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Investigating Special Education Teachers' Perspectives and Recommendations on Privacy Education for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the opinions and recommendations of special education teachers regarding the privacy education of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Privacy education is a critical component for these individuals to ensure their physical safety, maintain social boundaries, and protect themselves against abuse. The research was designed as a descriptive phenomenological study, an approach particularly suited to exploring teachers' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. The study group consisted of 27 special education teachers working in public special education schools, special education and rehabilitation centers, and guidance research centers in a single metropolitan province in western Türkiye. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers generally define privacy through concepts of secrecy and personal space. A majority of participants further reported that, in the absence of structured privacy instruction, they observed socially unintegrated behaviors associated with sexual development in their students. While the

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importance of early education was emphasized, teachers reported challenges organized around four dimensions: family-related factors, school-related factors, sociocultural factors, and teacher-related factors. The results suggest that privacy education should be systematically integrated into the special education curriculum and supported by family involvement. It is recommended that comprehensive in-service training programs be developed for teachers and awareness-raising programs for parents to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice.
Keywords: Privacy education; Intellectual disabilities (ID); Special education teachers; Descriptive phenomenology; Sexual safety.

Zihin Yetersizliği Olan Bireylerin Mahremiyet Eğitimine İlişkin Özel Eğitim Öğretmenlerinin Görüş ve Önerilerinin İncelenmesi

Öz

Bu araştırma, özel eğitim öğretmenlerinin zihin yetersizliği olan bireylerin mahremiyet eğitimine yönelik görüşlerini ve çözüm önerilerini belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Mahremiyet eğitimi, bu bireylerin fiziksel güvenliğini sağlamak, sosyal sınırlarını kavramalarına yardımcı olmak ve olası istismar durumlarına karşı korunmalarını desteklemek açısından kritik bir öneme sahiptir. Çalışma, öğretmenlerin yaşantılarına ve bu yaşantılara yükledikleri anlamlara odaklanan betimleyici fenomenoloji deseninde tasarlanmıştır. Araştırmanın çalışma grubunu Türkiye'nin batısındaki bir büyükşehirde özel eğitim ve rehabilitasyon merkezleri, resmî özel eğitim okulları ve rehberlik araştırma merkezlerinde görev yapan 27 özel eğitim öğretmeni oluşturmaktadır. Veriler, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme tekniği ile toplanmış ve tümevarımcı tematik analiz yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir. Araştırma bulguları, öğretmenlerin, mahremiyeti genellikle gizlilik ve özel alan kavramları üzerinden tanımladığını ortaya koymuştur. Katılımcıların önemli bir bölümü, yapılandırılmış mahremiyet öğretiminin yokluğunda öğrencilerinde cinsel gelişimle ilişkili sosyal olarak bütünleşmemiş davranışlar gözlemlediklerini belirtmiştir. Erken eğitimin önemine vurgu yapılmasına rağmen, güçlükler dört boyut altında toplanmıştır: aileye ilişkin etmenler, okula ilişkin etmenler, sosyokültürel etmenler ve öğretmene ilişkin etmenler. Sonuç olarak, mahremiyet eğitiminin özel eğitim müfredatına sistematik olarak entegre edilmesi ve aile katılımıyla desteklenmesi gerektiği görülmektedir. Teorik bilgi ile sınıf uygulamaları arasındaki boşluğu kapatmak amacıyla öğretmenlere yönelik kapsamlı hizmet içi eğitimlerin, ailelere yönelik ise farkındalık programlarının geliştirilmesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Mahremiyet eğitimi; Zihin yetersizliği olan bireyler; Özel eğitim öğretmenleri; Betimleyici fenomenoloji; Cinsel güvenlik.

Ethics Statement. This study was approved by the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of the corresponding author's affiliated university (Approval No: 2023/87; 2023/11-07). All participants provided voluntary informed consent prior to data collection.

Introduction

Privacy is a multi-dimensional construct. It encompasses an individual's physical, psychological, and social boundaries. At its core, privacy represents an individual's fundamental right to control access to their body, personal information, and private spaces (Turkish Language Association [TDK], 2021). Within the framework of human rights and personal autonomy, privacy is not merely social etiquette but a vital necessity for the preservation of human dignity. In special education, privacy is widely regarded as an important protective factor for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) with respect to social vulnerability, neglect, and various forms of abuse (Byrne, 2018; Tomsa et al., 2021).

The Theoretical Framework of Privacy in Special Education

This study is theoretically anchored in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), which conceptualizes a child's development as nested within microsystem (family, school), mesosystem (family-school interaction), exosystem (institutional policy, IEP frameworks), and macrosystem (cultural norms, taboos) influences. The model provides a coherent lens for interpreting privacy education as a phenomenon shaped simultaneously by classroom practice, family attitudes, school policy, and culturally embedded constructions of shame. The model is complemented by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (CAST, 2018), which underpins the pedagogical implications discussed in the findings.

Privacy education for individuals with intellectual disabilities is a systematic process. It teaches them to recognize their bodies, distinguish public and private spaces, and understand safe versus unsafe touch. From a developmental perspective, privacy skills are typically acquired through social modeling and incidental learning among typically developing peers. For individuals with ID, these skills often do not develop spontaneously due to cognitive limitations, difficulty perceiving social cues, and challenges with abstract

thinking (McCann et al., 2019). Therefore, privacy must be treated as a functional life skill that requires explicit, structured, and repetitive instruction.

The literature emphasizes three pillars of privacy education: covering (the physical act of dressing appropriately), secrecy (understanding that certain actions, such as hygiene or sexual expression, are not for public view), and boundaries (the ability to say no to unwanted physical contact). Across the international literature, individuals with disabilities are reported to be at substantially higher risk of sexual victimization than their peers without disabilities (Mailhot Amborski et al., 2021; Sullivan and Knutson, 2000); accordingly, privacy education has been framed as an essential protective practice.

Conceptual Boundaries: Privacy, Sexuality, and Safety Education

Although the constructs of privacy education, sexuality education, safety education, and social skills instruction frequently overlap in the literature, the present study treats them as conceptually distinct. Privacy education, as conceptualized here, refers to a structured set of instructional practices designed to help learners recognize private body parts, distinguish public from private spaces, identify safe and unsafe touch, and exercise bodily autonomy. Sexuality education encompasses a broader curriculum addressing biological development, reproduction, and relationships; safety education concerns wider personal safety (e.g., traffic, online safety); and social skills instruction targets interpersonal communication and norms. The present study restricts its scope to privacy education while acknowledging its conceptual interfaces with these adjacent domains.

Challenges and Risks for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

The vulnerability of individuals with ID arises from several interconnected factors. Many of these individuals need high levels of support for daily activities, such as bathing, dressing, and toileting. This constant physical contact with multiple caregivers can blur the individual's sense of bodily autonomy. Existing studies further suggest that the desire for social acceptance often makes individuals with ID more compliant with the demands of others, and that a lack of communication skills or appropriate vocabulary to describe private parts often prevents them from reporting inappropriate behavior.

In the Turkish educational context, research indicates that privacy is frequently approached with hesitation by both families and educators (Bilmez et al., 2026; Kürtüncü and Kurt, 2020), and is often addressed implicitly rather than as an explicit instructional goal. When privacy education is neglected,

students may exhibit behaviors such as undressing in public or touching others inappropriately, which are often misinterpreted as behavioral problems rather than the absence of educational guidance (Bilmez et al., 2026).

Privacy Education Research in the Turkish Context

Although still limited, a growing body of research has examined privacy education for individuals with intellectual disabilities in Türkiye. Kürtüncü and Kurt (2020) examined the views of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities and reported that the mothers' knowledge of their children's sexual development was limited and that they had difficulty managing the related behaviors. Bilmez et al., (2026) documented special education teachers' experiences of inappropriate sexual behaviors in Türkiye and identified reactive rather than planned responses, the limited availability of systematic privacy instruction, and gaps in teacher competence and home-school collaboration as recurrent themes. The instructional program developed by Uçar Rasmussen and Çifci Tekinarslan (2024), which taught sexual abuse prevention skills through stories and accompanying pictures, represents an early attempt to develop and evaluate a domestic privacy- and safety-skills curriculum for learners with intellectual disabilities.

These studies have made important contributions by identifying parental attitudes, teacher self-efficacy, and curricular gaps. However, they have predominantly focused either on parents in isolation or on broader sexuality-education constructs, with limited in-depth qualitative engagement with the day-to-day pedagogical reasoning of teachers who deliver privacy-related instruction. Specifically, less is known about how teachers conceptualize privacy in classroom practice, how they translate this construct into individualized goals, and how they navigate the intersection of cultural sensitivities and instructional decision-making. The present study addresses this gap by foregrounding teachers' lived experiences using a descriptive phenomenological approach.

The Role of Special Education Teachers

Teachers are among the central actors of the learning environment for students with ID. They must identify each student's needs and integrate privacy goals into the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Beyond pedagogical knowledge, teachers also navigate ethical, cultural, and emotional considerations specific to this content area.

Studies indicate that teachers often report feeling unprepared and unsupported when it comes to delivering privacy education. This feeling is compounded by the lack of standardized curricula, the absence of visual and tactile instructional materials tailored for ID students, and the fear of negative reactions from parents, which together form significant barriers (Strnadová et al., 2022). At the same time, however, recent studies have begun to document the effective practices teachers themselves develop, such as the adaptation of social stories, the use of routine-embedded modeling, and the careful staging of family conferences (Miltenberger and Novotny, 2022; Uçar Rasmussen and Çifci Tekinarslan, 2024). These positive practices are an important counterpoint to deficit-oriented accounts and informed our decision to ask participants explicitly about both challenges and successful strategies.

The Research Gap and Significance of the Study

Although there is a growing body of international literature on sexual health education for individuals with disabilities, qualitative research from Türkiye that focuses specifically on teachers' lived experiences of privacy education remains limited. Most studies are quantitative or examine only parental views.

This study aims to contribute to this literature by exploring, through a descriptive phenomenological lens, how 27 special education teachers in a single metropolitan context conceptualize and implement privacy education. While the single-province sampling limits broad generalization (see Limitations), the in-depth qualitative engagement offers a context-rich account that may inform subsequent studies, IEP template development, and in-service training design.

The Purpose of the Research

This study aims to investigate the opinions and recommendations of special education teachers regarding the privacy education of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The research questions are:

1. How do special education teachers define the concept of privacy within the context of intellectual disability?
2. What are the perceived needs and justifications for privacy education according to teachers?
3. What systemic, cultural, and pedagogical barriers do teachers face when implementing privacy goals?

4. What specific improvements do teachers recommend for the IEP, teacher training, and parent involvement processes?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design, a qualitative research methodology that focuses on uncovering the essence of a shared experience (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). Phenomenological research is particularly well-suited for this study, as it seeks to explore the lived experiences of special education teachers regarding privacy education. Consistent with Husserl's epistemological foundation, the descriptive phenomenological approach was operationalized in three concrete ways. First, data collection focused on detailed first-person accounts of teachers' classroom experiences, with interview questions structured around what was experienced and how it was experienced (textural and structural descriptions). Second, bracketing (epoché) was implemented through the researchers' written reflexive memos prior to and during analysis, in which prior assumptions, professional roles, and cultural positions were articulated and set aside. Third, analysis followed Moustakas's (1994) recommendation of horizontalization, treating each participant statement as initially equal in significance prior to clustering into themes.

Researcher Positionality

In line with phenomenological methodological standards, the researchers' positions are made explicit here. The first researcher is a faculty member in a Department of Special Education with prior teaching experience in special education and rehabilitation settings and previously published work on individuals with developmental disabilities. The second researcher is a qualitative methodologist with no prior content expertise in privacy education and served as an external auditor during coding to counterbalance content-related preconceptions. The first researcher's familiarity with the field facilitated rapport and contextual interpretation but also carried a risk of confirmatory framing; this was addressed through reflexive journaling, peer debriefing with two colleagues uninvolved in the study, and the deliberate inclusion of an external coder during analysis.

Study Group

The study group was determined using purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling. The selection criteria included: (1) being a certified special

education teacher; (2) having at least three years of professional experience working with students with intellectual disabilities, a criterion set to ensure that participants had encountered a sufficient range of privacy-related instructional situations; and (3) currently working in a setting in which IEPs are routinely developed. The research was conducted with 27 special education teachers (18 females and 9 males) working in special education and rehabilitation centers, public special education schools, and guidance research centers in a single metropolitan province in western Türkiye. Participants' professional experience ranged from 3 to 30 years (M = 18.7, SD = 7.9), providing diverse perspectives. To maintain strict confidentiality, all participants were assigned alphanumeric codes (e.g., T1, T2, ..., T27). Sample size was guided by the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016); recruitment continued until the research team judged that no new themes were emerging across three successive interviews, indicating thematic saturation. Detailed demographic characteristics of the study group are presented in Table 1.

Following reviewer feedback, the column previously labeled Tier has been renamed Service Setting / Tier and refers to the structured grouping of students by support intensity used in Turkish special education and rehabilitation centers (Tier 2 = students requiring moderate support; Tier 3 = students requiring extensive support; Tier 4 = students requiring pervasive support). RAM refers to Guidance Research Center (Rehberlik Araştırma Merkezi).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participating Special Education Teachers

Participant	Age	Gender	Graduated department	Years of experience	Service setting / Tier
P1	29	Male	Special Education Teaching	6	Tier 2
P2	58	Female	Classroom Teaching	27	Tier 4
P3	46	Male	Classroom Teaching	22	Tier 3
P4	57	Male	Classroom Teaching	30	Tier 3
P5	47	Male	Curriculum and Instruction	21	Tier 3
P6	31	Female	Hearing-Impaired Teaching	10	Tier 3
P7	33	Female	ID Teaching	12	Tier 2
P8	52	Female	Hearing-Impaired Teaching	30	Tier 2
P9	41	Female	Classroom Teaching	20	Tier 3
P10	35	Female	ID Teaching	10	Tier 3
P11	42	Female	ID Teaching	20	Tier 3
P12	37	Female	Special Education Teaching	6	Tier 3
P13	49	Female	Curriculum and Instruction	22	Tier 3
P14	46	Female	Biology	25	Tier 3
P15	40	Male	Classroom Teaching	18	Tier 3
P16	29	Female	ID Teaching	8	Tier 3
P17	40	Male	Classroom Teaching	13	Tier 3
P18	29	Female	ID Teaching	6	Tier 3
P19	43	Female	ID Teaching	21	RAM
P20	36	Female	Classroom Teaching	13	RAM
P21	40	Male	ID Teaching	16	RAM
P22	43	Male	ID Teaching	17	RAM
P23	52	Female	French Language & Literature	28	RAM
P24	41	Female	Classroom Teaching	18	RAM
P25	46	Male	Hearing-Impaired Teaching	21	RAM
P26	45	Male	Hearing-Impaired Teaching	27	Tier 2
P27	45	Female	Hearing-Impaired Teaching	21	Tier 2

Note. ID = Intellectual Disabilities; RAM = Guidance Research Center .

Data Collection Tools

The primary data were collected through a semi-structured interview form designed by the researchers. Interview questions were developed from three theoretical anchors derived from the literature review: (a) conceptualization of privacy (Frawley and O'Shea, 2020; UNESCO, 2018), (b) instructional implementation within an IEP framework (drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological model and Eisner's (2002) concept of null curriculum), and (c) perceived barriers and supports (Bilmez et al., 2026; Strnadová et al., 2022). Initially, a pool of 15 open-ended questions was generated. To ensure content validity, the form was reviewed by three independent experts in special education and qualitative methodology; on the basis of their feedback,

two semantically overlapping questions were merged, the wording of three questions was clarified (e.g., sexual was replaced with privacy-related where the original phrasing was likely to bias responses), and one question on perceived institutional support was added. A pilot interview was conducted with two teachers (excluded from the final sample) to test the comprehensibility of the questions and the flow of the protocol; following the pilot, the order of two questions was reversed (placing the conceptualization item before the implementation item), and one prompt was simplified for cultural sensitivity, resulting in the final 13-item interview form.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted through individual interviews, either face-to-face in a quiet environment or via secure online video platforms, at the participant's preference. Of the 27 interviews, 19 were conducted face-to-face and 8 via secure video conferencing. Data were collected between September 2023 and February 2024. Each session lasted between 30 and 55 minutes. Face-to-face interviews averaged 47 minutes and online interviews averaged 41 minutes; code density per minute was comparable across modalities, but face-to-face interviews yielded somewhat richer affective content, a pattern acknowledged as a possible source of variability (see Limitations). Before each interview, participants were provided with a Voluntary Informed Consent Form detailing the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent. Audio files were stored on encrypted, password-protected institutional storage accessible only to the research team and will be deleted five years after publication in accordance with institutional data-protection policy (KVKK, 2016). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant University Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 2023/87, No: 2023/11-07).

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) data familiarization (repeated reading of all 27 transcripts), (2) generation of initial codes (line-by-line open coding), (3) searching for themes (clustering codes into candidate sub-themes), (4) reviewing themes against the dataset, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. A total of 96 initial codes were generated, systematically clustered into 17 sub-themes, and ultimately synthesized into four overarching themes.

To illustrate the analytic process, a sample code-sub-theme-theme pathway is provided. The participant statement it is shameful to even name some body parts here was initially coded as naming as taboo. Together with the related codes parental avoidance of body talk, institutional silence, and teacher hesitation, this code was clustered into the sub-theme Cultural Taboos and the Concept of Shame, which in turn contributed to the overarching theme Socio-Cultural Barriers to Privacy Education. A similar pathway is documented in the audit trail for each of the 17 sub-themes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through the four-criterion framework of Guba and Lincoln (1982): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through expert validation of the interview protocol by three specialists, member checking with three purposively selected participants representing contrasting service settings (one Tier 2, one Tier 3, and one RAM), and peer debriefing with two colleagues uninvolved in the study. Transferability was enhanced through thick description of the setting and participant characteristics (Table 1). Dependability was supported through a systematic audit trail and through inter-coder reliability calculated using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula, reliability = agreements / (agreements + disagreements) × 100; two coders independently coded 20% of the dataset, yielding 92% agreement, after which discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussion. Confirmability was addressed through bracketing (see Researcher Positionality) and the maintenance of a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis.

Findings

The findings of this study were derived from the inductive thematic analysis of qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 special education teachers. The analysis yielded four overarching themes organized along four interlocking dimensions: conceptual, behavioral-instructional, socio-cultural and systemic, and recommendation-oriented. The findings tables are structured in a Theme / Sub-theme / Code / Frequency format, and interpretive commentary is reserved for the Discussion section so that this section retains a strictly descriptive function.

Theme 1: Conceptualization of Privacy in the Context of Intellectual Disability

The first stage of the analysis explored how special education teachers conceptualize the phenomenon of privacy. The distribution of codes is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Theme 1 — Conceptualization of Privacy: Sub-themes, Codes, and Frequencies

Sub-theme	Code	f
Privacy as concealment	Secrecy and confidentiality	18
Privacy as concealment	Personal space and physical boundaries	15
Privacy as bodily marker	Anatomical privacy (private body parts)	12
Privacy as autonomy	Bodily autonomy and the right to refuse	8
Privacy as social practice	Contextual privacy and social norms	6
Privacy as protection	Protection and sexual safety	5
Total		64

Table 2 indicates that the most frequently expressed conceptualization was Secrecy and Confidentiality (f = 18), followed by Personal Space and Physical Boundaries (f = 15). A smaller subset of participants articulated privacy in terms of bodily autonomy (f = 8) or social-contextual norms (f = 6). One participant (T4) articulated the secrecy conceptualization:

Privacy, for me, is the boundary of secrecy. It is the invisible wall that separates the individual's private sphere from the external environment. For our students, it means understanding that certain bodily functions and personal information are not for public consumption.

T12 reflected the personal-space conceptualization:

We explain privacy as a personal zone. It's about knowing where one's body ends and another person's territory begins. Since our students often lack a natural sense of social distance, we teach them to visualize a physical boundary that should not be crossed without permission.

T18 highlighted the anatomical framing:

We operationalize the concept by referring to it as the areas covered by a swimsuit. By using these clear anatomical markers, we give the students a tangible way to identify what is private. If they can name it, they can begin to protect it.

T27 articulated the autonomy framing:

Ultimately, privacy is the power to say no. The student realizes that their body belongs only to them. When we teach privacy, we are essentially teaching them that they have the right to refuse any touch that makes them uncomfortable, which is the cornerstone of their personal safety.

Theme 2: Perceived Necessity of Privacy Education and Observed Student Behaviors

The second theme captures teachers' rationales for privacy instruction and the behavioral observations that informed those rationales. Codes and frequencies are presented in Table 3. The descriptor previously phrased as inappropriate sexual behaviors has been replaced with the more neutral and clinically aligned socially unintegrated behaviors associated with sexual development.

Table 3. Theme 2 — Necessity of Privacy Education and Observed Behaviors: Sub-themes, Codes, and Frequencies

Sub-theme	Code	f
Justification for instruction	Protection against abuse	21
Justification for instruction	Social inclusion and dignity	14
Justification for instruction	Preparation for adolescence	11
Observed student behaviors	Public undressing	17
Observed student behaviors	Inappropriate touch (self/others)	13
Observed student behaviors	Public masturbation	9
Observed student behaviors	Confusion regarding personal space	8
Total		93

As Table 3 indicates, Protection against abuse (f = 21) was the most frequently cited justification, followed by Social inclusion and dignity (f = 14). The most frequently reported observed behavior was Public undressing (f = 17). T9 reported:

Almost every year, in nearly every classroom I have worked in, I have encountered at least one student who undresses in places that are not appropriate. This is not because the child is misbehaving. It is because no one ever taught them where and when undressing is appropriate.

Theme 3: Barriers to Implementation across Family, School, Cultural, and Teacher Dimensions

Theme 3 is structured along four bio-ecologically informed dimensions: family-related, school and institutional, socio-cultural, and teacher-related factors. Codes and frequencies are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Theme 3 — Barriers to Implementation: Sub-themes, Codes, and Frequencies

Sub-theme	Code	f
Family-related factors	Parental resistance	17
Family-related factors	Limited parental knowledge	12
School and institutional factors	Absence of structured privacy goals in the IEP	19
School and institutional factors	Deficiency of specialized instructional materials	15
School and institutional factors	Time constraints and overcrowded curriculum	8
Socio-cultural factors	Cultural taboos and the concept of shame	22
Teacher-related factors	Inadequate pre-service and in-service training	13
Total		106

Within the socio-cultural dimension, Cultural Taboos and the Concept of Shame (f = 22) was the most frequent code. One participant (T7) reflected:

We are operating within a social structure where even naming certain body parts is labeled as shameful (ayıp). Parents often approach us with the mindset that they are innocent, they don't need to know these things. This cultural shielding actually leaves the students more vulnerable because it prevents us from providing them with the necessary safety vocabulary.

Within the family dimension, Parental Resistance (f = 17) emerged prominently. T11 highlighted:

Even if we teach the boundaries at school, if the family continues to bathe the child without privacy or doesn't allow us to use visual aids depicting body parts, the education becomes inconsistent. Many parents see this education as giving ideas to the child rather than protecting them.

Within the school and institutional dimension, the Absence of Structured Privacy Goals in the IEP (f = 19) was identified as a key concern. T15 noted:

When you look at the IEP templates provided to us, there is almost no specific guidance on how to teach bodily boundaries or sexual safety. We are essentially left to improvise our own curricula, which leads to differences between classrooms.

Within the teacher dimension, the lack of structured professional preparation (f = 13) was widely reported. T2 noted:

My undergraduate degree in special education was comprehensive, yet it remained relatively silent on sexual health and privacy instruction. We are expected to manage these situations in the classroom, but we have not been given the theoretical or practical training to do so confidently.

Theme 4: Teachers' Recommendations for Enhancing Privacy Education

Table 5. Theme 4 — Recommendations: Sub-themes, Codes, and Frequencies

Sub-theme	Code	f
Instructional resources	Development of standardized visual and tactile materials	25
Institutional structure	Formal integration of privacy goals into the IEP	23
Professional development	Comprehensive in-service training programs	20
Family involvement	Mandatory awareness programs for parents	19
Early intervention	Initiating privacy education at preschool level	14
Multi-sectoral collaboration	Collaboration with health and legal professionals	6
Total		107

Recommendations centered on the development of standardized instructional materials (f = 25) and the formal integration of privacy goals into the IEP (f = 23). Importantly, participants did not endorse a single instructional modality; rather, social stories, 3D anatomical models, visual schedules, video modeling, and role-play scripts were all proposed as components of a more comprehensive instructional toolkit. T25 articulated the need:

We cannot expect these children to understand boundaries through words alone. We need a range of resources: social stories, anatomical models, visual schedules, video models, specifically designed for their cognitive levels. A single material type is not enough; what we need is a coordinated kit.

Discussion

This study explored special education teachers' perceptions, observations, challenges, and recommendations regarding privacy education for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The discussion is organized around headings that mirror the findings structure.

Conceptualizing Privacy: From Secrecy to Autonomy

Teachers' definitions of privacy in this sample tended to cluster around secrecy, confidentiality, and anatomical boundaries. This concrete framing is pedagogically pragmatic and aligns with the concrete, skill-based framing of

personal safety instruction recommended for learners with cognitive disabilities (Miltenberger and Novotny, 2022). At the same time, autonomy-oriented framings were less frequent, which may suggest, within the limits of this single-province sample, that broader conceptualizations of bodily autonomy and consent (Frawley and O'Shea, 2020; UNESCO, 2018) are not yet uniformly integrated into teachers' working definitions. Rather than positioning this as a categorical protectionist stance, an inference our sample size does not warrant, the finding is more cautiously read as an opportunity for in-service training that complements the existing emphasis on physical safety with autonomy- and rights-based content.

Observed Behaviors and Their Pedagogical Implications

The observed behaviors reported by participants, including public undressing, inappropriate touch, and public masturbation, are consistent with developmental expectations during puberty and have been documented across international samples of learners with ID (Hellemans et al., 2007; Sullivan and Knutson, 2000). The teachers in this study did not frame these behaviors as inherent to disability; rather, they framed them as developmentally typical responses that, in the absence of structured instruction, can be misread by surrounding social systems. This reading is consistent with the bio-ecological framing adopted in the present study and underscores the importance of curricular and family-level interventions in tandem with classroom instruction.

Cultural and Systemic Factors

The interplay between cultural sensitivities and systemic gaps emerged across the dataset. The construct of ayıp (broadly, that which is socially shameful) was widely cited by participants. Theoretically, this resonates with prior conceptualizations of shame-based and face-based social regulation in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies (Ataca, 2009; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007), as well as with Eisner's (2002) account of the null curriculum, that is, of what schooling systematically leaves untaught. We treat ayıp not as a monolithic cultural feature but as a discursive resource that participants invoked to explain hesitation in both home and school contexts.

Systemically, the reported absence of explicit privacy goals in IEP templates can be interpreted, in this sample, through Eisner's (2002) concept of the null curriculum, that is, what schools choose not to teach. We note, however, that this is a partial reading: in addition to curricular omission, participants pointed to limitations in pre-service teacher preparation, institutional

support, and policy guidance, which together suggest that any single explanatory frame is insufficient.

Effective Practices Identified by Teachers

Although much of the manuscript necessarily focuses on challenges, participants also described practices they had found effective in their own settings. These included embedding privacy modeling within routine self-care activities such as toileting and dressing, adapting commercial and self-developed social stories to local cultural sensitivities, conducting structured family conferences in which the same vocabulary was negotiated between home and school, and co-teaching with school counselors when introducing sensitive content. These reports indicate that, despite systemic constraints, teachers actively construct contextually adapted practices that warrant further empirical evaluation.

Implications for Materials, Training, and Policy

The strong call for standardized visual and tactile materials echoes the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), which emphasizes multiple means of representation. The participants' suggestion of a coordinated instructional toolkit, encompassing social stories, anatomical models, video modeling, and role-play scripts rather than any single material, is consistent with this principle. A practical implementation pathway might involve a pilot consortium of universities, the Ministry of National Education, and special education and rehabilitation centers, with iterative co-design and field testing in two or three provinces prior to national scaling.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered. First, the sample was drawn from a single metropolitan province in western Türkiye, and the findings are therefore not statistically generalizable; analytic transferability requires comparable cultural and institutional conditions. Second, the data are based on teacher self-report; parental and student perspectives were not directly collected. Third, although interview modality (face-to-face vs. online) did not produce major differences in code density, online interviews yielded somewhat less affective content, which may have shaped some accounts. Fourth, the first researcher's prior experience in the field, while methodologically addressed through reflexive memos and an external coder, remains a potential interpretive influence.

Future research should pursue longitudinal designs to evaluate the long-term effects of structured privacy instruction, multi-stakeholder designs that include parents and students, and quantitative studies in geographically diverse samples to test the transferability of the present themes.

Conclusion

This study provides a context-rich phenomenological account of how 27 special education teachers in a single metropolitan province in western Türkiye conceptualize and implement privacy education for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The results confirm that while teachers recognize privacy education as a fundamental safety and rights issue, the actual practice remains fragmented and secondary to traditional academic goals. Within the limits of the sample, the findings suggest that teachers' working definitions of privacy lean toward concealment and anatomical markers rather than autonomy and consent, and that the principal challenges cluster across family, school, socio-cultural, and teacher dimensions.

The contribution of the study lies in its in-depth qualitative engagement with teachers' lived experience, the bio-ecologically structured restatement of barriers, and the documentation of effective practices teachers have developed despite limited institutional support. The corresponding limitation is that the findings, grounded in a single-province purposive sample, are not statistically generalizable; they are best understood as analytically transferable to settings with comparable cultural and institutional conditions.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Curriculum reform. The Ministry of National Education should formally integrate privacy and safety goals into the special education curriculum and IEP templates, with developmentally sequenced and measurable objectives.

Toolkit-based materials. Rather than reliance on a single instructional modality, a coordinated National Privacy Education Toolkit, including social stories, 3D anatomical models, video modeling sequences, visual schedules, and role-play scripts, should be developed, piloted in two or three provinces, evaluated, and revised prior to national scaling.

Professional development. Pre-service and in-service teacher training programs should be revised to include practical modules on privacy instruction, crisis management of sexualized behaviors, and strategies for engaging culturally sensitive content.

Family empowerment. Schools should implement parent awareness programs and structured family conferences to align home and school vocabulary.

Multi-sectoral collaboration. Privacy education should be treated as a multi-sectoral issue, involving collaboration between special educators, healthcare professionals, and legal experts.

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