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Self-advocacy experiences of students with specific learning disabilities

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Abstract

Discussions about students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) often center on finding solutions for the difficulties they face in school. However, there is a lack of emphasis on the self-advocacy experiences of these students. Self-advocacy can empower students with SLD to pursue their interests, understand their rights, and effectively address any violations of those rights. Drawing on self-advocacy, which encompasses four domains (knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership), this study explores the self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD enrolled in vocational high schools in Istanbul, Turkey. Twelve students (50.0% females; M_{age} = 15.91 years; SD = 1.08; range = 14–18 years) participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that: (i) the students had limited knowledge of their SLD conditions, characteristics, and rights, despite having some self-awareness; (ii) they emphasized the difficulties and negative aspects when describing themselves and their school experiences; (iii) they were able to communicate their needs and preferences to school staff, but they were not frequently understood or responded to; and (iv) they rarely demonstrated leadership behaviors when advocating for others. These findings suggest that students with SLD may lack self-advocacy skills and are not effectively advocating for themselves and others in vocational high schools in Turkey.

Keywords Specific learning disabilities · Self-advocacy · Qualitative research · Turkey

Note: This article is based on the unpublished master's thesis of Duygu Betül Koca, the lead researcher; supervised by Dr. Zeynep Hande Sart, her supervisor; and examined by Dr. Halis Sakız and Dr. Deniz Albayrak Kaymak. All authors spent considerable mental and practical effort to prepare the article.

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1 Introduction

Self-advocacy refers to the act of advocating for a particular cause or proposal (Lee, 1998). It is a crucial aspect in the lives of individuals with disabilities, as it empowers them to advocate for the accommodations and services they need to overcome daily challenges (Sabatello, 2014). Individuals with disabilities who can effectively self-advocate can also challenge negative perceptions and stereotypes, as they demonstrate their ability to make decisions about their own lives (Test et al., 2005).

Students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) may encounter difficulties in schools due to the nature of their disabilities, insufficient resources, and a lack of self-advocacy skills to access and utilize these resources (Lock & Layton, 2001). However, with the development of self-advocacy skills, students with SLD can recognize their strengths and weaknesses and request appropriate educational accommodations (Mishna et al., 2011; Prater et al., 2014; Walker & Test, 2011). Despite the potential benefits of self-advocacy, the extent to which students with SLD develop and utilize these skills in school is not well understood. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD in vocational high schools in Turkey, where this topic has not been previously researched.

Attendance at vocational high schools can provide students with disabilities with the opportunity to develop independent careers through the acquisition of vocational knowledge and skills (Harpur, 2012). This is critical, as individuals with disabilities are often hindered from employment, with unemployment rates four to five times higher than for those without disabilities, often reaching 80% (Georgiadou et al., 2020). Effective vocational education and training can enhance occupational skills and employability for students with disabilities (De Oliveira Silva et al., 2020; Poppen et al., 2017). Despite these benefits, students with disabilities face challenges in vocational schools, such as the lack of support from school personnel and insufficient learning opportunities. For instance, a study in Turkey found that only 3.9% of 203 vocational high school teachers had an adequate level of knowledge about SLD (Sakiz, 2018). Further research is needed to better understand the self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD in vocational high schools.

1.1 Specific learning disabilities

The educational and psychological literature defines students with SLD as those whose actual academic performance falls below their expected performance due to difficulties with basic cognitive processing functions (Fletcher et al., 2019). These difficulties can include variations in working memory (Brandenburg et al., 2015; Klesczewski et al., 2015), language acquisition (Rayner et al., 2001), or perceptual issues, and can result in difficulties with reading, spelling, and mathematical tasks (Fuchs et al., 2014). These difficulties are classified under the "developmental learning disorder" category in the ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2018) as subtypes including reading impairment, written expression impairment, mathematics impairment, and other specified learning impairments. However, this definition does not cover children whose learning difficulties are primarily caused by economic, cultural,

or environmental disadvantages, or disabilities such as intellectual, motor, hearing, or visual disabilities (Al-Qadri et al., 2021).

The National Institute for Literacy defined learning difficulties in 2009 as problems that arise after school enrollment, affecting a student's behavior and ability to learn specific skills such as calculation, writing, and reading, despite having average or above-average intelligence. This can result in lower educational achievement and a failure to reach their full potential (Ferrer et al., 2010; National Council for Special Education, 2014).

Over the past few decades, significant progress has been made in the definition and understanding of SLD. SLD is now recognized as a heterogeneous set of academic skill disorders and a significant body of research has emerged on its cognitive, neurobiological, and environmental causes (Fletcher et al., 2019). Currently, there is a better understanding of the neurological factors underlying difficulties in reading, mathematics, and writing, as well as the genetic factors that increase the risk of SLD (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014). However, knowledge of the neurobiological correlates of SLD is not yet advanced enough to guide instruction and it is clear that explicit approaches are still needed to help children with SLD (Fletcher et al., 2019). Environmental factors such as education, home literacy, and language environment play a role in the expression of SLD and can increase or decrease the risk of these difficulties.

Zablotsky et al. (2019) found that 7.74% of students aged three to 17 were identified as having SLD. Adolescents with SLD may experience more academic problems and social difficulties such as peer-dyadic loneliness compared to their peers without SLD (Al-Yagon, 2016; Bakracevic Vukman et al., 2018) found that high school students with SLD had significantly lower levels of perceived social self-efficacy and significantly higher levels of anxiety compared to students without SLD. This cycle of underachievement can further lower self-efficacy and increase anxiety levels (Peleg, 2009).

SLD symptoms are often accompanied by emotional challenges such as poor self-esteem, low motivation, and depression (Alesi et al., 2014). It is important for any emotionally functioning system to have the ability to accurately understand its properties and weaknesses (Phillips, 1990). However, students with SLD may struggle with self-assessment and have a limited understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement.

1.2 Self-advocacy

Self-advocacy stems from the self-determination theory (Test et al., 2005; Wehmeyer et al., 2003). It refers to the ability to choose what one wants and effectively communicate and assert one's needs in pursuit of goals. Self-advocacy is effective and individuals with disabilities who practice it are more likely to experience success at work, school, and in life (Martin & Marshall, 1995). At school, students with disabilities who possess self-advocacy skills are better equipped to communicate and assert their needs.

Self-advocacy empowers individuals with disabilities by providing them with the knowledge and skills needed to combat discrimination and actively participate in

life (Sabatello, 2014). For students with disabilities, it means being able to assert themselves and fight for their rights and those of others in their community (Pennell, 2001). However, the level of self-advocacy displayed by students with disabilities in inclusive schools, where they have previously been excluded from participation and expression, requires further examination.

From the perspective of individuals with disabilities, self-advocacy has four components (Test et al., 2005). The first component is "knowledge of self," which involves understanding one's own strengths, weaknesses, goals, learning styles, support needs, interests, disability characteristics, and responsibilities. This includes the ability to articulate the nature of their learning difficulties and to identify strategies for overcoming them. The significance of self-knowledge is supported by studies reviewed by Merchant and Gajar (1997), which found that teaching students with SLD about their disabilities helps them set realistic goals and understand their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the interventions and accommodations that work for them. Brinckerhoff (1994) similarly suggests that self-knowledge helps students with SLD understand and advocate for their learning needs, including their learning styles and disability terminology.

The second component of self-advocacy is "knowledge of rights," which refers to human and educational rights. It is important for students with SLD to be aware of their rights in regards to their special needs and requirements. Previous research has found that providing students with SLD with knowledge about their rights can strengthen their self-advocacy skills. For instance, Pocock et al. (2002) used group activities to teach students about their educational rights and how to advocate for their needs, including knowledge about accommodations, legal rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act legislation, and participating in Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and 504 meetings. Zickel and Arnold (2001) also involved elementary school students with SLD in self-advocacy circles where they developed their own IEP, thereby becoming aware of their educational rights and taking an active role in IEP meetings.

The third component of self-advocacy is "communication," which involves expressing one's knowledge of self and rights. This component encompasses the use of negotiation, assertiveness, and problem-solving skills in both individual and group settings. Effective communication is crucial for students with disabilities, particularly in group settings and meetings, as they advocate for themselves (Schena et al., 2022).

The fourth and final component of self-advocacy is "leadership," which involves advocating for others with similar concerns. This includes knowledge of group rights, advocacy for others, political action, understanding team dynamics and roles, knowledge of resources, and participating in organizations. Leadership plays a crucial role in areas like student leadership in IEP or transition meetings (Allen et al., 2001). Studies emphasize the importance of developing leadership skills, group organization, and cohesion in equipping individuals with disabilities with self-advocacy skills (Schena et al., 2022).

1.3 Self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD

The experiences of students with SLD in school are shaped by the interaction between various individual, social, and educational factors (Sameroff, 2009). These factors can include both risk and protective factors that together contribute to the success or failure of students with SLD in school. The development and use of self-advocacy skills by students with SLD can be explained by the changes in their interactions with these factors (Sameroff, 2000).

The first set of risk factors for students with SLD include educational and instructional difficulties at schools. These students may face barriers to access and progress in the curriculum (Gilmour et al., 2019), their needs may go overlooked (Fletcher et al., 2019), and they may not receive adequate teacher support (Yakut, 2021), leading to a cycle of underachievement, retention, and even dropout. To address these risks, developing self-advocacy skills can help students become aware of their rights, speak up for themselves and others, and take responsibility for advocating for their needs (Beart, 2005; Dowse, 2001). Self-advocacy skills can also help students reduce the perceived difficulty of tasks by claiming and requesting adaptations that meet their specific needs (Schena et al., 2022), increasing their role as control agents and awareness of learning demands. By practicing self-advocacy, students can become mature learners by identifying their learning styles, expressing them to others, and adapting to various tasks and situations as needed (Jacques & Abel, 2020). Research has shown that self-advocacy is linked to higher grade point averages (Kreider et al., 2018), increased graduation rates (Lombardi et al., 2011), and reduced attrition from educational programs among students with SLD (Dunn et al., 2012).

There are also social risk factors that impact students with SLD. These risks include social stigma associated with disability (Kimball et al., 2016) leading to peer rejection and isolation (Al-Yagon, 2016; Heiman, 2006; Kilinc, 2022). In addition, the parents of students with SLD may not be adequately involved in their education due to factors such as lack of communication channels between school and home, family socioeconomic status, and the severity of the child's disability (Özkardeş, 2013). However, self-advocacy skills can serve as a protective factor for students with SLD in overcoming these social risks at school. Students who utilize these skills can advocate for equality and equity in the school community, communicate problems with school professionals, receive validation from peers, obtain social support from families, and socialize with others who face similar issues (Rosetti & Henderson, 2013). Furthermore, self-advocacy allows students to become aware of their disability, understand the social stigma, and challenge it. Through socialization with others, students with SLD also learn the importance and skills of advocating for themselves and others (Kimball et al., 2016).

The third set of risk factors for students with SLD include personal elements, such as lower levels of psychological well-being and self-esteem (Sakiz et al., 2015; Kuruyer & Çakıroğlu, 2017; Yildiz et al., 2012). Problems in learning experienced by these students can lead to attributing failure to a lack of ability, taking less personal credit for success, reporting less intrinsic motivation, showing lower levels of self-regulated school-related behavior, and having lower expectations for future performance (Pearl & Bay, 1999). However, self-advocacy can have a positive impact on

subjective well-being (Doren & Kang, 2016), by improving students' sense of well-being through creating new and supportive social networks, providing opportunities for participation and meaningful activity at school, and enhancing students' resources and self-esteem (Abdallah et al., 2011; Tilley et al., 2020).

1.4 SLD and advocacy in the education system in Turkey

In Turkey, compulsory education covers 12 years of primary, middle, and high school education, with each level including four grades. There are 18,085,943 students at the preschool, primary, middle and high schools. In total, 425,816 students (2.4%) are identified as having special needs and the majority of those with special needs (75.1%) attend mainstream schools. Of all students, 6,318,602 students (35%) are at high schools and 86,263 of these (1.4%) are identified with special needs (Ministry of National Education-MoNE, 2021). Of the high school students with special needs, 26,555 students (30.8%) attend special education vocational schools. Another 59,708 high school students with special needs (69.2%) attend mainstream high schools. However, there are no statistics documenting the ratio of those who attend mainstream vocational schools. Although the number of students with SLD is unknown, it is predicted that SLD is the most prevalent condition, constituting 50% of the students identified with special needs (MoNE, 2014).

Past research has shown that students with SLD in Turkey face challenges that necessitate the development of self-advocacy skills. These challenges includeI a lack of knowledge about their rights regarding special needs, inadequate planning of their education, and viewing advocacy as a task solely for their parents. Firstly, students often lack information about their rights related to their special needs and as a result, they may not seek out information and support (Sart et al., 2016). However, it is crucial that they learn about their rights at schools and Guidance and Research Centers (GRCs), which are assessment units under the MoNE. Secondly, the education of students with SLD is frequently criticized for several reasons, including measurement errors in assessments, inadequate consideration of the student's conditions during the referral process, and poor preparation, implementation, and evaluation of IEPs (Sakiz, 2018). Finally, most parents in Turkey serve as the sole advocates for their children and pursue legal procedures on their behalf. As a result, students may view advocacy as solely their parents' responsibility. It is important for students with SLD to understand their rights, procedures, and the support services available to them at school (Melekoğlu, 2014).

1.5 Significance of research

Students with SLD often face difficulties transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. They are often required to move from being passive to becoming independent (Robert et al., 2016). Self-advocacy is recognized as a crucial skill that can empower students with SLD and enable them to become more active in school (Walker & Test, 2011). However, opportunities to learn self-advocacy are limited in schools, and research on students' experiences with the absence of such resources is scarce (Holzberg et al., 2019).

Various national and international legislations, such as those set by the MoNE (2018) and the United Nations (2006), require schools to provide accommodations, modifications, and support for students with SLD. While educational resources are available, they are not often utilized by these students, and they may not express their own needs and interests (Holzberg et al., 2019). If students with SLD cannot advocate for themselves, they may miss out on these services (Livingston et al., 2018) as they may not take adequate steps to access, participate in, and benefit from the full range of educational resources and activities provided to them. However, the extent to which high school students with SLD possess and utilize self-advocacy skills in school is not well understood. Thus, further research is necessary to examine how high school students with SLD utilize the full range of educational resources offered to them and their peers, and to understand how they request the services, adjustments, and environment they need.

A review of existing literature indicates that the majority of studies examining self-advocacy skills in students with SLD have focused on variables such as employment skills interventions (Callahan et al., 2011), leadership and team-building skills (Krajewski et al., 2010), student outcomes (Lee et al., 2011), and personal skills such as self-confidence and social skills (Rothman et al., 2008). Only a limited number of studies (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; Kotzer & Margalit, 2007) have used a qualitative approach and sought to understand the self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD from the students' perspective. To date, no studies have been conducted in Turkey on the self-advocacy experiences of any disability group.

The number of high school students with SLD is on the rise (Fletcher et al., 2019). Despite this, there is limited research on their experiences (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011). High school students, ranging from 13 to 18 years old in Turkey, may have a deeper understanding and insight into their experiences, and are able to share their self-advocacy experiences through different perspectives and statements (Kenyon, 2013). With these considerations in mind, the purpose of this study was to address the research gap and answer the following question:

- What are the self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD who attend vocational high schools in Turkey?

2 Method

2.1 Research design

This study was designed using a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students with SLD. By reaching out to the students as primary sources and hearing their voices, the aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of their self-advocacy experiences. Qualitative research is deemed the most appropriate method for achieving this goal, as it allows for a thorough exploration and comprehension of the circumstances and reasons behind human behavior (Lichtman, 2014).

2.2 Participants

In this study, twelve students with SLD were selected using purposive sampling. They had been officially identified by the GRCs and referred to inclusive classrooms at least two years prior, ensuring that they had sufficient school experiences to reflect upon. All the participants were identified solely with SLD to focus specifically on their experiences related to this disability. The categories of SLD, such as dyslexia, were not taken into consideration as the identification process of SLD at the GRCs in Turkey does not specify SLD categories.

The study included six male and six female participants, all of whom were native Turkish speakers and did not have any major health problems. They were all attending vocational high schools that primarily offered vocational skills and the potential for employment upon graduation. The participants represented six different departments across six different schools, including child development and education, fashion design, industrial automation technologies, accounting, marketing, and machinery design. They were in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades of schools located in Istanbul, the most populated and diverse city in Turkey. Table 1 provides further details about the participants.

2.3 Data collection instruments

Data was collected using a demographic information form and a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix 1). The demographic information collected included the participants' age, grade, department, family socioeconomic status, and grade retention. The semi-structured interview form was designed based on the conceptual framework of self-advocacy developed by Test et al. (2005) and relevant national (e.g., Sakiz et al., 2015, 2017; Yakut, 2021) and international (e.g., Wehmeyer et al., 2003) literature. The form consisted of 17 open-ended questions aimed at exploring the participants' self-advocacy experiences and included topics such as family and school, learning styles and procedures, personal strengths, goals, disability perceptions, and rights.

Before collecting data, the interview form was pilot tested with a student who met the sampling criteria to assess the clarity of the data collection instruments. The student participated in the interview, answering all questions and providing feedback on the clarity, duration, and overall interview process. Based on the student's feedback, two questions were found to be difficult to understand and unclear, and modifications were made to improve them.

2.4 Procedure

The study received ethical approval from the Istanbul Directorate of National Education and the university where the lead researcher was based. To recruit participants, the researcher visited six GRCs in Istanbul and contacted 18 students with SLD and their families. Individual briefing sessions were held to inform them about the research aims, procedures, and participants' rights, and 12 students ultimately agreed to participate. Separate meetings with each student and their family were held

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Participants	Gender	Age	Grade	Department	Family income (TL)	Father's education and employment	Mother's education and employment	Grade retention
1	Female	14	10	Child development and education	7500	Bachelor/Employed	High school/Employed	No
2	Male	15	10	Industrial automation technologies	4000	High school/Employed	High school/Unemployed	No
3	Female	17	12	Fashion design	3200	High school/Employed	High school/Unemployed	No
4	Male	16	10	Accounting	1603	High school/Unemployed	High school/Employed	No
5	Female	16	11	Child development and education	2500	High school/Employed	Primary school/Unemployed	No
6	Male	16	10	Industrial automation technologies	3000	Bachelor/Employed	High school/Unemployed	Yes
7	Female	16	11	Fashion design	3500	High school/Employed	Middle school/Unemployed	No
8	Male	17	12	Marketing	1603	High school/Employed	Middle school/Unemployed	No
9	Female	15	10	Child development and education	5000	Middle school/Employed	Primary school/Unemployed	No
10	Male	15	10	Marketing	8000	High school/Employed	High school/Employed	No
11	Female	16	11	Accounting	4000	Bachelor/Employed	High school/Unemployed	No
12	Male	18	12	Machinery design	4500	High school/Employed	High school/Employed	Yes

Notes: (1) Values are in Turkish Liras (TL). By the time data were collected, the minimum wage in Turkey was 1603 TL; (2) Grade retention is the process of a student repeating a grade due to failing in the previous year.

to schedule the time and place for the interviews, which took place in quiet and distraction-free educational assessment rooms at the authorized GRCs. No incentives were offered.

The students were given the choice to participate in the interviews either alone or with their parents, and all chose to participate individually. The students signed an assent form, and their parents signed a consent form. Permission was obtained to audio-record the interviews. All participants answered the questions in the demographic and interview forms, with the duration of the interviews ranging from 36 to 55 min, averaging 43 min.

2.5 Data analysis

In this study, qualitative data analysis was informed by a semi-structured approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A semi-structured approach is appropriate for investigating a phenomenon in detail, considering the context and the perspectives of the participants. This approach was augmented with a hybrid method that incorporated a data-driven inductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998) and the deductive a priori template of themes approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Three researchers were involved in the data analysis process. Two researchers coded the text, and the third researcher provided a majority decision in instances where the two codes did not match. The researchers worked together to reach a consensus (100%) on the themes.

Initially, the data was coded inductively. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed to identify meaningful and recurring parts. Next, the researchers used inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to code the text in a way that allowed codes to emerge directly from the data. In the deductive analysis phase, an a priori template of themes was applied to the codes generated during inductive coding. These codes aligned with the overarching themes in Test et al.'s (2005) self-advocacy framework, as the interview questions were based on Test et al.'s (2005) four main categories (knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, leadership). This step ensured that the deductive thematic analysis process incorporated the tenets of self-advocacy. Some original codes, however, emerged as a result of the inductive coding and constituted some of the sub-themes (e.g., "Experience of an IEP Meeting") under each of the four overarching themes. The iterative process of induction and deduction led to the construction of themes that represented the categories of self-advocacy and the emergence of sub-themes induced by the coding process. Finally, the entire set of themes was confirmed and translated into English by a research team fluent in both Turkish and English.

2.6 Trustworthiness

In this qualitative research, several steps were taken to ensure its importance, trustworthiness, and value to its audiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the original Turkish transcripts were shared with participants through a process called member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were given the transcripts and were informed that they could make any changes if they felt their expressions were not accurately captured. However, no changes were suggested as the interviews were

Table 2 Themes, sub-themes and frequencies

Main themes	Sub-themes
Knowledge of self	- Learning strategies ($n=12$) - Future goals ($n=12$) - Social support resources ($n=12$) - Personal strengths ($n=11$) - Difficulties in learning ($n=10$) - Understanding SLD ($n=7$) - Accommodation needs ($n=3$)
Knowledge of rights	- Human rights ($n=9$) - Educational rights ($n=8$)
Communication	- Effective and appropriate communication of needs ($n=12$) - Communicating about SLD ($n=6$) - Assertive communication ($n=2$) - Negotiation ($n=2$)
Leadership	- Helping others understand SLD ($n=6$) - Understanding others with special needs and advocating for them ($n=3$) - Taking action for change ($n=2$) - Experience of an IEP meeting ($n=2$)

Note: 'n' expresses the number of participants who made a statement about a given sub-theme

audio-recorded and carefully transcribed to avoid adding or missing any words. Second, to increase dependability, the data was coded twice by two researchers and confirmed by a third researcher. In the event of a disagreement between the two researchers, the third researcher acted as a referee and made the majority decision. Third, to improve credibility, the researchers' interpretations were discussed with the participants. At this stage, the researchers interpreted the explicit and implicit meanings of the responses to gain a complete understanding of the text. Fourth, to enhance transferability, detailed information about the study context, participant selection and characteristics, data collection procedure, and data analysis is provided in the manuscript. Finally, the findings are presented rigorously and supported by appropriate quotations to accurately reflect the researchers' interpretations and the participants' opinions.

To reduce researcher bias, interpretations were reviewed and revised among members of the research team. The researchers, who were fluent in both Turkish and English, confirmed the English translation of the transcripts to maintain accuracy. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned codes (e.g., Student 1 = S1).

3 Findings

Table 2 displays the four overarching themes and 17 sub-themes derived from data analysis.

3.1 Knowledge of self

To investigate students' knowledge of self, they were encouraged to discuss their personal and academic strengths, challenges, understanding of SLD, and career goals. This resulted in the emergence of seven sub-themes.

3.1.1 Personal strengths

Eleven of the twelve participants identified personal strengths in various areas, including sports, social skills, mechanics, human development, and computer games. S1 struggled to identify her strengths but noted that this was the first time she had given it thought. Only S2 reported not having any personal strengths and stated that he was introverted.

3.1.2 Difficulties in learning

Second, students reported the difficulties they experienced in reading, comprehension, math, and writing. S2 had difficulties with reading in the past, but he has overcome these difficulties and now has no issues in areas where most students with SLD struggle. Seven other students reported difficulties with reading; for example, S10 stated, "There are often confusing English words, such as words ending with -ism. I struggle to read such words." Three participants reported difficulties with multiplication. S4 stated, "I love math, but I am struggling with multiplication. I need to memorize it, but I think it is too late for that now. I think it is not achievable anymore." Eight participants reported that they do not experience difficulties with writing. S5 shared her experience with writing, saying, "I can write without looking at the paper. Sometimes I need to take a glance while I am writing, but it is okay if I do not. I can write as long as I do not lift the pen."

3.1.3 Learning strategies

Third, all participants reported using strategies to overcome their learning difficulties by mentioning at least one approach. The most commonly cited strategies were the use of a calculator ($n=7$), memorization ($n=5$), technological aids ($n=5$), support from teachers ($n=4$), taking notes ($n=4$), and help from peers ($n=4$). For example, participant S5 stated, "I rely on my screen reader, which is very helpful when I have trouble reading. It can read text aloud from my computer screen or from scanned books."

3.1.4 Future goals

Fourth, participants discussed their future aspirations and goals. Some expressed a desire to continue their education at a university, while others intended to start a business. Three participants were unsure but all were able to identify at least one future goal. Six participants expressed eagerness to start working immediately after graduation. Two participants aimed to start their careers, and two had an interest in

fitness training and ice-skating coaching. Finally, two participants intended to attend university.

3.1.5 Social support resources

Fifth, all participants identified at least one source of social support. Their most preferred resources included families ($n=6$), mothers ($n=4$), teachers ($n=3$), a counselor ($n=1$), and peers ($n=1$). Participant S3 stated that her mother was the primary source of support for both her education and social life, saying, "My mother never misses a parent-teacher conference. She communicates with my teachers when necessary… She encourages me to study and succeed in school."

3.1.6 Understanding SLD

Sixth, the participants shared their understanding of SLD. When prompted with questions about their knowledge of SLD and how they would explain it to someone unfamiliar with the concept, seven students reported that they knew the meaning of SLD and provided definitions. For example, S6 said, "My mom explained it to me. She said, 'You learn slowly, but you learn properly.'" S3 defined SLD as, "the inability to focus on a task and learn, requiring excessive explanations to understand." Additionally, four participants expressed doubt about their SLD classification. S2 stated, "In my opinion, I do not have SLD because I am normal. I live life the way I want. I sleep, I wake up. I just do not want to do anything because I do not want to do it." S7 commented, "I wish there was no such thing as SLD because sometimes I struggle to express myself. I wonder if that is why. I am very hesitant. I see that my friends can write and express themselves better."

3.1.7 Accommodation needs

Finally, in response to questions about their learning needs and ways schools could improve, the participants shared their accommodation requirements. Three participants reported specific needs in their education. For example, S8 said, "Most of my teachers don't create individualized plans for me. Only my math teacher made an IEP. I think all teachers should do that."

3.2 Knowledge of rights

To assess the students' understanding of their rights, they were asked for their opinions and experiences regarding human and educational rights. The following are two sub-themes that emerged from their responses.

3.2.1 Human rights

First, nine out of 12 students mentioned human rights when asked about their rights. Four mentioned the right to freedom. For instance, S9 emphasized equality, saying, "As far as I know, every human is equal by birth. Life is the greatest right, and all

people are equal regardless of any condition.“ Similarly, S8 emphasized equality and the right to security. S11 added, “I have the right to defend my rights as a woman or if I am a victim of violence.“ Other participants mentioned the right to vote, the right to work, consumer rights, the right to defend, and women’s rights.

3.2.2 Educational rights

Eight participants discussed their educational rights, including the right to attend school. S5 stressed the right to attend classes, while S7 said she had the right to ask questions when she did not understand something. S6 mentioned, “I have the right to education. I believe teachers have responsibilities.“ S12 referred to his right to express his thoughts in school and S2 talked about equality in education, saying, “There should be equality among all students in schools. Some schools may not have it, but they should.“

Eight participants discussed their educational rights after being diagnosed with SLD. They were aware of their right to attend regular schools and classes and two noted that their individual needs had to be evaluated and addressed through additional measures. For instance, S7 said she could take modified or additional exams, and S4 stated that he was entitled to additional individualized instruction.

Participants commented on the role of IEPs in meeting their additional needs. When asked, only five participants stated that they were aware of IEP. Among them, S9 and S4 provided their opinions about it, while the other three reported that they had heard of IEP but were not clear on its exact nature. S9 said, “People like me who cannot read and write, or individuals with IEP who also have difficulties reading and writing, are considered to have intellectual disabilities.” S5, who is a student in the child development department, said, “We talked about IEP in class, but I cannot remember the details now. I think it is a report.”

3.3 Communication

To examine students’ communication experiences, they were asked about the strategies for resolving conflicts with friends or teachers, expressing difficulties to school staff, and requesting accommodations from professionals. Four sub-themes emerged.

3.3.1 Communicating about SLD

First, six participants discussed their experiences communicating about SLD with friends and teachers. Participant S10 reported, “My friends were aware that I was identified with SLD.“ Meanwhile, participant S1 stated, “This is only in my family and my teachers. My friends do not need to know anything.“ S7 shared, “I talked about my identification with one of my friends.“ S4 informed, “I told my teachers that I was diagnosed with SLD.“ And participant S2 reported, “I told my school counselor that I have SLD. I was embarrassed before. I was thinking that everyone would insult me. In reality, it is not like that, everyone is aware of my situation.“

3.3.2 Effective and appropriate communication of needs

All participants reported that they were comfortable asking their teachers for additional support, such as clarifications, repetitions, or accommodations. Seven students shared their experiences of communicating their needs to teachers, with S8 noting, "I could not read the teacher's handwriting, it was like scribbling. I got bored while reading it. I told her I could not read it and asked if she could print the script from the computer." Despite expressing their needs, eight participants reported that their needs were not frequently met by their teachers. S6 described this situation, saying, "When teachers did not respond to my needs, I turned to my friends and my mother for help in understanding what I was struggling with in school."

3.3.3 Assertive communication

The participants' statements demonstrated assertiveness in communication. Two students gave examples of assertive communication when addressing conflicts. S5 stated, "I have a general attitude towards me. I first warn them verbally. If they do not target me, then there are no problems." S8 added, "I cannot stay silent when my teachers ignore my needs. I almost got into a fight with my math teacher when she kept ignoring me."

3.3.4 Negotiation

All participants were asked about any conflicts they had with others and how they resolved them. Seven reported conflicts with friends, and two of them used negotiation as a resolution strategy. S12 said, "We resolve conflicts by talking politely. If there is a problem, we solve it by talking and negotiating to avoid negative consequences. Conversations make everything more understandable."

3.4 Leadership

To examine the participants' leadership experiences, they were asked about their participation in IEP meetings, their actions during these meetings, whether they shared their opinions with teachers or friends, how they would define SLD to someone who was unfamiliar with it, and how they advocated for themselves if they were treated unfairly. These questions resulted in four sub-themes.

3.4.1 Understanding others with special needs and advocating for them

First, participants provided their experiences with their peers who had special needs. S1 said, "When my friend told the class that she had a learning problem, others started to treat her badly. She receives special education, too. She is excluded but I do not want to exclude her because I know how it feels, so I do not exclude her." Also, eight students stated that they knew someone who was treated unfairly and three of them shared experiences of advocating for others. For example, S5 said, "Romani people are treated unfairly. When I see that, I go and scold the security guard. I say,

'What are you doing?' He does not even care. There was a Romani child the other day. The man slapped him to get them out of the subway." Similarly, S8 shared his experience of asking the teacher for clarifying the topic as some students were not able to read the teacher's handwriting, but no one could ask the teacher for a change because they were afraid. He said, "I told the teacher that we could not read. I know no one in the class could. Then, my friends whispered from behind, saying that they could not understand. The teacher pretended not to hear them and did not fix the handwriting. I was the first person to articulate our needs. Again, nothing changed. But if they had defended me, things could have changed. I think it is our right."

3.4.2 Helping others understand SLD

The participants were asked to explain SLD to those who were unfamiliar with it. Six participants reported that they had helped others understand SLD. For example, S8 gave a detailed definition, while three defined it as a learning difficulty. S4 stated, "It means struggling with understanding concepts, staying focused, avoiding distractions, paying attention, and expressing oneself."

3.4.3 Taking action for change

While prompted to discuss how action could be taken to create change in areas where students with SLD face difficulties, two students provided their opinions on the actions needed. For instance, S2 expressed a desire for change and improvement in the conditions of all students with SLD. He stated, "Few people understand us and work for us. It is necessary to raise awareness about all slow learners, like myself. I sometimes feel that schools do not want us. I strongly oppose that. Everyone needs to take action to change this. Schools should be for everyone."

3.4.4 Experience of an IEP meeting

Participants' reports regarding their experiences with IEP meetings showed that only two students had participated in such a meeting. The rest of the participants reported that they had not attended any IEP meetings. S8 shared, "I only attended one IEP meeting. My father was there with me. The teachers were discussing me. They had prepared different exams for me, but not all teachers did so. They asked me if I could manage the lessons, and I shared my opinions. They took them into consideration."

4 Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD attending vocational high schools in Turkey. Twelve students participated in interviews. The findings revealed the extent to which the students were aware of their SLD conditions and rights, how they defined these conditions and rights, their experiences in communicating their knowledge and rights, and their experiences advocating and supporting other students facing difficulties in school.

In this study, all participants shared their opinions and experiences regarding their strengths, preferred learning strategies, future aspirations, and accommodation needs. This indicates that the students possess some level of self-awareness (Martin & Marshall, 1995). Self-advocacy requires self-awareness (Test et al., 2005) because individuals must first understand their strengths, areas for improvement, and needs before they can advocate for themselves (Downing et al., 2007).

While having a certain level of self-awareness and a foundation for self-advocacy is crucial, more is necessary for students with SLD to attain their educational and developmental goals in school. The findings of this study revealed that most students lacked knowledge about SLD, its definition, requirements, and potential impact on them. Some students were not even aware that they had been diagnosed with SLD. There could be several reasons for this. Firstly, students with SLD may not receive adequate and appropriate information during the referral and assessment processes (Sakiz, 2017). Secondly, schools may not consider the educational needs of these students and fail to provide appropriate accommodations for their inclusion in the curriculum (Ashdown et al., 2018). Thirdly, parents may not have enough knowledge about SLD, which results in their inability to communicate SLD-related issues with their children. Finally, students with SLD may struggle with accepting their condition and may be concerned about being stigmatized. However, by developing self-advocacy skills, students can become mature learners who are aware of their unique needs, learning styles, and preferences and can communicate these effectively to others for necessary adjustments in different situations (Jacques & Abel, 2020).

Some students shared their current accomplishments and future aspirations. These statements may demonstrate a level of self-determination among the students, as self-determined individuals are aware of their personal needs, set their own goals, and track their progress towards achieving them (Martin & Marshall, 1995). Although most students shared their needs, they did not provide as much information about how they obtained what they needed. It could be argued that students need to learn how to effectively request appropriate accommodations from appropriate sources such as counselors and teachers.

The students tended to focus on the difficulties and negative aspects while describing themselves and their school experiences. For example, they often referred to themselves as learning "slowly" but rarely implied that they learned "differently". Most of them believed that they were responsible for their learning problems. They also attributed the symptoms of difficulties to themselves. For example, some students believed that they were having attention problems although they did not experience a major difficulty in learning and were not supported by the school staff when they experienced minor difficulties. These findings are in line with earlier studies that report negative internalizations and attributions among students with SLD (Donolato et al., 2022). Several reasons may account for this. First, the students may be influenced by their family and school environment that are not yet prepared to support students with a diverse range of needs and characteristics (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). Ultimately, these may involve negative attitudes and beliefs toward disability (Sakiz, 2017; Brandes & Crowson, 2009). Second, students with SLD may be misinformed and confused about their learning processes and the nature of SLD (Rosetti & Henderson, 2013). Also, it can be difficult to understand SLD due to the heterogeneity of

its manifestations. What is more, the similarities between SLD and other difficulties may add to the misinformation and confusion among students with SLD (Grigorenko et al., 2019).

Some students referred to human and educational rights in schools, but few referred to disability rights specifically related to SLD. Only a small number showed an awareness of their rights regarding the provision of resources to meet their needs and preferences in schools. For instance, they acknowledged their right to receive education, but most of them were not aware of an IEP and its role in their learning. However, involving students in IEP design and implementation processes is crucial for self-advocacy, as it empowers them to advocate for their needs and preferences in these meetings (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). Given that most students reported not participating in IEP meetings, their knowledge of their rights in education planning may have been limited.

In addition to being left out of the IEP process, the students were often not informed about the assessment process either. In this study, only two students were able to explain why they were referred to the GRC, while all students who are referred to the GRC must be informed about the procedure before they undergo the assessment. This lack of understanding of their rights before, during, and after the assessment is an indication that the students may not have basic self-advocacy skills, which could help them take an active role in the assessment process (Downing et al., 2007). This is a common issue in Turkey, as there are several barriers that prevent students from participating in the process of designing and implementing educational measures for them. For example, students are not provided with adequate counseling and guidance in schools and GRCs about the learning difficulties they face in schools and how these difficulties can be resolved (Sart et al., 2016). Additionally, in many cases, parents handle the majority of the legal and formal procedures related to the education of students with SLD, and the students may not be well-informed by their parents about these procedures.

The findings showed that students sought support from their teachers, but their requests for accommodations were not always met appropriately. This could be due to the teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in addressing SLD and implementing an inclusive pedagogy. There is also a possibility that teachers view the students as being "lazy," which is a common misconception due to the invisible nature of SLD. In addition, teachers may feel overwhelmed with their responsibilities, causing them to view accommodating students with special needs as an added burden (Sart et al., 2016). These findings are in line with previous studies in Turkey (Sakiz, 2017; Kilinc, 2022; Yakut, 2021) and across the world (Karande et al., 2019) that have reported similar challenges faced by teachers in accommodating students with SLD.

The findings showed that the students rarely exhibited leadership qualities and behaviors. They had limited experiences in understanding others with special needs, advocating for others, helping others understand SLD, taking action for change, and participating in IEP teams. This may be due to various reasons such as a lack of knowledge on how to lead, internalized powerlessness from negative educational and societal attitudes towards disability, and low perceived social self-efficacy, which can hinder the ability to organize and implement actions to achieve goals (Bakracevic

Vukman et al., 2018). A shortage of opportunities for students to lead their own decisions may also contribute to a limited experience in leadership.

The lack of concrete foundations in students' ideas and plans for post-high school employment may suggest a need for further education and support in career planning and development. Students with SLD need to be equipped with the knowledge of their rights, needs, and skills in order to effectively advocate for themselves and make informed decisions about their future. Providing opportunities for skill building and increasing employability should also be a priority in order to set students up for success after graduation (Tomlinson, 2017).

When students lack knowledge and strategies of self-advocacy, their vocational development may be hindered. In this sense, self-advocacy can support students in several aspects. Firstly, self-advocacy serves as a motivation strategy, enabling students to gain a sense of control and influence over their learning and development (Rosetti & Henderson, 2013). Secondly, it directs students' attention towards their learning and transition skills and provides them with a systematic process for identifying specific skills (De Oliveira Silva et al., 2020). Thirdly, mastering self-advocacy allows students to take an active role in making decisions related to their learning and development experiences. Fourthly, self-advocacy provides students with a way of getting organized before any type of conference or meeting. Finally, the steps of self-advocacy remind students of the behaviors and techniques needed for effectively communicating and advocating their vocational education and career goals (Reusen, 1996).

5 Limitations and recommendations

The limitations of this research must be noted. Firstly, the study was only based on interviews with students attending vocational high schools in the public-school system, and therefore the findings may not be applicable to other students in different school types and educational levels. Self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD may vary based on these factors (Hadley, 2006). Secondly, this study only approached the self-advocacy experiences of the students from their own perspectives and did not include the views of other relevant stakeholders such as teachers, families, and school counselors. As such, the findings should be interpreted with caution in light of this limitation. However, collecting the perspectives of parents, teachers, and peers could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the self-advocacy experiences of students with SLD (Schena et al., 2022). Future studies could aim to include participants from different backgrounds, such as individuals with different types of disabilities, and gather the views of a wider range of stakeholders.

As students in this study reported a need for more support from educators and counselors, the latter could listen to and understand the students' needs. This could be achieved by informing students about their assessment rights and providing effective instruction for learning (Rosetti & Henderson, 2013). Policymakers could also design plans to ensure that all students with SLD, their families, and school staff are informed about SLD and related rights. To support this, staff in the GRCs could be

equipped with the necessary skills to carry out accurate assessments, provide guidance on SLD, educational rights, and self-advocacy interventions.

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Data Availability Data can be made available upon request from the authors.

Declarations

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

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

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