Scent and Sensibility

Susannah Kirkman

describes an artificial therapeutic environment for children with physical handicaps and severe learning difficulties

Perfumed air wafts gently round the room: soft music plays: strange, dream-like images of tumbled clouds move across a screen. Coloured bubbles cascade in transparent tubes and jewel-bright lights are reflected in silver domes. Reclining on air cushions are two children, taking in the different sensation with rapt faces.

Five minutes earlier, 13-year old Carlton, whose movements can become very agitated, had been struggling with his teacher. Now he's smiling peacefully as she cradles him and shows him the colours glowing in some long optical fibres which the children can grasp and hold.

"I would defy anyone to leap around in an excited state in this room," says Mervyn Balson, head teacher of Liminton House School in Basingstoke here a remarkable new sensory stimulation unit is having a calming influence on the pupils who have profound learning difficulties and serious physical handicaps.

It cost £50,000 to build the unit-all money raised for the school. This might seem a heavy price to pay for relaxation, but relaxing is a therapy in itself for some of the Limington pupils. "We have one or two pupils who can be extremely violent. We can't reason with them until we've calmed them down," he explains.

The hi-tech room, called a Snoezelen (pronounced "snooze-a-lun" and derived from two Dutch words meaning "sniffing and dozing"), also evokes responses from pupils whose disabilities are so severe that it's difficult for them to react to anything. Frail ??-year-old Stephen, for instance, is almost paralyzed by a rare metabolic disorder. Although he attended a mainstream primary school 18 months ago, his condition has deteriorated so quickly that he can now only communicate with his eyes and occasionally by moving his head.

According to his teacher, Marilyn Gallagher, he became "very wide-eyed" when he was taken into the Snoezelen for the first time. He even managed to show his pleasure in the bubble unit by turning his head towards it to indicate that he wanted it switched on for a second time.

Jody, a 13-year-old girl with cerebral palsy who only learned to walk 18 months ago, was "absolutely in awe" when the lights were switched on. She clapped her hands and swayed and sang to the music.

Pupils like her will be able to develop their fine motor skills by touching and pushing the switches which control some of the lights and music.

The Snoezelen gives pupils with profound handicaps their first chance to experience sensations taken for granted by most people.

Children who are unable to run and feel the wind ruffling their hair can operate a fan which blows cool air at them.

One of the light screens is sensitive to sound, making it useful for pupils with hearing and speech impairments. The pictures can be made to change if the music is switched up, or if a pupil makes a noise in front of the screen.

Mervyn Balson is hoping that the Snoezelen experience could benefit parents too. "They don't often get the chance to see their children in such a relaxed state." He believes the cosy atmosphere of the Snoezelen makes it easier for parents and teachers to take older pupils back to the warmth and security of early childhood.

There are also plans to use the unit as a diagnostic aid, after teachers saw a pupil follow lights around the room with her eyes. They had thought she could see virtually nothing.

"We seem to be getting information about the children which even hospitals haven't been able to provide," says Mervyn Balson.

Next door to the Snoezelen is a soft playroom where pupils can let off steam. It's lined with padded cushions so that children who normally rarely leave their wheelchairs have the freedom to move around safely. In one corner, there's a ball pool, like a large paddling pool filled with plastic balls, where physiotherapy can take place.

"This room allows the pupils total expression", says Mervyn Balson. "They don't have their protective helmets on and it doesn't matter about noise."

He thinks the 18 months spent raising the money for the unit were worthwhile. Donations have come from primary school pupils, a local radio station and Allied Dunbar, the insurance company, which paid for the specially-designed building which houses the Snoezelen and the soft playroom.

The equipment was devised in Holland 10 years ago and the Limington unit-designed by Hampshire county architects-is believed to be the first of it's kind in Britain.

Allied Dunbar sees the unit as an ideal charitable project. The benefits are enjoyed by a large number of children. all 89 in the school, plus children from outside, whose sensory disabilities will be diagnosed in the Snoezelen.

The unit is now independent from Allied Dunbar, as Hampshire has picked up the running costs. Most importantly, the company views its own £24,000 contribution as pump-priming.

"It pushes the local authority and other people to contribute what they can," says Ron Chitty, a financial analyst who is on the staff committee which allocates the money raised by Allied Dunbar's sales force.

Mervyn Balson admits that it's easier for special schools to raise money than for mainstream schools because of the emotive appeal of children with handicaps.

Although he begrudges the time he and his staff spend fundraising, he says it is an essential part of his job. "If a prospective special school head told an interview panel that he wouldn't do any fundraising, he wouldn't get the job," he says.

Under local management of schools, special schools are likely to become even more dependent on fundraising.

"Local authority advisers for special education will no longer hold their own budgets," explains Mervyn Balson. "In future, if we need £3,000 for a special standing frame for a pupil, we'll have to raise the money ourselves.