

The UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) and the Montessori approach

An account of how one Montessori nursery school has fully embedded children's rights throughout the school

By the Principal, Randa Williams

Not since I discovered the Montessori approach have I been as excited about another educational approach. The UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) has inspired me to action, making resources to teach children about their rights through their right of education and watching the positive impact on the staff team, children and parents.

Montessori

Maria Montessori was a progressive woman, well beyond her time and back in her time she was already talking about all children making important contributions to our future and how she saw children as agents for potential social change through her vision of 'education for peace' and 'Cosmic education'. If she was still with us today, I have no doubt she would have evolved the Montessori approach incorporating something very much like the RRSA, if not taking part in the RRSA, to teach children about their rights, through their right of education.



Rights Respecting Schools Award



The UNICEF UK Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) supports schools and nurseries across the UK to embed children's rights in their ethos and culture. The award is based on the principles of equality, dignity, respect, non-discrimination and participation. It recognises achievements in putting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child at the heart of a school's practice to improve well-being and help all children realise their potential. A rights respecting school is a community where children's rights are learned, taught, practised, respected, protected and promoted. The RRSA work with nurseries, primary, secondary, schools for children with special educational needs and pupil referral units across the UK to promote a child

rights-based approach and to share good practice in improving outcomes for children and young people. Schools involved in the award have reported a positive impact on behaviour, relationships and well-being, leading to better learning, improved academic standards and a reduction in bullying.

How to start

The RRSA dovetails perfectly with the Montessori approach; there are so many synergies that it is very easy to incorporate the good practice. The first step is to reflect on which of the 54 Articles from the Convention you want to concentrate on in your setting. We chose 8, linking them with existing good Montessori practice while drawing the children to the language of the Convention where appropriate.

Article	Existing Practice
Article 7: "Every child has the right to have a name and nationality"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Checking names in and out of the nursery. ● Children taking the register
Article 12: "Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Peace table ● Children's Voice books ● Children's visual journals ● Practice of democracy (voting) ● Montessori child initiated work.
Article 19: Governments must do all they can to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse and bad treatment".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Safeguarding ● Peace table ● Prevent strategies
Article 23: A child with a disability has the right to live a full and decent life with dignity and independence".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prepared environment, representation of all ability materials. ● All ability small world models
Article 24: Every child has the right to the best possible health, good water and healthy food".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Healthy eating policy ● Preparing and provision of fruit and choice of cooking in cooking sessions ● Growing fruit and vegetables in school garden ● Forest school ● Free flow ● Outdoor Hospital role play ● Teaching children basic first aid.
Article 28 and 29 : "Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures and the environment."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● UNICEF RRSA Award ● Positive language/Role modelling ● Montessori ethos of following the child ● Highly qualified staff to scaffold and differentiate.
Article 31: "Every child has the right to relax, play"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Children have choice in everything they do ● Montessori principal of Free flow <p>Choice in participating or not participating in various extracurricular activities and work.</p>

After you have considered which Articles to concentrate on you have to spend time auditing your practice, your current position and identifying any actions you want to take against the criteria of each RRSA standard. There are plenty of resources provided to help and some very age-appropriate thoughtful books. Schools also share resources and ideas online to share good practice. There are also 24 lesson plans available around events and celebrations that take place through the year.

RRSA standards

There are four standards or criteria that you have to meet. Here are examples of how we met these standards:

Standard A: Right's respecting values underpin leadership and management

We include RRSA in the school vision, school improvement plan and polices. We ensure that everyone from the top down really understands what we are trying to achieve in letter and spirit.

Standard B: The whole school community learns about the Convention

We share information with parents and incorporate two curriculum areas with effective opportunities to learn about the convention.

Standard C: The school has a rights respecting ethos.

Practitioners model rights respecting language, attitudes with each other, children and parents, a true working in partnership with parents.

Standard D: Children are empowered to become active citizens and learners.

We demonstrate that children hold clear views about their learning and wellbeing. They are encouraged and supported to express views, are involved in decisions that affect their lives in school. They have access to information that enables them to make informed decisions about their learning and some children are involved in taking action to improve the lives of children locally and globally.

With existing good practice, a strong School Improvement Plan, and a staff team that are passionate about learning and teaching, it is much easier than you initially think to evidence the good work already done and to identify the gaps and action plans for the remaining standards you need to meet to put the RRSA into practice.

Putting the RRSA into practice

Here is one example from each standard from our audit and action plan which shows how we set about meeting the standards.

Standard A: The school uses RRSA to underpin its vision for the school improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Linked to staff Supervision• Linked to teachers' observations• Incorporated in school improvement plan
Standard B: Assemblies, displays and at least two curriculum areas provide effective opportunities about learning about the Convention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We have created a whole additional curriculum area to teach children about their rights in addition to linking it to other areas.
Standard C: nearly all classroom practitioners model rights respecting language and attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To continue to with our positive language and role modelling but to use the language of the convention to link Convention as a framework eg when using the Peace table link to the Right to talk Article 12
Standard D: Some children are involved in taking action to improve the lives of children locally and globally	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We participated in a school in a box UNICEF scheme, raising money to fund schools in other countries.• We participated in Clarks/UNICEF shoe share. Where children donate unwanted shoes raising money for UNICEF.

I came to the world of Montessori education rather unconventionally, having been a career civil servant, Head of Communications at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, there I was privy to witness the inability of various Peace processes to physically sit at the same Peace table to negotiate a solution. Now years later in Early Years I watch proudly as 2 and 3 year olds sit at our Peace table independently resolving conflict through language and stating "It is my right to talk" while pointing to the Article 12 positioned by the Peace table. The impact speaks for itself!

I was recently emailed some feedback by one of my parents which says it best

"You would have been proud of Jessica's Montessori training yesterday!

Jon and I were with my mum and step-dad, and she was deciding whose turn it would be to wear her teddy bear necklace. First, Jessica chose her Dad because she said he had been sitting "so patiently and sitting nicely." Then, to decide who would go next, she stood up in the middle of us and said we should vote. She asked who wanted to go anti-clockwise and asked them to raise their hand. Then she asked who wanted to go clockwise and asked them to raise their hand (explaining to Grandpa that he was only allowed to vote once!)

She then announced that we would be going anti-clockwise because "3 is bigger than 1", and when I asked her why we vote she said it was because this is a democracy! Haha!

Mum, Roy and Jon were all in shock that she had come out with this - I explained that this is how we make decisions at Children's House!"

The RRSA not only dovetails so well with our Montessori approach but also with our PREVENT duties, Safeguarding, Positive Language. It makes an impact, a positive contribution to tomorrow's empowered generation where peace, respect for rights may truly be possible.

There are three levels to this award, Bronze, Silver and Gold with only Bronze and Silver open to nurseries. We have recently been awarded the Gold RRSA, the first Montessori nursery to date to do so. We are always striving to create the best possible learning environment for our children and this achievement shows that we are committed to promoting and realising children's rights and encouraging adults, children and young people to respect the rights of others in school. Together with representatives of our parent body all our teaching team are involved in our steering group to ensure :

- the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) underpins our values and decision making in school
- the whole school learns about the CRC and respects the rights of others
- children are empowered to become active learners and active local and global citizens.

Unicef (United Nations Children's Fund) is the world's leading organisation working for children and their rights and we will be joining a community of over 4,000 schools in the UK working on the Rights Respecting Schools Award. RRSA across the country have reported that the Award has many positive impacts including improved relationships, well-being and self-esteem, leading to better attendance and improved learning. Unicef is the world's leading organisation working for children and young people and their rights. In 1989, governments across the world agreed that all children have the same rights by adopting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child . These rights are based on what a child needs to survive, grow, participate and fulfil their potential.