

What makes an inclusive SPHE classroom?

There is no such thing as a typical child or young person. Children and young people come to learning in SPHE from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences and identities. It's important to accept and celebrate each other and what makes us unique. Think about all the diversities that are in your SPHE classroom - diversity of family backgrounds, abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations, socio-economic circumstances, cultures, beliefs, and much more.

An inclusive SPHE classroom is one where students encounter diversity in a respectful way. It is grounded in a view of individual differences as a resource that can enrich the lives and learning of all.

The following strategies can help create a classroom where everyone has a sense of belonging.

- Develop caring relationships – get to know students' names as quickly as possible and show interest and concern for them both in and beyond your classroom.
- Agree clear ground rules/classroom contract and establish an atmosphere that allows students to have honest discussions, be listened to respectfully and be open to hearing opinions and experiences that might be different to their own.
- Use respectful and compassionate language when talking about people and challenge students if they use disrespectful language or display discriminatory behaviours, even if they are 'joking' or 'slagging'. A good test for checking if language is/is not respectful is to ask the students if they would like the word to be used to describe someone they love.
- If a class appears to be relatively homogenous (for example, in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic background), imagine a more diverse environment while teaching. For example, imagine how would you feel if someone from another culture/group was 'a fly on the wall' observing the teaching and learning? This will act as a safeguard against slipping into 'othering' language.
- Support students to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to recognise and address stereotypes, bias, unfairness and discrimination.
- When deciding on content and teaching methods, make sure to include different examples, scenarios, case studies, etc. that represent and reflect the diversity of children and young people's lives, experiences and identities.
- Assume diversity in your student population, even if you don't see it – you may not see or be aware of many aspects of students' lives, identities or backgrounds. For example, teach with a consciousness that you have students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds in every class and this can shape their life experiences and choices.
- Create an inclusive physical space by displaying images that reflect a diversity of young people's experiences, e.g. images of different family units, different kinds of relationships, information about youth services, health and wellbeing information, including information relevant for LGBT+ students.
- Ensure that all students have equal opportunities to express their views respectfully and sensitively, bearing in mind their differing levels of comfort, maturity and openness. Check in with the class regularly to make sure that this is happening.

What makes an inclusive SPHE classroom?

Watch your language!

Without being aware of it, teachers can often use language that excludes or makes some students feel uncomfortable or not valued. For example, it is not appropriate to use words such as ‘junkie’ or ‘alco’ when talking about alcohol or substances; or, terms like ‘crazy’, ‘psycho’, ‘mad’ when discussing mental health. When discussing healthy eating avoid commenting on people’s body shape (positively or negatively) and never label people as ‘fat’ or ‘thin’ (see *Taking a fresh look at teaching about food* for further guidance).

Use affirming and gender-inclusive language. Avoid heteronormative language and assumptions, such as referring to romantic relationships only in terms of boy/girl relationships and binary-based language that doesn’t take into account the diversity of ways that people can express gender and sexuality.

These strategies might be a helpful starting point

- Use **plain English** when introducing and discussing topics.
- Avoid using the word ‘normal’, especially when talking about people. It usually implies a judgment on those who fall outside the category of ‘normal’. Instead talk about people generally or typically and always point out that a variation of experiences is the norm.
- Everyone makes assumptions – where possible, try to draw attention to your own assumptions in a way that models a willingness to correct yourself and then move on in a way that doesn’t make a big deal but is nonetheless genuine, e.g. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed that actually.”
- Point out when textbooks or resources do not reflect diversity and inclusion. In doing this, you are helping your students to develop their critical thinking.
- Take up opportunities/teachable moments to prompt students to interrogate stereotypes, for example, in relation to gender or socio-economic assumptions. Discuss how these stereotypes can

limit opportunities and have damaging effects for everyone in society.

- When you greet your students for the first time, announce your name and pronouns (e.g. “My name is Ms Murphy and my pronouns are ‘she/her’”). This signals that you are aware and respectful of the fact that not everyone will use the pronouns that people expect or the name and pronouns that are on official records.
- Avoid unnecessary grouping students on the grounds of gender. This can overtly and subtly repeat assumptions and stereotypes about gender and it can also silence and exclude some students who may identify as transgender or non-binary. For example, you could replace “boys and girls” or “lad and ladies” with phrases like “everyone” or “folks” and you can use “parents and guardians” instead of “Mums and Dads”.

The Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle SPHE specifications:

“ **support teachers in adopting an approach that is inclusive in accordance with principles of equality, human rights and responsibilities. This ensures that all students can see themselves, their families and their communities reflected across the learning and can learn to value diversity as part of human life and as a source of enrichment. SPHE thus contributes to building a cohesive, compassionate and fair society; one that is inclusive of all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious beliefs/worldviews, social classes and abilities/disabilities.** ”