Sensory Activities for Children in Mainstream Classes

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Sensory art is a very important element in the area of Special Education for children in Ireland. Martin (2009) notes that for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) ‘Art is an interesting crossroads…because it is an activity in which strengths (visual learners, sensory interests) and deficits (imagination, need for sensory control) merge’. It is becoming better known as time goes on. But how about for children in mainstream classes? Incorporating sensory art into the mainstream curriculum in primary schools is, for many teachers, not a common practice. This could be largely due to a number of factors, including a lack of knowledge in the area and the often negative view of messy play in the classroom. Moving forward, with the idea of the new sociology of childhood becoming ever more prevalent, the importance of including any type of sensory activity in the classroom is becoming more well-known. Kranowitz (2006) writes that ‘Practising sensory-motor skills all day long means that the child’s activity level becomes better regulated. His attention span and emotional security increase because his sensations are becoming well organised.’ For young children, messy play is a very important area of the curriculum. ‘It is…an ideal way of helping a child begin to understand and interact with the world around him’ (Beckerleg, 2008). It helps children’s physical development (such as fine motor skills), language and communication development and even social development in the classroom. It is recognised by many as a very important element of the curriculum for children with Special Educational Needs. But why is sensory art not recognised as an important element of the mainstream curriculum in Ireland? Perhaps it could be incorporated through various different mediums, such as science. Creative, fun and sensory science experiments can have a significant impact on children’s learning in the early years. Having looked at the Irish Primary School Curriculum, and looking at Síolta, in particular SS2, C2.6 which looks at the environment and how it could provide various sources of sensory stimulation, and Aistear AT: Exploring and Thinking, particularly A4 LG1, sensory activities play a significant role, and could prove extremely beneficial if incorporated into practice, both at an Early Years, and Primary School level. When looking into this topic, I started by doing a review of the literature present in the area. But this led to conducting research among primary school teachers and early years educators, to get an insight into knowledge on the topic among practitioners.
Research on the topic

- ‘Difficulties with sensory processing (specifically, behavioural responses to sensory input, generally measured by parent report) have been widely reported in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Ben-Sasson et al. 2007, 2009; O’Donnell et al. 2012)

- Chang et al., 2014: ‘Over 90% of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) demonstrate atypical sensory behaviors’

- Robertson and Simmons, 2012: ‘atypical sensory responsiveness (including both hyper- and hypo-sensitivity)...was much more common in individuals with higher levels of autistic traits...What is interesting to note about this paper is that it looks at traits of autism being recognised in the general population, and the importance of incorporating sensory activities
Benefits for children with ASD

- Children with ASD may often be very creative and have many good ideas or thoughts, but they often have a hard time focusing on a single activity or engaging appropriately in such a situation.

- Art is used often, for children with ASD, as an Early Intervention Therapy or Rehabilitative Therapy, as it can help to develop areas such as fine motor skills, imagination deficits and social skills.
Issues with incorporating activities into mainstream curriculum

- Time constraints.
- Set up time and clean up time
- Follow on activities
- Pupil teacher ratios in class
- Messy elements of activities
- Lack of knowledge about sensory activities
- Often no help available from Special Needs Assistants
- Lack of confidence conducting sensory activities for the first time
For children in mainstream classes, art activities that use multiple senses are very beneficial as they are very enjoyable, fun and improve creativity.

Children can engage with classmates they wouldn’t normally socialise with.

Sensory art is a very important element in the area of Special Education for children with Special Educational Needs in Ireland.

Messy play helps children’s physical development, language and communication development and social development.
How can this be changed?

- Incorporate sensory activities into other areas of the curriculum like SESE, art and science.
Mentos Diet Coke Explosion

**How does it work?** The thing that makes diet coke bubbly is an invisible gas called carbon dioxide. When you drop a mentos sweet into the diet coke, the ingredients in the mentos sweet react with the ingredients in the diet coke. This causes a lot of bubbles to be made in the diet coke, and on the surface of the sweet. The mentos sweet is heavy, so it sinks to the bottom of the bottle, pushing all the gas and bubbles upwards, causing an explosion to happen.

**Why is this sensory?** The mentos and diet coke have different looks, textures and smells. The reaction it causes has a different texture also
Lava Lamp

- **How does it work?** The oil and water you added to the bottle separate from each other, with oil on top because it has a lower density than water. The food colouring falls through the oil and mixes with the water at the bottom. The piece of Alka-Seltzer tablet you drop in after releases small bubbles of carbon dioxide gas that rise to the top and take some of the coloured water along for the ride. The gas escapes when it reaches the top and the coloured water falls back down. The reason Alka-Seltzer fizzes in such a way is because it contains citric acid and baking soda (sodium bicarbonate), the two react with water to form sodium citrate and carbon dioxide gas (those are the bubbles that carry the coloured water to the top of the bottle).

- **Why is this sensory?** The materials all have different colours, scents and textures. There are further colours and textures when the experiment reaction occurs.
Sensory Art Examples from a Mainstream Class
Shaving Foam Paint

**Materials:**
Shaving foam, pva glue
acrylic paint, crepe paper,
glitter

**Why this is good?**
The shaving foam and glue makes a 3d paint, that stays ‘puffy’ once it dries

The shaving foam is scented, and textured, so sensory processing id developed

Glitter, crepe paper and leaves all add different textures to the finished piece, again good for any child with issues regarding texture

