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## Sensory Rooms in Schools

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# Sensory Rooms in Schools

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## Background

In order to be successful in school, students must be able to successfully engage in sensory processing in many different contexts and environments. As children grow, they learn to develop adaptive responses to sensory input to allow proper engagement with their environment, but in some cases, children may not produce an adequate adaptive response to sensory stimuli.<sup>5,6</sup> When these processing differences occur, it can lead to an academic performance that is below the student's true potential according to their cognitive abilities with or without a formal diagnosis.<sup>4</sup> One option that may help address sensory processing challenges in schools is the utilization of a sensory room. A sensory room is an environment that allows a child to appropriately process sensory information, create adaptive responses, and provide choice for meeting their sensory needs.<sup>7</sup> These rooms contain equipment that can modify experiences including, but not limited to, light, sound, and touch.<sup>10</sup> There are many proposed benefits for students utilizing sensory rooms including improved focus, attention, social interaction, communication, and mood, as well as decreased anxiety and repetitive motor behaviors.<sup>8,9</sup> Sensory rooms are increasingly used in schools, but there is a gap in the literature regarding the understanding as to how these should be used, who should use them, trainings necessary, and the impact, if any, that they have on students' educational performance.<sup>3,9</sup>

## Research Question

What are school staff's (teachers, related service providers, administrators, etc.) perceptions of the utilization and efficacy of sensory rooms to support student participation in education?

## Methods

### Participants

Participants included individuals (a) with direct contact with students who utilized a sensory room within the past year, (b) 18 years and older, and (c) employed in a school within the United States. Individuals were excluded if employed in a non-brick and mortar educational setting due to limited access to a shared sensory room.

### Instruments

An online survey hosted in Qualtrics© consisting of 25 questions was used to obtain information about sensory room usage, equipment, training, and purpose.

### Procedures

After obtaining IRB approval, a survey link was distributed via email to a list of educational staff known by the researchers. After 2-weeks a reminder email was sent as a reminder for participation. Further emails were sent after contacting Facebook groups. The email instructed participants to forward to any other educational professionals with a sensory room. The survey was accessed through a secure link. After completion of the informed consent participants completed the survey during a 5-week window.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using the use of descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages.

**Table 3.**  
*Reason for Sensory Room Installation.*

Reason for installation	Number of responses
Increased number of students enrolled in school with sensory processing support	15
Recommendation from therapists practicing within school environment	10
Received a grant	6
Recommendation from therapists outside of school	1
Unknown to me	2
Other	1

**Table 4.**  
*Type of Equipment in Sensory Room.*

Type of equipment	Number of responses
Mats	19
Alternative seating	18
Fidget toys	18
Yoga balls	15
Crash pads	12
Pillows/blankets	12
Posters/Visuals	12
Swings	10
Light equipment	9
Bosu ball	8
Bubble tubes	7
Sound equipment	7
Trampoline	7
Tunnels	7
Projecting equipment	6
Stepping stones	6
Tilt boards	5
Other	5
Fiber optics	4
Aroma diffuser	3
Balance beam	2
Fans	1

*Note.* There were 20 total respondents for these questions. The nature of the questions were select all that apply.

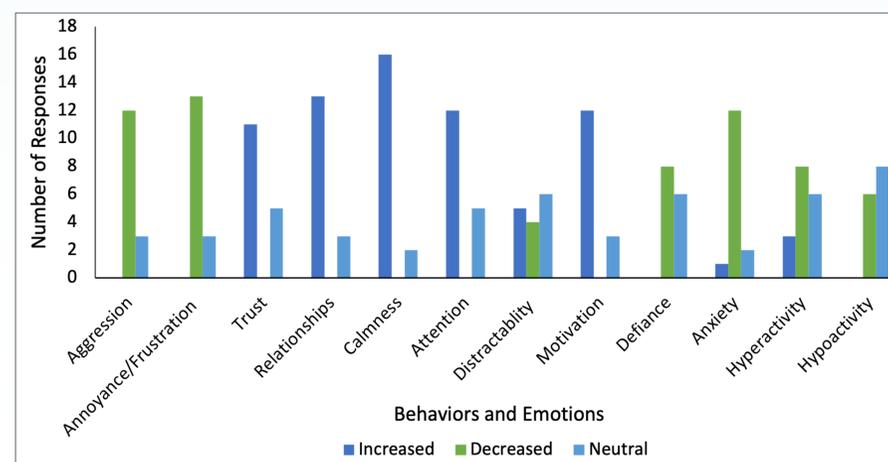
## Results

Most respondents were employed in public schools (85%) with most being special education teachers (30%) and occupational therapists (20%) at the elementary level. Respondents reported directly observing the student during sensory room usage while eleven reported they did not directly observe students. Fifteen out of 20 respondents reported that there are general policies and procedures in place for sensory room use. There was a large difference in the frequency of sensory room usage for students with the most common responses being one to two students and more than 10 students using the room each week.

**Table 5.**  
*Reasoning for Sending Student to Sensory Room*

Reported reasoning student sent to sensory room	Number of responses
Pre-planned movement breaks	17
Spontaneous breaks	17
Student requested	15
Engaging in undesirable behaviors	13
Reward/Prize	11
Therapy (Occupational, Physical, Speech)	9

**Figure A.**  
*Impact of Sensory Room Use on Behavior/Emotional Regulation*



**Table 6.**  
*Type of Student Utilization*

Reported student utilization of sensory room	Number of Responses
Calm down area	19
Safe sensory processing space	16
Reward/prize	10
Play area	6
Educational use	3
Other	1

**Table 7.**  
*Impact of Sensory Room on Educational Participation*

Impact on educational participation	Number of responses
Improved motivation in class	12
Improved peer interactions	11
Increased focus on classwork	11
Improved attention in class	10
Improved participation in class	9
Frustration to return to class	7
Fatigue in classroom due to energy exertion in sensory room	1
Negative peer interactions	1
None	1
Unknown	1

## Discussion

This study aimed to contribute to increasing the knowledge base of effective sensory room use in the school-based context.

- Majority of the respondents were special education teachers and school-based OTs, but according to literature, OTs should have the largest role.<sup>1,2</sup>
- There was vast diversity with how the rooms were used and what equipment/supplies were within the room (most for unplanned purposes).
- Responses were largely positive for the impact on student behavior/emotional regulation.
- 15 out of 20 respondents reported that their school has set policies/procedures.
  - o Changes have occurred in the past 10 years because literature previously stated no policies/procedures were typically in place.<sup>3,8</sup>

### Future Research

- Investigate why there is so much diversity in the usage/equipment.
  - This is possibly due to individualization to meet each student's specific needs according to best practice.<sup>1</sup>
  - It is also possibly due to a lack of clear implementation standards.
- Investigate if OTs working with the students in the sensory rooms are doing proper sensory assessments prior to the room's usage.
  - This is to keep in line with the Choosing Wisely Campaign®.<sup>1</sup>
  - Explore if sensory assessments are being performed or if criteria/policy change needs to occur.<sup>11</sup>

### Limitations

- Lack of literature regarding the understanding of how these rooms should be used within an educational setting
- Inclusion criteria narrowed the study significantly because it only allowed participants who have worked with students who have accessed the room in the past calendar year
- Administrators from several institutions did not allow the survey to be distributed to their school staff
- Low power because only a small number of participants responded to the survey.

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## References

