

Considering the use and role of guest speakers in SPHE/RSE

Introduction

This material aims to explore the benefits and challenges of inviting guest speakers into your classroom for the SPHE/RSE lesson. The sections are as follows:

- Thinking about inviting a guest speaker into your classroom: critical reflection
- Inviting a guest speaker: practical considerations
- After the guest speaker's visit: connecting the learning with teaching
- Reviewing the use of guest speakers
- How can I support parents¹?
- Further reading.

Thinking about inviting a guest speaker into your classroom

Having an established relationship with the children enables classroom teachers to teach SPHE/RSE sensitively and consistently by planning appropriate learning experiences to meet the needs of all children. While it is acknowledged that sometimes a guest speaker can offer support to the class teacher, it is important to take time as a whole school to consider if a guest speaker is necessary and, if so, why? The decision to invite external speakers into your classroom is best made in collaboration with school leadership, parents¹ and children.

The following are suggested factors to consider before choosing to invite a guest speaker into your classroom. Critical reflection is important when thinking about issuing such an invitation.

- **Progression of children's learning:** SPHE/RSE is taught in a spiral approach whereby topics are revisited and built upon each year, providing opportunities to revisit, review and deepen previous learning. In this regard, understanding the prior learning of the children, including their interests, curiosities and needs, is important.

You will be aware of children's prior learning, and the next steps in the progression through engaging in ongoing assessment practices. A guest speaker will not have these insights, therefore you need to consider if they can contribute to and complement the learning experiences that you provide.

- **Pedagogy:** Guest speakers use a range of teaching methodologies and approaches. These need to align with the approaches supported by the curriculum. If choosing a guest speaker, consideration must be given to how children engage with these methodologies and whether they are appropriate to their age, maturity and the context of your school community.
- **Experience and skills:** There are a variety of guest speakers that are available to visit primary schools. However, it is important to consider if their experience and skills are compatible with what you have identified when considering the experience and needs of the children in your class. You could do this by seeking information directly from the guest speaker, reviewing their website or seeking recommendations from other schools.
- **Diversity and inclusion:** Mirroring society, primary school classrooms are dynamic places in which teachers support and respond to a diversity of learners, helping each to grow and develop. This diversity is evident in the rich kaleidoscope of ages, competencies, cultures, ethnicities, family structures and backgrounds, home languages, religions, sexual identities, and worldviews that now characterise many primary classrooms. To meet the needs of all pupils, teachers engage in ongoing assessment that is underpinned by trusting relationships. Based on these assessments and the relationships they have with the children in their class, teachers make professional judgements about the pace, sequence, and pitch of learning. It is difficult to replicate this during an external input. Consider if a guest speaker can be inclusive of all the children in your class.

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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Inviting a guest speaker

If you decide that you do require a guest speaker, the following considerations need to be given some thought.

Before the visit(s):

- **Liase with school management:** It will be necessary to liaise with your school principal if you are inviting a guest speaker into your classroom. Your principal may need to seek Board of Management approval prior to inviting a guest speaker into the school and ensure that the appropriate procedures in relation to garda vetting have been adhered to. (See [Circular 0031/2016](#) for more information).
- **Child safeguarding:** Prior to the guest speaker visiting the school, please ensure they have read your school's child safeguarding statement.
- **Expectations:** A visit from a guest speaker can often evoke a range of emotions for children. Some may feel nervous, while it can similarly make others giddy. Preparing the children for the visit is important, not just in the way it is framed, but also in the learning that takes place beforehand. It should be agreed in advance how questions, particularly questions about sensitive aspects of the curriculum, will be answered – for example, will children write questions anonymously using a questions box or will children be free to ask questions at any stage? It is also important to consider how the children's questions be answered, for example, will they be responded to individually or as a plenary at the end of the lesson?
- **Frequency and duration of input:** If planning for a guest speaker, in the context of the needs identified and the experience of the children, careful decision-making on the frequency and duration of the guest speaker's input will be needed. You might consider what length of input is most appropriate for the children's motivation and engagement in effective learning of the topic. This, in turn, might contribute to the need for a number of visits over a period of weeks to meet the learning needs of the children.
- **Connecting with prior learning:** In advance of any input, a discussion between the class teacher and the guest speaker to plan the content and to connect it with children's prior learning, experience and knowledge is important. You should be made aware of the content of the guest speaker's input at this stage. Responsibility rests with the classroom teacher for what is taught, and a planning meeting will ensure the teacher is satisfied with the arrangements. This will also be a good time to decide on the role you play during the input and to agree this with the guest speaker.
- **Learning experiences needed before inputs:** Consider the preparatory learning experiences that are required in advance of the visit from the guest speaker in order to enable children to effectively engage in the input that has been agreed.
- **Effective communication with guest speaker:** Part of supporting the guest speaker in preparing for their input will involve advance communication. Consider planning for the input in the same way you might prepare with another teacher - share with the guest what learning you wish to be covered and the experience so far of the class. Find out what follow-up learning the guest speaker might have to suggest.
- **Connections with the school's SPHE/RSE policy and characteristic spirit:** A school's SPHE/RSE policy is developed in consultation with the school community. You, as a teacher in the school, will be familiar with your school's policy and understand the agreed approach within your school. Prior to the input, ensure that the speaker is given adequate contextual information about the school and its approach to SPHE/RSE.

During the guest speaker's visit(s):

- **Consider your role during the inputs:** Guest speakers always work under the guidance and supervision of the relevant classroom teacher who **must** remain in the classroom with the children at all times and retains a central role in the teaching of the subject matter. Through planning with the guest speaker and understanding your class and dynamic, you can decide what role to take during the external input – for example, co-facilitator, active participant or observer. These roles are interchangeable during the external inputs.

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- **Consider the children in your class:** Some children will naturally be a bit reticent to interact as they normally would when a guest speaker is present. It is important to support these children throughout the input. Let them know that you will be present in the classroom for the entirety of the visit. The 'Questions Box' is a great way of enabling children who are reluctant to interact with the guest speaker. Children write their questions anonymously and place them in a box for answering by the teacher or the guest later.
- **Debrief after input:** Make some time after the input to talk with the guest speaker about the lesson or input – the guest speaker may have insights and feedback for you as well as ideas about what learning experiences are required to progress children's learning.
- **Review with children:** It is important to ask the children how they felt the input went and what they liked and did not like. Was it engaging for them? Was there enough range of appropriate methodologies to suit their learning needs?

Teacher Snapshot



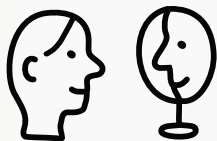
I always co-teach the beginning of any external input where we review the expectations and boundaries as well as introducing and connecting the content from the external input with prior learning. This helps settle and make the children feel comfortable. During inputs I play an active role when there is teaching of content in order to demonstrate this is part and not apart from learning in class.

After the guest speaker's visit(s):

- **Follow-up lessons:** After the guest speaker's input(s) you might consider developing a number of learning experiences to connect with the learning and the overall experience. Reflect on the learning from the input and clarify any gaps or messages that need to be re-emphasised. You might consider what types of experiences can develop from the guest input so as that it is seen as part of learning and not an isolated and once-off experience.
- **Review and reflect:** Reviewing inputs can be helpful in connecting your future preparation and teaching in SPHE/RSE with the input that has occurred.
- **Seek feedback from parents/guardians:** It might be appropriate after inputs to seek feedback from parents/guardians on their perspective on the entirety of the experience of inviting guest speakers to teach aspects of SPHE/RSE, and on how they feel the experience supported the learning of their child.
- **Reviewing the use of guest speakers:** Often schools have long-standing relationships with guest speakers they invite into their classrooms. It is important to reflect on the effectiveness of these guest speakers and review annually the need for, and scope of, the inputs provided. This can be achieved through discussions with children, teachers and parents about the experience and learning attained from inputs. If the purpose of the guest speaker is that you, as the teacher, can learn from them and develop your own competence and confidence in SPHE/RSE, and that your learning is incorporated in your future teaching methodologies, then there should be a clear plan in place to ensure that the use of a guest speaker is a temporary feature of the SPHE/RSE provision within the school. Sharing of this expertise with other members of staff may also be possible and will have greater impact on whole-school practice as well. Remember that there may be experienced and skilled teachers in your school who would be happy to team teach SPHE/RSE with you or allow you to observe them teaching SPHE/RSE so that you could develop your own practice. Establishing this relationship with colleagues could eliminate the need to invite a guest speaker and enable the class teacher to teach the curriculum instead.

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Teacher Reflection



- Have you used a guest speaker in the past as a method of upskilling? If so, how did you ensure this was a temporary measure and that the guest speaker would not be required in future?

Further supports/reading



Department of Education guidance: *Best practice guidance for primary schools in the use of programmes and/or external facilitators in promoting wellbeing consistent with the Department of Education and Skills' Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice - [Circular No. 0042/2018](#)*

Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice

References

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

What's Next?

How can I support parents?



Home learning: You might consider seeking ideas and activities from your guest speaker to share with parents/guardians to support and follow up on the input.

Communications: It will be important to communicate in advance with parents about guest speakers who may be teaching aspects of SPHE/RSE. Providing some information on the guest speaker's experience and the organisation they are associated with would be important if they are speaking about sensitive areas of SPHE/RSE.