The Unspoken Connection: A Teacher's Journey in Understanding How Non-Verbal Autistic Learners Communicate

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Abstract

Inclusive education for non-verbal autistic learners relied significantly on teachers' ability to interpret non-verbal communication, implement adaptive teaching strategies, and create supportive learning environments. However, challenges such as a lack of specialized training, difficulty in recognizing non-verbal cues, and limited institutional support hindered effective engagement. This study examined the experiences of educators working with non-verbal autistic students in inclusive education settings in Mati City, Davao Oriental, Philippines. Using a qualitative research design, the study explored themes related to teacher adaptability, instructional strategies, sensory-friendly environments, and collaborative support among educators, parents, and specialists. The findings revealed that while educators employed patience, structured routines, and visual-based teaching techniques to foster engagement, challenges such as frustration in initial interactions, trial-and-error learning approaches, and emotional strain remained prevalent. Addressing these issues required enhanced professional development programs, mentorship opportunities, and institutional policies that promoted individualized instruction and assistive communication tools.

Introduction

Non-verbal autistic learners posed a significant challenge in classrooms, as traditional verbal-focused teaching methods failed to meet their unique communication needs. Baker et al. (2017) highlighted the difficulties educators faced due to pervasive communication barriers when supporting these learners. Additionally, non-verbal autistic individuals, comprising an estimated 25% to 35% of those on the autism spectrum, experienced restricted functional speech, making teacher-student engagement particularly complex. Febriantini, Fitriati, and Oktaviani (2021) emphasized that these communication difficulties resulted in academic and social isolation, while educators struggled to implement effective interventions.

Globally, teachers faced significant challenges in addressing the communication needs of non-verbal autistic learners, creating barriers to effective education and social integration. Across diverse contexts, such as the United States and Indonesia, traditional verbal-focused teaching methods often failed to accommodate these learners' unique communication styles, leaving educators struggling to establish meaningful interactions. According to Febriantini, Fitriati, and Oktaviani (2021), the inability to address these needs resulted in academic and social isolation for non-verbal autistic learners, further highlighting the inadequacy of existing educational frameworks.

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In the Philippines, addressing communication barriers between teachers and non-verbal autistic learners became a pressing concern, particularly in local communities. According to Leosala (2023) and Febriantini, Fitriati, and Oktaviani (2021), Filipino educators often lacked access to specialized training and culturally adapted strategies, leaving them ill-equipped to interpret the unique communicative behaviors of non-verbal autistic learners. This issue was evident in Mati Central District, Mati City, Davao Oriental, where teachers faced significant challenges in fostering meaningful engagement with non-verbal learners due to gaps in training and tailored interventions.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory served as the foundation for understanding how teachers developed communication strategies for non-verbal autistic learners. This study highlighted the importance of firsthand experience in shaping educators' ability to engage with students who relied on non-verbal communication methods. Teachers learned through direct interaction, observing behavioral patterns, and adjusting instructional approaches to suit each learner's unique communication style. By continuously reflecting on their experiences, educators refined their techniques, incorporating visual aids, assistive technologies, and structured routines to enhance student engagement and comprehension.
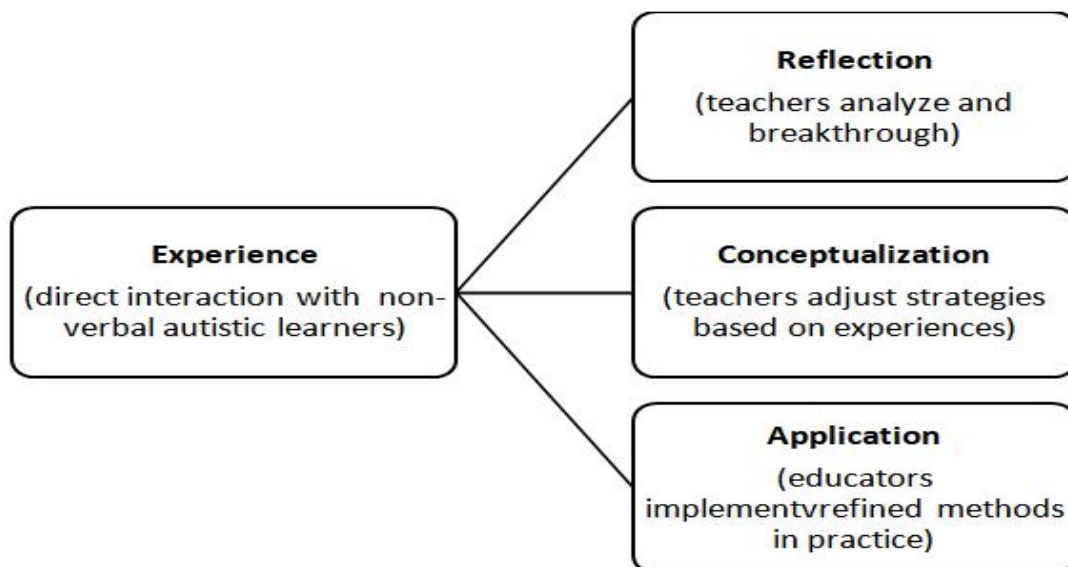

Figure No. 1 in this study presented a visual representation of how David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory applied to teachers' lived experiences with non-verbal autistic learners. It highlighted key concepts such as learning through experience, reflection, and adaptation in an educational setting.

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Methodology

This chapter provided a detailed account of the qualitative research design, participant selection criteria, ethical safeguards, data collection methods, and the analytical techniques employed to ensure the study's credibility. This study adopted a qualitative research design anchored in a phenomenological approach, drawing on the key insights of Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (2016). Phenomenology provided a method for uncovering the lived experiences of educators by encouraging a deliberate process of "bracketing"—setting aside preexisting assumptions to authentically engage with participants' accounts.

This study was conducted within the Mati Central District, Mati City, Davao Oriental, selecting schools with teachers actively working with autistic learners. This setting represented the challenges faced in resource-limited educational environments while offering opportunities to explore adaptive teaching practices. This study involved six purposively selected teachers from the Mati Central District, Mati City, Davao Oriental, who specifically handled classrooms with non-verbal autistic learners. These educators, despite lacking specialized training, were actively engaged in addressing the unique communication and behavioral challenges posed by these students. This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines throughout all stages of research. Prior to data collection, teachers received comprehensive explanations regarding the study's objectives and procedures and voluntarily provided written informed consent. Confidentiality was safeguarded by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and securely storing data.

This study used thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify, organize, and interpret patterns emerging from participants' narratives. The analysis process began with data familiarization, during which interview transcripts and observation notes were reviewed repeatedly.

Results

This section presented the qualitative data gathered to achieve the study's objectives. The data was sourced from audio-video recordings of teachers working with learners with disabilities at Mati Central District, Mati City, Davao Oriental. These recordings were manually transcribed and translated into English to ensure accuracy and clarity in the analysis.

Through the analysis of key statements from each interview transcript, meanings were derived, and recurring patterns were identified. Thematic analysis was then applied to develop and organize the resulting themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences in communicating with non-verbal autistic learners.
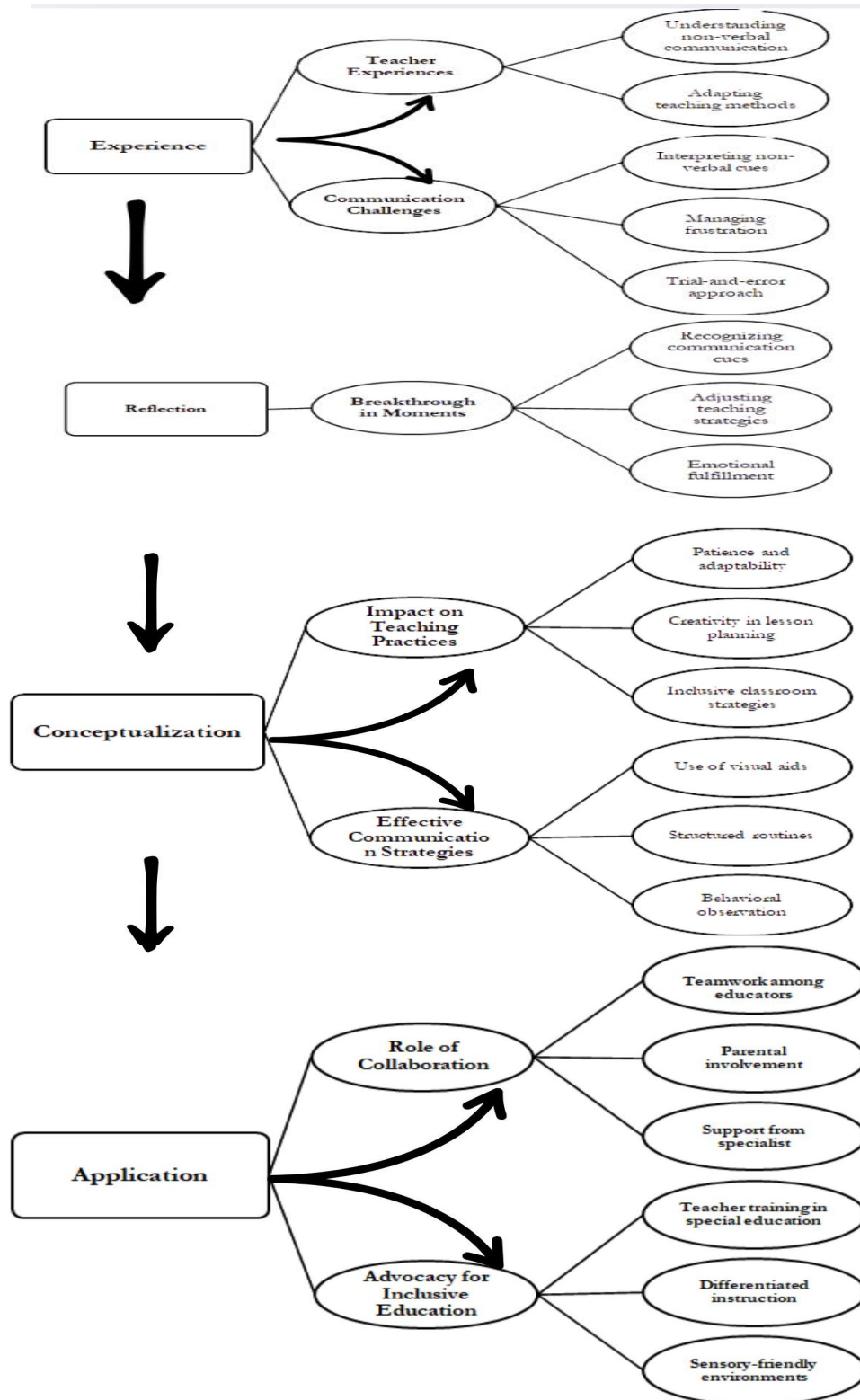
Figure 2: Modified Paradigm of Educators' Lived Realities in Teaching Students with Communication Challenges

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Figure 2. presented the four emergent themes and corresponding sub-themes derived from the lived experiences of teachers instructing students with communication difficulties. This thematic map provided a structured representation of the challenges, strategies, growth, and collaborative efforts shared by participants, offering valuable insights into effective teaching practices in inclusive education.

Themes	Subthemes
Teachers' Experiences	Understanding non-verbal communication
	Adapting teaching methods
Communication Challenges	Interpreting non-verbal cues
	Managing frustration
	Trial-and-error approach
Effective Communication Strategies	Use of visual aids
	Structured routines
	Behavioral observation
Breakthrough Moments	Recognizing communication cues
	Adjusting teaching strategies
	Emotional fulfillment
Role of Collaboration	Parental involvement
	Support from specialists
	Teamwork among educators
Impact on Teaching Practices	Patience and adaptability
	Creativity in lesson planning
	Inclusive classroom strategies
Advocacy for Inclusive Education	Teacher training in special education
	Differentiated instruction
	Sensory-friendly environments

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Teachers' Experiences
Teaching non-verbal autistic learners required patience, adaptability, and a profound understanding of individualized communication needs. Many educators initially struggled to interpret non-verbal cues, adjust their teaching methods, and find effective ways to engage students.

Understanding Non-Verbal Communication
"Lisod jud sa una kay wala koy idea unsaon pag-communicate nila. Murag maglibog ko kung unsa ilang gusto kay dili sila mo-express verbally."
(It was really difficult at first because I had no idea how to communicate with them. I was confused about what they wanted since they couldn't express themselves verbally.) – Participant 1

Adapting Teaching Methods
"Giunsa nako sila paglantaw ug giunsa nako paghulma ang ilang kasinatian sa pagkat-on aron matabangan sila nga maablihan ang ilang tibuok potensyal bisan pa sa ilang mga hagit, nagasalig kini sa akong kaugalingong kasinatian."
(How I perceive them and how I shape their learning experiences to help them unlock their full potential despite their challenges is based on my personal experience.) – Participant 5

Empathy and Emotional Support
"Nagtuo ang ilang mga magtutudlo sa ilang potensyal ug naghatag kanila ug gugma ug pag-atiman, nga makatabang gyud sa ilang pagsalig sa kaugalingon."
(Their teachers believe in their potential and give them love and care, which can really help boost the self-esteem of learners with disabilities.) – Participant 2
"Nagtuo ko nga ang pagila sa potensyal sa mga magtutudlo nga adunay kakulian ug ang pagpahigugma ug pag-atiman kanila makapauswag sa ilang kumpiyansa."
(I believe that recognizing the potential of learners with disabilities and showing them love and care can significantly boost their confidence.) – Participant 4

Recognizing Students' Capabilities
"Nakakita ko sa mga magtutudlo nga adunay kakulian nga mga kabalo nga indibidwal nga makahatag ug mahinungdanong kontribusyon sa palibot sa pagkat-on. Ang empatiya makatabang sa mas maayong pagsabot ug pagpasensya."
(I see students with disabilities as capable individuals who can make meaningful contributions to the learning environment. Empathy helps improve understanding and patience.) – Participant 3

Communication Challenges
Teaching non-verbal autistic learners presented unique challenges, particularly in interpreting non-verbal cues, managing frustration in initial interactions, and adopting a trial-and-error approach to communication.

Interpreting Non-Verbal Cues
"Lisod jud sa una kay dili ko kasabot sa ilang mga lihok ug reaksyon. Usahay, murag naglibog ko kung unsa ilang gusto."
(It was really difficult at first because I couldn't understand their movements and reactions. Sometimes, I felt confused about what they wanted.) – Participant 1

Managing Frustration in Initial Interactions
"Usahay, murag dili sila mo-react sa akong efforts. Maka-feel ko ug doubt kung sakto ba akong gibuhat."
(Sometimes, they don't seem to respond to my efforts. I feel doubtful if I'm doing the right thing.) – Participant 3

Adopting a Trial-and-Error Approach
"Nag-try ko ug flashcards, pero murag dili effective. Mao to nga nag-experiment ko ug sign language ug mas nakatabang siya."
(I tried using flashcards, but they didn't seem effective. So I experimented with sign language, and it helped more.) – Participant 5

Effective Communication Strategies

Teaching non-verbal autistic learners required specialized communication strategies that enhanced their ability to express themselves and engage in learning.

Use of Visual Aids

"Visual schedules ug timers. Helps them anticipate unsa sunod buhaton."

(Visual schedules and timers help them anticipate what comes next.) – Participant 4

Structured Routines for Predictability

"Structured routine ug consistency. Kung kabalo sila sa flow sa klase, mas dali sila mo-engage."

(A structured routine and consistency help them engage better when they know the flow of the class.) – Participant 2

Observing and Responding to Behavioral Patterns

"Nag-try ko ug flashcards, pero murag dili effective. Mao to nga nag-experiment ko ug sign language ug mas nakatabang siya."

(I tried using flashcards, but they didn't seem effective. So I experimented with sign language, and it helped more.) – Participant 5

Breakthrough Moments

Teaching non-verbal autistic learners presented unique challenges, but educators often experienced breakthrough moments that reshaped their approach to communication and instruction.

Recognizing Communication Cues

"Katong time nga usa ka bata nakalearn ug basic PECS ug nakastorya sa iyang mama gamit pictures. Maka-hilak jud ko sa kalipay!"

(That moment when a student learned basic PECS and was able to communicate with his mother using pictures—I was moved to tears with happiness!) – Participant 5

Adjusting Teaching Methods for Success

"Naa ko'y student nga dili jud mo-participate, pero pag-introduce nako ug music therapy, ni-improve iyang engagement."

(I had a student who wouldn't participate, but when I introduced music therapy, his engagement improved.) – Participant 6

Emotional Fulfillment in Teaching

"Maka-feel jud ko ug kalipay kung makita nako nga nakasabot sila ug mo-engage sa klase."

(I feel so happy when I see them understand and engage in class.) – Participant 3

Role of Collaboration

Collaboration played a critical role in ensuring the success of non-verbal autistic learners in an inclusive educational setting.

Parental Involvement in Communication Strategies

"Dako kaayo ug tabang ang parents. Kung consistent ang approach sa balay ug sa school, mas dali sila mo-learn."

(Parents are a huge help. If the approach is consistent at home and school, they learn more easily.) – Participant 1

Guidance from Specialists and SPED Teachers

"Ang specialists pud kay naghatag ug guidance sa mga best practices."

(Specialists also provided guidance on best practices.) – Participant 3

Teamwork Among Educators

"Kung magtinabangay ang mga magtutudlo, mas dali ang pag-develop ug mga epektibong pamaagi sa pagtudlo."

(When teachers collaborated, it became easier to develop effective teaching strategies.) – Participant 5

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight critical aspects of teaching non-verbal autistic learners, emphasizing the complexity of communication, instructional adaptation, and collaborative efforts in inclusive

education. The discussion of results is framed within key themes to provide a deeper analysis of educators' experiences and pedagogical strategies.

Educators working with non-verbal autistic learners encountered significant challenges in communication and instruction, requiring patience, adaptability, and innovative techniques. Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012) asserted that inclusive education demands flexible instructional methods tailored to each student's unique learning needs. In this study, teachers reported struggling initially with communication barriers but gradually developed effective strategies through direct engagement. Their lived experiences underscored the necessity of continuous reflection and adaptation, aligning with Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) perspective that inclusive teaching relies on recognizing students' potential rather than focusing on deficits.

Interpreting non-verbal cues emerged as a primary challenge, causing frustration and uncertainty among educators. Florian and Hegarty (2004) noted that communication difficulties could lead to academic and social isolation for learners with disabilities. In this study, teachers relied on observational learning and trial-and-error approaches to decode students' responses, reinforcing the findings of Mitchell (2020), who emphasized that non-verbal communication barriers necessitate specialized training for teachers. Overcoming these challenges required educators to refine their techniques, fostering deeper engagement with their students.

Teachers successfully implemented communication strategies that facilitated student interaction and learning. The use of visual aids, structured routines, and assistive communication tools supported learners in anticipating transitions and expressing themselves. Slee (2019) highlighted that structured environments enhance predictability, reducing anxiety in students with disabilities. Educators in this study confirmed that integrating visual schedules and sensory-friendly techniques improved engagement, reinforcing Torres and Mendoza's (2025) argument that sensory-friendly strategies enhance focus and comprehension among autistic learners.

Despite initial struggles, teachers experienced breakthrough moments that validated their instructional strategies. Witnessing students successfully use alternative communication systems, such as Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS), provided educators with a sense of fulfillment. Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012) emphasized that modifying instructional methods based on student responses leads to meaningful engagement. In this study, teachers adapted their approaches through reflection, demonstrating how experiential learning influences pedagogical development. These moments reinforced their commitment to inclusive education, aligning with Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) assertion that effective teaching requires recognizing students' abilities and potential.

Collaborative efforts among teachers, parents, and specialists significantly impacted student success. Parental involvement ensured consistency between home and school, allowing learners to develop communication skills in a structured environment. Mitchell (2020) emphasized that strong partnerships improve educational outcomes, while Torres and Mendoza (2025) highlighted that collaborative frameworks equip teachers with effective techniques to address non-verbal communication barriers. In this study, educators confirmed that working alongside families and specialists enhanced their understanding of students' unique needs, reinforcing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in inclusive education.

Teaching non-verbal autistic learners influenced educators' professional growth, shaping their adaptability, patience, and instructional creativity. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argued that inclusive education challenges teachers to refine their methodologies through continuous learning. In this study, educators reported increased confidence and skill development, demonstrating how experiential learning fosters professional growth. Implementing sensory-friendly environments and differentiated instruction ensured personalized support for students, reinforcing Torres and Mendoza's (2025) perspective that systemic support enhances engagement and learning outcomes.

Strengthening inclusive education for non-verbal autistic learners required initiatives at institutional, governmental, and research levels. The Department of Education needed to implement comprehensive training programs focused on effective communication strategies tailored to these students. Schools facilitated seminars, workshops, and Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions to help educators address communication barriers. Local Government Units (LGUs) enhanced support services, including assessment programs,

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community-based interventions, and teaching materials to improve education quality. Additionally, LGUs collaborated with advocacy groups to reduce autism stigma and promote awareness in local communities.

Future research needed to examine the long-term academic and social outcomes of non-verbal autistic learners in inclusive education programs. Studies investigated how cultural influences shaped teaching approaches and assessed the effectiveness of interventions and support programs. Research also focused on assistive technologies, AI-driven communication tools, and adaptive learning models to enhance engagement and comprehension among non-verbal autistic students. These efforts provided evidence-based recommendations to improve educational practices and policies for inclusive education.

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