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Outcomes of Equity-Based Multi-Tiered System of Support and Instructional Decision-Making for Autistic Students

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Abstract: For many autistic students, to experience more successful outcomes, school processes must be restructured and given necessary resources. The probability of success can be increased by implementing a school system that integrates research-based academic and behavioral instructional support, along with collaborative data-informed decision-making routines. This paper presents an example of a transformational framework and technical assistance that were provided to six schools to reshape and increase the schools' capacity to implement and sustain an equity-based multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) with intensified instructional decision making. Statistical analyses were used to examine the outcomes of autistic students ($n = 23$) who participated in a state assessment over three consecutive years in the same state. The results demonstrated an increase in academic scores, and many students transitioned to less-restrictive educational environments.

Keywords: MTSS; inclusion; equity-based MTSS; system change



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1. Introduction

1.1. A Schoolwide Approach to Providing Instruction and Support to Autistic Students: Challenges and Considerations

Schools face significant obstacles in providing appropriate and effective education to all students, including those with significant disadvantages and disabilities. This challenge can be even more acute for autistic students, who have unique blends of strengths and difficulties. As a group defined by notable differences between verbal and nonverbal functioning, they possess a wide range of intellectual and cognitive abilities [1]. No definitive learning profile exists for a student classified as having autism, though many struggle to perform at their full cognitive potential and face academic challenges [2–4]. Autistic students may also grapple with hyperactivity, attention difficulties, deficits in executive functioning, social communication challenges, self-injurious or repetitive behaviors, and heightened emotional sensitivity. In a research study, autistic students were reported as having the most difficulty with executive functioning, social–emotional management, and fine motor skills, while academic and sensory issues also affected their school experience [5]. Furthermore, autistic students are more likely to experience bullying compared to non-autistic students or those with other identified needs [6,7].

Studies have shown that local schools often do not provide the necessary support for autistic students to actively participate and achieve success in local schools. This is evident in the high rates of exclusion among these students [8]. Typically, autistic students are more likely to receive suspensions, struggle with school avoidance, underachieve, and/or drop out of school entirely [9–11]. Furthermore, teachers often feel unprepared, stressed, and overwhelmed when it comes to meeting the needs of autistic students in their classrooms [12,13].

The aforementioned challenges underscore the need to engage various partners, including general and specialized educators, families, and other service providers, in the

education of autistic students. These partners can bring together their expertise and resources through a schoolwide integrated support system. When structured environments and instructional modifications are consistently provided not only in classrooms but also in other areas of the school, autistic students are more likely to benefit. It is crucial for all adults in a school to have a fundamental understanding of the characteristics, strengths, and needs of autistic students, as well as a system in place to collaborate with experts and families in providing inclusive education. Furthermore, fostering a positive culture within the school community is essential, as it demonstrates the value that all educators and other critical partners place on the inclusion of autistic students and their belief in these students' potential to succeed with proper support.

1.2. Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) for Students with Disabilities

A multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is a widely recognized schoolwide framework that aims to efficiently integrate essential resources and support to meet the diverse needs of all students through adaptable structures and interventions in schools [14–17]. The implementation of an MTSS involves a structured approach that leverages differentiated instruction and support, utilizing evidence-based practices and assessments. These assessments, such as screening and progress monitoring, allow for data-informed decision-making to tailor instructional strategies and support to students who are likely to benefit from something more or different than other students [18,19].

Implementing an MTSS benefits all students, including those with disabilities at all levels. For students who have significant support needs (SSNs), including those who are evaluated using alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AASs), MTSS address their individual educational needs through instructional decisions aligned with general education curriculum and delivered within general education settings, rather than relying solely on placement decisions that exclude them from the general education environment [15,20]. A significant body of research has indicated that students with disabilities may benefit from increased time spent in general education classrooms with same-aged peers in various areas, including academic learning, positive social behaviors, and communication strategies [21].

Studies on MTSS further show benefits for students with SSNs, specifically in terms of behavioral challenges, which are one of the most often mentioned reasons for excluding them from general education environments. These benefits may include, but are not limited to, a decrease in disruptive behavior, an increase in social interaction, and an improvement in time spent on tasks [22]. Thus, when an MTSS supports improved behavior, their chances of being included in general education settings and curriculum with their peers improve as well [21,23,24].

1.3. Equity-Based MTSS

Equity-based multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is a model that activates and enhances the implementation of the tiered instructional system with four additional domains (i.e., administrative leadership, integrated educational framework, family and community engagement, and inclusive policy structure and practice) [15,25,26].

Equity-based MTSS is a comprehensive framework designed to supplement existing MTSS and promote more positive outcomes for students, regardless of their individual needs. By implementing this framework with fidelity, students are no longer disaggregated into separate programs based on their categories (e.g., special education, gifted programs, English language education), ensuring the equitable distribution of services and support to address students' varied and intersecting educational requirements. The framework fosters a positive school culture where students' voices, participation, and learning opportunities are valued. Collaboration between general and special education staff, data-informed decision-making, and strong administrative leadership are essential components of this framework in creating an inclusive school culture. Ultimately, all members of a school community will feel a sense of belonging within a school climate that is cultivated by this culture [14,25,27].

The administrative leadership domain within equity-based MTSS is paramount for establishing a school culture and climate conducive to implementing inclusive pedagogies and practices [28–30]. Such leadership has been described as an ethical approach to leadership [31] based on principles of care, justice, and critique [32]. These leaders foster a sense of community by actively listening to the perspectives of students and families and promote collaboration throughout the school community [31]. The practice of distributed leadership in particular has been demonstrated to have a beneficial effect on teacher leadership in inclusive settings [33]. This approach promotes a sense of collective responsibility and creates a more democratic environment for teachers to develop and exercise their leadership skills. As a result, teachers are more likely to lead the implementation of inclusive practices, supported by their principals' trust [34]. Without empowered teacher leadership, the connection between distributed leadership and the implementation of inclusive instructional strategies is not effectively established [33,35]. Furthermore, the administrative leadership domain not only involves providing support for educators but also focuses on building their capacity. By developing their skills and knowledge, educators are motivated to change their teaching behaviors [36]. Although principals play a crucial role in supporting and empowering educators, it is not enough to fully improve their inclusive teaching practices. Therefore, it is essential that educators take the initiative to proactively enhance their professional knowledge, skills, and capacities in implementing inclusive pedagogy. For this, school leadership needs to provide a systematic approach to support this goal [25–27].

The integrated educational framework and family and community engagement domains play crucial roles in promoting school connectedness for students with disabilities. These two domains are key components that are important for students with disabilities to feel that they belong and are valued in the school community. The practices dedicated to the integrated educational framework domain in equity-based MTSS focus on improving the organizational layout of schools and promoting a school environment that supports the educational needs of all students [14,25–27]. This is achieved by breaking down structural barriers and ensuring an equitable school culture and climate for the benefit of the students. The family and community engagement domain focuses on the participation of families and community members in educational decision making. This domain emphasizes collaboration and communication among diverse critical perspectives to establish goals, assess progress and results, and foster effective partnerships with community organizations, which are essential to sustaining MTSS and facilitating students' academic and social success. Parents and families also play a vital role in promoting the mental health and well-being of their children and in promoting a sense of school connectedness [37,38]. Numerous studies have established that school connectedness is a significant indicator of both present and future mental health, with positive connections being linked to resilience and overall well-being while negative connections are associated with symptoms of mental illness [39,40]. Scholars studying the relationship between young people and school often refer to concepts like school climate [41,42] and inclusive school culture [43]. Extensive research has shown that school connectedness during the adolescent stage is strongly linked to positive outcomes, such as academic achievement, smooth high school transitions, positive social behaviors, good mental health, high self-esteem, optimism, life satisfaction, and hope [44–47]. An equity-based MTSS is a holistic approach that values the strengths of students and their families, with a focus on establishing supportive systems to cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture.

Lastly, equity-based MTSS emphasizes the importance of the inclusive policy structure and practice domain as it recognizes that successful and lasting MTSS implementation in schools requires an alignment between district policies and school practices. In order to drive a successful and lasting improvement in schools, a strong and collaborative partnership between individual schools and their districts is necessary [48]. This partnership must be supported by a policy framework that fully aligns at all levels (school, district, state, and federal) to promote inclusive reform efforts and remove any obstacles to their effective implementation [49].

1.4. Intensified Support in Equity-Based MTSS

A key element of equity-based MTSS is the involvement of the entire school in implementing a proactive and adaptable strategy to assist students with varying needs. Recognizing that effective teaching methods are the basis of successful support, this collaborative approach allows the school to provide the best possible resources and services for the full spectrum of learner variability. Recent research has documented the effectiveness of multi-tiered approaches in shaping supportive school environments and programs for autistic students, in particular [50,51].

An equity-based MTSS includes a comprehensive approach to building and coordinating intensified support and collaborative efforts within grade-level team activities. The intensified support level of equity-based MTSS emphasizes collaboration among teachers, specialized educators, families, and students; the explicit use of data to identify needed support; and seeing students as active participants in their own learning, rather than passive recipients [52]. This system of support is designed to apply teaching practices and a curriculum that engages students in every stage of the learning process [20]. To benefit from this system, teachers must take a more inclusive approach to their teaching, having a comprehensive understanding of how their students learn best in order to ultimately improve learning outcomes. Some ways to achieve this are by utilizing and expanding upon students' strengths and interests, granting them autonomy and ownership, creating a sense of security from challenges, and establishing an ongoing monitoring and adjustment routine.

The implementation of a data routine is an integral part of the intensified support level in equity-based MTSS. The grade-level team, along with invited professionals and families/students, conducts a thorough assessment of each student's strengths and areas for improvement. This is performed by examining various data sources and collaborating to determine the best course of action to enhance both the universal and additional support levels. Ideas are shared and discussed to further enhance instruction for both universal and additional support. After identifying the intensification activities, the team delegates tasks to facilitate the activities and establishes a clear goal and strategy to track its progress [53].

Although there is promising potential for MTSS (including equity-based MTSS) to benefit students with support needs, including those with autism, few studies have extensively reported the impact of this approach on their outcomes. This study aimed to investigate the impact of equity-based MTSS on academic outcomes and the inclusive education environment for autistic students. We hypothesized that the adoption of an equity-based MTSS would lead to improvements in both the state summative assessment scores and the participation of autistic students in general education settings. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent do autistic students show an improvement in their scores on English Language, Arts, and Mathematics summative assessments (e.g., SBAC) after the implementation of an equity-based MTSS?
- To what extent do autistic students move to a less-restrictive educational environment in a school following the implementation of an equity-based MTSS?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The analysis examined data from 23 students who were identified as having autism in any of the three school years: 2014–2015, 2015–2016, and 2016–2017. These students took regular state assessments over these three consecutive years while enrolled at the same school, where their respective schools implemented an equity-based MTSS in State A, located in the western region of the United States. Spanning across six different elementary schools and three separate school districts, the students' academic progress was tracked, regardless of any changes to their primary disability status after the 2014–15 school year.

The purposeful selection of districts and schools was driven by the goal of implementing an equity-based MTSS framework for inclusive education. This initiative was part

of the Office of Special Education Program's (OSEP's) funding for the National Technical Assistance Center for Inclusive Education. Several states applied for the project and underwent a self-assessment to gauge their readiness. The Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center provided a questionnaire for each state to evaluate their current demographic, organizational, and educational performance context and identify their specific needs. After the center selected five states from the self-assessment results and conducted interviews, each state then nominated school districts to participate. In these districts, schools were nominated to take part in the project. Out of the five states, only two consistently administered the same state summative assessments for at least three years. Of those two, State A was the only one with a meaningful number of autistic students ($n = 23$) to be included in the analysis. In the state, sixteen schools across four school districts (four schools per district) implemented an equity-based MTSS. Among these schools, only six of the elementary schools had autistic students who participated in the state assessment over the course of three school years.

Out of the 23 elementary school students who had autism, eleven were male and twelve were female. The racial backgrounds of the students included twenty-one Latinx, one Native American, and one Black. Approximately 90% were enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program, while around 70% were also English language learners.

2.2. Procedures

From the 2013–14 school year to the 2016–17 school year, the SWIFT Center provided differentiated, intensive technical assistance to schools in installing an equity-based and inclusive MTSS. This assistance was intended to improve student outcomes in a sustainable manner. Six main practices were used, including (a) design and visioning, (b) data snapshot reviews, (c) prioritizing and action planning, (d) resource mapping and matching, (e) teaming, and (f) coaching. Through these practices, schools developed a shared understanding of their goals for inclusive education, assessed their strengths and areas for improvement, and created action plans [54]. The schools established a collective understanding of their desired future in terms of inclusive education. Educators utilized student data and organizational measures (e.g., SWIFT Fidelity of Implementation Tool) to assess their strengths and identify areas for improvement. This informed their priorities for the immediate future and resulted in the creation of action plans. Educators also evaluated their available resources and reallocated them strategically to align with their planned actions.

Data routine activities were integrated into the training, consisting of a three-step methodology: organize, process, and take action on the data. Organizing data involves arranging them in a way that effectively addresses the specific questions that a school's team wants to answer, based on each tier level. The presentation of the data by educators is crucial, as visual aids can often convey information more clearly and efficiently. The data process is optimized when teams approach it with a curious and open mindset and actively engage in reflection. In this stage, school teams utilize a data-informed approach to progress from comprehending student needs to taking ownership and designing necessary learning opportunities. This phase involves identifying strengths and areas for improvement, homing in on a key focus area, generating innovative ideas, and choosing appropriate resources to assist students [53]. By implementing the data from routine activities, grade-level teams were equipped with the necessary training to enhance universal and additional instruction and support for students in need of extensive support, including autistic students.

School teams received coaching support and participated in professional learning institutes to gain knowledge and skills related to equity-based inclusion. The technical assistance providers also had regular meetings with school principals and district staff (e.g., administrators, coaches, and specialists) to exchange information and incorporate these practices into their regular leadership meetings.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Academic Outcomes

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) is an annual state assessment administered in State A. It provides scaled and proficiency scores for both English Language and Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. Developed in alignment with the common core state standards, the official psychometric report for SBAC, published in 2016, reinforces its technical soundness [55].

2.3.2. Least Restrictive Educational Environment

The students' placement data, which was collected for the purpose of evaluating the inclusive education status, was categorized according to the least restrictive environment (LRE) categories. The categories for least restrictive environment (LRE) placement were consistent with those defined by the U.S. Department of Education, designating high inclusion as more than 80% of time in general education classrooms, moderate inclusion as between 40% and 79% of time in general education classrooms, low inclusion as less than 40% of time in general education classrooms, and no inclusion as no time spent in general education classrooms.

2.3.3. Fidelity of Implementation

The SWIFT Fidelity of Implementation Tool (SWIFT-FIT) was designed to measure the extent to which schools are implementing an equity-based MTSS framework. A study on the technical adequacy of SWIFT-FIT found a high level of content validity (the average content validity index for school features ranged from 0.87 to 1.0), indicating the effectiveness of the assessment. In terms of construct validity, a comparison between partner schools and knowledge development sites showed significant differences in scores ($t = -2.32, p < 0.05$; $ES = 1.77$). The ease of use for assessors was evaluated in order to assess the usability of SWIFT-FIT. The resulting overall mean score was 3.1 out of 4 on a 4-point Likert scale [56].

2.4. Research Design and Analysis

A longitudinal study design was utilized to investigate the enhancement of academic achievement and the least restrictive educational environment for autistic students. To determine whether there was a significant improvement in academic scores over the course of three consecutive school years, a repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized. This statistical method was chosen to assess the data and determine if there were any statistically significant differences in scores between the 2014–15, 2015–16, and 2016–17 school years. The Bonferroni method was utilized to perform post hoc analyses and further explore the statistical significance between years.

Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the variation in the least restrictive educational environments over time. The percentages of autistic students in three categories (more than 80% of time, between 40% and 79% of time, and less than 40% of time in general education classrooms) were computed for each academic year and compared. In addition, the least restrictive educational environment categories for each individual student were monitored to assess any changes in their inclusive education status over the years. The fidelity of implementing an equity-based MTSS was also evaluated through the use of descriptive statistics. This involved calculating the mean score (i.e., averages of SWIFT-FIT features as subscales) for each domain and the overall mean score of SWIFT-FIT, as well as analyzing any changes in progress over time.

3. Results

3.1. Fidelity of Equity-Based MTSS Implementation

Each school showed improvement in the fidelity of equity-based MTSS implementation over the course of three school years. An analysis of descriptive statistics revealed a continuous increase in the average total mean score of SWIFT-FIT across all years. Specifically, in the 2014–15 school year, the average total mean score for the six elementary schools

was 59.06% ($SD = 12.70$), which increased to 63.32% ($SD = 7.60$) in the following year, and further improved to 67.16% ($SD = 7.33$) in the 2016–17 school year.

The MTSS domain, a crucial component of an equity-based MTSS, demonstrated consistent improvement over the course of all years. Beginning at a score of 39.20% ($SD = 6.46$) in the 2014–15 school year, it steadily increased to 44.14% ($SD = 9.18$) the following year and to 45.06% ($SD = 6.16$) in the 2016–17 school year. This indicates a trend of steady improvement in the fidelity of equity-based MTSS implementation. Figure 1 displays a graphical representation of the fidelity of an equity-based MTSS improvement.

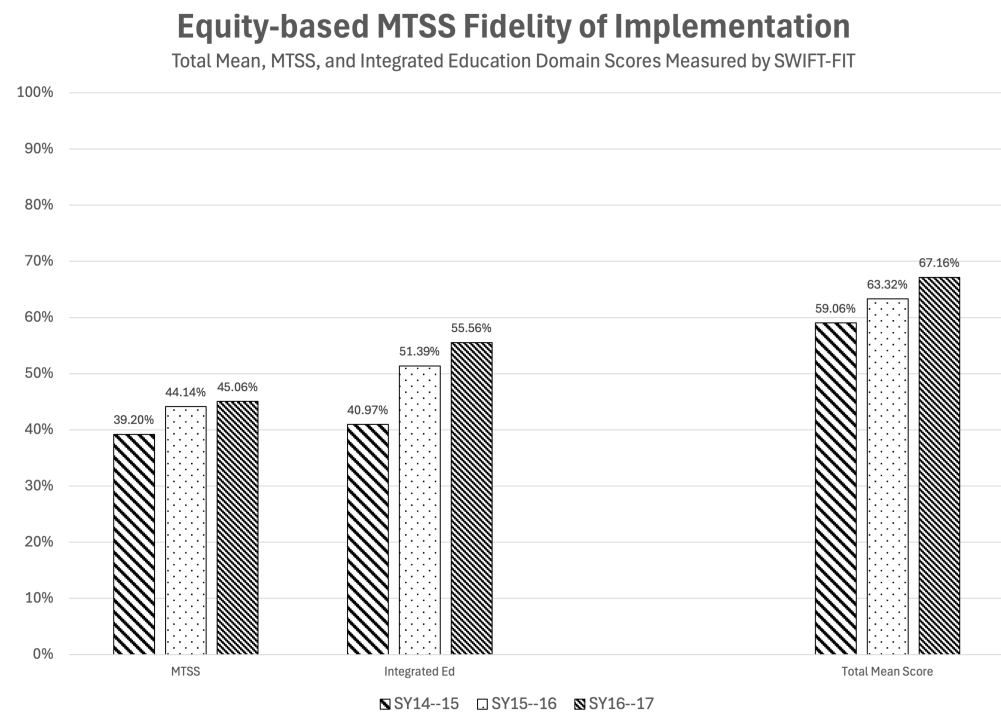


Figure 1. Fidelity of implementation improvement.

3.2. Academic Outcome Improvement

The results of the repeated measure ANOVA showed a statistically significant increase in scores on the ELA and Mathematics state summative assessments over a span of three years. The mean ELA score of the 23 autistic students was 2377.13 ($SD = 61.10$) in the 2014–15 school year, improved to 2424.00 ($SD = 73.50$) in the 2015–16 school year, and improved again to 2470.87 ($SD = 86.47$) in the 2016–17 school year. Table 1 shows the average score for each academic year, while Figure 2 illustrates the scoring trends over time.

Table 1. ELA and Mathematics mean score changes.

	Year	N	Mean	Standard Dev.	Variance
ELA	SY14–15	23	2377.13	61.10	3733.48
	SY15–16	23	2424.00	73.50	5402.36
	SY16–17	23	2470.87	86.47	7477.57
Math	SY14–15	23	2385.74	70.67	4994.47
	SY15–16	23	2429.74	62.88	3954.20
	SY16–17	23	2455.39	83.90	7039.07

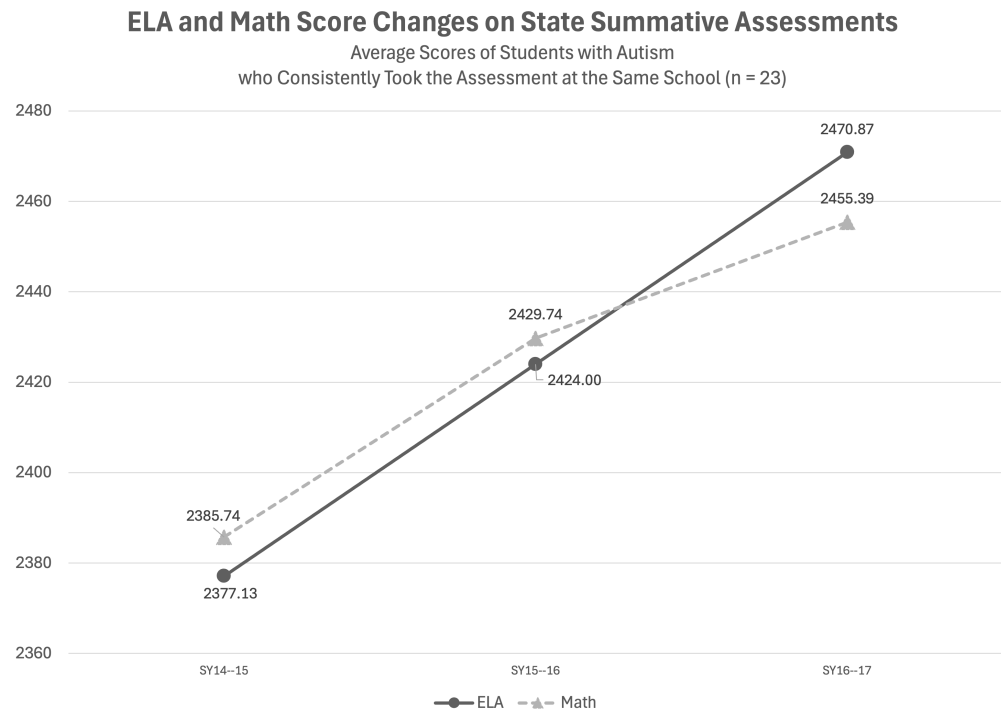


Figure 2. State assessment average score changes.

The results of the repeated measure ANOVA showed significant differences in the mean scores of the ELA score over time: $F(2, 44) = 30.03$ at $p < 0.0001$. The results of the Bonferroni post hoc analysis revealed significant score differences between the years 2014–15 ($M = 2377.12$; $SD = 61.10$) and 2015–16 ($M = 2424$; $SD = 73.50$) at $p < 0.01$, as well as between 2015–16 and 2016–17 ($M = 2470.87$; $SD = 86.47$) at $p < 0.01$. The effect size of the time variable (i.e., year) was large, as indicated by an Eta-squared value of 0.58, which exceeds the general large effect size standard of 0.14.

The mean scores for Mathematics showed a significant and continuous increase over the course of the three implementation years: $F(2, 44) = 21.82$ at $p < 0.0001$. The Bonferroni post hoc analysis further revealed that there was a statistically significant score increase between the 2014–15 school year ($M = 2385.74$; $SD = 70.67$) and the 2015–16 school year ($M = 2429.74$; $SD = 62.88$) at $p < 0.001$. However, there was no significant difference between the 2015–16 school year and the 2016–17 school year ($M = 2455.39$; $SD = 83.90$) at $p = 0.06$. The effect size of time (i.e., year) for Mathematics was 0.50, which surpassed the general large effect size standard of 0.14. Table 2 below summarizes the results of the repeated measures ANOVA.

Table 2. Repeated measure ANOVA results.

	Source	Partial SS	df	MS	F	Sig. (p-Value)
ELA	time (year)	101,050.78	2	50,525.39	30.03	0.00
	studentID	291,474.67	22	13,248.85	7.88	0.00
	Residual	74,020.55	44	1682.29		
Math	time (year)	57,081.86	2	28,540.93	21.82	0.00
	studentID	294,173.54	22	13,371.52	10.22	0.00
	Residual	57,556.81	44	1308.11		

3.3. Least Restrictive Educational Environment

The descriptive statistics show a remarkable transformation in the realm of inclusive education as an equity-based MTSS was implemented. Notably, a considerable proportion

of autistic students were able to successfully transition out of special education services. During the academic years of 2014–2015 and 2015–2016, out of the 21 autistic students, 20 of them successfully transitioned out of special education services. Although a total of two new students were identified as having autism in the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years—one student each year—none of the twenty returned to receive specialized services. The changes in the educational environment for autistic students during the three implementation school years are illustrated in Figure 3.

In addition, the analysis results also show an increase in the proportion of autistic students spending more than 80% of their time in a general education classroom over a span of three years. When students who identified as having autism were considered in each school year, the proportion of students who spent more than 80% of their time in general education increased from 61.90% (thirteen out of twenty-one) in the 2014–15 school year to 100.00% (two out of two, including one of the twenty-one students from the previous year and one newly identified student) in the next year (2015–16). This trend continued in the following year (2016–17), with a remaining proportion of 100.00% (three out of three, including two of the twenty-two students with autism from previous years and one newly identified student).

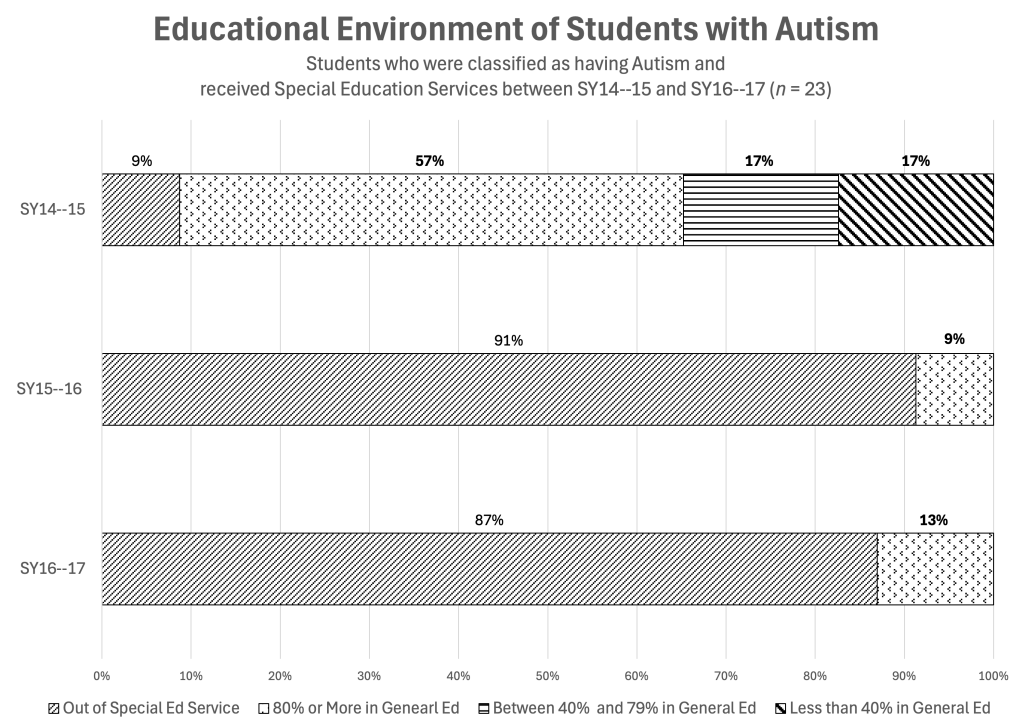


Figure 3. Transformation of the educational setting for autistic students.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the impact of an equity-based MTSS on longitudinal academic and inclusive education outcomes for autistic students. The results showed a significant increase in state summative assessment scores for ELA and Math over three years as the fidelity of equity-based MTSS implementation improved. Additionally, there was a significant increase in the proportion of autistic students in less-restrictive educational settings, with a large proportion transitioning out of special education services.

The present study's findings reinforce the positive impact of equity-based MTSS on students with disabilities [14,25,27]. The findings in the current study especially revealed that equity-based MTSS have great potential in addressing the learning requirements of autistic students. There are several unique characteristics of equity-based MTSS that may lead to successful outcomes in this study.

First, equity-based MTSS successfully integrated academic and behavioral MTSS. The subscale scores of the SWIFT-FIT revealed a positive trend, with the mean scores for the academic MTSS rising from 31.94% to 36.58% and the behavioral MTSS domain experiencing an improvement from 53.70% to 62.04%. For academic improvement, educators were trained to effectively address the learning needs of autistic students through an equity-based MTSS model. This was achieved through a collaborative effort between the grade-level team, experts, and families/students, who guided the reallocation of resources and personnel and modified universal and additional group instruction to meet the unique needs of these students at the grade-level team meeting. During whole class instruction, less-intensive, modified differentiated instruction was used to provide universal-level support, with implementation carried out by grade-level teachers and paraprofessionals. For more targeted interventions, educators modeled a strategy and guided the students until they could work independently, while certain support might require smaller group or individual instruction [53,57].

Second, equity-based MTSS utilizes the research-based practices that are already in place within the school district. This familiarity with the resources (rather than building new instructional practices) may provide a more sustainable and effective model of support for educators and students. By utilizing existing resources, equity-based MTSS was able to promote a sense of continuity and consistency. This framework approach integrated multiple research-based practices regarding emergent literacy skills, differentiated literacy support (e.g., peer-mediated learning, graphic organizers, visual support, adapted texts) [58–60], additional literacy support (e.g., self-regulated strategy development, reciprocal questioning, thinking maps, repeated reading) [61–63], and one-to-one instructional support (e.g., task analysis, direct instruction, copy–cover–compare) [64–66].

Third, team-based data routine activities were encouraged more in the inclusive education setting. In some cases, individual autistic students required more personalized and intensified support, for which qualified individuals were assigned to work with them. Instructional strategies were outlined to offer connected support at both the universal and additional levels for these students, and the progress was monitored during grade-level team meetings, allowing for further modifications as needed [53,67]. This finding is consistent with the systematic review conducted by Rutherford et al. [68], which revealed that when teachers engage in data-based decision-making, they can effectively support the diverse needs of students with SSNs and improve outcomes for both teachers and students. The current study advanced knowledge by showing improved outcomes for autistic students when they receive the necessary support to reach their full potential in a general education context.

Finally, the implementation of an equity-based MTSS resulted in a significant shift in the responsibility of providing educational support for autistic students. This was made possible through the adoption of a grade-level team approach, which fostered the provision of intensified support for autistic students. Throughout this process, grade-level teachers played a crucial role in consistently and routinely using data to make informed decisions, closely monitoring student progress, and modifying instructional support at each tier level. Additionally, interdisciplinary support was integrated, including academic, behavioral, and specialized instruction, in order to effectively promote inclusive education for autistic students.

The results indicating positive progress toward a more inclusive educational environment are encouraging. However, the findings regarding the transition out of special education services warrant careful deliberation. While an outcome of inclusive education practices is beneficial, a nuanced understanding of the transition mechanism necessitates considering the context of disability status and granular school system transformations. For instance, if autistic students were already functioning adequately and schools were merely denying them access to general education, the decision to place those students in a general education setting and foster an inclusive school culture would carry greater significance than implementing changes in instructional and support systems. Conversely,

if students require substantial accommodations and modifications, systemic overhauls in educational delivery and support structures would be essential to facilitating successful transitions. A thorough examination of the underlying factors is crucial to ensuring that the transition process is tailored to the specific needs of each student and the unique challenges faced by individual school systems. The current study was not designed to collect these detailed follow-up data; however, the findings revealed that even autistic students who were previously placed in general education settings for 40% to 79% ($n = 4$) and less than 40% ($n = 4$) of the time transitioned out of special education services. According to data from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), during the 2016–17 academic year, approximately 2.88% (62,465 out of 2,166,980) of students nationwide with disabilities and aged from 14 to 21 transferred from special education to regular education programs [69]. Unfortunately, OSEP does not provide data on students with disabilities exiting special education services below the age of 14, which is the age range of students in the current study, making direct comparisons challenging. However, it is evident that the proportion of students transitioning out of special education in this study (i.e., higher than 90%) was remarkably high compared to the national figures for the 14–21 age group. This study finding, coupled with the increased fidelity of implementation, provides valuable insight into the instructional and support system changes that enable inclusive education for this population. During the study period, the SWIFT-FIT's integrated educational framework domain consistently improved from 41.97% to 55.56%, suggesting a positive shift in attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities. This improvement may ultimately result in better teaching practices and lower levels of emotional exhaustion [70], as facilitated by measures such as non-categorical service delivery, an increased responsibility of general educators for all students, and increased opportunities for all students to engage in school activities. The academic and behavioral integrated MTSS as well as the implementation of strong universal-level support such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction, have the potential to create a comprehensive framework that enables educators to enhance their teaching within an inclusive classroom setting [71].

The present study's findings have potential implications for schools and districts that struggle with academic and social/behavioral issues among marginalized, low-performing students, including those with disabilities and autism. By examining the structure of the equity-based MTSS framework and the efforts to provide intensified support, these findings can serve as a crucial starting point for district-level administrators and policymakers in building an inclusive education system. By implementing an equity-based MTSS framework and providing intensified support, schools and districts can establish a more inclusive environment where all students have access to high-quality education and support systems. This, in turn, can lead to improved academic and social outcomes for marginalized students, ultimately contributing to the closing of the achievement gap and promoting equity in education. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge the efforts of implementing an equity-based MTSS in shifting the school culture, where families and students are actively involved in instructional decisions. Data routine activities for intensified support, in particular, actively included families and students in the procedure and incorporated students' interests and strengths to intensify current instruction and support. This included utilizing the family's support and providing home instruction and activities. What is perhaps more interesting is that these findings can pave the way for future research and serve as a guide for the organization of evidence-based practices in addressing the needs of marginalized students in the education system. As such, the implications of this study reach far beyond schools and districts, but extend to the broader field of education and its ongoing efforts towards promoting equity and inclusion.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

There are several important points that must be considered to appropriately interpret and apply the results of the current study. The statistical analyses were limited to schools in three districts within one state that voluntarily implemented the equity-based MTSS

framework, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. To make stronger claims about the effectiveness of equity-based MTSS, a future study with a more controlled experimental design, such as a randomized controlled trial or quasi-experiment with a matched control group, would be beneficial. The small number of schools for analysis was a limitation, and the use of inconsistent academic assessment tools by different states posed a barrier to analyzing outcome data from all schools involved in the project. This could be addressed in a future study. Additionally, it is important to note that the current study did not collect or analyze data for autistic students who took alternate assessments, as they may be considered to have significant cognitive disabilities. This decision was made due to the small number of students in this category, which could potentially lead to the disclosure of personally identifiable information. Future research endeavors should consider including that population, contingent upon obtaining proper parental consent and employing appropriate analytical approaches to accommodate small sample sizes.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine if a whole-school equity-based approach known as MTSS can change the educational environment of autistic students to be more inclusive and improve their academic outcomes. The findings in the present study confirm that implementing an equity-focused MTSS that encompasses all students can enhance academic outcomes and create an inclusive educational environment for autistic students. The process of an inclusive school transformation aims to cultivate an inclusive and supportive atmosphere for all students, particularly those with disabilities, including autism. This is achieved by fostering a cohesive and positive school culture in which every staff member takes responsibility for the academic and social well-being of these students. Through effective collaboration, the needs of these students are identified and addressed, ensuring their overall success in the school community. This equity-based approach promotes a school culture that has the potential to benefit marginalized students, such as those with disabilities, from low economic backgrounds, or who are non-native English speakers, by providing them with equal opportunities to access the general education curriculum in an inclusive educational setting.

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