SENSORY ROOMS IN SCHOOLS: A TRENDY ACCESSORY OR A PURPOSEFUL RESOURCE?

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Abstract

Sensory rooms have become increasingly visible in school settings, yet the presence of specialised equipment does not by itself demonstrate that a room is being used as an individualised educational or therapeutic resource. The main objective of the research is to determine the organization and manner of implementation of sensory rooms in primary schools within the territory of the City of Skopje. The descriptive method was applied in the research, while document analysis and surveying were used as techniques. The results indicate that out of the 10 schools included in the study, only 7 confirmed that a sensory room exists and is operational within the school. However, 57.1% of respondents from schools with a sensory room pointed that a previously developed sensory profile was not used, and more than half considered further staff training necessary. Respondents also reported variation in scheduling and documentation, while lack of equipment and time were prominent practical barriers. The available data establish that schools systematically confuse sensory rooms with calming rooms. The sensory room should be understood as a purposeful resource only when its use is linked to individual assessment, measurable goals, appropriately trained staff, child participation, documented monitoring and meaningful family collaboration. An appropriate implementation needs a school-level protocol, clear differentiation between sensory and calming rooms, informed parental consent procedures, and wider research across North Macedonia.

Keywords: sensory rooms; calming rooms; sensory profile; school inclusion; parental consent.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education requires schools to respond to differences in how pupils perceive process and react to information from their bodies and the surrounding environment. Classrooms contain continuous visual, auditory, tactile and movement-related input, while pupils are also expected to process all stimulations, attend, communicate, follow instructions, participate in learning and manage transitions. For some children, sensory demands may affect comfort, regulation and participation. Support should therefore be based on the child's individual functioning and the demands of the context, rather than on assumptions linked only to a diagnosis or visible behavior (Dunn *et al.*, 2016; Unwin *et al.*, 2022).

A sensory room, also described as a multisensory environment, is a specially organized space in which sensory stimuli and equipment can be adjusted to support particular experiences and goals. Sensory rooms are specially designed areas created to provide controlled sensory experiences. Unlike the traditional classroom, sensory rooms are designed to be flexible, allowing students to adapt their environment based on their individual sensory needs. Depending on its purpose, equipment may provide visual, auditory, tactile, vestibular or proprioceptive input by adjustable lighting, comfortable seating, textured materials, calming sounds, and various tactile elements. Such rooms can offer opportunities for stimulation, exploration, engagement and relaxation, but their purpose is not defined by the equipment alone. The selection and intensity of stimuli, the way the child participates, and the link between activities and functional goals are central to purposeful use (Leonardi *et al.*, 2025; Williams *et al.*, 2024).

A related but distinct concept is the calming room or calming space. A calming room is a low-stimulation environment created to help individuals reduce stress, de-escalate, and recover after emotional overload. These rooms are intentionally quiet, predictable, and soothing. They are used when someone is showing signs of anxiety, frustration, sensory overwhelm, or

behavioral escalation. A calming room is generally intended to support emotional regulation and provide a lower-stimulation environment when a pupil needs time or support to regain regulation. A sensory room, by contrast, may provide planned sensory experiences based on identified needs and individual goals. To achieve the desired results from their implementation, it is particularly important to distinguish between the intended functions of calming spaces and sensory spaces (Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, 2026). If a sensory room is used mainly as a place to send pupils when they are distressed or disruptive, its educational or therapeutic purpose may become unclear. This does not mean that calming activities are inappropriate in a sensory room; rather, the intended purpose, the child's needs, the child's choice and the outcomes sought should be explicit.

The connection between sensory regulation and academic success is well established in educational research. When students are in an optimal state of arousal (neither over nor under stimulated) they are better able to take on information, engage in class discussions and complete assignments. Sensory rooms help students achieve this ideal state. Moreover, sensory rooms can improve attendance and reduce the need for disciplinary actions. Students who previously might have been suspended for behavioral issues stemming from sensory difficulties now have an alternative. This keeps them in school and engaged in their education rather than missing valuable learning time. Beyond immediate academic benefits, sensory rooms serve as training grounds for crucial life skills. Students learn to recognize their own sensory needs and develop self-awareness and the ability to communicate what helps them feel regulated (Whiting *et al.,* 2023).

In North Macedonia, sensory rooms have been established in a number of primary schools, but their existence raises questions about how they are organized and used in everyday practice. The central issue is not simply whether a school has a room or specialist equipment, but whether pupils' needs are assessed, goals are defined, activities are planned, staff have appropriate preparation, and use is monitored. Family involvement, child assent where appropriate, safety procedures and informed parental consent are also important components of responsible practice.

This paper aimed to determinate whether sensory rooms are functioning as purposeful resources or risk becoming spaces whose use is insufficiently individualized or procedurally defined. The paper presents the study's findings within their actual scope and distinguishes measured results from issues that the study did not directly investigate.

1.2. Conceptual framework

1.2.1. From equipment to an individualized resource

A sensory room should be understood as an adaptable environment rather than a fixed collection of products. Equipment may include bubble tubes, fibre-optic lights, projectors, tactile panels, textured objects, sound systems, mats, seating or movement-related equipment. However, no single equipment package defines an effective room. Equipment selection should follow the purpose of the space and the child's needs, preferences and responses. A room with extensive equipment may still be used ineffectively if activities are not planned or if the sensory experience is not monitored.

Sensory processing differs across children and across situations. Dunn et al. (2016) describe the importance of sensory factors in everyday functioning, while the sensory-profile approach can help organize information about a child's responses to sensory experiences. A profile is not a diagnosis and should not be used in isolation. It should be considered alongside observation, functional assessment, family information and the pupil's own communication

and preferences. The resulting information can guide the selection of activities and help staff identify environmental conditions that facilitate or hinder participation.

1.*2.2. Professional, ethical and organizational safeguards*

Purposeful use requires staff who can recognize individual sensory responses, select appropriate activities, monitor signs of discomfort or overload, and connect activities with a functional goal. Knowledge of equipment alone is not equivalent to specialized competence in sensory assessment or intervention. Ayres Sensory Integration® is also more specific than general sensory stimulation or use of a sensory room; it involves defined assessment and intervention principles and appropriate professional preparation (Lane et al., 2019; Schoen et al., 2019).

A written protocol can support consistency and safety. It should specify the purpose of the room, referral and assessment procedures, who may supervise its use, session planning, duration and frequency, safety checks, documentation, review of outcomes, and procedures for stopping an activity if a child shows distress. It should also explain how the room complements classroom participation and how families are informed and involved. Informed parental consent should be addressed through school policy and applicable legal and ethical requirements, with age-appropriate information and respect for the pupil's assent and refusal wherever possible (Rashikj-Canevska, 2022).

1.2.3 Organization and methods of using the school sensory room

Use of the sensory room can be planned in advance and integrated into the student's schedule, or organized more flexibly in response to needs arising during the school day. Scheduled visits allow for the advance determination of usage time, objectives, activities, and the staff member who will work with the student. Flexibility, on the other hand, enables support to be tailored to the student's immediate needs. However, flexible use should not imply an absence of criteria and goals; rather, it offers the opportunity to adapt the established support approach to the specific situation and the student's reactions.

Work organization also encompasses the frequency and duration of visits. These aspects should not be determined uniformly for all students but rather based on individual needs, established goals, and reactions during activities. Existing literature reveals significant variations in the duration, frequency, and implementation methods of activities in multisensory environments; consequently, no single schedule can be defined as suitable for all users (Testerink et al., 2023).

2. Methodology of the research

The subject of this research is the prevalence, organization, and use of sensory rooms in primary schools within the city of Skopje. The study aims to examine the current situation in school practice—specifically, to determine the presence of sensory rooms and the ways in which they are organized and utilized in working with students. The research seeks to provide insight into the functioning of sensory rooms in schools by examining their equipment, the characteristics of the students who use them, the types of activities conducted, and the organization of their use.

In defining the research objectives, we proceeded from the main premise that sensory rooms are present in the majority of the primary schools included in the study and are utilized as part of the support provided to students with special educational needs, yet without a clearly established protocol for their proper use.

The study employs the descriptive method to ensure an accurate and reliable presentation and analysis of the data. This method enables an assessment of the current situation regarding equipment, usage practices, work organization, the professional staff involved, and other aspects related to the functioning of sensory rooms.
Document analysis and surveys were used as the primary research techniques. Data collection was carried out using a questionnaire specifically designed for this study and addressed to staff at the primary schools included in the research. To interpret the results, the study applies a focused narrative synthesis of the research findings and the conceptual literature cited in the thesis. The document analysis comprises a review of institutional documentation—such as official protocols, regulations, guidelines, educational policies, consent forms, operational manuals, professional training materials, and sensory profiles—as well as a review of professional and scientific literature relevant to the research topic. This approach facilitates the systematic review, classification, and interpretation of documents and online content concerning the organization and implementation of sensory rooms in schools. Through descriptive analysis, we identified the existing documents, protocols, and procedures and the topics they cover, while through critical content analysis, we assessed whether the documents provide clear guidelines for the safe, individualized, and professionally justified use of sensory rooms.
Although we gained a clear picture of the situation on the ground, further research is still needed because the study's small, geographically restricted sample limits generalisation, findings describe the ten participating schools and should not be interpreted as representative estimates for every primary school in North Macedonia.

3. Results

This section presents, analyzes, and interprets the results obtained from the conducted research. The data were processed using descriptive statistics and are presented via absolute frequencies (n) and relative frequencies (%), accompanied by appropriate tabular and graphical displays.
Regarding the availability of sensory rooms, seven of the ten schools included in the study (70.0%) reported having a sensory room, while three schools (30.0%) did not. This finding demonstrates that sensory rooms were present in a majority of the participating schools, but access was not universal even within this small sample. More importantly, the presence of a room does not establish that it is organised around individual assessment, planned goals or consistent procedures.
Despite the necessity of creating a sensory profile for each user when utilizing sensory rooms, the study found that 57.1% of respondents from schools with a sensory room reported that a previously developed sensory profile was not used. This is a significant practice concern because children's sensory responses and needs can differ considerably, including among children with similar developmental profiles. Without an individual assessment process, staff may select activities according to general assumptions, available equipment or immediate behaviour rather than documented needs. The result does not mean that no informal observation occurs; it indicates that a previously developed sensory profile was not consistently applied.
Special educators and rehabilitators were the most frequently reported professionals involved in sensory-room work (71.4%). Among respondents from schools with a room, 57.1% reported that staff had received training related to sensory integration, while 14.3% reported partial preparation and 28.6% reported no such training. At the same time, 57.1% considered additional training necessary. These results suggest variation in staff preparation and show that prior training does not necessarily remove the need for continuing professional development (Table 1).

Table 1. Staff preparation and professional training

Indicator	Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Staff training in sensory integration	Yes	4	57.1
	Partially	1	14.3
	No	2	28.6
Additional training needed	Yes	4	57.1
Special educators and rehabilitators involved	Reported involvement	5	71.4

When analyzing information related to scheduling, documentation and the use of rooms, reported practices were not fully uniform. A fixed schedule for room use was reported by 28.6% of respondents, a partial schedule by 42.9%, and no schedule by 28.6%. Documentation of every visit was reported by 71.4%, while other respondents described partial or absent recording (Table 2). Documentation regarding a specific student's use of a sensory room is based solely on recording attendance, rather than providing an accurate account of the activities undertaken and their purpose. The study also found that individual and combined forms of work were equally represented and that sensory rooms were used during regular teaching and across different subjects. These findings point to variation in how access is organised and how the purpose and outcome of visits are recorded.

Relaxation was among the most common activities reported. This can be appropriate when relaxation is an identified goal, but it makes it important to clarify the intended function of each room. The study did not directly establish that schools systematically used sensory rooms as calming rooms or that staff explicitly treated the two concepts as equivalent. Further research should ask schools to define the purpose of their spaces and document the reasons pupils are referred.

Table 2. Scheduling and documentation of sensory-room use

Indicator	Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Fixed schedule	Yes	2	28.6
	Partially	3	42.9
	No	2	28.6
Documentation of every visit	Yes	5	71.4

Knowing that the involvement of parents in the development of the Individualized Educational Program (IEP), as well as in the planning and implementation of additional treatments and resources, is of immense importance for a successful outcome and better results, regarding the question of parental involvement and practical barriers, five of the examinees (71.4%) reported that parents were regularly involved, one (14.3%) reported occasional involvement, and one (14.3%) reported that parents were never involved. Thus, family involvement was reported as regular in most participating schools with sensory rooms, but practice was not consistent across all schools, and also there was not a specific written informed-consent form signed by parents before a pupil used the room.

When asked about the challenges they face and their biggest problems, the respondents pointed out that the most frequently practical challenge they faced was insufficient equipment (57.1%), followed by lack of time (42.9%). Lack of training and financial constraints were each reported by 28.6%, and insufficient institutional support by 14.3% (Table 3). These results suggest that implementation is affected by material and organisational constraints as well as by questions of assessment and staff competence.

Table 3. Practical and organisational barriers

Reported barrier	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Insufficient equipment	4	57.1
Lack of time	3	42.9
Lack of staff training	2	28.6
Financial constraints	2	28.6
Insufficient institutional support	1	14.3

4. Discussion

The findings support the central argument that sensory rooms should not be evaluated simply by counting rooms or cataloguing equipment. In the participating schools, availability was relatively common, but the use of sensory profiles, staff preparation, scheduling and documentation varied. This difference between physical availability and procedural readiness is consistent with Stephenson and Carter (2011), who examined multisensory environments in two special schools and found that teachers often expected broad, automatic benefits from sensory rooms, while there was less evidence of focused programming, teaching and monitoring intended to achieve functional outcomes. Similarly, Nickels (2023), in the doctoral dissertation A Wall for Wellness: Analyzing Sensory Room Usage, examined how sensory rooms are used and how their implementation can be understood and evaluated. Together, these sources support the argument that a room becomes a purposeful resource through assessment, planning, skilled facilitation and review, rather than through equipment alone. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study describe reported school practices and do not, by themselves, establish whether the rooms improved pupils' outcomes.

The finding that 57.1% of respondents did not use a previously developed sensory profile is particularly important. A sensory environment can contain stimulating or calming elements, but the same stimulus may be helpful for one child and uncomfortable or dysregulating for another. Williams et al. (2024), in their scoping review of sensory-adaptive environments for autistic children, identified limitations in the evidence base and highlighted the need for further research into how these environments are used and individualised. Unwin et al. (2024) similarly emphasised the importance of comprehensive assessment and consideration of individual pupils' needs and contexts when selecting sensory supports. The study presented by Abu Khairin and Al-Taiti (as reported by IRIS Sensory, 2023) also examined sensory environments in ten Palestinian Ministry of Education schools and recommended both appropriate use of sensory environments and further research. The authors reported potential benefits for academic achievement and social interaction; however, the publicly available summary provides limited information about the outcome measures and statistical results, so these claims should be interpreted cautiously. Individualised planning should therefore begin with a functional question: what participation-related need is the school trying to address? The plan should identify a baseline, a specific goal, selected activities and

observable indicators that can be reviewed. A sensory profile can contribute to this process but should be combined with observation and information from the pupil, family and school team. The present finding identifies a potential gap in assessment practices; it does not establish that pupils in schools not using a formal sensory profile necessarily received ineffective support.

The reported need for additional training reinforces the importance of distinguishing general familiarity with a room from competence in planning and monitoring sensory activities. Stephenson and Carter (2011) found that school staff had limited familiarity with the research literature on multisensory environments and often relied on information from the internet and commercial providers when forming beliefs about their benefits. Their observations also indicated limited evidence of structured programming and monitoring. These findings are particularly relevant to the present study because variation in staff preparation may affect whether sensory activities are implemented consistently and linked to meaningful goals. Unwin et al. (2021) also explored practitioners' experiences of multisensory environments and highlighted the importance of considering the individual child and the practitioner's role. Staff should understand how to adapt the intensity and duration of activities, recognise signs of distress or overload, provide choice, and stop or modify an activity when necessary. Training should also clarify that use of a sensory room is not automatically equivalent to a formal sensory-integration intervention. Bodison and Parham (2018), in their systematic review of sensory techniques and environmental modifications, examined specific interventions rather than treating all sensory-based approaches as interchangeable. Schools should identify which professionals are responsible for assessment, implementation, supervision and review, while ensuring that practice remains collaborative and within each professional's competence.

Variation in schedules and documentation makes it difficult to compare practice between schools or determine whether a room is contributing to pupils' participation. Stephenson and Carter (2011) called for schools and education authorities to monitor and evaluate multisensory environments more actively because evidence of educational benefits was limited. Nickels (2023) likewise provides a practice-focused contribution to understanding sensory-room usage and implementation through a doctoral investigation devoted to how these spaces are used. In a related but different setting, Watchorn et al. (2025, published in the 2026 journal issue) explored sensory rooms in Australian public buildings through an online survey of 57 participants and four semi-structured interviews. Participants reported benefits relating to sensory and emotional regulation and community participation, but they also identified challenges involving design, the social environment and the predictability of room features and equipment. These findings suggest that the presence of a room does not guarantee that it will be consistently accessible or useful. A record that only notes that a child visited the room is less informative than a record of why the visit occurred, what was offered, how the pupil responded, whether the planned goal was addressed and what follow-up is required. Documentation should be proportionate and protect confidentiality; its purpose is to support continuity and review rather than create paperwork without practical value. Although the present study identified variation in documentation practices, further research would be needed to determine whether these differences affect pupil outcomes.

The distinction between a sensory room and a calming room deserves explicit attention in school policy. The frequent reporting of relaxation activities is not, in itself, evidence of inappropriate use, since regulation may be a legitimate goal. However, without a clearly defined purpose and referral process, the room may be used interchangeably for sensory exploration, planned intervention, short breaks and responses to challenging situations. Stephenson and Carter (2011) found that teachers often expected wide-ranging benefits from multisensory environments, despite limited evidence of systematic programming and monitoring. This supports the need to define what each room is intended to achieve and how its use will be evaluated. Watchorn et al. (2025, published in the 2026 journal issue) also found

that sensory rooms in public buildings could support regulation and participation, while highlighting challenges in design and management. Although their research concerned public buildings rather than schools, it demonstrates the importance of considering the user's needs and the practical conditions under which a room is accessed. A written school policy should explain the different purposes of the room, avoid using it as punishment or exclusion, and ensure that leaving the classroom does not become a substitute for making the classroom accessible and supportive. Research by Brede et al. (2017) on autistic students' experiences of school exclusion and reintegration provides broader context for the importance of inclusive school practices, although it did not specifically evaluate sensory-room policies.

Family involvement was reported as regular by most respondents, which is a positive sign, but the study did not investigate consent forms or the information provided to parents in detail. It would therefore be inaccurate to conclude from these data that parental consent is generally absent in North Macedonia. Nevertheless, schools should establish a transparent process that explains the purpose of the room, expected activities, possible discomforts, safety measures, how progress will be reviewed and how parents can raise concerns. Watchorn et al. (2025, published in the 2026 journal issue) included autistic people, people with disabilities, carers and supporters among their participants, providing a useful example of why sensory-room design and management should consider the experiences of intended users and those supporting them. Unwin et al. (2024) also emphasised the importance of considering the individual pupil's family and school context when selecting sensory supports. Written informed consent should be addressed explicitly in institutional procedures in accordance with applicable legal and ethical requirements, alongside meaningful participation and the child's assent whenever appropriate. Because consent procedures were not directly examined in the present study, this recommendation should be understood as an implication for policy and future investigation rather than a conclusion about current practice in North Macedonia.

Finally, the study's geographic and sample limitations matter. Ten respondents from ten schools in Skopje provide an initial picture of reported practice, not a national prevalence estimate. The small sample also means that the findings should be interpreted as descriptive rather than representative of all schools in North Macedonia. Stephenson and Carter (2011), whose qualitative research involved five teachers from two special schools, demonstrate the value of detailed investigation into practice while also illustrating why findings from small samples should not be generalised indiscriminately. The Palestinian study reported by IRIS Sensory (2023) similarly involved ten schools and ten respondents, but its context and reported measures differ from those of the present research; therefore, the similarity in sample size does not establish that the findings are directly comparable. Future research should directly examine written protocols, consent procedures, distinctions between room types, assessment tools, professional qualifications, pupil experience and outcomes. Direct observation and review of anonymised documentation would complement self-reported questionnaire responses. Larger studies covering different regions of North Macedonia would help establish how widespread the reported practices are, while longitudinal or comparative research could investigate whether individualised planning, staff training and systematic evaluation are associated with improved participation and wellbeing. Overall, the findings suggest that the central question is not simply whether schools have sensory rooms, but whether these rooms are used purposefully, responsibly and in ways that meet pupils' identified needs.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that sensory rooms in schools should not be considered purposeful resources solely because they are available or equipped with sensory materials, but rather according to how effectively they are planned, implemented and evaluated in relation to pupils' individual needs. Although sensory rooms may support self-regulation, wellbeing and participation, their potential benefits depend on individualised assessment, adequate staff training, clearly defined objectives and systematic documentation. The variation identified in sensory profiles, staff preparation, scheduling and monitoring suggests a need for more consistent procedures and evidence-informed practices in the participating schools. Therefore, sensory rooms should be regarded as potentially valuable educational resources whose effectiveness must be demonstrated through purposeful use and measurable outcomes, rather than as trendy accessories.

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