AbSPORU
Alberta SPOR SUPPORT Unit



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Project Title:
Making Space: Exploring Innovative Approaches to Inclusion to Foster the Wellbeing of Autistic Students in Mainstream Schools

ABOUT SANTWANA

Santwana Carstensen-Sinha is an Occupational Therapist (OT) who has worked with and advocated for Autistic children and their families in schools and community settings over many years. She is also the parent of an Autistic son (now an adult). Her lived experiences led her to pursue graduate studies in the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine (University of Alberta) where she is researching the experiences of Autistic children within inclusive school settings. Her PhD project builds on collaborative relationships with the Autistic community and local school districts to explore models that support experiences of belonging for Autistic children at school.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Although Autistic children are included in mainstream classrooms, they often experience stress and social exclusion at school. This has a negative impact on their health, wellbeing and learning. One school in Alberta is trying a new approach to inclusion by creating a program called SPACE (Sensory, Play, Autonomy, Communication, Environment). The SPACE program includes part-time teacher support as well as a dedicated classroom that is designed with the needs of and preferences of the Autistic students. Although they are assigned to mainstream classes, Autistic students can choose to

access the SPACE program as they need, throughout the school day, as part of their inclusive school program. The SPACE program is intended to provide a place for Autistic students to gather in a community where their unique ways of being are celebrated and supported.

This study is exploring the experiences of Autistic students who participate in an inclusive classroom placement that includes the SPACE program. This question will be explored through frequent school observations and interviews/focus groups with staff and parents over the course of a school year. Since the Autistic students may be minimally/non-speaking, innovative arts-based methods are being explored to facilitate their active participation and understand their perspectives.

In order to better understand their school experience, wearables that can track Autistic students' body signals are being explored. As Autistic students move between their mainstream classrooms and the SPACE program, observations can be paired with data from wearables to deepen our understanding of their school experience.

This study will allow us to learn about this innovative approach to inclusion, while also pioneering new ways to include non-speaking Autistic students as active participants in research.