

# ASK THE EXPERT: SEN

COULD A SENSORY ROOM IMPROVE LIFE FOR VULNERABLE STUDENTS AT SECONDARY SCHOOL? **CAROL ALLEN** CONSIDERS THE QUESTION...

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I know that they are commonly used in early years settings – and increasingly so in primary schools, too – but I've been wondering lately whether a sensory room might also be worth considering for students at KS3 and beyond. Classrooms can be quite intense and challenging environments for teenagers with issues around communication, social interaction, and anxiety; it seems to me that a separate, safe space, designed to help young people relax, manage their emotions, and generally cope with the demands of the day, might be a very useful resource. Do you think that a 'sensory room' for older children is a viable proposition? And if so, how would I go about ensuring that it is not seen as too 'babyish' for those who really need it?

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Hello, what an amazingly creative thought process and how brilliant a question to answer! There are a few points to consider here, however a great place to start is to remember that the concept of a sensory space is not only to calm, but equally can be to stimulate and both are to facilitate learning of all different types. Many 'stressful' adult situations now offer sensory facilities – for example, light and sound displays at some dentists, soothing light effects for long-term isolation patients and so on, so the use of sensory stimulation to calm, relax and focus is becoming more and more mainstream.

I would wholeheartedly recommend the creation of such a space for older students. The key element required would be the ability to choose and control, so for some it might be their preference to have somewhere with comfortable seating, low lighting and no sound. For others, a gently moving visual display combined with calming music might be the best option. Some may just find the offer of a quiet study area with comfortable seating a more amenable setting for their workflow. The space therefore must offer choice and a variety of auditory and visual options to support diversity of need.

Most importantly, this space can then be used for more than a 'safe' escape space. The ability to add sound, light and multimedia to texts being studied, to dramatic performance, to be able to view a video sequence on your own, or in a small group, adds emphasis and



focus and offers an alternative to the usual classroom setting. For example, immersing a small group in a video of the rainforest whilst engaging with the sound track sets the scene perfectly for some further exploration, perhaps via a live streaming webcam from a major city, to look at contrasts of location in geography.

The space should be one that is available throughout the day. It is not only the classroom that can cause anxiety for many students – social break times can be equally, if not more, challenging for many. Having the facility open before, during and after school will allow for support and use at all times. Ensure that there is some secure storage both outside and within the room. If the room is being used as a calming strategy, the student's personal items require safe storage so that the young person can

solely focus on him/herself for a period of time.

I have recently seen some excellent simple breathing technique apps, which would project from a portable device to the walls running a sequence to which the student breathes in time whilst watching the beautiful visuals and having his/her breathing rate and rhythm slowed by the tempo of the sound track. I think you might find many staff would welcome such a facility... I know I would!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Carol Allen is the school improvement advisor for ICT and SEN in North Tyneside LA. She has taught since 1980 in both mainstream schools – primary and high – and schools for students with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties.