

The Hirstwood



Training

Theme work in the multi sensory room.

Course Tutor

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Theme and Curriculum work in the MSR.

Many multi sensory rooms are now being referred to as the 'Studio'. The term 'studio' communicates a different outlook to the room. In a studio we work with a host of subjects not just with early skills and relaxation. The studio can offer an environment, which is an exciting learning environment for all abilities.

Most are modified multi sensory rooms, but the design of this room offers a lot more flexibility. There is less soft matting and more flexible equipment. Projection is often used as the mainstay to create themes. Children and adults are encouraged to take part and create the theme themselves. It is often seen as a way to give more 'ownership' of the room to the students. In the studio more school or center made props may be used.

Theme rooms described by Hirstwood and Gray (1995)

'Participant's (children or adults) are generally required to contribute something to the core theme either by passive or active involvement. This could be during the session or at some stage during the preparation of it.

A theme does not have to involve a full-scale production. It can be on a small scale in the corner of the MSR aimed at one person. The theme can be a continuation of one, which is being carried out throughout the school, hospital, or day centre -and it's not just for children! There are countless themes, which can be carried out, but care should be taken when working with adults to use age-appropriate activities. Whatever the age group, introducing different cultural experiences in this manner does much to promote awareness of other subjects such as history, geography, people's experiences and lifestyles and a whole host of subjects. Curriculum subjects can to some degree be approached by theme work in the MSR.

A day center multi sensory room was re-created to represent a Corfu beach and a cave. This simple approach involved community and indoor activities and the adults themselves performed as prop builders, actors and participants within the theme.

The Corfu theme was approached through a variety of sensory experiences:

Sight: waves, sand, blue sky, tavernas, lights, people, bathing costumes, waiters.

Sound: waves, bouzouki music, Greek language, seagulls.

Touch and Feel: shells, sand, heat, restaurant table, beach towels, and seaweed.

Smell: garlic, seaweed, suntan oil.

Taste: wines, moussaka, taramasalata, salads.

Much of the equipment was collected or made by the adults. Add the cloud wheel on your Solar 250, string up a patio set with lights and put seaweed, shells, sand and beach towels on the floor, paint waves on the wall panels, blue spots and distortion wheels. Add food, drink, costumes, turn up the heating and you're theme is running.

It could be said that the latter were examples of themes with both adults and children, which took time to prepare and build, these themes would generally last for more than one day. But many curriculum aims and links could be met during this preparation.

But more simple themes can be developed – Leaf Theme for example:

Sight: leaves/Solar 250 leaf wheel (home made with dried leaves)

Sound: dried leaves, wind in trees (sound effect tapes or desk fans)

Smell: herbs, aromatic leaves

Touch: different leaf shapes and textures

Taste: teas, lettuce, spinach, herbs

Themes within the room are often about more than just the room. The outside activity for the leaf theme could be going to collect the leaves from the woods. The choice could be around the decision of what props will we use and who is going to build them. Like making your own wheels described later in this book, themes actually created by the children or adults will be much more meaningful. For special schools it could involve mainstream schools being involved in the creation of the theme. For hospitals and day centres how can people integrated in the community come in and help with the theme? Many messages can be relayed in theme work, for special and integrated schools, using a theme can access the national curriculum.

More and more **schools** are adapting a national curriculum, **day services** are encouraging social skills and preparation for work. If the room is to be a part of the everyday activities of integrated students then an alternative approach may be taken. The room must be treated as a part of the whole school or centre and the activities within must be viewed by all as normal.

This year (2001) there are more of these rooms appearing all over the U.K. The companies are reacting by creating equipment which is much more suited to this type of work. Literacy is being taught by using the room for stories with children and adults. History and geography are a part of the 'lesson' in the studio.

For example, I was asked to do the story of the 'Rainbow Fish' in a studio. With the children we read the book, but it was accompanied by the background sound of waves in the ocean. An effect wheel was made with story, this allowed all to see the pictures in the story projected onto the wall. After the story was over, we then made our own 'rainbow fish' by using cut out cardboard fish selotaped to drinking straws. These were used for shadow puppets to enable us to reinact the story.

Another school needed myself and a colleague to carry out a session about medieval history. Students were encouraged to make 'castle wall' wheels for the projector. Some students made swords and shields from reflective card. Pointing the projector onto a glitter 'pompom' enabled us to demonstrate making a fire. All this was done to the sounds of medieval music another member of staff supplied.

There are many themes, which could be carried out in the studio, but one thing we should be aware of is that this use for the room is not just for the more able students. Everybody will gain from a session of this nature. However the gains will be varied, some students will understand the full concept, other maybe just a part. This could be split into 3 levels of understanding.

The 3 levels of theme work

Level 1. Experiential

A student may experience the theme at a level of understanding which means:

They will experience vision - Light/ Dark/colour/form/shape

They will experience sound - Frequency, soft/loud, fast/slow, stationary, directional, moving.

They will experience touch - Soft/hard/smooth/rough/stationary/moving

They will experience taste - Bitter/sweet/salt/sour/related

They will experience smell - Pleasant/unpleasant/related

Level 2. Understanding parts

A student may experience the theme at a level of understanding which means:

They will experience vision - and understand in part what the images are, and the relevance to the theme. E.g. may see the stars but not link them to the sky or theme.

They will experience sound - With or without a hearing loss the student may hear the sound and understand the sound but not link it to the theme. E.g. may hear the sound of water and understand the sound means wet, but not link it to the theme.

They will experience touch - The student may tolerate tactile work and experience and match some items and sensations. E.g. they may understand the soft ball is for throwing but not link it to the beach theme.

They will experience taste - The student will understand the taste and relate it to the object but not make the link to the situation. E.g. the taste of the apple is recognizable but the student does not link the taste to the picnic.

They will experience smell - The student recognises the smell but does not relate it to the theme. E.g. the student recognises the smell of the flower but not link it to the colour theme.

Level 3. Experience the whole story

A student may experience the theme at a level of understanding which means:

They will experience vision - And understand in full what the images are, and the relevance to the theme. E.g. may see the stars and link them to the theme.

They will experience sound - The student may hear the sound and understand the sound and link it to the theme. E.g. may hear the sound of water and understand the sound and link it to the beach theme.

They will experience touch - The student may experience and match the items and sensations in both a tactile and cognitive sense. E.g. the soft ball is for throwing and linked to the beach theme.

They will experience taste - The student will understand the taste and relate it to the situation. E.g. the taste of the apple is recognisable and the student links it to the picnic.

They will experience smell - The student recognizes the smell and does relate it to the theme. E.g. the student recognises the smell of the flower and links it to the colour theme.

The 3 levels could be broken into 300 levels. However the point is that we must realise that all students whatever the ability, get something from a theme approach. The multi sensory studio is the perfect place due to the vast array of equipment available too you. All students will enjoy learning by using new and exiting sound, lighting and tactile experience. Take a look at modern museum; you no longer go round looking at boring artefacts. You touch them, see them and hear the sounds. You experience a multi-media presentation and get to experiment. That is the way to learn!

Back to the welcome page and index.