Title: Provision of Education Services and Supports for Diploma-Track High School Students on the Autism Spectrum

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Introduction: Individuals on the autism spectrum who have average or above intellectual ability do not achieve adult outcomes commensurate with their potential. Many struggle to complete post-secondary education or secure employment that is aligned with their capabilities (Roux, Shattuck, Rast, Rava, & Anderson, 2015). Despite their intellectual abilities, these students often qualify for special education services in high school based on their need for social-communication, executive functioning, behavioral, or other academic supports. Providing special education services and supports to students on the autism spectrum who are academically capable poses challenges as inclusion in general education classes and academic demands may leave little time for additional supports and services to prepare this population for life after school. Current research indicates that the needs of students on the autism spectrum are not being met, which is attributed to limited school resources and inconsistent service delivery. The most common services or accommodations are the presence of a teacher’s aide or personal assistant, speech-language therapy, and psychological or mental health services or counseling (Kucharczyk et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2018). However, none of the existing research focuses specifically on the unique needs of high school students on the autism spectrum who plan to graduate with a regular high school diploma. This study aimed to describe the current status of service provision to this population through a state-wide online survey of high school personnel who provide services to these students.

Method: Data were collected from 107 Massachusetts school personnel such as special education teachers, administrators, or transition coordinators. The survey content was guided by qualitative reports from different school personnel who worked directly with transition-age diploma track students on the autism spectrum. Key topics drawn from focus groups, such as lists of common supports and services and relevance of transition planning document, informed the creation of the survey. A literature review of best practices, common supports, and experiences of youth on the autism spectrum during the transition period also informed survey development. The final survey was disseminated through Qualtrics software. Potential participants were identified primarily through online searches of special education staff within all Massachusetts school districts and sent an email with a link to the online survey. The survey included: consent/inclusion criteria, descriptions of the personnel, district, and diploma-track students on the autism spectrum, and information about supports, services, and transition planning.

Results: School personnel reported that most diploma-track students on the autism spectrum in their school or district had an individualized education program. Most of these students spent the majority of their time in general education settings, while one-quarter spent less than half of their time in general education settings. About half of school personnel reported that their school or school district had an articulated approach to providing services for diploma-track students on the autism spectrum. Schools were most likely to regularly provide services to address organizational skills and study skills, and social skills interventions or supports. Disability disclosure or advocacy, self-care, and mental health symptom management frequently were not addressed. Special education teachers, general education teachers, and school counselors provided most supports and services to these students.

Discussion: The findings from this study highlight the considerable variability of special education service provision to high school students on the autism spectrum who are preparing to graduate high school with a regular diploma. While academic support (e.g. organizational and study skills instruction) for students on the diploma-track is appropriate and important, a focus on academics may overshadow other types of instruction or support that may be important post-graduation for students on the autism spectrum (e.g. disability disclosure or advocacy, self-care, and mental health symptom management). Special and general education teachers provided most supports. However, for some of the types of instruction or support, there may be a missed opportunity to utilize the expertise of other school personnel or related service providers. The continued growth of this population in the coming years may require schools to more equitably distribute instruction and supports to other school personnel who have relevant expertise. Our findings have implications for the development and testing of evidence-based approaches to prepare these academically capable students for successful adult lives.
References:


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