

# International Journal of Human Sciences Research

## FREE SENSORY EXPERIENCES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** Sensory development is the channel through which boys and girls receive information from their environment and from their own bodies. Based on this information, the individual will be able to give answers adapted to the conditions of the environment or environment, that is, they will carry out intelligent actions. This way, sensory stimulation favors the level of integration, facilitating basic learning and opening doors to more meaningful relationships. In this sense, it is the sensory rooms of educational institutions that present a clear and concrete proposal for said sensory development. The results of the creation of one of them in the first cycle of early childhood education, under a free experimentation methodology, in an institution in Zaragoza in Spain are presented below. The observed results have been a growing attention to the sensations experienced, evidenced in the expressions of the boys and girls about what their senses perceived. These perceptions were increasing, as well as the attention and concentration in the interaction with the stimuli and objects in the room.

**Keywords:** Childhood, sensory room, senses, free experimentation.

## INTRODUCTION

This project focuses on the sensory development of students, an aspect that due to the evolutionary characteristics of this stage is key to achieving the objective of sustainable development of health and well-being (objective 3). Guaranteeing a healthy life and promoting well-being for everyone at all ages means, in the first cycle of early childhood education, stimulating and guaranteeing adequate development of the evolutionary stage in progress. It is the sensory systems and sensory-motor development that guide and structure educational practice at this stage (Lázaro and Berruezo, 2009). The

sensory room created through an active and free exploration methodology will allow students to develop curiosity and interest in sensorimotor exploration, as well as sensory integration of the world through perceptual possibilities based on meaningful and emotionally positive learning experiences.

For its part, today we know that not all of us learn the same things in the same way. As proposed by the legislation on educational matters, the educational intervention must contemplate the diversity of the student body, adapting the educational practice to the personal characteristics, needs, interests and cognitive style of the student body (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2022). In this sense, the sensory room is a space that enables knowledge of the environment and of oneself through the multiple ways that each individual has to learn. A space for development and free sensory exploration, enriches the quality of the education provided, thus contributing to sustainable development goal number 4. This space allows us to work towards the goal of guaranteeing inclusive, equitable and quality education and promoting opportunities of learning in the educational stage that concerns us. Various investigations have revealed the importance of sensory development from newborns and the way in which these experiences contribute to meeting the specific educational needs that are found in our classrooms today (Badde et al. 2019; Pineda, 2020).

Sensory rooms, although initially created in the therapeutic field, have shown positive effects in various fields (Etchepareborda, Abad and Pina, 2003; Long and Haig, 1992). Today, these spaces are constituted as a proposal that in the school environment has proven to be a great ally of positive child development and attention to diversity in the educational field.

## GOALS

The creation of the sensory room in the school constituted an educational innovation project that sought to contribute to the development of the sensory capacities of the students through a progressive assimilation and sensory integration, favoring knowledge, understanding of the environment and acting on it. Also stimulate interest in students for free exploration and sensory expression seeking satisfaction, pleasure and relaxation. Likewise, it was sought to put into practice a discovery learning methodology that would motivate the initiatives of the students and allow the development of divergent thinking.

## PROPOSAL

The management team of the nursery school proposed to the faculty the creation of a sensory room in a disused space in the educational facilities. A split methodology was proposed as regards the organization of the group, thus allowing a more personalized accompaniment of the students in the sensory experience.

At first, meetings were organized where the team members shared their experience with this type of room and with sensory education. The school in the area that has a sensory room was visited and they told us about its methodology and materials, as well as how it works in the second cycle of early childhood education. Subsequently, through the level meetings and the cloisters, we have been able to share experiences, doubts and proposals. While the support staff collaborated in preparing the space at a structural level, the educators worked on the design, materials, and methodology to be used with the students.

Within the sensory room, the educational methodology has been free expression and movement. Approximately 60 boys and girls between 4 months and 3 years of age participated in this project in the first year.

One of the strong aspects of the project due to its methodology and which the team valued was the possibility that this space contributed positively to responding to the specific needs of the students.

For the evaluation of this project, the degree of satisfaction, relaxation, well-being, restlessness and displeasure of the students has been taken into account, using systematic and direct observation. Also if in the programming this space has taken place or not and why, if the space and the materials attend to the different rhythms and learning styles of the students. And finally, if it has been possible to promote learning by discovery and the students have been able to explore freely.

## RESULTS

From the direct observation of the students in their interaction with the materials in the room and the proposals, it has been possible to see an interest and motivation for free exploration, which leads us to think that the objectives of sensory stimulation and learning by discovery have been accomplished. Likewise, those boys and girls who, due to their personal characteristics, do not feel comfortable working in a structured way, have found in this space a place where, autonomously, they can interact without the need for specific adult support to guide their activity. The opening of the space to interlevel work also demonstrated the possibilities of adapting these materials and proposals to the evolutionary characteristics that all early childhood individually possesses.

For its part, the impact of the project on the educational team has been equally positive by offering this space the possibility of attending to the natural diversity of the classroom in a personalized way by the educators, which is achieved thanks to the unfolding. With the project, a new space in the school has been achieved for the sensory development

of the students where an active learning methodology can be established.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The importance of sensory development in early childhood and the need for its stimulation is already evidence that the scientific literature reflects (Etchepareborda, Abad & Pina, 2003). Some authors such as Gimeno Sacristán (1998) propose a change in educational proposals in order to attend to that natural diversity that exists between people in the classroom, as in society. The sensory rooms under a free exploration methodology are presented as an attractive educational proposal and, in this case, with the promotion of interactions in small groups. Sensory rooms require the use of multiple materials that encourage the participation of various abilities, thus stimulating the comprehensive development of students.

It is true, however, that the use of this methodology and the difficult task of making the appropriate material available to students requires the training of the professionals who attend it. The scientific community agrees on the need for teacher training in relation to sensory education and on the methodologies that allow stimulating this development in the classroom (Castellanos and Melos, 2020; Kamal, A. and Farhana, A. (2020). Likewise, it is worth noting the role of non-instructive accompaniment of the teaching staff to achieve the objectives that are proposed in the rooms.

Despite the progress that has been made in this regard in recent years in terms of methodology in schools, there is still a long way to go in terms of the teaching role and its involvement in spaces such as the sensory room, where accompanying and preparing the environment are the key tools.

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