

Reflecting on my practice and exploring my experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs

Introduction

This material aims to support teachers in reflecting upon their practice in SPHE/RSE in order to develop their awareness of the impact their own experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs have on their understanding of SPHE/RSE and how they approach the teaching of SPHE/RSE.

We are all influenced by the environments, family and community in which we grow and develop, and so children and teachers bring different values and attitudes to the classroom. Knowledge of your own values and beliefs is an important step in supporting an approach to SPHE/RSE which is open and without judgement; creating a classroom environment where everyone feels a sense of respect and belonging.

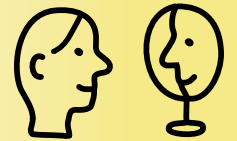
The support material sets forth a number of findings from research and reflective questions in the following sections:

- Your feelings and attitudes towards topics in SPHE/RSE
- Modelling respect for the wide range of beliefs, values, attitudes and opinions held by children in your class
- Skills required to communicate effectively in SPHE/RSE
- Your school's SPHE/RSE policy and characteristic spirit
- Further reading.

Your feelings and attitudes about topics in SPHE/RSE

Reflecting on your own feelings and attitudes about relationships and sexuality can help in how you approach teaching and learning in SPHE/RSE. The snapshot from research, on the next page, is an example of how a teacher's discomfort can negatively impact the learning experience of the child. The following questions can help you and your colleagues to reflect on your attitudes and values related to the teaching of SPHE/RSE and enable you to consider ways to increase your competence and confidence as a teacher of SPHE/RSE.

Teacher Reflection



- Are there topics that you are less comfortable teaching? If so, what can you do to increase your confidence with these topics?
- What strategies or approaches have you found to be most effective in addressing these feelings and supporting your teaching of SPHE/RSE?
- What experiences in SPHE/RSE would you like children to have in your class?

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Snapshot from research



Discussions with 5th class children demonstrated that schools were implementing the 'Stay Safe' programme, which supports elements of RSE. Children recalled learning about topics like keeping safe, friendship and bullying. However, when first year students were asked about their experience of RSE in upper primary school, many associated RSE with 'the talk'. A small number of children felt they had covered a comprehensive range of topics, but for most students, their recollection of primary RSE was almost exclusively related to learning about the biological changes that happen during puberty. When speaking about their experience of RSE, students preferred when a wide range of topics were covered by the teacher and stressed the importance of being involved in decisions about the content of their learning in RSE. (NCCA, 2019, p. 16).

Modelling respect for the wide range of beliefs, values, attitudes and opinions held by children in your class

Your ability to model respect for the wide range of beliefs, values, attitudes and opinions held by children in your class on topics is critical in enabling children to reflect on and consider their own beliefs. The following activity asks you to consider some practice statements. The statements encourage you to think about how you can demonstrate respect and acceptance for others' feelings and attitudes about issues and topics in SPHE/RSE. The list is not exhaustive but is rather a starting point for reflecting on your practice.

Child snapshot



I like it when teacher asks me about myself, my family and what we like to do. We did a project and I got to write and draw about them [my family] and where we're from. Everyone was asking questions and I liked talking about Mam and Dad, and grampes [grandparent] in Poland, our favourite foods and Polish. And I liked learning about my friends' families too. They're a little different to mine and it's nice to get to know everyone better.

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Activity

Read the statements in the table and tick the box that most represents your practice.

Always = I always use this in my teaching

Sometimes = I sometimes use this in my teaching

Never = I do not use this in my teaching

★ = I would like to try this, though I may need more information or professional development

Practice statements	★	Never	Sometimes	Always
I take time to learn about the experiences and backgrounds of the children in my class through talking to the children, their parents ¹ and colleagues who have taught them in the past.				
I choose resources that deliberately reflect diversity and that do not reinforce stereotypes.				
I am aware of my own discomforts and biases in SPHE/RSE.				
I actively try to overcome my discomforts and biases so that they do not negatively impact on the learning experiences of children in my class.				
When using scenarios in the classroom, I include scenarios that are inclusive of a diverse range of characters.				
I speak to the children and their parents about their expectations and understandings of SPHE/RSE.				
I carefully frame lessons when raising potentially sensitive topics.				
I structure discussions to include a wide range of voices so that the children realise people have different feelings, attitudes and beliefs about topics in SPHE/RSE.				
I know the children's preferred names and the pronouns they use and I encourage children to learn and use these for each other.				
I create a safe classroom environment where everybody is aware of their responsibilities.				
I avoid making generalisations and encourage the children in my class to do the same.				
I refrain from asking individual children to speak on behalf of a group just because they belong to that group.				
I model respectful disagreement and show children how to critique an idea rather than the speaker.				
I give children the opportunity to give feedback on their learning experiences and use this feedback to inform future lessons.				
I acknowledge the value of having a diverse range of perspectives in the classroom and consider it an asset.				
I am careful when assigning the children to groups for group work that I do not isolate a child from a minority background.				
I have established protocols in my classroom whereby children know they do not have to contribute to a discussion and can let me know if they feel uncomfortable.				
I have established protocols in my classroom that enable me to stop a lesson or intervene in a discussion if comments become disparaging or derogatory.				

¹ Parents refers to mothers, fathers and those with parental responsibility in different parenting relationships. This may include foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, and carers.

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Skills required to communicate effectively in SPHE/RSE

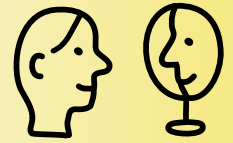
Snapshot from research



The capacity to facilitate group discussions and allow questions to emerge was regarded as very important. Teachers frequently noted that this demands a lot of confidence and skill, as well as requiring a positive and open teacher-student relationship (NCCA, 2019, p. 15).

Your willingness to talk about RSE, through formal and informal opportunities, communicates your comfort with the topic. Your ability to talk with ease, confidence, and competence also supports children's level of comfort with the topics. Creating a safe space for discussion is an important first step. Take time to establish shared responsibilities and boundaries with your class. It might be helpful to identify potential topics that some children may find challenging so that you can prepare in advance. A good way to do this could be to talk with their parents or their previous teacher. Where a challenging comment arises during a discussion, it may be a good idea to ask the child to provide an explanation of their thinking. In doing this you are encouraging them to challenge what they think and understand why, or if, they really believe what they have said. Lastly, nobody has all the answers, so be honest about when you don't know something and explain to the children that you will do some research and come back to them at a later point with an answer. The following questions will help you to reflect on your communication strategies and practices in SPHE/RSE.

Teacher Reflection



- Do you find managing discussions in SPHE/RSE challenging? If so, what strategies do you use to overcome these challenges?
- What types of practices would you like to develop to enhance your communication skills when teaching SPHE/RSE?

Teacher Snapshot



The year I learned the most about teaching RSE was when I worked with another colleague. We did team teaching and it was amazing. To see how someone else frames it is great.

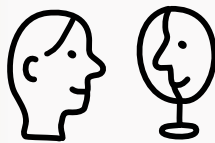
Your school's SPHE/RSE policy and characteristic spirit

All schools are required to develop an RSE policy through a consultative process involving parents, teachers and the board of management. Where possible and when appropriate, children could also be included in this process. The policy should be reviewed regularly and be consistent with other policies in the school. Your school's SPHE/RSE policy provides important information for teachers and parents on the content, topics and approaches to teaching SPHE/RSE. It also makes important links to the characteristic spirit of the school, as well as the role of teachers and parents in both the formal and informal teaching of SPHE/RSE. It is important to be familiar with your school's policy in RSE and SPHE, the approaches that your school supports, the programmes that are in place and how you and your colleagues engage with the curriculum. Where possible, there should be opportunities for teachers to discuss the RSE policy and the approaches used to teach SPHE/RSE in the school on a regular basis. In research conducted by the NCCA,

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some teachers spoke of opportunities in school that supported them in gaining competence and confidence in the teaching of SPHE/RSE: examples included team-teaching and mentoring (NCCA, 2019). Opportunities like these will encourage a collaborative whole-school approach to SPHE/RSE and allow teachers to share good practice and identify areas for professional development.

Teacher Reflection



- In considering your own school's policy, how will it help in your preparation for teaching and learning in SPHE/RSE?
- Do you have opportunities to discuss the teaching of SPHE/RSE with colleagues? If not, how could this practice be established?
- Do you have opportunities to engage in team teaching and mentoring in SPHE/RSE in your school? If not, how could these practices be established?

What's Next?

Further reading



Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST): The PDST have produced a number of webinars to support teaching and learning in SPHE/RSE.

- [An Introduction to SPHE](#)
- [Resources for Pupils with Special Educational Needs](#)
- [Relationships and Sexuality for Primary Schools: A Look at Resources](#)
- [Health and Wellbeing Portal](#)

BeLongTo: BeLongTo provide an online resources and a training platform to consider some key areas of practice in creating LGBTI+ Inclusive Schools.

- [LGBTI+ Inclusive Schools](#)
- [LGBTI+ Inclusive Language](#)

HSE Sexual Health Services: The HSE have an informative website that provides a variety of resources for parents and professionals to support the teaching of relationships and sexuality.

[Sample questions and answers for parents](#)

TENI: Resources and information on helpful definitions related to gender.

[Helpful Terms and Definitions – TENI](#)

Professional Learning Opportunities in SPHE/RSE: Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST) run workshops and offer school support in SPHE/RSE. For further details and to access support please visit: [Contact details | PDST](#)

Employee Assistance Service/Spectrum Life: The Employee Assistance Service (EAS) is arranged and managed by the Department of Education & Skills and provides teachers and immediate family members, i.e. partner, spouse or adult child (aged 18 and over) residing at the same address as the employee, with access to confidential counselling and assists in coping with the effect of personal and work-related issues.

- Free Phone: 1800 411 057
- SMS and WhatsApp – Text 'Hi' to 087 369 0010
- <https://wellbeingtogether.spectrum.life/login>

References

NCCA. (1999). *Social Personal and Health Education Teacher Guidelines*, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

NCCA. (2019). *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Primary and Post-Primary Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.