

Black and White Multisensory Rooms

Educational Rooms used with Deafblind and Multisensory Impaired Students

By

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Two multisensory rooms are used in some schools in the Province of Ontario with students who are Deafblind and with those who are multisensory impaired. The '*White Room*', utilizing the Snoezelen¹ philosophy, uses a non-directive approach where exploration and relaxation is fostered. The '*Black Room*' has different motives, where a more directive approach with goals and outcomes can be assessed. This article will present the educational possibilities of these two distinctive yet complementary rooms. The content of this paper is based on the Qualification Additionnelle en Surdic cit  (Additional Qualifications Course on Deafblindness) that is offered to teachers at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Sauv  Guindon, Christine (2003 – 2012).

The White Room – A setting for exploration and observation

The Snoezelen 'White Room' is an environment where Deafblind and multisensory impaired students have the opportunity to explore and simply 'be'. It is a privileged environment that uses a non-directional approach where the students are able to enjoy a multisensory setting using their senses of touch, residual vision, residual hearing, smell, as well as their vestibular senses and body proprioceptors. The White Room offers a safe and peaceful environment where a child can experience music, lights, vibrations and various textures, Biblio-th me no 6, 2010. It is a motivational setting that encourages choice making hence promoting learning. It is usually here that the child first has a control over his or her environment. This can

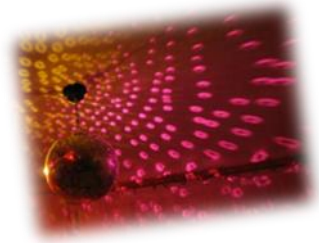


¹ Registered Trade Mark of English Company Rompa. Originally developed in the Netherlands in 1970 as a Multi Sensory Environment to provide therapy for people with developmental disabilities. From Wikipedia.

lead to reduced levels of anxiety and a lessening of their defence mechanisms caused by enhanced sensory stimuli.

It is in the White Room that teachers observe their students. They see the student's true potential; observing their making choices and what senses the students utilise as well as how other senses could be further developed; observing what relaxes or stimulates the child, including their likes and dislikes, etc.

Once a student knows a Snoezelen room and feels at ease in it, he will interact spaciouly using their vestibular senses; moving around, despite sensory deprivations or physical limitations. Feeling at ease, the student will crawl or roll towards a stimulus; possibly activating a switch, or choosing to rock in a chair. A child with very limited functional vision can suddenly react to lights. Having control over their environment, the student can make deliberate choices. In summary, the White Room is an environment where the potential of the student can emerge and bloom.



For example, Marisol seems to enjoy illuminated objects in a darkened room. The fibre optic lights captivate her and she appears to truly enjoy playing with them. By simply paying attention and observing, a few of her capabilities become evident, such as: visually tracking and manipulating lighted objects in the dark; integrating her vision and touch; ability to problem solve, anticipate and communicate, etc. She demonstrates spatial awareness and shows the capacity to make deliberate choices in the room.



The Black Room – A setting for teaching

The Black Room is an environment conducive to teaching and learning. Here, the teacher directs the activities. It is an interactive space that enables training for different skills. It is a

controlled environment; an ideal setting to work on specific educational goals described in the student's Individual Educational Plan (IEP).

This interactive multisensory environment characterized by lights, sounds of different frequencies originating from various musical instruments, is a valuable educational setting that promotes discovery and learning. The goal here is to make the setting purposeful and meaningful for the learner. In summary, it is a space where one can consolidate knowledge.



For example, if we have a student that we observe in the White Room who can visually track, we should be able to replicate this activity in a formal and controlled setting. The Black Room is an important setting where we can solicit one sense at a time without distractions from other noises or distractions.

In this room the student is accompanied by an adult who directs activities which vary according to the needs of the individual student and their specific goals. It is here that one can concentrate and work on the following areas: vision and hearing, sensory integration, communication, cause and effect (action/reaction goals), bonding and formal curriculum, etc.

In a Black Room, one will usually find:

- › a room painted black or in a colour that absorbs the light;
- › a sound proofed room;
- › equipment that will permit visual and auditory stimulation;
- › an area with switches and interactive toys to work with action – reaction goals;
- › an area to promote fine and gross motor skills;
- › other equipment (swings, ballpools, mats, bean bags, etc.) positioned to ensure comfort and allowing for different stimulations

To ensure success of the activities in the Black room, the teacher should: know their student very well including their goals; understand how to work the various pieces of equipment of the room; ensure the child's comfort, and carefully record their observations.

How to set goals?

Remember that little girl, Marisol? With each visit in the Snoezelen room, I was continually watching and recording my observations. Afterwards, I would try to make links between what I had observed to create an educational plan perfectly suited for her, and set goals to be worked in the Black Room. By paying close attention, individualized goals can be set in many key areas such as: residual vision, residual hearing, cause and effect, communication, fine and gross motor, orientation and mobility, and formal curriculum goals.

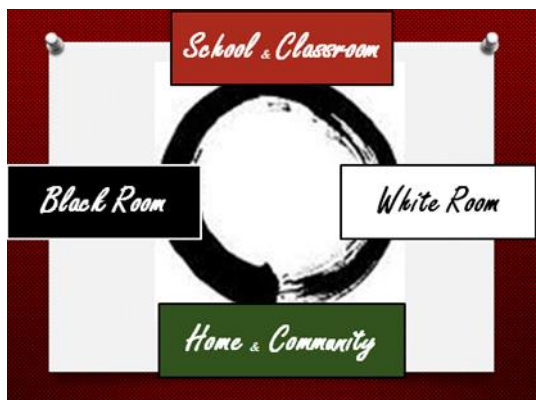


There needs to be a link between the informal education done in the White Room to the formal education that can be done in the Black Room. The IEP should reflect these modifications and include adaptations and strategies to ensure the student's success. The IEP should make SENSE.

I often say to adults who work with kids with multisensory needs: *“What will be the reward? What is the motivator?”* What are you doing with your students that will motivate them? What incites them or drives them to want to succeed? Activities we choose to do with our students must be **“purposeful and meaningful!”**

« It is not possible for the child to do anything, until he wishes to try. »

J.M. McInnes and J.A.Treffry (1982)



It was through the advice from John McInnes (McInnes & Treffry 1982) that I learned that it all has to start with the interest shown by the child. Being that the Snoezelen room is a 'reactive environment', it is the students' who take the lead. It is the students who decide what they want to do, what to try and what they will explore; it is all on their terms. What they show us they can do by their own conscious effort in this room is what should be transferred to the Black Room. This is what we can do to achieve their true potential.

When new abilities are reached, the next logical step is that we need to work to transfer these newly acquired abilities out of the White and Black rooms into the formal classroom. The student should then benefit from these new skills and put them to good use in other settings. The ultimate goal will be to transfer these same skills for better integration in their home and community.

Conclusion

Learning is a cycle. The more you know, the more knowledge you can acquire. New goals can be elaborated; leading us to plan for new expectations, new challenges... one goal at a time, building on what was learned. The circle of knowledge is continuously evolving! My wish is for my students to have the opportunity to develop, grow, flourish, and strive. The multisensory rooms (black and white) are perfect settings to achieve this. In these rooms, one sets goals that are worthy of their interests, their skills, and their physical and intellectual abilities. To witness these children making so much progress through this process is incredibly exciting and fulfilling!

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Christine Sauvé Guindon with Steve, a former student

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