

**THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA**

**Report By**

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**2003 CHURCHILL FELLOW**

*To examine multi-sensory programs for disabled students and how these programs will assist students acquire and develop functional skills to further their independence and quality of life.*



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**Signed: Ian Gallan**

**Dated: 24.07.2004**

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## **Introduction:**

Within the field of special education throughout Australia a number of teachers, therapists and programmers have incorporated aspects of a multi sensory approach into students programs, particularly those students with high support and / or multiple disabilities.

A number of settings in Australia have developed expensive and highly resourced centers while others have developed a more low cost approach.

As an educator in a special school setting I wanted to examine examples of best practice overseas and to experience how a multi sensory approach could assist students develop their functional skills and improve their quality of life.

Within a school context there are implications for the purchase of expensive resources as well as aspects such as designated learning spaces and storage facilities and this project endeavoured to see first hand what others were doing to integrate a multi sensory approach into students programs.

Whilst one could have merely looked at the range of resources available through catalogues or internet sites the very notion of a multi sensory environment means that this approach needs to be experienced first hand in order to fully appreciate other aspects than just the visual such as sound, tactile, smell and taste as well as its impact on student learning.

## **Acknowledgements:**

For my Churchill Fellowship to be such a success I wish to acknowledge the following:

- All those contacts listed in my program for their willingness to share ideas, resources, answer my many questions and provide inspiration
- My family Margo, Matt, Ben & Amy for their support and pride in my Fellowship
- Work colleagues for “holding the fort” while I was away and allowing me to focus on my project
- The many students and staff who shared with me their classrooms and learning time
- New South Wales Department of Education and Training for providing study leave
- The Winston Churchill Fellowship Memorial Trust Australia for providing this opportunity which has proven to be one of the highlights of both my personal and professional career

## Executive Summary

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**Project:** *To examine multi-sensory programs for disabled students and how these programs will assist students acquire and develop functional skills to further their independence and quality of life.*

### **Highlights:**

- **Technology and Persons with Disabilities Conference, L.A.** - California State University. Two presenters of particular assistance to my project were Linda Burkhart and Caroline Musslewhite.
- **Flaghouse, Canada** – Barbara Mc Cormack – Vice President
- **Muki Baum Association, Toronto** – Dr. Nehama Baum – Executive Director
- **Lifespire, New York** – Linda Messbauer – Rehabilitation Co ordinator
- **Hameenlinna Polytechnic, Finland** – Marja Sirkkola – Senior Lecturer
- **Balders Hus School, Sweden** – Gunilla Lund – Principal
- **Victoria School, Birmingham** – Flo Longhorn & Richard Hirstwood – Presenters
- **British Institute for Brain Injured Children** – Vivienne Streeter - Director

### **Conclusions:**

- The incorporation of a multi sensory approach assists children and adults with developmental, emotional and psychiatric disabilities acquire functional skills and improve their quality of life.
- No set formula or list of resources is needed but rather a commitment from staff and carers to provide appropriate experience using a variety of sensory stimulations.
- Multi sensory education should be incorporated into special education, therapy and carer training.
- Flexibility in sharing resources either within an organisation or throughout the country needs to be considered to maximise access to a greater number of people.

**Dissemination:** I propose sharing my Fellowship findings via the following:

- Implementing programs at The Crescent School
- Special Schools network Illawarra / South Coast
- Presenting workshop at NSW Special Education Conference
- Australian sensory network – ECAPSS

## **Program**

My Churchill Fellowship covered a period of seven weeks from 15<sup>th</sup> March – 30<sup>th</sup> April 2004 and included visits to the following:

### **U.S.A.:**

The Centre on Disabilities at California State University, Los Angeles.  
19<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference – Technology and Persons With Disabilities.  
Lifespire Multi Support Centres – New York

### **Canada:** Toronto

Variety Village  
Lucy McCormack Senior School  
Muki Baum Association  
MacMillan Children's Centre  
Bloorview Children's Centre  
Applewood Acres School  
Seneca School  
Sunny View School

### **United Kingdom:**

Treloar Senior College - Basingstoke  
British Institute for Brain Injured Children - Bridgewater  
Hope Lodge School - Southampton  
Victoria Special School- Birmingham  
The Space Centre – Preston  
Wings School - Milnthorp

### **Finland / Sweden:**

Institute for the Blind - Helsinki  
Jukko Lighting Systems  
Aged Care facilities - Helsinki  
Hameenlinna Polytechnic  
Balders Hus Special School - Norrtelje

### **Northern Ireland:** Belfast

Mitchell House Special School  
Flemming Fulton Special School  
Oakwood School  
Glenveagh School

### **Republic of Ireland:** Dublin

University of Ireland  
Trinity College

## **Major Findings and Observations**

At the outset it needs to be pointed out that while my project set out to examine multi sensory programs many organisations referred to their programs as SNOEZELEN® which is actually a trade mark and many facilities incorporated aspects of the Snoezelen philosophy and products as well as other commercial or their own developed resources.

Snoezelen is a concept which started in Holland in the late 1970's and is a combination of two Dutch words, "snuffelen" – to seek or explore and "doezelen" to relax. Many organizations visited referred to their facilities or programs as Snoezelen but had also incorporated a number of variations so that the term "multi sensory" is a more appropriate descriptor and will be used throughout this report.

In undertaking a project such as this, across a number of educational, pre and post school settings and countries, it is inevitable that some duplication arises. The following is therefore a summary of the main trends, findings and observations made which however had some variations due to the approach taken by staff, the level of resourcing, degree of disability experienced by students / clients, and other variables such as climate, facilities, funding and location.

Whilst my investigations were predominantly based in school settings a number of post school and adult facilities were also visited. For the purpose of this report I will be referring to students however this could be broadened to include client / aged person / young adult.

A multi sensory approach is one that:

- provides visual, tactile and auditory stimulation
- allows participants the opportunity to use the senses they have
- concentrates on strengths, not disabilities
- offers security to allow one to relax mentally and physically
- is client controlled
- offers the opportunity to have a rich and pleasurable experience
- motivates and facilitates discovery learning
- facilitates communication
- provides an improved sense of well being
- encourages social interaction
- facilitates improved client / carer relationship

For some students due to their disability they may need to have their senses over stimulated to maximize the input whereas others, particularly those with autism or mental illness, may need to have an approach which screens out much of the sensory overload they are experiencing and provide a more calming and controlled environment.

In facilities visited there was a significant variation in the level of resources. However there was no obvious evidence that those that expended huge amounts on resources were obtaining better results than those who were operating with fewer resources or in more confined environments.



The factors which indicated an effective multi sensory program included:

- resources being available and accessible when needed
- resources being well maintained
- a variety of equipment and approaches to maintain motivation
- well trained staff who understood concepts of program
- understanding of students / clients sensory needs
- linking sensory experience to other aspects such as communication
- a calm and pleasurable atmosphere
- integration of thematic work to maximize learning opportunities
- flexibility to be responsive to changing needs of student
- training of staff / carers who would use the resources

As indicated earlier a number of facilities have set up what are generally known as “Snoezelen” rooms which are specific areas incorporating many of the traditional products or resources which may include:

- various light sources such as bubble tubes, projected images, fibre optic strands
- relaxing or pulsating music
- multi coloured floor or fibre optic floor mats
- padded floors and walls (usually in white to reflect light sources)
- vibrating and or interactive panels
- switch operated activities to encourage interaction
- leaf chair swing or vibrating beds
- aroma fans or diffusers



Two facilities visited also incorporated many of these features into a therapy pool situation which provided and the extra dimension of heated water and underwater speakers.

Some facilities however were not in a position to allocate a specific room or area for the setting up their multi sensory resources but adopted other approaches such as:

- cupboards (particularly with more active and destructive students)
- sinks or cardboard boxes to house multi sensory activities
- mobile carts which allowed resources to be moved around the organisation
- mobile vans which facilitated resources travelling around the country



*Equipment stored in mobile cart to facilitate movement between classrooms / wards*

Some organisations indicated that sensory resources they made or modified were actually used more due to the ownership value compared to those merely purchased from a catalogue although durability and safety aspects needed to be considered. Generally most available commercial equipment purchased, whilst expensive, gave very good value for money over a considerable number of years and commercial suppliers appeared to give very good back up service, technical advice and support.

One aspect of my project was to examine how a multi sensory approach assisted students acquire functional skills and improved their quality of life.

An inherent danger in having a separate room or scheduled multi sensory activity is that the experience can be provided in isolation and not be incorporated into assisting students develop skills in other settings or contexts. There was a range of views in this respect including:

- allowing student to merely have a relaxing and fun time
- providing students with the opportunity to calm down or be over stimulated
- linking very closely the multi sensory activity with another aspect of learning
- integrating aspects such as communication, therapy, behaviour management
- developing thematic work e.g. life under the sea, with multi sensory activities
- providing stimulation or motivation before introducing a more complex task
- using a multi sensory activity as a reward for good work or behaviour
- empowering students to take control of their emotions

The link between a multi sensory activity and aspects such as the student's communication and behaviour management were very strong and there were many instances where teachers and carers indicated that a multi sensory activity was the most effective way of motivation in these two important areas.

Several documented case studies of children and adults with complex and severe emotional and psychiatric disabilities were presented to me during visits to a number of

organizations with a very significant and measurable change to aggressive behaviours when a planned multi sensory program was introduced.

There was also evidence put forward by a number of organizations that the general areas of the individual that benefited the most by adopting a multi sensory approach were:

- Sensory awareness
- Gross motor development
- Fine motor development
- Social Interaction
- Communication
- Behaviour management

Whilst some contacts advocated that students responded best to a more relaxed and unstructured approach to multi sensory activities others maintained that to maximize the effectiveness it was essential that a very structured assessment and program needed to be delivered. Some advocates indicated that some students, particularly those experiencing severe and multiple disabilities, have very little opportunity to explore their environments and that sessions or activities should allow them a degree of freedom to interact with the equipment. Other practitioners adopted a more structured or sequential approach whereby a very specific activity was planned, monitored and assessed for the student. There would seem to be benefits for students at various times for both approaches and it is important that multi sensory experiences be provided across a range of settings and not be scheduled to a specific lesson or time of the day or week but rather an approach that is able to be adapted to a number of learning opportunities.

In respect to the issue of quality of life many instances were tended of how a multi sensory approach empowered students to engage in a greater degree of choice making, made them feel better about themselves and improved their behaviour so that others more willingly interacted with them. Quality of life, while difficult to define, generally incorporates certain aspects including physical, material, emotional, social, psychological and spiritual well being (Baum 1999)

Feedback from parents also indicated that after their child had been involved in a multi sensory program there was also an improvement not only in their child's quality of life but also a flow on effect to the parent and other family members.

In order to maximize use of resources some organizations actively encouraged after hours access by families and community groups which helped offset the initial cost and provided greater opportunities for the client and their carers to engage in programs.

Whilst obviously a project such as this was to seek out some examples of best practice around the world it was evident that all those visited were very strong advocates for a multi sensory program and have not discounted this approach after many years of incorporating aspects into their various organizations.

**Conclusions:**

- The incorporation of a multi sensory approach assists children and adults with developmental, emotional and psychiatric disabilities acquire functional skills and improve their quality of life.
- No set formula or list of resources is needed but rather a commitment from staff and carers to provide appropriate experience using a variety of sensory stimulations.
- Multi sensory education should be incorporated into special education, therapy and carer training.
- Flexibility in sharing resources either within an organisation or throughout the country needs to be considered to maximise access by a greater number of people.

**Dissemination:** I propose sharing my Fellowship findings via the following:

- Implementing programs at The Crescent School
- Special Schools network Illawarra / South Coast education region.
- Presenting workshop at NSW Special Education Conference
- Responding to invitations already issued to schools and community groups
- Australian sensory network - ECAPSS
- Application for mobile van funding to appropriate funding bodies



*Snoezelen Mobile Van travels around many areas in Canada and North America*

## Recommendations

My seven week Fellowship and contact with a number of organisations dealing with a very diverse age and disability range clearly demonstrated that a multi sensory approach integrated into their programs impacted in a number of areas for their students / clients.

I will be advocating that this approach is worthwhile considering in special education, at a pre school, school and post school level, in aged care / dementia facilities and in facilities that deal with therapy, developmental, emotional and psychiatric disabilities.

In my role as principal of a Special Education School within New South Wales I have become involved in a number of valuable networks throughout the region and state wide. Initially I will be inservicing the staff at my school and sharing with my school community aspects of my Fellowship and how we might be able to integrate more aspects of multi sensory activities into students programs at The Crescent School.

There has been considerable interest from a number of schools and organisations prior to my departure and return from my seven week Fellowship with invitations to speak to staff and parents about my findings.

The internet has been very valuable in the planning of my trip and I am currently a member of the Enhancing Communication and Participation through Sensory Stimulation network and a contributor to their listserv which is a valuable way of contributing to discussions or answering questions Australia wide.

It needs to be recognized that the setting up of specialised rooms with necessary equipment, hoist, wiring and soundproofing is a significant cost to an organisation and that to maximize benefits to students / clients adequate training and care of equipment needs to be undertaken.

The use of mobile carts is a very cost effective way of allowing resources to be moved to areas of need throughout an organisation as well as effective use of existing rooms.

Incorporating multi sensory equipment into a mobile van is a very cost effective means of maximizing exposure to groups who may not be able to set up multi sensory areas within their facility due to space restrictions, lack of finances, isolated settings or untrained staff. The development of this model of delivery could be a worthwhile opportunity for sponsorship from a commercial or community based organization to undertake and it would be a unique resource and one which would be in demand from a wide range of disability related groups.

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