# School counselors' microaggressions towards students with disabilities in inclusive schools

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## Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore school counselors' microaggressions directed at students with disabilities (SWD) in inclusive schools. The study involved conducting structured interviews with 23 counselors employed at public primary and secondary schools. The data obtained from these interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in the identification and categorization of 10 themes. The findings revealed that school counselors exhibited various forms of microaggressions towards SWD, including denial of privacy, patronization, otherization, secondary gain, second class citizenship, helplessness, denial of identity, minimization, positive discrimination, and spread effect. Implications of these findings for school counselors are highlighted and discussed, considering relevant literature. The study underscores the significance of raising awareness regarding microaggressions targeting SWD, which can foster personal and systemic changes towards social justice-oriented practices and the development of counseling competencies in this domain.

**Keywords** Microaggressions · Disability · School counselors · Inclusive education · Qualitative research

## Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24) (United Nations-UN, 2006) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4.5) acknowledge and affirm the right of students with disabilities (SWD) to education. These provisions guarantee inclusive and equitable access to high-quality education, as well as promote lifelong learning opportunities for them (UN, 2019). However, despite global initiatives to enhance educational opportunities for all, SWD experience a widening disparity in comparison to their peers without disabilities. The gaps between these two groups have significantly expanded. Statistics indicate that only 60% of SWD possess basic literacy skills, while merely one-third of them successfully finish secondary school (Male & Wodon, 2017). Also, attitudes towards SWD and their inclusion in schools include predominantly discriminatory beliefs, acts and emotions (Bešić, 2020; Duncan et al., 2020). Discrimination can often manifest in subtle forms, commonly referred to as microaggressions, which may not be readily apparent and ultimately impede the full participation of SWD in education.

Discrimination occurs when an individual treats another person in a disparate manner due to their personal biases (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008). Microaggressions represent a specific form of discrimination and are characterized as everyday occurrences involving behavioral, verbal, or environmental actions (Sue, 2010). These behaviors can be observed in financial, educational, and policy systems that communicate negative, hostile, or derogatory remarks specifically directed towards individuals in marginalized positions (Olkin et al., 2019). SWD frequently encounter deliberate and inadvertent behaviors that exclude them,

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stemming from the challenges they may face in accessing, participating in, and completing education (World Health Organization, 2021). Given that negative actions, beliefs, and attitudes surrounding disability can jeopardize children's inclusion in free, accessible, and compulsory education (UNICEF, 2015), it becomes essential to examine acts of discrimination directed towards SWD.

## Counseling, disability, and inclusion

The school counselor's role has undergone progressive changes following the implementation of laws and mandates focused on special and inclusive education (Pincus et al., 2020; Sakız et al., 2015). Notably, legislations such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004), and international frameworks like the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-UNESCO, 1994) have played a significant role in shaping this evolution. School counselors are responsible to offer services to SWD and their parents, leading to an increased need for their involvement with SWD (Mullen et al., 2021). As per Hall (2015) and O'Connor (2018), school counselors play an active role in a range of tasks such as addressing ethical and legal considerations, countering discrimination and bias against SWD in schools by aiding them in formulating and implementing self-advocacy action plans (American Counseling Association-ACA, 2014), collaborating in multidisciplinary pre-referral teams, and facilitating the creation and evaluation of individual education plans. With the shift towards inclusive education there is a greater likelihood of school counselors interacting with a larger population of SWD within the regular education setting (Lee, 2018).

School counselors have a vital role in promoting and supporting the academic, career, and social-emotional development of every student within their school counseling programs (American School Counselor Association, 2013). Their commitment lies in helping all students reach their full potential and meet academic standards, considering their strengths as well as the unique challenges presented by disabilities and special needs. School counselors actively contribute to student success and postsecondary planning by implementing a comprehensive school counseling and guidance program that benefits all students. It is crucial for school counselors to advocate for the rights of SWD and strive to eliminate any forms of discrimination they may face (Koca et al., 2023).

The increasing enrollment of SWD in mainstream schools because of the push for inclusive education has presented challenges for schools in developing inclusive attitudes and

practices (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Despite the need to believe in the potential of SWD to succeed in the curriculum, school professionals, including counselors, may still struggle with embracing the concept that schools should be inclusive for all children (Boyle & Kennedy, 2019). Unfortunately, in school cultures where exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes prevail, there is a risk of microaggressions being directed towards SWD.

## Disability microaggressions

The concept of microaggressions encompasses various forms of discrimination (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008). Microaggressions are described as implicit, elusive, covert, or subtle discriminatory messages that are conveyed intentionally or unintentionally through verbal or non-verbal communication (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, Lin et al., 2007). What sets microaggressions apart from traditional discrimination is their challenging nature to identify in social interactions, enabling perpetrators to conceal their discriminatory behaviors. Moreover, individuals who exhibit microaggressions may unknowingly convey discriminatory messages without being aware of their biased behaviors or verbal expressions (Nadal, 2008; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008).

Microaggressions performed towards individuals with disabilities are called "disability microaggressions" (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p. 241; Nadal, 2008). Keller and Galgay (2010) conducted a study that examined microaggressions directed at individuals with disabilities, specifically focusing on various domains of microaggressions within social contexts. Their findings revealed eight distinct types of disability microaggressions (Keller & Galgay, 2010).

According to Keller and Galgay's (2010) classification, *denial of identity* encompasses two aspects. The first dimension involves denying the personal identity of individuals with disabilities, where their disabling condition is emphasized as their most significant characteristic. This viewpoint diminishes the significance of other personal dimensions, including their accomplishments, capabilities, and talents. The second dimension of denial of identity pertains to downplaying or dismissing the experiences of individuals with disabilities. It involves underestimating or denying their personal feelings and ideas regarding discrimination and bias, often implying that they are overly sensitive. *Denial of privacy* refers to the infringement upon the confidentiality of individuals with disabilities, treating them as if they lack the ability and authority to independently manage their own lives. *Helplessness* encompasses the notion that individuals with disabilities are unable to engage in independent actions, necessitating ongoing support and reliance on

others to meet their needs. It implies a perception that their well-being should be catered to by external parties. *Secondary gain* denotes the concept that individuals interacting with people with disabilities have ulterior motives aimed at personal benefits or advantages. *Spread effect* entails the recognition that the identification of a disability impacts various aspects of an individual's life, spanning multiple domains and areas of functioning. *Patronization* manifests in two distinct forms. The first is through *infantilization*, where individuals with disabilities are perceived as children or immature. As a result, they may be exposed to acts of goodwill and decisions on their behalf, disregarding their right to make their choices. In the case of *false admiration*, individuals with disabilities receive constant praise for even the most ordinary or mundane actions. It is a phenomenon where their achievements or behaviors, regardless of their significance, are excessively commended. *Second class citizenship* operates under the assumption that individuals with disabilities do not necessarily need to enjoy the full spectrum of rights and privileges, as they may not effectively utilize or exercise certain rights. *Desexualization* involves the perception that individuals with disabilities are unattractive or incapable of engaging in sexual activities (Keller & Galgay, 2010).

There are other disability microaggression types identified by researchers. First, *otherization* involves labeling individuals with disabilities as abnormal or deficient (Conover et al., 2017). Additionally, *positive discrimination* refers to the belief that individuals with disabilities require affirmative support solely due to their disabling conditions (Canel-Çınarbaş et al., 2012). However, the microaggression perspective on positive discrimination fails to consider the need to provide accommodations as a fundamental right in the context of education. In other words, it overlooks the importance of ensuring equal access and support for SWD to receive an education on an equal footing with their peers. Third, in *minimization*, the feelings and experiences are underestimated (Conover et al., 2017). For those who minimize, individuals with disabilities exaggerate their experiences and therefore there is no need for further accommodations (Canel-Çınarbaş et al., 2012).

## Research context: counseling and inclusion in Türkiye

In Türkiye, the Ministry of National Education (MONE) assigns counselors to regular schools to provide guidance and psychological counseling services to a diverse student population, including SWD. Counselors typically commence their professional careers immediately after completing their undergraduate studies in education, specifically within programs referred to as "guidance and psychological counseling." These programs typically span a duration of four years and provide comprehensive training to aspiring counselors. However, the inclusion and coverage of disability-related content in these programs can vary significantly, as it is not mandatory within the existing bachelor curriculum. The extent to which counselor candidates receive coursework and education pertaining to disability and inclusion varies widely depending on the specific program they enroll in.

In Türkiye, counselors are employed in schools and assessment units. Their duties and responsibilities are specified in the Regulation of Guidance and Psychological Counseling Services (MONE, 2020). Within schools, counselors fulfill the following functions: (a) Evaluating students' abilities, interests, needs, values, academic progress, and cultural backgrounds to provide relevant guidance and counseling services; (b) guiding students to enhance their motivation, skills, learning capabilities, and making appropriate transitions; (c) assisting students in making suitable career choices; and (d) delivering counseling to support students' personal and social growth, aiding them in managing emotional challenges.

Since the publication of the Special Education Regulation (No. 573) in 1997, Türkiye has witnessed a significant advancement in the inclusion of SWD in mainstream schools. Since the new millennium, MONE has consistently pursued efforts to promote inclusive education for SWD. In 2008, the Regulation for Educational Practices through Inclusion (No. 2008/60) and the Regulation for Special Education Services (No: 30,471) were published (MONE, 2008, 2018), respectively. The enactment of the Law on People with Disabilities (No. 5378) in 2005 further outlined the procedure for organizing and implementing inclusive education in Türkiye. The policy documents highlight the importance of inclusive environments, ensuring SWD are not excluded and have equal opportunities, while also addressing their individual needs for full participation and inclusion. As a result, counselors have been assigned significant responsibilities in meeting the educational requirements of SWD within mainstream schools.

## Background and significance of Research

Inclusive education has gained significant attention in recent years as societies strive to create educational environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students, including SWD (Biklen, 1992). However, despite the progress made in promoting inclusive practices, challenges and barriers persist, including the experiences of microaggressions faced by SWD at schools (Sue et al., 2007a, b). Understanding

the occurrence and impact of microaggressions on SWD requires an examination of the role of school counselors, who play a critical role in supporting their well-being and development within inclusive schools.

Furthermore, the experiences of microaggressions within inclusive schools can hinder the effectiveness of inclusive practices (Bešić, 2020). Microaggressions can undermine the inclusive ethos of schools and perpetuate discriminatory attitudes and behaviors (Austin et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the specific microaggressions experienced by SWD within the school counseling context is crucial for promoting inclusive practices and fostering a supportive school environment. Also, investigating the microaggressions directed at SWD by school counselors aligns with the broader goal of advancing social justice-oriented practices in education. Social justice-oriented counseling approaches recognize the importance of addressing systemic inequities and promoting the well-being of marginalized populations (Ratts et al., 2016).

Studies have highlighted that microaggressions can manifest in different forms, including verbal, behavioral, and environmental microaggressions (Nadal, 2008; Sue et al., 2007a, b) and can contribute to feelings of exclusion, reduced self-esteem, and compromised mental health (Nadal et al., 2012). The literature on microaggressions has extensively examined their occurrence and impact on various marginalized populations, such as racial and ethnic minorities (e.g., Sue & Spanierman, 2020). While studies have examined microaggressions in various contexts such as healthcare, workplace, and education (e.g., Bond & Haynes-Baratz, 2022; Walls et al., 2015), limited attention has been given to the experiences of SWD within inclusive education. School counselors are well-positioned to support the diverse needs of SWD, providing guidance, advocacy, and emotional support (Hall, 2015). However, the potential occurrence and impact of microaggressions within the counselor-student relationship have not been adequately explored.

Research on the role of school counselors in inclusive education has primarily focused on their responsibilities, competencies, and practices in supporting SWD. Studies have emphasized school counselors' importance in advocating for SWD, facilitating their transition into inclusive classrooms, and promoting their overall well-being (Hays, 2020; Gysbers & Henderson, 2014; Vilbas & King-Sears, 2023). However, limited attention has been given to exploring the potential occurrence of microaggressions by school counselors toward SWD. Also, little is known about the specific factors that may influence counselors' microaggressions. Understanding these factors is essential for developing targeted interventions and training programs that address the

root causes of microaggressions and promote more inclusive and supportive practices.

Understanding school counselors' microaggressions towards SWD in inclusive schools is important for both theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, this understanding would contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of school counseling, disability, and inclusive education. It would provide a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between school counselors and SWD (Cimsir & Hunt, 2018), shedding light on the prevalence, forms, and underlying factors of microaggressions. By expanding the theoretical framework, researchers can develop more comprehensive models and theories that capture the nuances of microaggressions in inclusive educational settings. This, in turn, would enhance the ability to conceptualize and analyze the experiences of SWD and inform the development of effective intervention strategies and counselor training programs. From a practical standpoint, this study informs evidence-based practices and promotes positive change within school counseling settings.

All in all, the description of the perspectives and practices of school counselors in their work with SWD and studying their microaggressions towards SWD is of utmost importance, considering the limited research available on the experiences of school counselors in this context (Cimsir & Carney, 2017). To achieve this aim, the study seeks to answer the following research question: "Do school counselors perform any disability microaggressions in inclusive schools? If they do, what are these microaggressions?"

## Method

### Research design

Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study delved into the experiences of school counselors, enabling a comprehensive exploration, and understanding of the subjective meanings ascribed to those experiences (Berg & Lune, 2014; Stake, 2010). Also, qualitative research is helpful while studying under-researched topics (Bell, 2013). Since microaggressions towards SWD have not been studied adequately, this approach was employed to investigate the present state of disability microaggressions performed by school counselors.

### Participants

The research involved a total of 23 school counselors from Türkiye who were employed in 23 different public primary and secondary schools where full-time inclusive practices were implemented. The participants' age ranged from 25 to

38 ($M = 28.08$, $SD = 4.48$). Among the participants, 13 were women and 10 were men. Ten counselors worked in primary schools and thirteen worked in secondary schools. The counselors' overall professional experience ranged from three to 18 years ($M = 9.23$, $SD = 4.75$). Additionally, their years of experience at their current schools varied from two to 11 years ($M = 8.04$, $SD = 2.57$). The total student population across the 23 schools where the counselors were employed ranged from 936 to 2,656, while the number of SWD in each school ranged from 15 to 31. The SWD encompassed a range of disabilities, including specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, orthopedic disabilities, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, speech and language difficulties, hearing difficulties, and developmental disabilities.

Counselors were chosen for participation in the study from inclusive schools that had a minimum of 15 SWD, ensuring that the selected counselors had substantial experience working with SWD. To achieve this, a purposive sampling strategy was employed, which involved deliberately selecting participants who met specific criteria aligned with the objectives of the study. The researchers exercised their judgment to establish a purposive sample of school counselors, considering their expertise and suitability for the requirements of the study. This approach allowed for the intentional selection of counselors who could provide valuable insights and perspectives relevant to the research objectives. To ensure that school counselors have more observations, contacts, and practices with SWD, all had a minimum of three years of experience in the counseling field, and they had been working at their current schools for a minimum of two years. The participants in this study were selected exclusively from Istanbul, Türkiye, primarily for reasons of availability and convenience. Istanbul is the most populated and multicultural city in Türkiye.

### Data collection instruments

A demographic information form and a structured interview form were used to collect data in this study. The structured interview form was utilized to gather information from school counselors regarding their perspectives, experiences, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors concerning SWD in inclusive schools. The form was developed by the research team following a thorough literature review on disability microaggressions, support by research supervisors, a pilot study, and expert views in the field of disability. In constructing the interview questions, relevant literature (e.g., Canel-Çınarbaş et al., 2012; Cimsir & Carney, 2017; Conover et al., 2017; Keller & Galgay, 2010; MONE, 2020; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008) guided the process. The interview schedule included open-ended and yes–no questions. The semi-structured nature of the interview schedule provided

flexibility for researchers to focus on specific issues while allowing for adaptations based on the participants' responses. Appendix A provides the interview protocol. Before the interviews, the schedule was pre-tested with a school counselor. Following the pilot test, revisions were made on the issues raised by the participant and research supervisors.

### Procedure

To adhere to ethical and legal standards, the study obtained necessary approvals from both the Boğaziçi University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects and the Istanbul Directorate of National Education. Detailed explanations regarding ethical considerations were provided to the participants. Consent forms were then signed by those who voluntarily chose to participate. Following completion of the demographic information forms, the interviews were conducted individually and in Turkish. The duration of the interviews varied between 49 and 101 min, with an average duration of 58 min. All data were recorded in audio format and stored using participant numbers for identification purposes. Following data collection, all electronic data were transferred to a password-protected personal computer. Once the data were transcribed and analyzed, the audio recordings were permanently deleted.

### Data analysis

For the qualitative data analysis in this study, a semi-structured approach was employed, drawing on the framework outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). This approach allowed for a thorough exploration of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. To enhance the analysis, a hybrid approach was utilized, combining a data-driven inductive approach based on Boyatzis (1998) and a deductive a priori template of themes-approach as proposed by Crabtree and Miller (1999). This combination of approaches facilitated a comprehensive examination of the data, incorporating both emergent themes and pre-existing thematic frameworks. Initially, the researchers employed an inductive coding approach, allowing codes to emerge directly from the data in a bottom-up fashion. This method facilitated the identification of codes based on patterns and themes observed within the data itself (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Subsequently, the pre-existing template of themes was applied to the coded data and additional codes were created before the codes and identifying themes were connected. Finally, the coded themes were corroborated and legitimated. In the study, data were coded to fit into relevant domains of the microaggressions frameworks of Canel-Çınarbaş et al. (2012), Conover et al. (2017), and Keller and

Galgay (2010). This approach facilitated the integration of the research question with the deductive thematic analysis, incorporating the key elements of microaggressions.

During data analysis, the transcripts were thoroughly examined to identify significant and recurring segments. These meaningful segments were then organized into specific categories. Subsequently, these categories were grouped together to form broader themes that corresponded to the predetermined template of microaggression categories. Some modifications were made during this process, such as adjusting the labeling of themes and merging similar themes when appropriate. Finally, through an iterative process of induction and deduction, themes were derived to capture the different categories of microaggressions.

The researchers determined data saturation based on the repetition of information, indicating that no new or significant data were emerging from the interviews. Next, audio-records of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The text was coded by two researchers, and another researcher provided the majority decision in such cases when the two codes did not match. The three researchers collaborated and reached a unanimous consensus (100%) on the identified themes. The researchers utilized theme frequency and theme intensity as indicators to assess the strength of associations found in the study. Theme frequency represented the number of participants who mentioned a particular theme, while theme intensity referred to the frequency of statements related to that theme. These measures were employed to evaluate the significance and prevalence of the identified themes within the data. Finally, the findings were translated into English and the language was confirmed by the research team who were fluent in Turkish and English.

## Trustworthiness

Various strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One such strategy was member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and verify the accuracy of the data, thereby ensuring alignment with their own experiences and perspectives. All participants were provided with the interview transcripts and verbally informed that they had the opportunity to make any necessary revisions or mark any changes if they felt their expressions were not accurately reflected in the transcripts. No change was suggested by the participants because the interviews had been audio-recorded and careful transcription had been carried out not to add or miss any word. To ensure dependability, the data were coded twice by two researchers and verified by a third researcher in cases where consensus was not reached. To enhance credibility, the researchers engaged in discussions with the participants to

interpret the data and gain a comprehensive understanding of their responses. Detailed information about participant selection, study context, and the data collection and analysis process is provided to enhance transferability. Finally, findings are presented rigorously, incorporating appropriate quotations to accurately reflect the researchers' interpretations and the participants' opinions.

To mitigate researcher bias, the interpretations of the data were collaboratively shared, supported, and refined through active engagement with other members of the research team. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning participant numbers that maintained anonymity. Primary and secondary school counselors were given numbers with the prefixes "P" (e.g., P-1) and "S" (e.g., S-1), respectively. This coding system allowed for identification of participants based on school type and participant number while preserving their privacy.

## Findings

The interviews revealed that counselors exhibited microaggressions towards SWD. The findings are organized into themes, presented as subtitles and depicted in Fig. 1.

### Patronization

Patronization, an act considering SWD as immature and incomplete, emerged in all interviews. Counselors engaged in patronizing behaviors towards SWD by characterizing them or their parents as sensitive and fragile, recruiting supervisors to SWD among students or teachers, expressing sympathy towards SWD, supervising them, and forcing them to integrate into society.

While defining SWD, eighteen counselors used the words "sensitive" and "fragile." Eight counselors referred to SWD as "having a special condition" or "special children". Additionally, eight counselors used the statement "in need of love and affection" to describe SWD. Counselor P-2 said that "Due to their fragility, there should be a more sensitive approach towards SWD. They can experience failure and get frustrated more easily than others. They face challenges and require constant support and supervision at school."

In addition, thirteen counselors defined parents of SWD as sensitive. As an example, Counselor S-11 mentioned, "During my conversations with their parents, I tried to select my words carefully due to their sensitivity. I know that discussing their child's disability evokes strong emotions, concerns, and anxieties within them." Ten counselors mentioned that they assigned a student to supervise SWD, while eight counselors assigned the responsibility of supervising SWD to all students in the class by informing them
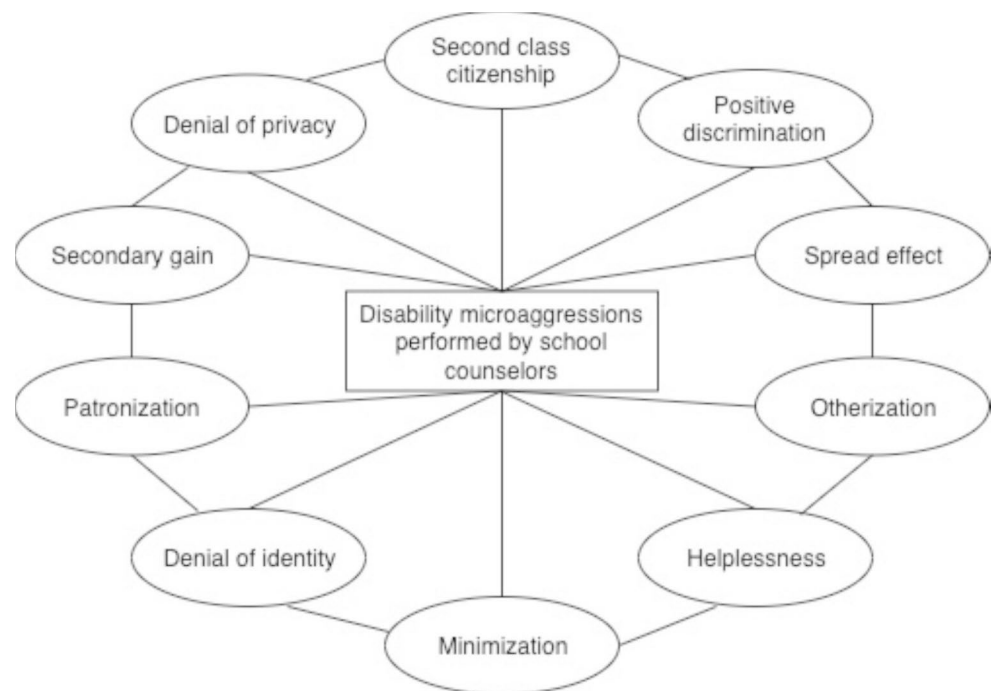
about the disabilities of SWD. Additionally, three counselors assigned a teacher as a supervisor for SWD. One of them (S-5) justified this by saying, "When they [SWD] participate in activities, they always need supervision. I try to delegate teachers to supervise them."

Expressing sympathy to SWD was another sub-theme of patronization. Sixteen counselors expressed sympathy by stating that they found SWD "very sympathetic". Nine counselors stated that they gave SWD hugs (S-1 and S-9) and gifts (S-5 and S-10) when they were unhappy. Also, Counselor S-3 illustrated the feeling of sympathy by saying, "I experience a distinct emotional response with them. I notice a change in my tone of voice, which becomes gentler and smoother. I feel a heightened sense of affection towards them. I find myself adopting a more childlike demeanor when communicating with them."

Supervising SWD was the fourth sub-theme of patronization. Twelve counselors stated the necessity to supervise SWD constantly. Counselors P-1, P-10, and S-13 recruited students to supervise SWD, while P-5 and S-3 supported distribution of this task to specific students. Counselor S-8 was one of them. They said, "When a problem arises, I communicate to other students that their peer's behavior is not intentional or conscious. I emphasize the importance of providing love as the primary means of effectively dealing with them."

Finally, patronization entails the belief that SWD should conform to prevailing norms or standards set by the majority and integrate into the mainstream. This act was exemplified by Counselor P-4, one of the seven counselors who

expressed this perspective, stating, "Inclusive education is about teaching students to conform to the norms of the majority and integrate into society. SWD need to do this if they want to establish more friendships or earn the respect of their peers. We should force them if they are reluctant."

### Secondary gain

In this study, all counselors' reports revealed that they targeted secondary gains from their interaction with SWD. The secondary gains involved clearing conscience and taking care of SWD for avoiding a penalty. First, fifteen counselors expressed that they worked with SWD for clearing conscience. Counselor S-5 said, "I believe it is my moral duty to act and fulfill my sense of responsibility towards others. I also feel a strong sense of humanitarian obligation." Similarly, Counselor S-12 said, "Working with SWD brings me a sense of cleansing and purification for my conscience. While doing this, I believe I am engaging in a noble act that absolves any guilt or moral shortcomings I perceive in myself."

Working with SWD for avoiding a penalty was another sub-theme of secondary gain. In this theme, fourteen counselors stated that disability could happen to everyone. Other statements reflecting this theme included beliefs such as "anyone can become disabled", "perceiving disability as a form of divine justice", and "the notion of assisting SWD with the understanding that they might require help themselves if they were to experience disability in the future". For example, counselor P-7 said, "It's important for us to

support SWD because we never know when we might find ourselves in a similar situation. It's like an insurance policy, you know? By helping them, we're securing our own future if something happens to us."

## Spread effect

Every counselor acknowledged that the challenges faced by SWD have the potential to extend and impact various aspects of their lives. Microaggressions with a potential spread effect encompassed effects on academic achievement, social development, behavior issues, and intellectual capacity. First, counselors believed that the nature of the disabilities would affect academic achievement of SWD. Sixteen counselors believed that SWD had low academic achievement and that they were surprised when SWD achieved academically. For example, Counselor S-1 said, "Even though she lost visual capacity in one eye she graduated from our school, ranking second academically. I thought her disability would not allow her to succeed at school. Everyone at school was surprised."

Fifteen counselors believed that disability had a spread effect on social development, including behavior problems. For example, Counselor P-7 observed, "One of their [SWD] characteristics is that they encounter challenges in socializing. They have limited friendships and struggle with assertiveness in social situations." Counselor S-10 made a similar attribution, saying "These children are not popular among friends. They perform misbehavior, are not self-caring and attractive. Therefore, they are often excluded." Thirteen counselors associated disability with behavior problems. Counselor S-2 remarked, "It is quite normal for students with hearing disabilities to exhibit temper issues and behavioral problems."

Finally, the counselors thought that the intellectual capacity of SWD is naturally affected by disabilities, regardless of the nature of the disability. Seven counselors thought that disability meant that the individual is intellectually disabled. For example, Counselor P-6 said, "They may not be diagnosed with an intellectual disability, but I think they [SWD] have intellectual problems, too. When there is disability, there is intellectual deficiency."

## Otherization

Different forms of otherization encompassed negative attitudes towards disability and the classification of students into distinct categories as "inclusion students" and "normal students." First, counselors viewed disability as a "disease" and a "problem." Eleven counselors used the word "disease" interchangeably for disability while disability was seen as a "problem" by seven counselors. When describing disability, four counselors used "distress"; three used "deficiency"; and two used "inability." "Fault", "malfunction", "negativity", and "students with individual education plans" were also used by one counselor.

The second sub-theme of otherization was comparing students as "normal students" and "inclusion students." Thirteen counselors made this comparison. For example, Counselor S-3 stated, "Inclusion students [SWD] are not normal individuals. They have deficiencies and problems of their own. How can they be in the same classrooms with their normal peers?"

## Second class citizenship

Fifteen counselors attributed second class citizenship to SWD, which led to avoidance behaviors. The counselors regarded SWD as different from others by questioning their right to inclusive education. Seven counselors reported that segregated classrooms have more advantages and benefits than inclusive classrooms have. These remarks were defined as microaggressions because their words were ornamented as if they favored SWD. For example, Counselor P-4 questioned inclusive education and advocated segregated schools by saying, "SWD should be placed in schools that cater to their specific needs and conditions. For example, if a child has autism, it may be more suitable for them not to be placed in a regular classroom to avoid overcrowding. This approach acknowledges the potential clash that can arise when students with varying ability levels are mixed."

The counselors were reluctant to advocate the right to inclusive education when a stakeholder at school discriminated against SWD. For instance, in situations where parents objected to the inclusion of SWD in their own child's classroom, eight counselors expressed their inability to advocate for the right of inclusion. Instead, counselors said that they could not do anything about this discriminatory situation; but acknowledged the fact that SWD had to stay in mainstream classrooms just because the law enforced that. Reasons for the reluctance included the belief that SWD could rarely benefit from inclusive education even when they are included within mainstream classes and that it was not their task to advocate for the inclusion of SWD. Counselor S-9 said, "While I understand the importance [of inclusive education], my role is to support students' personal needs. We must be realistic about the challenges. In my experience, SWD often struggle to keep up with the pace and demands of mainstream classrooms. It's not fair to their classmates if they are constantly falling behind. Advocating for inclusion in the face of parental objections may create tension between the school and parents. It is not within my purview to intervene in such matters."

## Denial of identity

In this study, fifteen school counselors denied identities of SWD. Counselors exhibited a tendency to either solely focus on the disabilities of students, underestimating their other personal characteristics, or actively avoided discussing disabilities altogether. Some counselors performed denial of identity by avoiding contact with SWD and working with their parents and teachers. Nine of the fifteen counselors who performed denial of identity avoided talking to SWD about their disabilities. For example, Counselor P-8 said, "During counseling sessions, I refrain from addressing their specific limitations. I avoid highlighting the student's condition and instead prioritize their educational needs, treating them as normal students."

Eleven counselors preferred to work with parents and teachers of SWD rather than directly with the students. The counselors stated that they discussed the cases with their parents when SWD experienced behavior problems. For example, Counselor P-5 stated, "I engage in discussions with the parents of SWD instead of directly addressing the students about their challenges. Talking to the students about their problems rarely returns positive outcomes. I avoid mentioning their problems and instead reassure them that everything will be fine."

## Denial of privacy

In this study, counselor statements involved a lack of respect for the privacy of SWD. Fourteen counselors breached the privacy of SWD by (i) sharing information about their disabling conditions with other students and parents, and (ii) encouraging teachers to disclose the disabling conditions of SWD to the entire class without obtaining consent from the SWD and their parents.

Counselors reported that they shared information about the specific conditions of SWD without obtaining their consent. They conducted briefing sessions in a class hour when SWD were not in the classroom. One counselor preferred informing the students in a class hour when the SWD was in the class. Another informed the students in the presence of SWD. Counselor P-8 gave an example, "I believe it's important for students to understand the challenges that SWD face, so I took it upon myself to educate the class. I invited the SWD to be present during the session. I did not seek consent from the SWD, because I assumed it was for their own benefit."

Counselors acknowledged that they encouraged teachers to disclose the conditions of SWD to all students in the class, without necessarily obtaining the consent of SWD. For example, Counselor S-6 mentioned, "I provide teachers with notes on how to inform students [about SWD].

They share these notes with the classroom and let students know what their peers with disabilities can do or do not." Counselors also disclosed private information about SWD in public places at schools. Counselor S-3 said, "I display the list of SWD, including their disabilities and needs, on the announcement board at the teachers' lounge. The list is regularly updated on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. This is important for everyone to recognize the sensitivities of SWD."

## Helplessness

Twelve counselors expressed the belief that SWD were constantly in need of assistance, emphasizing the importance of meeting their help needs as they were seen as unable to do things independently. For example, Counselor S-3 said, "I understand that support may not always benefit them because they have a certain ability threshold. I believe that they require ongoing assistance and support. They should be provided with more additional help and guidance [than their peers without disabilities]." Also, counselor P-1 referred to SWD as "students who need constant help."

## Positive discrimination

The analysis revealed that fourteen counselors talked about positive discrimination that involved affirmative actions for SWD. Counselors' statements conveyed the reasons for advocating positive discrimination in favor of SWD in school. For instance, Counselor P-3 argued for positive discrimination by stating, "They [SWD] are academically, socially, and psychologically disadvantaged. Therefore, they should always be given priority in all activities." Similarly, Counselor S-4 remarked, "To ensure fairness in addressing their unique conditions and needs, I consistently treat SWD as if they are successful, even if they may not be. Treating them like that will enhance their confidence, like a parent treats a young child."

## Minimization

Thirteen counselors expressed the belief that disability was a condition that needed to be cured or resolved. They also stated that there was no need to provide SWD with accommodations at schools. They exhibited a tendency to minimize the experiences and challenges faced by SWD, while they held the belief that disability should be resolved or cured. For example, Counselor P-10 expressed microaggressions involving "minimizing the disability" and "eliminating the disability" while reporting their experiences with SWD. Counselor S-9 expressed the view that "It is necessary to find solutions for the disabling conditions of SWD.

The disabling conditions of SWD should be resolved." Counselor S-4 also mentioned, "There is a possibility for certain disabilities to fade away or disappear over time if they [SWD] put enough effort into it."

Nine school counselors believed that certain SWD did not require accommodations, even though these students had been identified as having additional educational needs. Counselor P-1 illustrated this, saying, "If the child is successful, they do not see themselves as a SWD. No additional accommodations are necessary for SWD because they already perceive themselves as excluded." Similarly, according to Counselor S-12, "Inclusion is not necessary if the academic performance of the student is satisfactory. Accommodations and special treatment only hinder their progress and prevent them from developing their true potential."

## Discussion

This study investigated school counselors' microaggressions towards SWD within inclusive schools. The findings revealed that counselors exhibited patronization while talking about SWD. The counselors defined SWD and their parents as fragile and sensitive, and indicated the need for protecting SWD. This suggests that they viewed themselves and individuals without disabilities as more capable and mature in comparison to SWD (Keller & Galgay, 2010). This finding supports Banks (2017) and Waite (2015), who observed that school staff commonly perceive SWD as more vulnerable and dependent compared to their peers, often resulting in patronizing attitudes. Such patronizing behaviors exhibited by school counselors can create challenges in establishing a supportive counseling environment where SWD feel valued, understood, and respected (Cimsir & Hunt, 2018).

The findings showed that counselors approached SWD to attain a secondary gain. They perceived their engagement with SWD to alleviate their own guilt and evade potential consequences, as they held the belief that they or someone they cared about might face punishment if they neglected their responsibilities towards SWD. In Türkiye, there is a common belief that views disability as a personal tragedy and places a responsibility on individuals without disabilities to support those with disabilities to gain merit and prevent a similar tragedy in their own lives (Ünal, 2018). Similar cases have been documented, such as the findings reported by Keller and Galgay (2010) indicating that individuals feel a sense of relief and conscientiousness when assisting people with disabilities. However, the presence of such beliefs within school settings poses a threat to inclusive school cultures, as they can foster hierarchical, ableist,

and marginalizing attitudes towards SWD, unless the culture embraces values of equality (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020).

Counselors spread the effect of the disability of SWD toward different areas. For example, they advised teachers to lower the academic expectations for SWD regardless of their individual capabilities and accomplishments. This finding aligns with Lambert and Tan (2020) and Sakiz (2018) who stressed that counselors had low expectations from SWD regardless of their intellectual capacity, and these expectations were reflected in the counseling process, curriculum design, and instruction. Also, Kilinc (2018) determined that SWD are exposed to the misconception that they are natural underachievers at schools. All in all, the perception that SWD possess a fixed ability level and are unable to perform well in any field, may prevent counseling and pedagogical practices that aim to empower SWD and offer them opportunities to learn, develop, and achieve in schools (Conover et al., 2017).

The counselors' statements in this study often involved negative and discriminatory perceptions of disability. This is not a new case, considering the historical unfavorable attitudes towards SWD. According to Kilinc (2018), SWD in Türkiye are often perceived to have negative personal characteristics compared to their peers, who are considered as "normal". Likewise, Conover et al. (2017) noted that SWD are frequently marginalized and perceived as different from their peers, creating a distinction between them and individuals without disabilities. When counselors engage in discriminatory behaviors towards SWD, they may neglect to provide inclusive counseling services to the entire student body. Additionally, they may fail to act as advocates for fostering a multicultural school environment where all students feel valued as integral members of the school community (Varkula et al., 2017).

Some counselors held the belief that SWD were second-class citizens and questioned their right to inclusive education, citing their disabilities as a hindrance to benefiting from the general curriculum. This aligns with previous research indicating that teachers and counselors (e.g., Asamoah et al., 2018; Engelbrecht & Savolainen, 2018; Sakiz & Woods, 2014) advocated for segregated classrooms and schools for SWD. However, it is expected that school counselors advocate for social justice (Keklik, 2010) and support the universal consensus that SWD should have access to mainstream schools, considering their unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs (UNESCO, 1994).

The counselors displayed a lack of sensitivity towards the privacy rights of SWD. They denied the privacy of SWD by providing information about them to other stakeholders. Past research reported similar findings. For example, May (2017) reported that school staff talked about students' disabilities and asked questions about the details of their

difficulties. According to Kilinc (2018), teachers frequently disclosed information about the disabling conditions of students to all their peers. Although teachers in these studies performed this act often with good intentions such as promoting peer acceptance between SWD and their peers, they were often not aware that they violated the privacy of SWD. However, respecting and protecting the client's right to privacy and confidentiality is a fundamental responsibility of counselors, as emphasized by ACA (2014). Trust plays a crucial role in the counseling relationship, and counselors are expected to uphold the principles of privacy and confidentiality.

Counselors in this study believed that SWD required constant assistance and should be supported even without their request. A previous study highlighted the common practice of offering help to SWD without their consent or knowledge of their actual needs (Kattari et al., 2018). Indeed, attributing incapability and a constant need for support to individuals with disabilities is a recurring form of disability microaggression (Conover et al., 2017). This microaggression reinforces the perception of helplessness in SWD and can have negative impacts by implying their inability to act independently (Keller & Galgay, 2010). Such beliefs and behaviors can be potentially detrimental as SWD may internalize the idea that they are incapable of achieving academic and counseling goals in schools (Kattari et al., 2018).

Findings showed that counselors supported positive discrimination towards SWD. Despite good intentions, counselors were rarely aware that they placed themselves on a higher hierarchy and imply that SWD are inferior to them (Canel-Çınarbaş et al., 2012). This is a common case in Türkiye as several studies reported that school counselors feel that SWD need to be positively discriminated against (Canel-Çınarbaş et al., 2012). The suggestion of positive discrimination towards SWD could potentially indicate a lack of advocacy skills among school counselors (Gupta & Priyadarshi, 2020). Counselors with appropriate advocacy skills can support the elimination of barriers to the participation of SWD and the creation of opportunities for their well-being and achievement (Trusty & Brown, 2005). According to ACA (2014), counselors are encouraged to advocate for their clients at various levels, including individual, group, institutional, and societal levels. This advocacy involves identifying and addressing barriers that may impede clients' access to resources and hinder their personal growth and development.

Advocacy is a multifaceted and advanced skill that goes beyond suggesting positive discrimination (Trusty & Brown, 2005). It involves various sub-skills, such as problem assessment, problem-solving, and decision-making. Unlike suggesting positive discriminations, advocacy focuses on addressing institutional barriers and promoting inclusivity

for at-risk students, including SWD. By advocating for the elimination of such barriers, counselors can effectively support the full integration of SWD into all aspects of educational life. This comprehensive approach to advocacy is considered more effective and beneficial, as it aims to create an inclusive environment that embraces diversity and provides equal opportunities for all students. Positive discriminations, in contrast, bear resemblance to charity activities, as they often do not encourage active participation of at-risk students in their own learning, development, and access to educational opportunities (Schellenberg, 2018). All in all, advocacy is not only related to specific groups. On the contrary, it improves the inclusiveness of schools to provide quality education to all learners. Achieving such improvement necessitates broader initiatives such as school reform and systemic change, rather than relying solely on affirmative actions targeting specific vulnerable student groups.

The findings revealed that school counselors tended to underestimate the experiences of SWD by stating that disability should be cured and that no additional accommodations are required for SWD in inclusive schools. Similarly, some counselors expressed disbelief in the need for accommodations and adaptations for SWD, despite assessment reports indicating otherwise. A previous study noted that SWD were constantly advocating for additional accommodations and regulations in schools and society to address their specific challenges (Kattari et al., 2018). However, when SWD requested accommodations to exercise their accessibility rights, they were often unfairly labeled as "lazy". However, downplaying the experiences of SWD can create barriers to effective counseling and pedagogical services. It may lead to their personal needs being overlooked, their potential to benefit from counseling being underestimated, and their ability to achieve educational objectives being underestimated (Varkula et al., 2017).

The findings of this study highlight the prevalence and various manifestations of microaggressions by school counselors towards SWD in inclusive schools. These findings underscore the need to address these negative experiences within the counseling context, as they can hinder the emotional well-being and academic progress of SWD (Cimsir & Carney, 2017). By identifying specific microaggressions, findings provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of SWD and emphasize the importance of creating a more inclusive and supportive school environment. Furthermore, findings contribute to the field of inclusive education by expanding the understanding of the complex dynamics within counseling settings. They deepen the comprehension of how subtle forms of discrimination and marginalization manifest in educational contexts, enriching the theoretical framework of microaggressions. These insights have profound implications for practitioners. By raising awareness

about these microaggressions and their negative impact, practitioners can develop training programs and interventions that promote cultural sensitivity, empathy, and inclusivity. Findings thus extend to theory, practice, and policy, providing a roadmap for addressing microaggressions and promoting a more inclusive educational landscape.

The findings are significant for educators, psychologists, policy-makers, and society in understanding the experiences of SWD in inclusive educational settings. Educators and school counselors can address identified microaggressions like denial of privacy, second-class citizenship, and positive discrimination, fostering inclusive learning environments. Clinical psychologists can integrate these findings into therapeutic approaches, supporting SWD in navigating the emotional and psychological challenges posed by microaggressions. Additionally, policymakers can use these findings to formulate guidelines and policies that foster a correct understanding of inclusive education and encourage wider acceptance of SWD. Increasing awareness of microaggressions faced by SWD can foster a culture of acceptance and empathy, achieved through campaigns, community engagement, and stakeholder collaboration (Duncan et al., 2021). Adjusting educational-related procedures and systems is crucial to advocate wider acceptance of inclusive education. Comprehensive policies prioritizing inclusion and well-being can enhance educators' sensitivity and knowledge. Providing appropriate interventions and support systems, including assistive technologies, individualized educational plans, and specialized professionals, ensures equal access and opportunities for success. These adjustments can foster an environment where SWD can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

## Limitations and recommendations

Although this study was carefully conducted, there were some limitations. First, the study specifically focused on counselors working in public schools in Istanbul. However, reports from counselors working in private schools could provide an additional perspective. Although Istanbul is a cosmopolitan city, views of counselors from other regions and cities could contain different opinions that enhance the reliability of the findings. Second, it is important to acknowledge that the counselors' responses during the interviews may have been influenced by social desirability, potentially impacting the accuracy and depth of their perspectives. Multiple methods could be employed by future research to reduce this likelihood.

An in-depth analysis of school counselors' disability microaggressions allows us to offer recommendations for school counselors' practices. First, counselors were not aware of the microaggressions they performed towards SWD; many of them thought that their microaggressions were useful for SWD. To address these limitations and promote a more inclusive and sensitive approach, it is recommended that counselors stay updated with the current literature on microaggressions, disability, and inclusion. A primary task of a counselor is to positively regard all students unconditionally, be aware of their own bias and stereotypes, and combat these effectively. In Türkiye, the current program does not sufficiently address issues of multiculturalism, disability, inclusion, and advocacy (Arslan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2018). However, literature reports that effective and lifelong counselor education that allows direct contact may improve counselors' knowledge and practice about working with SWD and may serve the purpose of inclusive education (e.g., Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2020; Rivas & Hill, 2018).

Second, school counselors may allocate time to work with SWD and develop counseling strategies to support their own focus on their feelings and thoughts. Direct practice with SWD can help overcome microaggressions and support students to cope with disability microaggressions. Without self-reflection and self-analysis, school counselors may not understand their unconscious and subtle acts toward SWD (Dinkmeyer et al., 2015). Counselors can employ strategies such as supervision, measurement scales, and clinical questioning to examine their beliefs and assumptions about disability. This process can help uncover any inadvertent biases that may influence their behavior and interpretations.

Third, improving advocacy skills is important for counselors. Counselors should focus on developing the necessary knowledge, skills, and dedication to social justice to become effective advocates for SWD at various levels, including the individual, group, institutional, and societal levels. Also, they need to employ a whole school approach for counseling and develop universal and targeted interventions to prevent microaggressions in schools (Uygur et al., 2018; Warren & Robinson, 2015). Counselors should ensure that their practices align with a manner that respects the basic human rights of SWD. This encompasses respecting their dignity, acknowledging their right to lead an independent life, and honoring their autonomy in decision-making, even if those decisions may entail some level of risk or potential failure.

Finally, school counselors should update their knowledge and practices regarding inclusive educational approaches. Counselors can actively advocate for equal opportunities that enable full inclusion and participation of SWD in all aspects of school and society. This includes promoting an inclusive environment that fosters equality and supports the holistic development and integration of SWD. They should focus more on improving social and emotional development of SWD, enhancing their educational achievement,

and creating multiple and diverse opportunities for them where they could select and progress throughout their lives. Awareness about the microaggressions of school counselors towards SWD might lead to personal and systematic changes for social justice-based practices as well acknowledges competencies in the counseling profession (Ratts et al., 2016).

## Declarations

**Ethics approval** Ethical approval for the research was obtained from Boğaziçi University.

**Informed consent** All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national). Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

**Conflict of interest** No conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

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