# REFLECTION OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WHO GET SERVICE FROM DEPARTMENT OF DISABLED STUDENTS ON THEIR DISABILITIES TO EDUCATION EXPERIENCES[1]

**Engelli Öğrenci Biriminden Hizmet Alan Engelli Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Engelliliğe İlişkin Algılarının Eğitim Yaşantılarına Yansıması**

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## ABSTRACT

*The aim of the present study is to evaluate perceptions of the disabled university students for their disabilities, at the ages of 19-27 and applying to Department of Disabled Students of a university in Konya between 2015-2017, and to investigate its reflections on students' educational lives. In order to achieve this target, 13 participants with disabilities were asked such questions as "what disability means for them, how they have assessed the effects of their disabilities on access to educational opportunities when they realized that they were different from their peers (how they realized and what they felt), how they assess or perceive their own disability compared with other types of disabilities, and how effective Department of Disabled Students of a university is in raising awareness for disabilities" by using qualitative research method. The data were compiled via in-depth interviews with a semi-structured interview form. The interviews were recorded with the voice recorder and deciphered on the same day. By analyzing the content, similar and same expressions were categorized. According to these results, it is suggested for the future work to focus on the self-perceptions of the disabled people and the functions of Departments of Disabled Students in other universities.*

*Key words: Disability, disabled student, education and disability, perception*

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## ÖZET

*Bu çalışmanın amacı 2015-2017 yılları arasında, Konya'da Engelli Öğrenci Birimi'ne başvuran 19-27 yaşları arasındaki engelli üniversite öğrencilerinin engelliğe ilişkin algılarını ve bunun eğitim yaşamlarına etkisini değerlendirmektedir. Bu amaca ulaşabilmek amacıyla nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılarak 13 engelli üniversite öğrencisine "engelliliğin onlar için ne ifade ettiği, eğitim fırsatlarına ulaşmada engel durumlarının etkisini nasıl değerlendirdikleri, yaşıtlarından farklı olduklarını ne zaman fark ettikleri (nasıl fark ettikleri ve ne hissettikleri), kendi engel türlerini diğer engel türleri arasında nasıl değerlendirdikleri ve Engelli Öğrenci Birimi'nin engellilik konusunda farkındalık yaratmada nasıl bir etkisinin olduğu" gibi sorular yöneltilmiştir. Veriler, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formuyla derinlemesine görüşme yapılarak toplanmıştır. Yapılan görüşmeler ses kayıt cihazıyla kayıt altına alınmış ve aynı gün yazıya aktarılmıştır. İçerik analizi yapılarak benzer ve aynı ifadeler kategorilere ayrılmıştır. Elde edilen sonuçlara göre, gelecekteki çalışmaların engellilerin algılarına ve diğer üniversitelerdeki Engelli Öğrenci Birimlerinin işlevlerine odaklanması önerilmektedir.*

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** Engellilik, engelli öğrenci, eğitim ve engellilik, algı*

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of disability has emerged as a subject emphasized in recent years and has been given importance in the aspect of law and practice. Disability is a challenge that should be considered and evaluated by many disciplines under the headings, such as education, health, social life, employment and family, requiring that novel policies should be developed in these areas.

Although it is stated that there is a difference between the concepts of "handicap" and "disability" in literature, two concepts can be used in place of each other (Mahmut & Karademir, 2011; Subaşıoğlu, 2008). While the World Health Organization (WHO) described handicap as limitations and insufficiency in performing an activity in a normal manner and within normal limits, it describes disability as the condition where an individual is limited or cannot perform the roles supposed, based on age, gender, social and cultural factors, due to handicaps or insufficiency (Karataş & Oran, 2007). Considering the difference between the two concepts, the term "disability" was adopted in the present study to prevent confusion.

The types of disability are primarily put into four main groups as hearing loss, visual loss, physical and mental disabilities. Although the challenges each disability group faces seem to be common in general, the problem areas in each individual's personal life differ. These problem areas can be listed as education, participation in social life, employment, health, transportation, family and economic problems. The self-perceptions of disabled individuals gain importance, while coping mechanisms with these challenges faced by the disabled individuals are evaluated.

As a concept, it is emphasized that disability has social and individual consequences, and the term became more widespread in social life, especially after the Industrial Revolution, and the reason for this is the demand shown by the disabled to integrate into society (Genç & Çat, 2013). Based on the statistics published by the Turkish Statistical Institute, it is stated that 6.6% of the total population in our country are those with disabilities (TÜİK, 2011), and 41.6% of the disabled individuals are illiterate (TÜİK, 2010). A study describes education as a process encompassing all life-long period, during which an individual needs to socialize (Kaya, 2010). In another study, it is emphasized that the individuals with disabilities should be educated like other individuals in the same environments, and the difference between those with disabilities and others showing normal development can be eliminated with the tools and methods used in education (Zan & Özgür, 2004).

Although the article number 42 of Turkish Constitution states that "*no one can be deprived of the right for education and learning*", only a small quantity of the individuals with disabilities can benefit from the opportunities educational system has provided and receive appropriate training (Aykara, 2011; Gürek, 2016). Based on the statistics published by the TSI, only 7.7% of the disabled population has a high school or higher education level (TÜİK, 2010). As different from their peers, however, the education and training given to the disabled have been interrupted due to various health, economic, environmental and transportation problems (Pehlivan & Acar, 2009).

While disability is a risk itself for an individual, it is considered that the measures not taken in time can also yield new risks, and the individuals with disabilities have to struggle with these risks (Genç & Çat, 2013). The environment should also be well-planned and designed for the individuals with disabilities to maintain their routine activities in an accessible manner like other individuals (Sirel et al., 2012). Though those without disabilities should be trained and know about the needs of the disabled individuals, this is not the case (Pehlivanoglu, 2012). At this point, training is important, and education is stated to be the most important contributor to raising social awareness (Butdisuwan, 1999; Isbir & Çubuk, 2018).

Although there are some prenatal and postpartum reasons for disabilities, the social attitudes and prejudices against the disabled are reported as the most significant obstacles in front of the disabled individuals (Çolak & Çetin, 2014). All behaviours

out of reflexive behaviours are acquired, especially by children at small age through learning or observing peers or adults (Ulutaşdemir, 2007). As age advances, children develop perceptions by observing the lives of individuals around. A study defines our perceptions as a process of giving meaning to the objects and events in our circle by organizing and interpreting emotional data (Cüceloğlu, 2015).

Such perceptions are sometimes positive, or vice versa. To prevent negative perceptions and behaviours, it is known that training those with normal development and disabled individuals in the same education environment will be beneficial for both parties, and so a social inclusion will also be achieved in the society (Nacar, Çetinkaya, & Baykan, 2012). With the help of these inclusion programs, it is asserted that individuals educated in schools will be grown up more consciously and able to act more sensitively to the problems the disabled individuals will face in the future (Şahin & Çicek, 2008; Ulutaşdemir, 2007). It is even emphasized that those who will be trained together with the disabled individuals should be prepared for such education environments, and these education programs interest all segments in the society (Fırat, 2008). In another study, it is stated that the co-education of those with disabled and non-disabled students should be started in the pre-school period, and so the disabled and non-disabled children will have opportunities to observe and communicate with each other; this process should also be continued in primary education (Artan & Balat, 2003). In order to achieve this target, an inclusive education program should be implemented in pre-school, primary school and high school environments.

However, as well as students' lack of information, teachers also receive no in-service training for the inclusive education. Little or no information has been inserted into the syllabus or the textbooks, and the disabled individuals and disability-related challenges are only touched on during the Week of the Disabled at the second week of May each year. Considering that an average of 15-year education time has been spent until colleges, the educators play a key role in terminating the obstacles faced by the disabled students (Çolak & Çetin, 2014). Given that the places where more time is spent than families, even after the family, are schools, the influence of the educators on students' perceptions is quite high (Tortop, Kandemir, Kaya, & Demir, 2015). It is stated that the most common definition used for education is "behaviour change" and that the educator's value judgments, beliefs and practices affect the result (Bencuya, 2003). There are great tasks for educators to turn this goal from negative to positive, and teachers have a greater chance of making a positive

impact on students. Because teachers' attitude and approach to children with disabilities affect the positive attitude and approach of non-disabled students (Batu, 2000).

When the literature was scanned, the studies investigating the challenges of individuals with disabilities were seen to focus on family (Güllüpinar, 2013; Sadioğlu, Batu, & Bilgin, 2012; Yavuz, Baran, & Bıçakçı, 2010; Mutlu, Piştav-Akmeşe, & Kerem-Günel, 2008; Özgür, 2008; Işıkhan, 2005; Uğuz, Toros, İnanç, & Çolakkadioğlu, 2004; Zan & Ozgur, 2004; Özşenol et al., 2003; Danış, 2001; Tümkaya, 2001; Turkoğlu & Artan, 2001; Atay, 1999), social environment (Aykara, 2011; Demirbilek, 2013; Kurnaz Özdemir, 2012; Ünal, 2010; Koçman & Tufan, 2005) and schools (Nacar et al., 2012; Kaya, 2010; Bayazıt, Meriç, Adin,& Seyrek, 2007; Özbek, 2005;). These dimensions are known to be influential in the formation of disabled individuals' self-perceptions since childhood period. Although it is suggested that the familial approach may be mostly positive for children's self-perceptions, the school and social environment are asserted to have negative effects on disabled individuals' self-perceptions.

It is known that the first steps related to "the equality of opportunity in education" have been taken in universities of most countries since 1990s, and offices have been established under various names for students with disabilities at universities (Akgul & Vercan, 2003). Unfortunately, there were no regulations related to inclusive education in higher education organizations in Turkey until 2005, but some regulations have been made to eliminate this loophole in law since 2005 (Akbulut, 2012).

Under the Turkish Constitution (law and item number: 5378/15) on the amendments to decrees related to disabled individuals, it is stated that "*Education of disabled individuals cannot be prevented for any reason. Disabled children, adolescents and adults are provided with equal education opportunities in an integrated environment and with non-disabled individuals, taking into account special circumstances and differences*". Accordingly, Departments of Disabled Students (DDS) have been established at universities. Based on the law published on the Official Gazette (date and number: June 20, 2006/26204) for the higher education institutions prepared by the Presidency of the Council of Higher Education, it was announced that DDS of university was established to "*determine the needs and difficulties of disabled students in various fields during their education, to meet the identified needs and to*

*eliminate the difficulties, to develop and provide services to increase the awareness and awareness level of the university employees and students in the field of disability regarding the physical, academic and social support needs of disabled students*" on 20th June, 2009.

As mentioned above, although there are numerous studies investigating different perspectives (family, health and schools) for disabled individuals, non-disabled individuals' perceptions towards the disabled ones (Tortop et al., 2015; Çolak & Çetin, 2014) and their attitudes (Çolak & Çetin, 2014; Yelpaze & Türküm, 2018), a few studies investigated disabled individuals' self-perceptions (Yılmaz, 2015; Zheng et al., 2016; Ünal, 2018). We consider that it is necessary to enlighten the conditions experienced by disabled students at a university. In this study, therefore, it was aimed to elucidate self-perceptions of disabled students applying to DDS of university and to investigate its effects on these students' educational life. In accordance with this purpose there are three main questions in this study:

- What are the self-perceptions of disabled students about their disability?

- How do students' self-perceptions affect the students' educational experiences?

- What are the considerations of disabled students about effect of DDS in increasing the awareness of the disabilities?

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this study, phenomenological approach was preferred. This approach focuses on facts that we are aware of but do not have an in-depth and detailed understanding of. Facts can appear in various forms such as events, experiences, perceptions, tendencies, concepts and situations in the world we live in. We can encounter these facts in various ways in our daily life. However, this acquaintance does not mean that we fully understand the facts. Phenomenological approach creates an appropriate research ground for studies that are not entirely foreign to us but also aim to investigate cases that we cannot fully grasp (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008; Erdoğan et al., 2014).

The most important reason for the qualitative research pattern to be preferred in the research is undoubtedly that it reveals the perspectives and worlds of meaning of the research subjects, which are the main characteristics of qualitative research and which are also prominent in the definitions (Kuş, 2012). Another reason why a qualitative research pattern is preferred is that it is stated that the traditional

hypothesis testing approach is not suitable when dealing with social research problems arising from professional practice, organizational and institutional environments (Punch, 2005). In this study, it was tried to make sense of the disability perceptions of the university students with disabilities who applied to the disabled student unit within the framework of qualitative research.

The study was performed by using qualitative research method with 13 disabled students attending from different faculties of university between 2015-2017, applying to DDS of university and accepting to participate in the study. It is seen that of all participants, seven were from female gender, age level ranged between 19 and 27 years, and 10 had a disability grade of 50% and over according to the last disability health report as the percentage of total evaluation. The socio-demographic data of the participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. The socio-demographic data of the participants**

| | Gender | Age | Students' Departments | Type/Degree of Disabilities | Time when the disabilities were first realized |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Female | 21 | Turkish Literature | Motor Disability (Cerebral Palsy)/ %51 | Intranatal |
| P2 | Female | 21 | Accounting and Tax Applications | Chronic/Orthopedic (Cancer)/%49 | Postpartum |
| P3 | Male | 27 | Engineering of Mapping | Orthopedic/%45 | Prenatal |
| P4 | Male | 24 | History | Visual Loss/%90 | Postpartum |
| P5 | Female | 19 | Office Management | Orthopedic/%74 | Intranatal |
| P6 | Female | 20 | History | Visual Loss/%63 | Prenatal |
| P7 | Male | 23 | English Literature | Orthopedic/Psychological/%24 | Unknown |
| P8 | Female | 20 | Midwifery | Orthopedic/%72 | Prenatal |
| P9 | Male | 21 | Air Conditioning and Cooling | Mental/%50 | Prenatal |
| P10 | Female | 19 | Office Management | Hearing Loss/%65 | Intranatal |
| P11 | Male | 19 | Electronics and Communication | General (Cancer)/%58 | Postpartum |
| P12 | Female | 20 | Public Relations and Publicity | Hearing Loss (Diabetes Mellitus)/%80 | Postpartum |
| P13 | Male | 19 | Computer programming | Hearing Loss/%53 | Prenatal |

It is seen that 7 of the 13 participants were from female gender, age rate ranged between 19 and 27 years, and 10 of all participants had a disability grade of 50% and over, according to the last disability health report as a percentage of total evaluation.

**Process**

Participants were university students studying at Selcuk University between 2015-2017 and applying to DDS of Selcuk University. Researchers were the coordinator and assistant coordinator at DDS of Selcuk University on the specified dates. Students with disabilities who were in contact with DDS were informed about the research and the research was completed with volunteer participants. Also pointed out that the interviews would be recorded in line with their permission, the content of the interviews would be shared with no institutions and persons other than the study, the identification information would not be included into the interviews, and they could be withdrawn whenever they wished. The interviews were held outside the course hours of the participants and in the interview room of DDS. The interview times range from 26 to 41 minutes.

**Data-Collection Tool**

As a data-collection tool, a semi-structured questionnaire was used, and all interviews were performed in DDS, electronically recorded, and written down as short reminders. Each recording was decoded just after the interviews and combined with the notes. The interviews were performed in a single session with each participant in order to avoid from a second interview. During the interviews with each participant, personal questions including socio-demographic data were asked, and then continued with the questions appropriate for the study and formed after scanning the literature, such as:*"When did you notice first that you were different from your peers (how did you notice, and what did you feel?)", "Can you compare your disability with other types of disabilities (in terms of advantages or disadvantages)?", "Can you refer to what disability means for you?", "How do you evaluate the effect of your disability in access to education or taking advantage of education opportunities?", "Can you assess the effect of DDS in increasing the awareness of disability?".*Particularly, the questions such as *"How did you notice?"* and *"What did you feel?"* were also asked in order to evaluate individual difference and to get deeper information. Accordingly, the second part consists of five main questions.

**Data Analysis**

In the study, qualitative research design was preferred. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2008) have described the qualitative research as *"a research model in which qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interview and document analysis are used, and the perceptions and events are monitored in a realistic and holistic manner in the natural environment."* As similar to the previous description, İslamoğlu and Alnıaçık (2016) describe it as *"acquiring knowledge by assessing social events through observation, interviews or evaluating documents in an environment where they are located with natural appearances and developing a theory by analyzing this information".* The data were investigated with content analysis. In various studies, content analysis is reported to be commonly used in qualitative researches, preferred for the cases where the present information is put into pieces and seen as appropriate for obtaining descriptions related to the cases (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In the evaluation of the data, the four-phase method of Graneheim and Lundman (2004) was used, including the following phases: 1) Choosing the analysis unit (all interviews with participants), 2) Understanding significant units and attribution to a key word or statement, 3) Condensation or abbreviation by keeping the original, 4) Abstraction or interpretation at a higher logical level, description and formation of categories.

The voice recordings were decoded and transferred to the text for data analysis. The deciphering of one participant took an average of 1.5 hours. The data set obtained in the research is 51 pages. The decoded text was read many times. Significant expressions in the data set were condensed, and the code list was prepared. Codes where similarities and differences were determined were conceptualized through abstraction. Data analysis and generation of the code were performed by one researcher and then confirmed by the other researcher.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

According to the three main questions mentioned above, some main themes were reached in the research. From these main themes titles (1), (2), and (3) are about the first question; title (4) is about the second question and the title (5) is about last question.

**(1)When and how the participants realized to be different from their peers, and what they felt**

When the participants were asked when they realized to be different from their peers, ten of 13 participants (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11 and P13) were determined to respond as *"when I started the primary school"*. Two participants (P2 and P10) reported the difference as *"at high school"*. One participant (P9) responded as *"when I went to the rehabilitation center"*. Also, when asked how they realized to be different from their peers, eight out of 13 participants (P1, P4, P6, P9, P10, P11, P12 and P13) were detected to give responses as *"with peers making fun"*. Five participants (P2, P3, P5, P7 and P8) were seen to respond as *"through other individuals looking at me"*. When the participants were asked what they felt when they realized to be different, six (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6 and P8) of 13 participants were determined to respond as *"I felt isolated".* While six participants (P2, P7, P9, P10, P12 and P13) gave responses to the same question as *"I was sad"*, one (P11) was observed to respond as *"Having priority made me happy".* When the participants were assessed as to when and how they realized to be different from the peers, especially schooling age and behaviours of school friends were concluded to be effective.

One of the participants, P6, declared the following response as related to the same question: *"Maybe, I have realized since I was born. I didn't say I was visually-impaired when I was nearly one year old, because I have always been aware of the problem. I knew I couldn't see, but I don't remember if I have been disabled. I knew I didn't see the board at least. Some of my friends made fun of me. So, I realized at that moment. It meant that I had been seeing little".* Disabled students are more rejected by their peers and less popular among their peers (Farmer, 1996). In addition, it is stated that disabled students are not preferred to work together by their friends and that they are seen as problematic in terms of compliance (Kabasakal, 2008). It is stated that disabled students feel excluded at school for two main reasons. Firstly, students with disabilities can be rejected by their peers because they have difficulty expressing themselves in social settings. Secondly, educators do not give equal opportunities for disabled students to participate in educational and non-educational activities. This separation can prevent disabled students from belonging to the classroom and experiencing a sense of acceptance (Bakkaloğlu, 2008). It is stated that children at a young age display negative attitudes toward disabled individuals, the same attitudes can be continued at high school and college

periods, and male gender displays higher negative attitudes, compared with girls (Ahlborn, Panek, & Jungers, 2008). Although it has been emphasized that children should be trained starting from the young ages to change these negative attitudes (Şahin & Çiçek, 2008; Ulutaşdemir, 2007), most teachers do not wish to teach disabled students, even wish the disabled not to be in their classes and be trained in special schools. Teachers also show exaggerated responses to the mistakes made by disabled students. However, students do not accept those different from themselves and isolate such students. In a study investigating how and how much Turkish textbooks used in primary schools include disabilities, it is reported that textbooks include almost nothing, and when the textbooks are taken into account at all grades, the rates of passages, photos and illustrations are 1.7, 0.9 and 0%, respectively (Tuncer, Karasu, Altunay, & Güler, 2011). In fact, it is necessary that respect for differences be taught more profoundly, and it is important that teachers have deeper perspectives on this issue for training future generations.

**(2) The participants' comparisons of their own disabilities with the other types of disabilities**

When the responses, through which all participants assessed their own disabilities as comparisons with other types, were investigated, it was found out that the participants responded as *"I see myself better and more advantageous than other groups"*. While a participant, P4, announced to see himself more advantageously compared with other disabilities and gave the following response to the same question: *"I am visually-impaired, but a hearing-impaired person, for example a born-hearing impaired person, cannot speak, cannot express himself well. I think I'm a little more advantageous than hearing-impaired individuals. For example, we aren't so much needy; in fact, I can say that wheelchair users are always in need while taking a bus; in other words, they live a little dependent on assistance devices. For example, a hearing-impaired guy, if another person does not help for the dialogues, or if s/he doesn't communicate in a written instrument, there isn't a bridge for communication. So, I think those with visual impairment are less needy than the other disability groups",* another participant, P3 stated: *"I am advantageous. Most people will say the same, probably. I am advantageous because no problems in feet, if there had been problems in my both hands, it would have been a greater problem. In general, however, I haven't experienced such a big problem to live on so far, because it is a condition requiring a small support. I can't carry big things, of course it is extreme, but I can carry small things; I can cope with on my own".* From

all participants' comparisons with other types of disabilities, it is seen that their disabilities are more advantageous. In other words, it can be said that disabled students emphasize positive points in positioning their perception of disability to other types of disability. It can be stated that disabled students are successful at dealing with their own disability type, strengthen themselves at this point and emphasize their strengths in comparison other types of disability. In the literature, it is stated that disabled people encounter various problems and these problems can be addressed in various topics. Among these, the topics of health, economic, family, participation in social life, employment, transportation and education come to the fore (Karakuş ve Kırlıoğlu, 2019; Kırlıoğlu, 2019). For example, in a study, it was concluded that the problems experienced by students with physical disabilities during their university education are mostly about transportation and accessibility (Sevinç & Çay, 2017). In another study, it was concluded that visually impaired individuals have problems in employment in social life, have to deal with negative attitudes of employers and poverty due to their disabilities (Arslan et al., 2014).

**(3)What disability means for the participants**

With the question asking what disability means, all participants were asked to describe disability in general as to self-perceptions and taking their own disability into consideration. Of 13 study participants, six (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6 and P7) were found out to describe disability as *"an obstacle or barrier put by outsiders"*, while three (P3, P10 and P13) described the condition as *"a defect"*. Even so, it was concluded that two participants (P8 and P11) described the disability as *"an advantage, but not a failure"* with a positive approach, although two (P9 and P12) handled the subject with a religious point of view and described it as *"a providential thing caused by God"*. Another participant, P2 emphasized that the disability was shaped by the environment, commenting on the same question: *"Disability is becoming an obstacle put by external world. The individual does not see himself as disabled, as long as outsiders do not set an obstacle. The person cannot do the job, and when you cannot perform anything yourself, you see it's an obstacle. You are making comparisons; for example, you compare your previous life with the situation after your disability.* She also added *"if I were without my obstacle, I could do this thing"*.

Although many attempts have been made in terms of disability in recent years, many provinces in Turkey cannot be assessed to be disability-friendly cities,

because streets, houses, schools, public transportation vehicles and cars have not been produced according to international design. This situation also restricts the disabled individuals' access to many facilities such as schools, work places and educational places. For example, in a study investigating the availability and use of the open areas for disabled individuals in Cukurova University, it is stated to be concluded that recreational areas are not suitable for the use by those with disabilities (Sirel et al., 2012).

On the other hand, individuals' narrow point of view is also another type of restriction. It is stated in literature that general biases are present in society regarding the disabled individuals, and that the biases cause the disabled individuals to be seen as *"a weak and pitiable one needing someone else's help"* (Akbulut, 2012). As supportive to this notion, in the study performed by Tortop et al. (2015), teacher candidates are reported to use expressions, such as *"individuals needing help and having to be reintegrated into society"* while describing the disabled individuals. However, in another study, Östring and Nieminen (1982) point out that as disabled individuals' dependence increases on others, or behaving independently is restricted, self-esteem diminishes. In addition, there are also other examples of discriminatory practices led by the Measuring, Selection and Placement Center (MSPC), the official exam center for entering universities, against the disabled individuals (Akbulut 2012). As mentioned in literature, other individuals or opportunities offered to the disabled have influences on the disabled individuals. The positive changes of perceptions and behaviours caused by external factors will, in fact, be effective in eliminating many problems from the disabled individuals' standpoint because the majority of the students assert that the obstacles are placed by external factors.

**(4)The effects of disability on access to education and taking advantage of educational opportunities**

The participants were asked how they assessed the effects of their own disabilities on access to education and taking advantage of educational opportunities. Of 13 participants, seven (P1, P2, P5, P8, P10, P11 and P12) responses that their own disabilities had no effect on educational process and stated *"not to see their disabilities as obstacles for their training"*. The fact that five (P2, P5, P10, P11 and P12) of these seven participants also replied as *"if s/he wishes, an individual can cope with those obstacles"* suggested that indeed they overcame the barriers they

encountered through their own efforts, and perhaps such barriers influenced their present thoughts. The remaining six participants (P3, P4, P6, P7, P9 and P13) stated that *"their disabilities constituted obstacles for their training".* All of these six participants emphasized *"the negative effects of environmental factors"* on access to educational opportunities such as suitable department for the type of disable; access the university; the protective attitude of the close environment. While one of the participants (P11) replied to this question as: *"Actually it is not an obstacle. There is no obstacle we can cope with if we all try hard. Because of that, we shouldn't put ourselves into too much stress, we have to trust ourselves. We need to define a target for ourselves by saying 'I can tackle with this obstacle'. I think our disabilities originate because of our own thought.",* another participant (P6) declared: *"That I couldn't choose the faculty I wanted is an obstacle for me. I wanted to choose the faculty of radio, television or journalism. My high school teachers, at first, said journalism was very difficult, advising me to choose the faculty of radio or television. Some others also said the opposite. That's why it's so difficult, because I also wanted to be a policewoman or something like that more... I searched much, but people around me said I couldn't succeed. I had negative thoughts as well, and I said I couldn't. So, I paid no mind. That I could not choose the faculty I wanted is a bit an obstacle for me to make my dreams come true."*

As understood from their statements, a part of participants report that the disabilities yield no obstacles in front of the educational process, and the participants suggesting that the disabilities creates no obstacles for training solve the challenges and overcome the difficulties by performing positive coping strategies. The celebrities, such as Beethoven, Stephen Hawking and Franklin D. Roosevelt, can be given as good examples to such individuals. In other words, the obstacle itself ceases to be disadvantageous and the obstacle becomes a strength in a sense.

However, the participants seeing the disabilities as obstacles attribute to the negative environmental factors. The environment is the premise for these individuals to do or not to do certain things. In the manuals for the national level university entrance examination of Student Selection and Placement System prepared by MSPC, some conditions related to unacceptance of the disabled into various faculties are the examples of negative environmental effects. Also, there are examples that a disabled student cannot complete a college program when the student does not meet some requirements for a certain lesson (Bülbül, 2009).

36% of individuals with disabilities are illiterate and only 15% have secondary or higher education (Özürlüler İdaresi Başkanlığı, 2010). According to another data, these rates are 41.6 and 18, respectively (TÜİK, 2011). On the other hand, 62% of disabled people aged 18-24 in Turkey are leaving the education system without completing high school (Eurostat, 2014). Especially individuals with mental disabilities are known to experience challenges related to education at a higher rate. In a study performed by Akbulut (2012), many mentally retarded individuals are reported to be trained with individualized education programs during pre-university education lives. However, it is emphasized that there are several problems in practice. These are stated as transportation, inexperience, lack of educational equipment, inadequate physical environment, and communication problems with teachers (Gürgür, Kış, & Akçamete, 2012). When an individualized education program is implemented, such problems as lack of equipment, inadequacy of physical conditions in schools, lack of infrastructure, inadequacy of computer use, inadequacy of teachers and insufficient time can be encountered (Öztürk & Eratay, 2010). Even teachers taking part in the implementation of individualized education programs do not know some basic concepts and definitions (Tortop et al., 2015; Tuğrul, Üstün, Akman, Erkan, & Sendoğdu, 2001).

**(5) The participants' considerations related to Department of Disabled Students**

When the participants were asked about the effect of DDS of the university in increasing the awareness of the disabilities, eleven (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11 and P12) of 13 participants were determined to see DDS *"effective"* in a positive manner; even so, two participants (P1 and P13) were found out to response as *"inadequate"*. Emphasizing the activities in the DDS for the disabled students and stating that she wanted to be supported by public, another participant (P8) replied the same question as: *"It was absolutely effective. Before I came here, I couldn't communicate. After I started coming to the DDS, I learned to communicate more easily, the number my friends was proliferated, and we started to do activities. We are trying to do various things in the university, but everyone and the society need to be aware of the condition. For example, I do not like 3rd December, the day of individuals with disabilities. I do not want any activities to be performed on that day. But when we do activities on different days, everyone in Konya should be informed about it. They also know that we are in this community. They shouldn't regard us as strange, but support us."* In terms of the same question, the participant

(P2) both emphasized the importance of the activity for herself and drew attention for the activity to work as bridge between the society and the disabled individuals, responding as:*"For example, as students, let's say the disabled students, we didn't have a chance to play in places like theatres. I am commenting on the play we performed during the last term. I mean by incorporating us into the society more, as awareness, we preformed as if I said 'I don't have an obstacle, I'm not different from you'. I think this theatrical activity also made other friends happy like me."* The point emphasized by P2 is seen to be in line with the tasks of DDS stated in The Consultation and Coordination Regulations of Higher Education Institutions for The Disabled Students (2010). The related regulations have loaded different responsibilities for DDS in universities to help solve all types of problems encountered by the disabled students and perform the necessary studies. The fact that students taking part in no activities until years in universities begin participating in the activities in higher education institutions can be effective in developing disabled students' own skills and improving communicative talents. Such students also wish to be integrated into the society like other individuals by participating in social and cultural activities (Öztabak, 2018; Salderay, 2012). It is stated that students with or without disabilities who will teach knowledge and science should be free (Kalyon, 2012). Especially students with disabilities in universities have difficulties in the way exams are given, the way the lecture is taught is not suitable for students with disabilities, and practice courses (Karakuş et al., 2017). At this point, DDS carries out various practices aimed at facilitating the educational life of students with disabilities such as face-to-face expression, giving projects and assignments considering the disability group, provision of computers for visually impaired students if necessary, and ease of changing courses (Özdelikara & Arslan, 2017).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the study findings, it was found out that the participants realized to be different from their peers when they started *"primary school"* and with *"their friends' making fun of them"*, and as a result of this, they felt *"isolated"* and *"sad"*. Based on the findings, the participants were detected to define the disability as *"an obstacle placed by others"* and not to consider the disability as an obstacle in reaching educational opportunities. Another point is that the participants found their disability status to be *"advantageous"*, compared to other types of disabilities and DDS to be effective in raising awareness about disabilities in higher education institutions.

Based on our study findings, it is recommended that social awareness should be raised for disabled individuals not to be influenced negatively in the community. For this reason, training should not only be confined to schools. Several mechanisms, through which the disabled can be professionally supported, should be constituted. As it is understood that the disabled individuals overcome obstacles by their own efforts, an integrative education model should be adopted in training process of the disabled from early ages, and among the disabled students, those showing improvement should be prepared for participation in social life; the social and educational opportunities of the disabled individuals should not be considered apart from each other. While the curriculum arranging the participation in education is planned, the authorities should be informed and trained with lessons and topics such as approaches to the disabled individuals; and finally, DDS in universities having roles to facilitate the participation of the students with disabilities in the education processes in the universities should perform studies not only for the disabled, but also for healthy individuals. According to these results, it is suggested for the future work to focus on the self-perceptions of the disabled people, the reasons why disabled students see themselves as advantageous among other types of disabilities and the functions of DDS in other universities.

**Ethical Information about Research**

Prior to the interviews, all participants were informed about the aim and design of the study, and also pointed out that the interviews would be recorded in line with their permission, the content of the interviews would be shared with no institutions and persons other than the study, the identification information would not be included into the interviews, and they could be withdrawn whenever they wished.

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