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The Sensory Smart Classroom

**By Christina Sparker, MOT, OTR/L
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Today's savvy teachers are aware of the importance of meeting students' sensory needs in the classroom and even know various strategies to address these needs. At the same time, these teachers often have difficulty incorporating these strategies into their every day classroom routine. In actuality, it can be very easy to integrate sensory strategies in the daily schedule. Examining a day in the class of one fictitious 1st grade teacher, who is dedicated to running a sensory smart classroom for her 25 students, reveals relatively easy ways most teachers can begin to address her students' sensory needs in the context of the classroom.

Ms. Sorensen's classroom in a suburb outside of Seattle is carefully crafted to address her students' sensory needs. The walls in the classroom are purposefully uncluttered and free of extraneous posters and pictures to help her students avoid visual distraction. The one set of posters prominently displayed proclaims "Ways to move my body," and has pictures of children demonstrating various yoga poses and isometric exercises designed to provide deep proprioceptive input to the child. Prominently and distinctly displayed on the board at the front of the room is the daily schedule in words and pictures. There are also several visual timers, which Ms. Sorensen uses throughout the day.

On first glance the desks in Ms. Sorensen's class may appear to be haphazardly arranged. In actuality, they are carefully placed in various configurations: some in groups, some side by side in pairs, and some placed individually either facing a wall or the front of the classroom. The various formations are selected to meet her students' needs for visual and auditory over- and under-responsiveness, and to create a location where each student can function at his or her best, be it with a partner, in a small group, or alone. In addition to the desk arrangements, Ms. Sorensen has pieces of cardboard that can be arranged on a desk to create a cubicle or used to block off stimuli from one side or the other. There are many seating options available for her students: height appropriate desk chairs both with and without arms, chairs that rotate, ball chairs, rocking chairs, large pillows, stability discs, theraballs, single legged stools and most recently she was able to procure a standing desk for her sensory seeking/craving child (see www.standupforlearning.com and other brands of stand up desks by googling "stand up desks for children".)

Ms. Sorensen has created spaces around the classroom where students can go during their free time or independent work time to receive or block sensory input. There are 3 different sensory tables in the room, a bean table, a sand table, and a water table. There is also an area where students can experiment with Play-Doh, Moon Sand and Theraputty. A sign on one corner of the room states, "Cozy corner." Here students are shaded from overhead light and can curl up among pillows of various sizes. Another corner has a sign that reads, "Break Box." This is a wooden box about 3'x3'x3', lined with carpet and open on one side. Students can enter the box and pull down a fabric curtain to create a comforting cave. Ms. Sorensen makes the most of the natural light that comes into her classroom and the lights in Ms. Sorensen's classroom are on dimmer switches, thus she can raise or lower them depending on the arousal level of her students. For auditory input, she has placed several speakers throughout the room, and, with an MP3 player, can play any tempo and volume of music.

Finally, Ms. Sorensen has a row of boxes, each of which contain smaller items that can be taken to a student's desk, to assist in sensory regulation. For oral motor stimulation she has gum in various flavors, pretzels, soft and hard candy, room temperature and cold water, and straws of various diameters. To address auditory needs there are headphones which block out varying decibels of noise. For proprioceptive input there are weighted lap blankets, Theratubes and Therabands. In the tactile box students can find Koosh-like balls, balls that squish and/or stretch, stress balls of various textures and resistance levels, small cloths of various textures and other "fidget" items. In the last bin, the olfactory bin there are scratch 'n sniff stickers, and small film canisters, each containing a cotton ball with drops of an essential oil such as vanilla, peppermint, and lavender placed in it.

Most importantly, from the first day of school Ms. Sorensen explained to her students that each of them has a sensory system that has different needs and that during the year they would all be on a quest to discover what helped each student's system reach a point so that he or she could do his or her best work. She gave her students permission to explore, test, and try, knowing that even if another child liked something different from his or her best friend that was perfectly okay. Ms. Sorensen created a classroom culture in which it wasn't odd or strange to try different sensory solutions but rather the norm.

Ms. Sorensen has done an amazing job of preparing her classroom for when the students arrive. Now that the classroom is set, let's follow Ms. Sorensen's and her students during a typical day. Before the students arrive Ms. Sorensen has carefully selected calming music to be playing during the morning routine, and has carefully controlled the amount of light in the classroom so there is less visual input upon entering the room. As the students arrive, each student has his or her own morning routine: put away backpacks and coats to keep the classroom clutter free, find chairs and carry them to each students desk to provide deep proprioceptive input, and check the choice board to determine what activities are available for choice time today. Many different choices are offered in order to meet the sensory needs of students as they transition into school. Some of these choices are: looking at books in a cozy corner, playing in one of the 3 different sensory bins, stretching with assistance from yoga cards, using any of the sensory boxes, and jumping on hoppy balls. The available activities are tailored to meet each child's sensory needs.

During morning exploration Ms. Sorensen gives the children verbal and visual (i.e. visual timer) warnings that free time will end in a few minutes to prepare the students to finish their activities and complete clean up. She also requests that each student move as a particular animal to the next activity (i.e. animal walks, to provide proprioceptive input prior to the group activity). Following free choice, Ms. Sorensen always has a classroom



meeting in the back of a classroom. For this activity, the students utilize the many different seating options available such as small chairs, stability discs, ball chairs, pillows, carpet squares, or simply sitting on the floor. The first activity in morning group is always a proprioceptive activity such as more animal walks, yoga poses, dancing to music, pulling on Therabands, or doing wheelbarrow walks. Following the proprioceptive activity, Ms. Sorenson checks in with each student on how his or her body is feeling today (She often uses the "How Does your Engine Run" program for this check in). Other important classroom announcements are made at this time as well as a brief story time.

Following morning group it is time to start academic work. On each student's desk is a card that states, "I need a break." Students are encouraged to use this card, go to a defined break spot (cozy corner or break box) for a few minutes, then return to their desk. In the front of the room is a visual timer that informs the students when academic instruction time will be over. Ms. Sorenson is aware of which students are able to follow the group instructions as well as which students need direct attention from her to begin. Students are encouraged to use sensory supports during all academic activities. Some of these supports are 3-way U-shaped cardboard foldouts to create a visual barrier for students who are distracted easily, access to the tactile bin, access to the oral motor bin, access to weighted lap blankets, and access to noise cancelling headphones as desired by the child. Choice is king!

Ms. Sorenson recognizes that the academic part of the day can be most difficult for children with sensory processing difficulties and encourages these students to use the available supports. She has also taught the students how to do chair exercises when they start to feel overwhelmed. In between each academic subject, 5-10 minutes is dedicated to a movement break where students can access the various sensory materials in the room as well as engage in a group movement activity. Ms. Sorenson also allows students to eat their snack during these breaks if they are hungry.

A morning recess divides the morning academic work. When the kids are waiting in line to go out, Ms. Sorenson asks the children who think they might feel "fidgety" to bring a toy to play with as they are waiting in line. The fidget toy gives the student something to do with his or her hands while he or she waits. Once on the playground, Ms. Sorenson watches the students but only gets involved if there is a problem. She might direct a student towards an activity that she knows is regulating for the student or encourage students to engage with each other and keep their body moving.

Lunchtime in the lunchroom with all the other students in the school can be a difficult part of the day for some students, and Ms. Sorenson has learned over time that not all students can be successful in the lunchroom. She offers to allow whoever wants to the opportunity to eat in the classroom. They call themselves the "lunch bunch." She also provides other accommodations to students in the lunchroom such as noise cancelling headphones and straws with which to drink their yogurt (which is highly regulating due to the sucking). She also advocates for her table to be on the edge of the cafeteria to reduce noise.

Following lunch is another recess that looks very similar to the first recess with the same sensory supports. Ms. Sorenson recognizes that the afternoon is a very difficult time for children to focus unless engaged through their senses, thus each afternoon has a different hands on learning activity. Some of these activities include science (with a hands on approach), art, PE and music. During these afternoon activities, Ms. Sorenson is constantly checking on each student and making sensory-based suggestions if she sees a student is having a difficult time. She will occasionally stop the activity and do a brief movement break of stretching, jumping jacks, running in place, pushing on the hands of another student, or doing yoga poses.

Ms. Sorenson ends the day with a classroom meeting using the same seating set up as the morning meeting. In this meeting, Ms. Sorenson informs the class of any changes to the next day's schedule to prepare the students for the next day. The students then follow the end of the day routine of putting their chairs away for proprioceptive input, cleaning up the desk, getting their coat and backpack and lining up at the door where fidgets are again available.

All of Ms. Sorenson's students are able to have a successful and productive day due to her ability to provide each student with academic learning as well as needed sensory supports. Ms. Sorenson skillfully recognizes when a student needs a break and helps each student learn to read his or her own body cues and advocate for his or her sensory needs.

As a classroom with a focus on self-control, self regulation and learning, Ms. Sorenson's classroom represents an ideal way to address students' sensory needs in the classroom. Yet, as you can see, throughout the day there are many opportunities for any teacher to capitalize on his or her knowledge of the importance of addressing sensory needs in the classroom and incorporate sensory activities into the classroom routine. Some activities require special equipment, however many sensory needs can be addressed with little to no equipment. All it requires to begin running a sensory smart classroom is a willingness to look at the classroom and its routine through the lens of a child's sensory needs, and the creativity and motivation to try to do something just a little bit differently.

We admire and celebrate all the Ms. Sorensons out there!

