2020)—presents an additional problem as teachers find it difficult to differentiate between them. That scholars take diverging stands on whether HRE is something specific or is largely the same thing as, e.g., citizenship education or peace education (Cassidy et al., 2014; Zembylas et al., 2015), adds to the confusion. Hence, scholarly and professional uncertainty around what HRE is presents a difficulty that hinders the uptake in school discourse.

### **Previous research on the impact of school programmes for rights education**

Research that studies school programmes for children's rights education almost exclusively refers to the findings of two groups of scholars, whose research was conducted during the first decade of the millennium.

First, Covell and Howe's (and colleagues) evaluations of the school programme *Rights Respect and Responsibility* are often referred to. This research reported good effects, such as increased academic engagement, a more positive school climate, improved relationships, reduced bullying, improved behaviour, and a higher sense of common responsibility for ethically sound conduct (see e.g., Covell, 2010; Covell et al., 2010). They also found that some schools tended to overemphasise responsibilities. This affected children's understanding of the nature of

rights and made them believe that rights are contingent on responsibilities, leading to a certain 'miseducation' (Howe and Covell, 2010).

Second, Sebba and Robinson's evaluation (2010) of UNICEF's *Rights Respecting Schools Award* is widely referenced. The main findings showed a range of positive outcomes: extensive knowledge about rights; positive relationships and little bullying; pupils felt empowered and knew how to influence decisions; pupils were engaged in the rights of others and had positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and behavioural or emotional problems; and their engagement in learning had improved. Some concerns were also raised by the authors: the sustainability of the effects was uncertain; reward schemes for desired attitudes and the language used raised questions about pupils' reasons for adapting; 'helping poor people'-attitudes were noted, as was contradictory communication among staff; most decisions were still made by teachers and school leaders. Sebba and Robinson (2010) acknowledged some methodological limitations of their study. Student participants were selected by senior managers, and the schools in the study were all involved in other initiatives, which made it difficult to attribute positive effects to the rights programme specifically.

Jerome et al. (2015) compiled research on the impact of child rights education published up to 2012. They concluded that there seems to be grounds to claim a positive relation between learning about rights and being more respectful towards others. They also found research support for a correlation between knowledge about rights and high levels of reported wellbeing and experiences of participation. The authors, however, also expressed concerns that the evidence presented for the positive impact of child rights education is rather weak. Evaluations have tended to focus on aspects that are easy to 'measure'—such as implemented processes—rather than on educational impact. They also pointed to methodological weaknesses in several studies that negatively affect the findings' trustworthiness, such as low response rates from questionnaires, opportunistic sampling of research participants, and relying exclusively on teachers' reports when assessing levels of implementation. These concerns need to be taken seriously: evidence for claims of impact must be reliable.

### **The Rights Respecting Schools Award programme**

UNICEF's *Rights Respecting Schools Award* was initiated in the UK in 2004 to help schools to employ the UNCRC (UN, 1989) as their values framework. The programme has also been extended to other countries (e.g., Norway, Denmark, Sweden). The UK version of the programme is organised as an accreditation scheme; schools start at bronze level and, after certain work and activities are undertaken and assessment passed, can receive accreditation at silver or gold levels. UNICEF provides the framework to follow, some material and resources, and organises training and the evaluation procedure for accreditation. The cost of

registration in the programme and higher accreditations varies from £100 to £1000, depending on school size. The UK programme has undergone modification over time, and apart from the renaming of the levels, some larger conceptual changes have been made in recent years that have brought the programme closer to HRE terminology.

In the transfer of UNICEF UK's version of the programme to other countries, some adaptations can be noted. For example, in the Nordic countries the programme is called 'Rights School' (Denmark, Norway), and 'Rights-based School' (Sweden). The exclusion of the word 'respecting' indicates a different stance on pairing rights and respect; they are not as closely linked as in the UK version. This could be due to earlier critical comments on misinterpretations of respect as responsibility (Dunhill, 2019; Howe and Covell, 2010). Furthermore, none of these countries charge schools for the programme.

## **Material and analysis**

To explore the extent to which UNICEF's school programme can be a way to work effectively with children's and young people's human rights education, the study was designed as follows.

### ***RQ1 - main aims***

The first research question, regarding the main aims of UNICEF's programme, was addressed by examining all available material about the programme on the UNICEF UK website. A decision to focus on the UK version was made as the UK webpages provide a large volume of information in comparison with the material available on the websites of UNICEF in the Nordic countries. The Nordic countries' versions build on the UK's, and their websites also have links to UNICEF UK material. Despite a few differences, such as the previously mentioned toning down of the use of the word 'respect' in the Nordic countries, the different national versions were judged as sufficiently similar to motivate detailed analysis of only the UK version.

In the abundance of information about the programme, several alternative vocabularies are used in parallel, which points to different aspects being core to the programme. As a result, the central web pages/documents *The three strands*, *Four key areas of school life*, *Theory of change* and the annual *Impact reports* communicate a rather incoherent image of the programme. UNICEF UK does not explain how the varying conceptualisations of their programme that are presented in the range of documents relate to each other. It is therefore challenging to understand how they make up a whole.

The material was analysed by marking frequently used terms and aspects that were given particular emphasis in each document or webpage. These were considered to indicate central objectives for the programme. Key terms and aspects were collated and, through a process of going back and forth between the material and the collated aspects and terms, the

information was grouped, condensed, and abstracted, until overarching aims could be distinguished. The analysis of the programme material was therefore a process of abstracting aims above the separate conceptualisations. The aims that constitute the findings from the analysis are thus the construction of the researcher rather than being distinctly communicated by UNICEF, but they build closely on the material and the different conceptualisations on UNICEF's webpage.

### ***RQ2 - research support for aim achievement***

The second research question, concerning research support for the achievement of the programme's aims, was addressed by analysing recent studies of UNICEF's programme. To find as many studies as possible, a systematic search for publications in all languages accessible to the author was made via the electronic database Academic Search Elite and in Google Scholar. Search terms used were *RRSA, UNICEF, Rights Respecting Schools Award*, in different combinations with *school, children's rights* and *education*. The reference lists of the studies found in the electronic search were then checked to identify further publications. To be included, the work had to:

- be published in 2011 or later;
- report on original research;
- focus on UNICEF's school programme or feature it as a significant part of the study.

Ten publications were found. Research from a UK context dominated - all but one of the studies had examined UNICEF UK's programme. Only one non-UK publication was found, and this examined the Norwegian iteration of the programme. Since the total number of identified publications was low, it was decided to include the Norwegian study despite it being the only one from another national context.

To respond to Jerome et al.'s (2015) caution about weak evidence due to design problems, the ten studies underwent quality assessment. They were screened according to the following criteria, which were weighed together to judge overall quality:

- match between the purpose of the study and the chosen research method/s and data produced;
- account of the analysis made;
- findings and conclusions that are reasonable in relation to chosen method/s and data produced, and to the analysis described;
- reflection on the limitations of the study.

The quality assessment led to the exclusion of three studies. Two were not seen to meet reasonable expectations for representative sampling and sample size, as findings were

portrayed as representative of students and teachers generally at the studied schools. One provided no account of the method of analysis and did not demonstrate sufficient analytical depth. One of the seven remaining studies was excluded as it reported on the same research as another included text. The objectives and research design of the six studies that were finally included are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Analysed publications.*

<b>Publication</b>	<b>Aim of study</b>	<b>Research design</b>
Dunhill, A. (2019). <i>The language of the human rights of children: a critical discourse analysis</i> . (Doctoral dissertation, University of Hull).	Examines to what extent the language of human rights of children is incorporated into UNICEF UK's RRSA and how it is presented on school websites.	Discourse analysis of how UNICEF UK in its RRSA incorporates the language of human rights of children, and of how RRSA schools present this language on their website. Text analysis.
Emerson, L., & Lloyd, K. (2017). Measuring children's experience of their right to participate in school and community: A rights-based approach. <i>Children &amp; Society</i> , 31(2), 120-133.	To develop and test a children's rights based measure of child participation.	Development of survey in collaboration with children's advisory group. Online survey, 3733 children 10-11 years old in primary schools in Northern Ireland, 595 of these in RRSA schools (separated in report of findings).
Halås, C. T. (2020). <i>UNICEFs rettighetsskoler: En undersøkelse av to pilotskolers erfaringer med å bli UNICEF rettighetsskoler</i> [UNICEF's rights schools: an examination of two pilot schools' experiences of becoming a UNICEF rights school]. FoU-rapport nr 58. (R&D-report). Bodö: Nord universitet.	Examines how children and adults experience participation and results when becoming a UNICEF Norway Rights School.	Visits to two pilot primary schools during two years. Data sources were research led workshops with children, and interviews with students, teachers, and leaders. Thematic analysis.
Webb, R. (2014). <i>Doing the rights thing: An ethnography of a</i>	Examines implications of adopting a dominant	Ethnographic research during 10 months in

Publication	Aim of study	Research design
<i>dominant discourse of rights in a primary school in England.</i> (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sussex).	discourse of rights as a framework for guiding policy and practice in a RRSA school.	English primary school. Discourse analysis of ethnographic data; observations, interviews, texts.
Winch, A. (2020). <i>Our voices matter: How student voice is understood, enacted and experienced explored through case studies of 'Rights Respecting Schools' in England.</i> (Doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter).	Develops a detailed understanding of how student voice is conceptualised, enabled, enacted and experienced by students, teachers and leaders.	Case studies of three English secondary RRSA schools. Data sources were interviews, observations, focus groups, provision mapping. Thematic analysis.
Woods, F., & Bond, C. (2020). How does a Level 2 Rights Respecting School facilitate play for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)? <i>International Journal of Playwork Practice</i> , 1(1), 1-31.	Examines how a RRSA school facilitates play for children with special educational needs and disabilities.	Single case study of English RRSA primary school. Data sources were child and teacher interviews and observations.  Thematic analysis.

The studies were read in full. None of them had the explicit aim of evaluating the programme or assessing the achievement of its goals. Instead, they focused on a specific issue or aspect. However, descriptions and analyses contained rich information, and therefore offered insights into a wide range of programme-related matters. The findings presented in the different studies were reflected against the aims identified in the analysis of the programme. This entailed several steps: first, findings that were seen as relevant were collected for each aim. The collected findings for each aim were then analysed to identify qualitatively different elements. Finally, an assessment was made of the research support for both the achievement of each respective aim and concerns raised relating to the aim.

It should be acknowledged that the low number of publications limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the study. As argued earlier, the need to shed new light on the use of school programmes for children's human rights education still motivates attention to the limited work that has been done. The findings of this study add important elements that enable us to get a more credible picture of whether whole school programmes can provide a good model for children's HRE; however, they cannot provide a definitive answer.

## **Findings**

The findings will be presented in two sections, corresponding to the research questions. In the first section, references to UNICEF documents are given with short names (see legend before references).

### ***What are the main aims of UNICEF school programme?***

Based on the information on its webpages, the following three main aims of UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award were identified:

1. Students' experiences in school should be positive.
2. Students' capacity as rights holders should be built.
3. Adults' rights competence should increase.

#### ***Aim 1: Students' experiences in school should be positive***

That schools offer students experiences that are positive and promote their wellbeing is a core ambition of UNICEF's programme. Experiences of feeling valued, safe, and of being heard in school stand out as very significant. That students feel and are safe and protected is emphasised; the Theory of Change documentation, for example, states as a long-term impact that 'Children feel safe in school'. Positive relations between students and teachers, and between students, are also frequently pointed out as decisive for wellbeing in school. To show that the programme affects relations positively, the 2020 Evidence Report (Theory+) describes an 'increase in those who agreed that pupils were kind and helpful'. The centrality of positive experiences, from being able to express your views and being listened to, is demonstrated in statements such as: 'teachers and teaching assistants listen positively to pupils' views and show respect for their opinions' (Toolbox+). Further, the school community should be founded on dignity and mutual respect for rights and non-discrimination, which will let students experience being treated as equals (Strands+; Impact).

These positive experiences are to be achieved by embedding rights principles and values into all school matters and contexts. A rights-based perspective is accordingly expected to have a transformational effect on the school environment and human relations in school, and thereby on students' experiences. An undercurrent to this line of argumentation is found in the material in indications that students' present experiences are unsatisfactory and should be improved. This is disclosed by statements such as: 'The Award improves the lives of children in the UK by taking a whole school approach to putting children's rights at the heart of school policy and practice' (Impact), or the very name of the Theory of *Change* (emphasis added).

The aim mainly takes a here-and-now perspective – children are seen to be entitled to experiences that are beneficial for their present wellbeing. But there are also some future-directed aspects of this aim. Positive school experiences are expected to build self-esteem and

confidence, which will contribute to further growth and development.

***Aim 2: Students' capacity as rights holders should be built***

That students develop as rights holders and increase their capacities to claim, exercise and protect rights is also a main aim of the programme. Such capacities are seen to build on knowledge about the UNCRC and an understanding of what rights mean in their own and others' lives. The centrality of knowledge development is demonstrated in such phrases as 'The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is made known to children' (Strands) and 'children have a better knowledge of children's rights and what these mean in their lives' (Theory).

Increased knowledge about the Convention is assumed to have a range of both immediate and long-term effects. One immediate effect anticipated is that children who know their rights will be 'empowered to enjoy and exercise their rights and promote the rights of others' (Strands). Having knowledge about rights is assumed to make it easier for children to recognise when their own or other children's rights are being breached in school (Theory). There is also an expectation that knowledge about the Convention will make children themselves better respect the rights of others in school. This will reduce '[n]on-rights respecting behaviours such as bullying and discrimination' (Theory).

Developing capacities to express an opinion and to take part in decision making are frequently pointed out as central. This is seen in such outcomes as 'Young people can express their opinions, have been involved in decisions about their life in school' (Strand+) and 'Opportunities for children to participate in decisions that affect them' (Theory).

More lasting impacts on rights holder capacity are also estimated. Rights-respecting attitudes are anticipated to support development towards improved global justice and sustainable living. For example, students are expected to 'develop a strong sense of social justice and knowledge of local and global issues from a rights perspective and become ambassadors for rights' (Toolbox+), and to 'become "active", politically engaged citizens' (Theory). Thus, school is seen as key to the development of long-term engagement in social justice issues and children's capacity to be active citizens who can contribute to change.

***Aim 3: Adults' rights competence should increase***

The third main aim that is identified in UNICEF's programme targets adults in schools, particularly teachers. Adults are not expected to already have sufficient knowledge about the UNCRC and rights for children. This is evident in several passages that state that the Convention should be made known to adults/teachers or that they should develop better knowledge of it (Strands, Theory). Attention is also directed to the actions of adults in school: 'The Award is not just about what children do but also, importantly, what adults do' (Key

Areas). To support schools and teachers to develop knowledge and capacities, UNICEF arranges training for adults about the programme and about the Convention.

Adults are sometimes called 'duty bearers' in the material, which is a strong concept that does not entirely match the more lenient tone concerning teachers' knowledge. It is spelled out that adults, as duty bearers, are 'accountable for ensuring that children experience their rights' (Strands).

***To what extent does recent research show that the aims are achieved in schools that use the programme?***

In the following I will account for findings in the reviewed research that support the view that programme schools achieve the aims elaborated above, or that question the extent of the contributions. To make the text more readable, references to the six analysed publications are given with surnames only in the running text (with publication year given the first time a publication is referenced).

***Aim 1 - Students' experiences in school should be positive***

The collated research findings that relate to the first aim show that the programme positively affects school experiences, but also cast some doubt over the same claim.

Halås (2020), Winch (2020) and Woods & Bond (2020) show that most students who attend programme schools talk favourably about their everyday school lives and social relations in their schools. For example, students in Halås' and Winch's studies describe feeling part of a community characterised by mutual recognition and considerate friendliness, where violence and conflicts are uncommon. Most students also report that they can have a say in most matters, are listened to, and can often influence decisions. In Emerson & Lloyd's (2017) study, students in programme schools report higher levels of participation than students in non-programme schools. The studies also show that some students disagree with the overall satisfaction conveyed by most students.

The research also commonly demonstrates that most teachers in the schools visited report that changes for the better have taken place since joining the programme. Teachers say that the social relations have improved, mainly between students but also between students and teachers. For example, the teachers in Halås' study report that there are less conflicts, that students' ability to see others' perspectives has improved and that the school environment feels safer. The most significant change reported by teachers relates to students' involvement in discussion and decision making, which is seen to have improved considerably.

Reports from students and teachers in these studies offer support for the view that most students' experiences of everyday life in programme schools are positive. It is more difficult

to conclude, however, to what extent this is attributable to joining the programme, as the only evidence presented is teachers' accounts in interviews. Another aspect that casts some doubt over claims that perceived changes and the current satisfactory situation can be attributed to the programme is that several schools in the studies describe themselves as having been competent and interested in student participation, social relations, and inclusivity before they started the programme. The programme is seen to give a language and a framework for what they think they were already doing.

### *Aim 2 - Students' capacity as rights holders should be built*

The reviewed research clearly shows that the programme schools studied do actively seek to develop students' capacities as rights holders. There is much work to facilitate students' opportunities and abilities to have a say in and influence aspects of their school day and environment. Halås, Winch, Webb (2014), and Woods & Bond all report on practices in the schools that aim to strengthen students' desire and capacity to take part in discussions and decision making, and they all report that students describe having a say in most matters, being listened to and often being able to affect decisions. The rights council is, in Halås' study, described as giving more power to the students than the students' council. Winch finds that students' feeling that they have a voice is not diminished when their views do not, in the end, change the decision; the students understand that they cannot always get what they want.

Teachers report that students have responded to these changes by becoming more engaged in discussions and decision making, and by starting to claim scope for influence. For example, the secondary school students in Winch's study have formed 'lobbying groups', which are considered to be very influential. Webb argues that the efforts made in relation to giving students more scope to state their views and to influence decisions develop their citizenship capacities and even hold the potential to foster future activism.

A second rights-related area through which schools clearly build rights capacity is non-discriminatory and inclusive relationships. The research reports that students in the programme schools generally show awareness of the equal value of all persons and think that differing views or physical or cultural characteristics should be valued, or at least respected. Woods and Bond observe that children adapt ongoing play when it is needed for a child with physical disabilities, for example, to take part. Students in Halås' study connect rights to bullying and loneliness, and reflect on dilemmas in relations and groups. Winch reports students as saying that with voice comes collective responsibility; voices of hate or discriminatory attacks on persons should not go unchallenged.

Taken together, the research solidly supports the view that the high ambitions in UNICEF programme schools to develop students' capacity to state their views, take part in decision

making and to act in inclusive and non-discriminatory ways can be achieved. Nevertheless, this represents a narrow scope in terms of rights education: the development of capacity in other rights-related areas is barely visible in the research. For example, students' knowledge about rights is an area for capacity building that is highly prioritised in NICEF's description of the programme. Knowledge about the UNCRC, the rights and their meaning is said to be the foundation on which our capacity as rights holders rests. Very little can be found, however, about programme schools' work to develop such knowledge. Halås briefly mentions that rights learning in these schools has improved, but also reports that when asked to state rights, most children interviewed found it hard to remember any. Winch notes that rights teaching was seen in the silver and gold schools, but in the bronze school she writes that '[e]xplicitly teaching about rights is not yet an integral part of the school's practice, and student participants do not have an awareness of their rights' (p. 147).

### *Aim 3 - Adults' rights competence should increase*

Teachers in Winch's, Halås' and Woods & Bond's studies say consistently that the programme has expanded their knowledge about the Convention and rights for children, and that their understanding and commitment have grown. The framework and language that the programme provides is said to guide thinking and action. For example, teachers in Halås' study say that they have gained a new comprehension of what it means to listen to children, and that they have changed the way they collaborate with children. The research also demonstrates that adults in programme schools are aware of how important leadership and policy are to achieve any change, and that structures and practices must be in line with what is communicated in policies. This improvement in adults' rights competence is only verified by the teachers' self-reported elevation in knowledge and commitment, which by itself is weak evidence for a programme effect.

Studies that have examined practice in these schools point out that not all teachers are enthusiastic about the programme, and some are sceptical and do not want to prioritise rights work. Webb finds that many school professionals find it a challenge to be the kind of adult the programme asks for. The research does not really discuss that several teachers responsible for implementing the programme take on this role somewhat unwillingly and what the consequences of this might be.

Dunhill's (2019) examination of schools' written material raises questions about whether the knowledge level and commitment to children's rights in the programme schools have increased as reported by the teachers. First, she shows that the examined programme schools do not employ UNCRC language to a great degree, and references to or quotations from it quite often contain direct errors. Instead, UNICEF's language is repeated, including its focus on 'rights-respecting' (rather than rights). According to Dunhill and Webb, this risks producing

a rights-respecting discourse, rather than a rights discourse. Second, Dunhill demonstrates that some elements in schools' information about their rights work conflict with basic ideas of children's human rights; for example, statements that some rights are more important than others, and frequent reference to responsibilities.

Some findings from studies of school practice also counter the impression of the programme's positive effects on adults' rights competence. Instances where schools' and teachers' reasoning does not harmonise with rights principles are demonstrated. Winch finds, for example, that rights for children are presented as conditional on competence, and notes that students' participation (judged according to a four-step scale) in two of the visited schools is restricted to the two lowest steps. Webb shows how the 'empowered' child subject constructed in UNICEF's program becomes a taken-for-granted figure of the child. She reports how, in the school in her study, this image of the child makes school staff less inclined or prepared to notice gendered patterns that negatively affect girls.

## **Discussion**

The overarching concern of this article is to contribute elaborated knowledge about whether collaboration between schools and outside actors can support children's HRE. To bring UNICEF's programme and HRE closer together, the following discussion will integrate the study's findings with HRE terminology and thinking. The insights from the analysis of UNICEF's *Rights Respecting Schools Award*, and of previous research on UNICEF's programme, will be mapped onto the three elements of a full-scale HRE—education *about, through* and *for* human rights—and critically considered. Table 2 shows, in the left-hand column, how the three aims and their main content relate to the HRE framework. The middle column shows research findings that support that the programme has led to progress towards the aims, and the right-hand column shows findings that question the extent of the programme's positive contribution.

**Table 2**

*Programme aims and research findings related to HRE framework.*

<b>Programme aims mapped onto the HRE framework</b>	<b>Findings from the analysis that support or question programme contributions to achieving the aims</b>	
<b>Education about rights</b>		
Build rights capacity	<u>Findings that support</u>	<u>Findings that question</u>
Knowledge about the Convention and about the meaning of rights	Many students seem familiar with everyone's equal value and can name some rights.	Findings on teaching/learning about rights or students' knowledge limited and unclear.
<b>Education through rights</b>		
Positive school experience	<u>Findings that support</u>	<u>Findings that question</u>
Positive experiences in the present in relation to:  - being safe - expressing opinions - being heard - being equally treated	Student satisfaction with school community's safety and friendliness, possibility to express opinions and to be heard.  Teachers claim programme effect – improvement in relations and participation.	No comparison with non-programme schools.  Schools describe being committed before joining programme.
<b>Increase adult rights competence</b>	Teachers say the programme has expanded their knowledge and changed their way of acting.	Errors in written material and ideas not in line with rights.  Disharmonising reasoning and actions by teachers.  Some teachers unwilling/sceptical.  Only teachers' self-reporting.  No comparison with non-program schools.

Programme aims mapped onto the HRE framework	Findings from the analysis that support or question programme contributions to achieving the aims	
Education <b>for</b> rights		
Build rights capacity	<u>Findings that support</u>	<u>Findings that question</u>
Empowered in the present to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- enjoy and exercise rights</li> <li>- protect rights of others</li> <li>- identify rights breaches</li> <li>- express opinion</li> <li>- take part in decision making</li> </ul>	Schools work actively a) to build students' capacity to express opinions and take part in decisions, and b) to develop students' views on difference and equality. Teachers claim programme effect – improvement in students' engagement and claims for influence.	Narrow scope of capacity building displayed.  No comparison with non-programme schools.
Empowered in the future to be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- active politically engaged citizen</li> <li>- committed to social justice issues, locally and globally</li> </ul>	Schools work to build capacity for actions that confirm the human dignity and equal value of everyone.	

As can be seen, UNICEF's programme engages in all elements of HRE. Regarding education *about* rights, the programme emphasises knowledge development, but existing research does not offer much detail about whether this takes place in schools or not, how it is done, or what knowledge students have. Clearly, researchers have not chosen to examine this matter; none of the studies in this analysis examined rights teaching or students' knowledge. Some possible reasons may be: (1) the dominant interest in the field of children's rights studies in issues of 'participation', identified in earlier reviews (Reyneart et al., 2009; Quennerstedt 2020); (2) the tendency noticed by Jerome and colleagues (2015) to study processes rather than impact, which is difficult to measure; and (3) the lack of a HRE curriculum, as discussed by Parker (2018). It is not possible, therefore, to come to a research-based conclusion about whether UNICEF's school programme is a way to work effectively toward education *about* rights. One concern is the programme's placing of the UNCRC as the main object of knowledge, rather than children's rights or human rights. This is often expressed in terms of students developing 'knowledge about the Convention'. The strong emphasis on the Convention itself might distract from deeper considerations of what rights are and mean, and risk limiting learning. Further, human rights, or the wider body of international legislation that surrounds human

rights, are not suggested in the programme to be part of the knowledge that students should draw on when learning about rights. These aspects constitute clear areas of development for the programme if it is to meet the requirements for HRE.

Education *through* rights can be said to be the main focus of UNICEF's programme. There is a strong emphasis on respectful social relations, students' wellbeing and being heard, and the centrality of adults' approach, commitment and actions are underlined. There is a clear alignment between the UN's (2011) description of what education *through* rights entails and the two programme aims mapped to this HRE element. A good deal of research supports that the work done in programme schools to make students' experiences positive has a real effect. But some findings, and a lack of comparative research, raise questions about the extent to which the effects can be specifically accredited to the programme. In terms of the increase of adults' rights competence, research that supports the effect of the programme is weak as it only draws on self-reporting, and several research findings question whether adults' competence has increased as much as claimed by teachers themselves. Again, no comparative studies are available to confirm that adults in programme schools have a more developed rights competence than teachers in non-programme schools. Taken together, it can be concluded that UNICEF's school programme might well be a way to work effectively with the HRE element education *through* rights: the programme provides good support and research findings are promising. There are too many question marks to claim any certainty, however.

Finally, regarding education *for* rights, the programme aims to build a rights capacity that covers a reasonably wide area, and so aligns fairly well with how the UN describes what education *for* rights should achieve. Further, the programme includes both present and future empowerment. The research findings demonstrate that capacity building is prioritised in programme schools, but that their concrete work seems limited to a few rights areas, and accordingly builds a narrower rights capacity than the one aimed for by UNICEF. For these restricted capacities, good effects are demonstrated by the research. To include a wider range of rights capacities in schools' capacity building efforts is an obvious area for development for UNICEF and schools that work within the programme. The lack of comparative research also hinders the possibility to conclude with certainty that there is a programme effect; whether programme schools' rights capacity work is better than non-programme schools' has not been studied. Taken together, the programme itself holds a good potential to effectively guide education for rights, but the work in schools does not seem to be broad enough to meet what is expected from a HRE perspective.

## **Conclusions and looking forward**

This study can conclude that UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Award can provide good

support for effective work with children’s human rights education; however, it also concludes that the programme needs development. The weakest part of the programme regards education about rights, where significant improvement to conform to the standards that can be expected from a HRE viewpoint seems vital. As Parker (2018) notes, a curriculum of HRE could aid such development. Concerning education through and for rights, the programme harmonises well with HRE ambitions, but the actual work in schools seems to be narrower than what the programme aims for, and the changes might not be as extensive as argued. A recommendation to UNICEF is to consider how the programme can push for a broader approach by schools.

In 2015, Jerome et al. pointed out positive effects of school programmes that are well supported by the research evidence. This study confirms these effects and elaborates on how they take concrete form in educational practice. The evidence for programme effect remains quite weak. I suggest that future research about school programmes for rights education should consider this when designing research, so that stronger evidence can be obtained. This includes thorough considerations of sample sizes and selection of research participants, to ensure that data is sufficient and representative of the school population, and undertaking comparative research that includes the situations in and reports from both programme schools and non-programme ones. As noted above, there is also a dire need for studies that examine programmes’ impact on students’ knowledge about rights.

School programmes devised by outside actors are and will continue to be a valuable support for teachers and schools in their efforts to provide HRE for children and young people. In the long term, however, HRE needs to become a standard part of teachers’ professional competence. Relying on outside actors cannot be a permanent solution for HRE in schools. We are not there yet, however, and such school programmes will aid the development in the meantime.

### Table 3

*Legend and links to referenced UNICEF material.*

<b>Short name</b>	<b>Full name</b>	<b>Link</b>
<i>Strands (+)</i>	<i>Working towards the RRSA. The strands of a rights respecting school (webpage)</i>	<a href="https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/the-rrsa-strands/">https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/the-rrsa-strands/</a>

<b>Short name</b>	<b>Full name</b>	<b>Link</b>
Key areas	<u><a href="#">What is a rights respecting school? (webpage)</a></u>	<u><a href="https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/what-is-a-rights-respecting-school/">https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/what-is-a-rights-respecting-school/</a></u> <u><a href="https://www.unicef.org.uk/ri">https://www.unicef.org.uk/ri</a></u>
Toolbox (+)	<u><a href="#">Teaching and learning toolbox (webpage)</a></u>	<u><a href="https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/resources/teaching-resources/teaching-learning-toolbox/">https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/resources/teaching-resources/teaching-learning-toolbox/</a></u>
Theory	<u><a href="#">Unicef UK Rights Respecting Schools Award Theory of Change (pdf download)</a></u>	<u><a href="https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/01/RRSA-Theory-of-Change-Evidence-Booklet.pdf">https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/01/RRSA-Theory-of-Change-Evidence-Booklet.pdf</a></u>
Impact (+)	<u><a href="#">The impact of the reward. Safe, respected, engaged (webpage)</a></u>	<u><a href="https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/impact-of-rrsa/">https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/impact-of-rrsa/</a></u>

Note: A + after the short name indicates that one or several other pages or pdf-downloads can be accessed from the link stated.

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