

## Ifield School – Rising to the challenge

By David Payne, Sensory Product Manager

Responding to challenges set by customers is one of the most enjoyable facets of developing sensory and soft play environments. Standing in a large cavernous room at Ifield School, Gravesend last year, surrounded by walls painted 'battleship' grey with a ceiling arcing from standard room height up to 5m high up and with precious few plug sockets present, I was faced with just such a challenge.

As part of a whole school renovation this entirely new development was stylishly designed and like so many of its contemporaries included architectural features aimed to promote an aesthetic experience both inside and out.

Alongside me in the grey room last year was School Fundraising Manager, Gill Robinson, who also explained the ceiling would be near impossible to fix to. At that precise moment I held a very different perspective on those 'architectural features'! However, when a clear route forward is hard to fathom, understanding what the customer wants to achieve in the room always begins to clear the way. Put aside equipment; projectors, bubble tubes or fibre optics and think about outcomes. Gill and I did just that to unravel the type of room Ifield School really needed.

Now complete, the end result is a telling example of SensoryPlus' ability to work with customers to create effective environments regardless of the space, layout and budget available.

In all, the project stretched over many months, as the exact specifications of the environment were discussed, amended and developed. In fact, even post-order the layout of the room altered more than once. As I often relay to customers during the opening assessment, the ensuing proposal is merely a working document.

Being flexible is an essential part of working on modern sensory environments, firstly by being non-prescriptive during assessment and then being open to change as the project unfolds. Ifield School's circumstances moved and shifted as the school's redevelopment progressed and the design had to move with it. Ultimately, they knew and understood their children and staff far better than I ever could. With this in mind, I actively encourage all SensoryPlus sales advisors to follow the customer's lead. Customers are the real experts, though more often than not they don't realise it.

The brief for the room aimed to provide a multi-functioning area, ideal for younger users both as a relaxing environment and as a stimulating goal-orientated space.

Most eye-catching of all is the comprehensive Colour Wash system the school opted for, flooding the walls from top to bottom with selectable colours around the entire perimeter of the 64sqm space. The Colour Wash system has fast become SensoryPlus' most requested innovation. A dramatic backwash to themed work or a simple calming experience to relax students, the Colour Wash system is sophisticated yet incredibly simple. I've learnt customers crave simplicity, complicated or intricate equipment takes up valuable time that carers, teachers, therapists and parents have precious little of.

The system works best on neutral cream-coloured walls so what happened to the 'battleship grey' you may wonder? SensoryPlus organised the painting of the room and enhanced the provision of electrical sockets to make them switchable from a single panel situated close to the door. Providing a more rounded, turnkey service like this helped move the project along and kept things simple for the school. According to Gill Robinson, a willingness to help represented one of the key benefits of working in partnership with SensoryPlus.

Elsewhere an array of tools and equipment provide a terrific starting position for staff, helping them experiment with new pieces as well as develop understanding and activities for more traditional items without over specifying the space. Interactivity formed an integral aspect of the brief too and is reflected in the wireless control of the bubble tube and bubble dome in addition to the switch capability of the tactile panel and other smaller items.

Complimenting these is the low amplified stereo system with a resonating speaker built into the base of the waterbed aimed at including those with hearing loss into all facets of the learning experience. An ultra violet lighting area heightens the visual experience for those children with visual impairments and netted curtain areas allow teachers to section off the room appropriately for different activities and users.

All in all, the new environment has proven incredibly popular and worth the wait for staff and children alike. Complimented by a full day of inset training booked through SensoryPlus and delivered by renowned sensory trainer, Richard Hirstwood, the whole project has been a source of great satisfaction for both the school and the company.

I always try to learn something from every project and at Ifield School the overriding lesson was probably to further implore customers to regard the design of a sensory environment as a fluid partnership between customer and company, not simply an 'off the peg, off the page' purchase.

Working with customers like Gill, Deputy Head, Cole Andrews and Head Teacher Pam Jones is always an enjoyable experience because over time and through collaboration a sense of teamwork develops and everyone involved genuinely feels they've contributed to the end product. When that happens, the room proves popular, productive and a source of pride for all parties.....Just like Ifield.