

Students with Disabilities: Practical Information for School Counselors in Turkey

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Abstract In Turkey, there is a lack of literature that is focused on providing school counselors working in mainstream schools with practical information about working with students with disabilities, despite the research indicating a need in this regard. This article was thus written with the aim of helping school counselors in Turkey better assist students with disabilities by providing them with current and practical information about working with such students. Another objective of this article was to present a comparative perspective for counselors and other readers who are interested in students with disabilities and inclusive education in other countries. Following a brief overview of common challenges experienced by students with disabilities and the importance of disability legislation, a description of school counselor roles pertaining to students with disabilities is provided. Information is also provided on interacting with students with disabilities and disability etiquette, increasing student respect and sensitivity to people with disabilities in schools, and working with parents, teachers, and school administrators.

Keywords School counselors · Students with disabilities · Inclusive education · Counselor education

Introduction

The mandatory inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classes has increasingly improved the number and experiences of students with disabilities in Turkish schools since legislation was passed in 1983 (Sucuoglu and Akalin 2010; Sucuoglu et al. 2010; Tohum

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Otizm Foundation [TOHUM] & Educational Reform Initiative [ERG], 2011). This has also resulted in an increased need for school counselor involvement with students with disabilities. As a result, school counselors have found themselves in a position of being expected to provide a wider variety of services to students with disabilities, their families, and school staff when working in inclusive schools in Turkey.

In addition to inclusive public schools, Turkish school counselors work in three other educational settings: Rehberlik Arastirma Merkezi (RAM; Provincial Public Guidance and Research Centers), private special education centers, and special public schools, where they also assume major responsibilities in regard to students with disabilities (SWD). Although the extent to which school counselors are involved with students with disabilities varies depending on the educational setting, researchers (e.g., Aksoy and Diken 2009; Cimsir and Carney 2016; Sargın & Hamurcu, 2010) have shown that Turkish school counselors appear to be in need of information, practical training, and assistance to better provide services to students with disabilities, regardless of the type of work setting.

Despite research indicating Turkish school counselors experience difficulty regarding working with students with disabilities (e.g., Aksoy and Diken 2009; Cimsir and Carney 2016; Sargın & Hamurcu, 2010), it is surprising that there is a lack of literature counselors and other school professionals providing services to students with disabilities in Turkey can refer to for practical information. The aim of this paper was, therefore, to produce a disability primer to provide school counselors in Turkey with practical information about working with students with disabilities. Although the focus is on Turkey, especially when it comes to the particular pieces of legislation regulating school counselor roles pertaining to students with disabilities, other information in this paper, such as common challenges experienced by students with disabilities and interacting with students with disabilities and disability etiquette, can be helpful for school counselors in other countries. Furthermore, the paper provides a comparative perspective for readers from other nations.

In line with these objectives, we next provide a brief overview of common challenges experienced by students with disabilities, followed by highlighting the importance of disability legislation, school counselor roles regarding working with students with disabilities, interacting with students with disabilities and disability etiquette, and increasing student respect and sensitivity to people with disabilities. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for working with parents, teachers, and school administrators.

Common Challenges Experienced by Students with Disabilities

Understanding common challenges experienced by SWD starts with defining the concept of disability from a comprehensive perspective. Although the definition of disability changes based on the disability model (e.g., social, medical), the World Health Organization (WHO) views disability as an interaction among health conditions, environmental factors, and personal factors rather than associating with only biological or psychosocial factors (WHO, 2012b). Similarly, International Classification of Health and Functioning (ICF), which is WHO's framework for providing a universal classification of disability and health, conceptualizes disability as an umbrella term for impairments, activity restrictions, and participation limitations (WHO, 2012a). As can be seen, these conceptualizations of disability highlight the need for knowing the whole individual as well as the limitations and restrictions individuals experience as a result of biological, psychological and social factors.

Another important factor to consider when approaching the topic of challenges experienced by individuals with disabilities is that individuals with and without disabilities are similar, in that they all experience a range of challenges throughout their lives (Milsom 2001). Thus, school counselors should be aware of individual differences when working with students with disabilities, because students with disabilities do not have the same experiences, functional limitations, or responses to their disability even when they have the same type of disability. For example, while a student with a specific learning disability in reading might display a degree of acting-out behavior or/and low self-esteem another student with the same kind of disability might have positive self-esteem and positive adjustment to the disability (Baumberger and Harper 2007).

On the other hand, the significance of certain common problems and challenges that students with disabilities experience cannot be underestimated. For example, a counselor might realize during group counseling or in classroom guidance activities that students with the same disability may experience problems with attending, efficiency, and being organized (Baumberger and Harper 2007). It is thus critical for school counselors to educate themselves about different types of disabilities, so that they can have a general knowledge of the challenges that are more commonly experienced by the students having the same specific category of disability.

Myers and Nicole (2005) suggest that a higher risk of depression, conduct disorders, and substance use disorders can be seen with the diagnosis of a disability, regardless of the disability type. It should not be overlooked that these difficulties can sometimes directly result from the disability itself while, at other times, they can arise from the stigma regarding disability. Other challenges outlined in the literature consist of social-emotional problems such as anxiety, dependency, non-participation, low self-esteem, and shortcomings in interpersonal skills (Bowen and Glenn 1998; Owens et al. 2011). According to Myers and Nicole (2005), students with disabilities typically experience more difficulty regarding their interpersonal and social capabilities, rather than limitations in the academic area. On the other hand, academic difficulties, such as identifying appropriate classes, pursuing suitable career possibilities, and recognizing personal strengths, are still as important as personal/social difficulties for students with disabilities.

Some disabilities are not outwardly noticeable, such as disabilities in the domains of emotion regulation, learning, and chronic health, which do not necessarily mean a lack of difficulty or limitation (WHO, 2012a). Having an open discussion with the student and/or family regarding what specific needs and accommodations are required when working with a student with a less visible disability is, therefore, of crucial importance (Beecher et al. 2004). Nonetheless, literature suggests that students with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to bullying and peer rejection, a great risk factor for victimization, than their peers without disabilities (Carter and Spencer 2006; Young et al. 2011), which can be related to the shortcomings in social and interpersonal skills either as an attribute pertaining to the disability category itself or due to social isolation as a result of the disability (Young et al. 2011).

Locating accommodations constitutes another area of difficulty for students with disabilities, which renders school counselors' help in identifying potential accommodations an important area of assistance (Owens et al. 2011). Similarly, Milsom (2006) suggests that assessing school climate for students with disabilities and, if necessary, advocating for improvements remains among the important responsibilities of school counselors.

Importance of Disability Legislation

The importance of legislative regulations along with knowledge of such relevant legislation by school professionals, including school counselors, who come into contact with students with disabilities has been highlighted by many researchers (e.g., Bowen and Glenn 1998; Deck et al., 1999; Milsom 2002, Milsom et al. 2007). In Turkey, The Primary Instruction and Education Law (No. 222), which passed in 1962, was the first piece of legislation specific to children with special needs (Melekoglu et al. 2009). Despite highlighting the need for schools to provide accommodations for children with special needs, The Primary Instruction and Education Law did not distinctly mandate the inclusion of students with disabilities into regular schools. This was later incorporated in law that passed in 1983. The importance of inclusive education was reemphasized with the passage of the Decree-Law related to Special Education (No. 573) in 1997, reiterating the need to include students with special needs in regular education classrooms (Melekoglu et al. 2009). Emphasized in this law were the inseparableness of special education as a part of general public education, the entitlement of all children to special education services regardless of the severity of their disability, the importance of early intervention, the significance of individualized educational programs to meet the unique needs of children with special needs, the importance of non-restrictive environments for children with special needs and their peers without disabilities, the vitality of providing children with special needs with vocational education and rehabilitation services without interruption, and the expectation from relevant institutions of planning for education services for children with special needs. With the enactment of this decree-law, the number of student with disabilities has increased in mainstream education settings over time (Ministry of National Education 2012).

When it comes to the most current information about inclusive education, the latest amendments to the Special Education Services Legislation, which were issued in 2012, can be used as a guide (Special Education Services Legislation 2012). According to Article 7 of this legislation, educational diagnosis and assessment of a child with special needs is made by the RAM (Rehberlik Arastirma Merkezi [Provincial Public Guidance and Research Centers]) staff. Schools, provincial directorates of national education, medical centers, universities, and child protection services are responsible for referring children who need special education to the RAMs to provide these children with appropriate educational diagnosis and assessment. Committees responsible for this job within the RAMs prioritize placing students in the least restrictive environments. Therefore, these committees first consider placing students in inclusive schools and then, if necessary, move on to considering less inclusive environments. A BEP (Bireyselleştirilmiş Eğitim Planı [Individualized Education Plan]) is developed for every child who receives educational diagnosis and assessment services in this domain and this plan is renewed every year by the BEP committee in the school where the student is enrolled (Special Education Services Legislation 2012).

Legislated School Counselor Roles Pertaining to Students with Disabilities

In Turkey, it is hard to find one single piece of legislation that can comprehensively inform school counselors about their roles when working with students with disabilities. Rather, school counselors need to familiarize themselves with the pertinent parts of legislation related to both disability and school counseling. Relevant parts of the Special Education Services

Legislation (including the 2012 Amendments) and the Guidance and Psychological Counseling Services Legislation (including the 2009 Amendments) are reviewed in this section, since examining every single piece of legislation that might be relevant is beyond the scope of this paper.

Article 63 of the Special Education Services Legislation, which involves the description of the roles of school counselors regarding working with students with disabilities holds school counselors responsible for organizing educational services for the families of students who need special education. School counselors are expected to cooperate with associated people and institutions, families, teachers, related personnel, and the school unit responsible for developing Individualized Education Plans. They are also supposed to follow the individual developments of students with special needs and cooperate with teachers and families in generating individual development reports. Finally, school counselors are required to work with teachers, with the Individual Educational Plan development unit, and with the Guidance and Counseling Services Executive Commission in meeting the needs of special needs students (Special Education Services Legislation 2012).

The Guidance and Psychological Counseling Services Legislation, which was amended in 2009, divides the roles of school counselors into five realms: educational guidance, career and vocational guidance, individual guidance, recognition of students, and group counseling (Ministry of National Education 2013b). Students with disabilities, however, are not mentioned in this legislation, so school counselors may be unsure as to how exactly they need to be involved with students with disabilities. Since the legislation lacks a clear description of the roles of school counselors with students with disabilities, they may assume that they do not have much responsibility regarding such students, other than fulfilling their roles around BEPs and cooperating with staff, parents, and teachers.

The BEP development process is an area where Turkish school counselors have a direct role. They serve as a part of the team responsible for developing Individualized Education Plans, along with the school principal or assistant manager assigned by the school principal, a mobile teacher, the parents/guardians, the student with the disability, and the student's teacher. The functions of school counselors in these teams include: (a) providing guidance and expertise regarding the educational needs of the student with the disability, and (b) monitoring the student's progress (Ministry of National Education 2013a). Considering that participating in the Individualized Education Plan process is an important way school counselors can contribute their expertise when providing services to students with disabilities (Milsom et al. 2007), it is important for school counselors to effectively fulfill their roles in this realm.

Interacting with Students with Disabilities and Disability Etiquette

Literature highlights the importance of feeling comfortable for all school professionals when interacting with SWD. Beckwith and Matthews (1994) maintained that when professionals are uncomfortable, they tend to avoid contact or interact in a way that inhibits or prevents client development. Many people, including school counselors and teachers, do not know how to effectively interact with students with disabilities, resulting in them feeling uneasy around students. Furthermore, many school staff are unaware of the importance of practicing disability etiquette when interacting with students with disabilities.

All individuals who work with students with disabilities should interact with them in an accepting and affirming manner, and they should learn about specific disabilities. According to

Murphy (2007), educators should be aware of their thoughts and feelings towards individuals with disabilities, along with knowing how those thoughts and feelings can affect their behaviors. School counselors, specifically, need to examine their own attitudes because negative attitudes can lead to patronizing and condescending behaviors toward students with disabilities as well as holding diminished expectations for such students (Dunn and Baker 2002; Milsom 2001). Lack of knowledge and experience can cause fear of not knowing how to react and interact with students with disabilities, which can lead to inappropriate and potentially harmful interactions (Murphy 2007).

One's attitudes and behaviors are closely linked to the labels one uses when referring to people with disabilities. Therefore, terminology for written and oral communication should be appropriate and acceptable as the first critical step (Murphy 2007). The term *ozurlu (disabled)* implies that the individual herself/himself has a deficiency or illness responsible for the difficulty that she/he has been experiencing, when the difficulty in fact stems essentially from an unaccommodating physical environment. On the other hand, the term *engelli (person with a disability)* more closely reflects that the person with the disability has been presented with obstacles by the environment, which is essentially the reality (Tufan 2012). To give some examples for specific disabilities, using the term *fiziksel engelli (person with a physical disability)* instead of *felcli (crippled)* or *sakat (handicapped)* and saying *gorme engelli (person who has a visual impairment)* rather than *kor (blind)* are more appropriate and precise. Furthermore, saying *tekerlekli sandalye kullanan (wheelchair user)* rather than *tekerli sandalyeye mahkum (confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair bound)* is more appropriate because the wheelchair is a tool that helps the individual to navigate and, as such, it is liberating rather than being confining (Cohen 1998).

Learning how to interact in an affirming and respectful manner is vital to creating a positive experience for students with disabilities. According to Baumberger and Harper (2007), some important points to consider when interacting with people with disabilities include:

1. Automatically assuming that a person needs help just because of her/his disability is a faulty assumption. People with disabilities have the right to be treated as independent people. Therefore, offering assistance only if the person appears to need it is a respectful way to interact. Even better, ask the person if she or needs help before stepping in and providing help. Think about how you might interact with a person without a disability who appeared to need help with something.
2. People with disabilities should be accepted as the best judge of what they can and cannot do. Deciding not to include a person with a disability in a given activity based on one's own presumptions about that individual's disability is inherently misguided and discriminatory.
3. Any assistive device that the individual with the disability uses is considered part of that individual's personal space. Touching a person's wheelchair, scooter, or cane are behaviors to avoid because they can violate the person's personal space as well as interfere with his or her balance.
4. Talking to the individual with a disability in the same way that one would with anyone else is important. Thus, the respectful way is speaking directly to the person with the disability not to his or her companion, aide, or sign language interpreter. When talking with a person with a hearing disability, face the person directly and try to sit or stand in a lighted space so she or he can see your face. When talking with a person who uses a wheelchair or scooter, try to sit down or position yourself so you are more at eye-level

- with the person. If standing when the person is sitting, it is helpful to stand back a little so she or he does not have to look directly up at you.
5. When talking with a person with a disability, speak in your normal tone of voice and your usual rate of speech. There is no need to talk more slowly or louder to people with disabilities.
 6. People with disabilities generally do not mind children's natural curiosity and questions about their disabilities, but when adults ask about their disability in a way that reflects a lack of respect it might make them feel a sense of being reduced to their disability.

Increasing Student Respect and Sensitivity to People with Disabilities

There are a number of actions school counselors can perform in schools to increase empathy and respect in students toward their peers with disabilities. First of all, school counselors should demonstrate respectful conversational and written etiquette in all of their interactions with students, with and without disabilities (Murphy 2007). It is important for school counselors to set an example for students. According to Murphy (2007), role-playing can be an effective way to teach proper conversational etiquette. Discussions following role-plays can increase student awareness and sensitivity, including students with disabilities since they may also have biased or negative views toward students with disabilities as a result of societal stigma and bias. Being aware of body language, having a relaxed tone and body posture around people with disabilities, and keeping eye contact when interacting with people who use an interpreter are among some of the points that can be discussed when role playing and doing classroom demonstrations (Murphy 2007).

School counselors can also inform students about causes of disabilities. Lack of factual information perpetuates prejudice, myths, misperceptions, and rumors (Henderson and Bryan 2004). Murphy (2007) suggests that students can be given assignments to learn more about particular disabilities as well as about people with disabilities, which can also encompass collaboration in the community. Providing students with more opportunities to experience contact with people with disabilities is another way to develop insight and sensitivity in students.

Holding open and non-judgmental forums during class times where students can discuss their concerns and thoughts about people with disabilities, and facilitating class discussions where students can discuss conversational and written etiquette are two activities that can be helpful in promoting insight in students (Murphy 2007). School counselors can also provide sentence completion activities during guidance hours that are geared toward promoting empathy in students.

The Special Education and Guidance Services General Directorate in Turkey released "The Program of Class Guidance Activity Samples for Primary Education," which includes examples of activities created to achieve 120 learning outcomes, such as self-discovery and acceptance, time-management, decision-making, problem-solving, effective communication, cooperation with others, respecting others, exploration of careers, and identification of self-interests, capabilities and qualities (Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Special Education, Guidance and Counseling Services 2017). The activities are expected to be employed by teachers during the classes allocated as guidance hours. Out of 120 activity samples, only two activities, one for first graders and another for second graders, appear to have been developed with the aim of instilling empathic attitudes toward people with disabilities in students.

Based on her own experiences as a school counselor in Turkey, the first author of this article believes that activities developed for sensitivity and empathy raising toward people with disabilities should be implemented in all grades of primary education, not only in two, in accordance with the developmental needs and levels of students. Given that school counselors may not have enough time and/or opportunity to implement all the activities suggested in this section, it is crucial for school counselors to request help from teachers in infusing some of the activities into the curriculum.

Working with Parents, Teachers, and School Administrators

Collaborating with families, teachers, and school administrators is one of the most important tools school counselors can use to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Although legislation has been enacted in Turkey to protect the rights of students with disabilities, these rights may be ignored or school administrators and teachers may not be aware of such rights. When school counselors are up-to-date on laws and regulations, they can inform other staff and also families about the rights of students with disabilities. Organizing an open discussion with teachers and school administrators and requesting their assistance in raising awareness and sensitivity in all students can be an important beginning step in creating an accommodating atmosphere for students with disabilities.

Myers and Nicole (2005) suggest assessing current beliefs and knowledge of school personnel about their roles so that all staff involved are able to address the personal and psychosocial needs of students with disabilities, with an awareness of their unique contributions in meeting these needs. School counselors can also invite school personnel to examine their own attitudes toward people with disabilities in order to prevent students with disabilities from being treated poorly by school personnel (Milsom 2001; Murphy 2007).

It is important for school counselors to advocate for students with disabilities. Often not many school personnel other than school counselors demonstrate a willingness to take on the responsibility of advocating on behalf of students in schools (Owens et al. 2011). Myers and Nicole (2005) found, through their qualitative inquiry, that school counselors used advocacy as a tool to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the social/personal realm. School counselors manifested advocacy by including students with disabilities in all of their counseling services, not just services they designed for students with disabilities. School counselors also ensured that students with disabilities were not excluded from any school-wide activity (Myers and Nicole 2005).

School counselors can also teach parents or guardians about advocating for their children with disabilities to guarantee that they receive the services and accommodations they need to be successful in school. Owens et al. (2011) suggest that school counselors inform parents about any services and programs available for students with disabilities. School counselors can also encourage families to be more involved in their children's education. Organizing group guidance sessions with parents and providing them with knowledge about disabilities is one way to increase parental involvement.

Making sure the physical environment of the school is accommodating and accessible to the specific needs of students with disabilities is essential. For example, according to the law in Turkey, the maximum number of students with disabilities who can be placed in an inclusive class is two (Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Special Education, Guidance and Counseling Services 2013), and class size should not be more than 25 if there are two students with a disability in a class. If there is only one student with a disability, the class size should be no bigger than 35 students. Furthermore, for students with disabilities to

receive education with their peers in schools in a socially integrated manner, special education support services (supported education room), special equipment (depending on the disability), and accessible educational materials (e.g., large print or braille for students with visual impairments), need to be provided by the school administration. School counselors should also make sure that the education program (i.e., BEP) is applied in an individualized manner and that necessary physical accommodations are in place (Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Special Education, Guidance and Counseling Services 2013).

Conclusion

This paper was written to provide practical and current information for school counselors who work in inclusive schools in Turkey, and to provide a comparative perspective for counselors in other nations. It is well documented in the literature that school counselors play an important role in ensuring that all students with disabilities receive the services and accommodations they need to thrive in a school environment. The number of students with disabilities who are being mainstreamed in Turkey has been increasing year by year and the professional responsibilities of school counselors are also increasing, given the uniqueness of the needs of students with disabilities, their families, school staff, and the community. On the other hand, there has been very little consideration given to and literature on how prepared, skilled, and confident school counselors are about providing services to students with disabilities in Turkey. Therefore, school counselors and other school professionals need research and other written work that can assist them in better fulfilling the needs of such students in the school environment in Turkey.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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