

"Unspoken Emotions: Teachers' Understanding And Supporting For The Emotional Well-Being Of Non-Verbal Autistic Learners"

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Abstract

Inclusive education for non-verbal autistic learners relies on educators' ability to interpret non-verbal communication, implement adaptive teaching strategies, and foster supportive learning environments. However, challenges such as inadequate specialized training, difficulty in recognizing non-verbal cues, and limited institutional support hinder effective engagement. This study examines the experiences of teachers working with non-verbal autistic students in inclusive education settings at Christian Life School of Davao Oriental, Inc. Using a qualitative research design, it explores themes related to teacher adaptability, instructional methods, sensory-friendly learning environments, and collaborative support among educators, parents, and specialists. The findings reveal that while educators utilize patience, structured routines, and visual-based teaching techniques to promote engagement, challenges such as frustration in early interactions, reliance on trial-and-error learning approaches, and emotional strain remain prevalent. Addressing these issues requires enhanced professional development programs, mentorship opportunities, and institutional policies that advocate for individualized instruction and assistive communication tools. Strengthening support systems for educators and improving inclusive education policies will lead to a more effective learning experience for non-verbal autistic students, ensuring equitable access to quality education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Non-Verbal Autism, Teacher Training, Communication Strategies, Instructional Adaptability, Sensory-Friendly Learning, Special Education (SPED)

1. Introduction

Non-verbal autistic learners face unique challenges in inclusive education, as conventional speech-based teaching methods often do not fully accommodate their communication needs. The principles of experiential learning, which emphasize active engagement, observation, and reflection, have been identified by Kolb (1984) as essential for effective teaching. However, educators frequently struggle to interpret non-verbal cues, creating barriers to meaningful interactions in the classroom. According to Rogers, Hepburn, and Wehner (2003), difficulties in decoding non-verbal behaviors can hinder learning progress and result in disengagement. Studies indicate that non-verbal autistic individuals, who represent a significant portion of the autism spectrum, often experience academic and social isolation due to their limited verbal expression, as highlighted by Denworth (2020). Without targeted interventions, their ability to actively participate in classroom activities remains restricted, as emphasized by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011).

On a global scale, teachers encounter obstacles in supporting non-verbal autistic students, primarily due to insufficient training in non-verbal communication techniques, as noted by Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012). Some countries have recognized the shortcomings of traditional teaching approaches and have introduced assistive technologies, structured interventions, and peer-assisted learning programs to improve accessibility, as discussed by Rogers et al. (2003). However, discrepancies in implementation persist, affecting overall instructional effectiveness, as explored by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011).

In the Philippines, educators face additional difficulties due to limited access to specialized training and resources, according to Sharma et al. (2012). Many teachers lack adequate preparation to implement non-verbal communication strategies, making it challenging to facilitate engagement and meaningful learning

experiences. The absence of structured professional development programs addressing communication barriers contributes to the struggle educators encounter in fostering inclusive classrooms.

This problem is also evident in Christian Life School, Davao Oriental, Inc. Teachers continue to struggle with engaging non-verbal autistic learners due to gaps in institutional support and a lack of accessible teaching tools, as reported by Denworth (2020). Limited resources, including assistive communication devices and sensory-friendly learning materials, further hinder the ability of educators to provide effective interventions. Addressing these challenges through policy improvements, increased funding, and specialized teacher training is essential to ensuring that non-verbal autistic students receive equitable access to education.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study aims to address these gaps by highlighting the importance of adaptive communication techniques and targeted professional development. By identifying existing challenges and exploring practical solutions, the research seeks to contribute to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

1. How do teachers at Christian Life School, Davao Oriental, Inc. experience and navigate the communication needs of non-verbal autistic learners in their classrooms?
2. What obstacles and breakthroughs do educators encounter when developing communication strategies for non-verbal autistic students?
3. How do teachers' interactions and experiences with non-verbal autistic learners shape their teaching approaches and impact the inclusivity of education?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study is grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which asserts that learning is an active process shaped by experience, reflection, and adaptation. Instead of passively receiving information, individuals build knowledge through their interactions and engagements with the world. This perspective is particularly relevant to educators working with non-verbal autistic learners, as traditional verbal-based teaching methods often fail to meet their communication needs. By emphasizing learning through direct experience, Kolb's theory provides a foundation for examining how teachers develop communication strategies tailored to non-verbal autistic students.

Aligned with this concept, experiential learning highlights the role of hands-on engagement in shaping teaching practices. Educators supporting non-verbal autistic learners must observe behaviors, interpret non-verbal cues, and modify their instructional approaches to ensure effective communication. Rather than relying solely on standardized teaching techniques, teachers continuously adapt their strategies based on real-time interactions, fostering a more responsive and inclusive learning environment. Through trial, observation, and reflection, teachers refine their ability to support students' unique ways of communicating, reinforcing Kolb's idea that learning is an ongoing, experience-driven process.

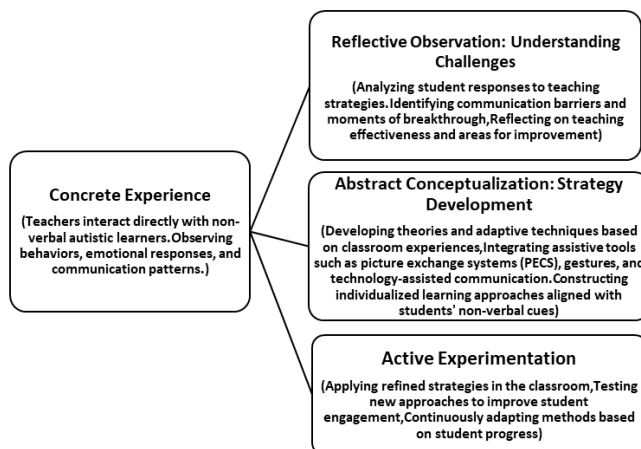


Figure 1. IPO Conceptual Framework of the Study

2. Method

This study utilizes a qualitative, phenomenological research design inspired by Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (2016) to explore the lived experiences of teachers who work with non-verbal autistic learners. By employing phenomenology, the study seeks to understand how educators develop communication strategies from their firsthand perspectives, free from researcher bias through the use of bracketing. The research was conducted at Christian Life School of Davao Oriental, Inc., a setting that presents unique challenges related to limited resources and the implementation of inclusive education strategies in the Philippines.

Six purposively selected teachers participated in the study, all of whom have direct experience with non-verbal autistic learners. Their selection ensured a range of perspectives based on years of teaching experience and exposure to autism-specific strategies. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, supported by observation notes and a review of school documents and policies. Ethical considerations were rigorously followed, with informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw emphasized throughout the process to ensure participant protection and data integrity.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifying key patterns in teachers’ experiences and practices. Themes such as “interpreting non-verbal cues,” “adapting communication techniques,” and “overcoming resource limitations” emerged from the analysis. Guided by Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory, the study highlights how teachers learn and adapt through reflective practice. The findings contribute meaningful insights into how educators in resource-constrained environments implement inclusive strategies, offering practical implications for improving communication support for non-verbal autistic learners.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the qualitative data gathered to achieve the study’s objectives. The data was sourced from interviews and observations of teachers working with non-verbal autistic learners at Christian Life School of Davao Oriental, Inc.

Major Themes	Subthemes
Challenges in Communication	Difficulty in Understanding Non-Verbal Cues
	Frustration and Emotional Responses
	Limited Access to Specialized Communication Tools
	Adjusting Teaching Strategies to Overcome Communication Barriers
Strategies for Effective Communication	Utilization of Visual Aids and Structured Routines
	Sensory-Friendly Learning Spaces
	Encouraging Alternative Expression Methods
	Consistency and Reinforcement in Communication Strategies

Institutional Barriers and Teacher Training Needs	Lack of Specialized Teacher Training
	Limited Institutional Support and Resources
	Need for Policy Improvements and Advocacy
Impact on Teaching Approaches	Shift Toward Experiential and Hands-On Learning
	Increased Patience and Adaptability in Educators
	Stronger Focus on Inclusivity in Lesson Planning

Challenges in Communication

Difficulty in Understanding Non-Verbal Cues. Understanding non-verbal communication is one of the core challenges faced by educators working with autistic learners. Unlike verbal students who articulate their needs, non-verbal autistic learners depend on gestures, facial expressions, repetitive behaviors, and movement patterns to convey thoughts, emotions, and requests.

"Sa sinugdanan, lisod gyud kay dili ko kasabot sa ilang timailhan. Usahay, naglibog ko kung unsa ilang gusto o kung giunsa nila ang pagpakita sa ilang panginahanglan." (At first, it was really difficult because I couldn't understand their signals. Sometimes, I was confused about what they wanted or how they expressed their needs.) – Participant 1

Rogers et al. (2003) highlight that non-verbal autistic learners exhibit highly individualized communication styles, making interpretation difficult for teachers unfamiliar with autism-specific behavioral cues. They emphasize that building familiarity with each student's unique non-verbal signals leads to stronger engagement and improved interaction outcomes.

Frustration and Emotional Responses. Failure in communication interpretation often results in emotional distress and frustration among non-verbal autistic learners. When students feel misunderstood or unheard, they resort to behavioral expressions, such as withdrawal, sudden emotional outbursts, or heightened sensory reactions to indicate discomfort.

"Kung dili ko makasabot dayon sa ilang timailhan, mahimong sila maglagot ug magpakita og agresibong lihok." (If I don't understand their signals quickly, they may become frustrated and display aggressive behavior.) – Participant 3

Denworth (2020) asserts that communication barriers in autistic individuals significantly impact emotional regulation, leading to meltdowns, social withdrawal, or anxiety-related reactions. He discusses that educators who recognize distress signs early can mitigate emotional breakdowns by providing structured coping mechanisms, such as calming techniques, sensory tools, or alternative interaction methods tailored to each student's needs.

Limited Access to Specialized Communication Tools. Assistive technology and structured communication tools play a crucial role in enhancing interaction and comprehension among non-verbal autistic

learners. However, many educators struggle with limited access to PECS, digital speech devices, and personalized sensory learning aids, restricting their ability to effectively support communication development.

"Wala mi igong access sa assistive technology. Kung naa, mas dali unta ang pagtabang sa mga bata nga dili makasulti." (We don't have enough access to assistive technology. If we did, it would be easier to support non-verbal students.) – Participant 4

Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that institutional limitations hinder inclusivity by failing to provide essential resources that facilitate non-verbal engagement. Their study emphasizes the importance of government policies and school funding in ensuring that educators receive specialized communication aids to accommodate diverse learning needs.

Adjusting Teaching Strategies to Overcome Communication Barriers. Educators continuously refine teaching strategies through trial-based techniques, behavioral observations, and adaptive learning interventions that accommodate each student's communication style.

"Kinahanglan mag-adjust ko sa akong pamaagi. Ang paggamit sa hulagway ug structured routines nakatabang sa ilang pagsabot sa klase." (I need to adjust my methods. Using pictures and structured routines helps them understand the lesson.) – Participant 2

Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012) assert that successful inclusive education depends on teachers' ability to modify instructional methods based on student responses. Their findings underscore that rigid teaching structures fail to accommodate non-verbal autistic learners, highlighting the need for personalized learning adjustments such as multi-sensory engagement, consistent routines, and alternative interaction methods.

Strategies for Effective Communication

Utilization of Visual Aids and Structured Routines. Visual communication serves as a primary intervention method for non-verbal autistic learners. Because they process information differently from verbal students, structured visuals such as PECS, illustrated schedules, and symbolic representations assist in bridging communication gaps.

"Ang paggamit sa hulagway ug PECS makatabang sa ilang pagsabot ug pagpakigsulti. Mas sayon nila mahibal-an kung unsay buhaton kung adunay klaro nga hulagway." (Using pictures and PECS helps them understand and communicate. It's easier for them to follow instructions when visual cues are provided.) – Participant 2

Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) highlight that incorporating visual learning techniques enhances classroom inclusivity by enabling students to engage without verbal instruction barriers. Their research demonstrates that predictability in visual schedules reduces anxiety while reinforcing step-by-step comprehension.

Sensory-Friendly Learning Spaces. Sensory processing plays a critical role in communication and interaction for non-verbal autistic learners. Overstimulation or discomfort can lead to shutdowns, avoidance, or extreme behavioral reactions, preventing effective engagement.

"Ang pagbutang og sensory-friendly nga mga materyales makatabang sa ilang pagsabot ug pagpakigsulti. Mas makomportable sila ug mas sayon nila mahibal-an ang ilang buluhaton."
(Providing sensory-friendly materials helps with communication and understanding. It makes them feel more comfortable and allows them to follow activities more easily.) – Participant 4

Rogers et al. (2003) note that creating sensory-friendly environments helps autistic students process stimuli in a controlled, comfortable setting, reducing stress and supporting positive interaction experiences. Teachers integrate modified lighting, controlled noise levels, and tactile learning materials to foster better communication pathways.

Encouraging Alternative Expression Methods. Given that verbal speech is limited, educators encourage alternative forms of communication, such as gestures, sign language, pointing, or object-based interactions. Reinforcing non-verbal expression techniques ensures that autistic learners are not excluded from meaningful classroom discussions.

"Kung dili sila makasulti, kinahanglan naa silay laing pamaagi sa pagpakigsulti. Kung motudlo sila, kung mogamit og hulagway, kung mosulat—kinahanglan nga hatagan og bili ang ilang mga pamaagi." *(If they can't speak, they need another way to communicate. Whether they point, use pictures, or write, we need to recognize their forms of expression.) – Participant 5*

Denworth (2020) emphasizes that validating non-verbal expression fosters confidence in autistic individuals, allowing them to engage in social interactions without anxiety. Their study suggests that acknowledging diverse communication methods encourages autistic learners to actively participate in learning environments.

Consistency and Reinforcement in Communication Strategies. To ensure long-term communication success, teachers implement predictable teaching methods that reinforce memory, comprehension, and routine recognition.

"Kinahanglan consistent ang pamaagi. Kung magbag-o kada adlaw, malibog sila. Ang paggamit og structured routine makatabang sa ilang pagsabot sa klase." *(Communication strategies need to be consistent. If they change daily, students will be confused. Using structured routines helps them understand and follow lessons.) – Participant 1*

Sharma et al. (2012) highlight that reinforcing structured communication techniques over time results in higher engagement levels among non-verbal autistic learners. Their study notes that consistent, repetitive methods minimize anxiety and confusion, making educational environments more accessible for students with autism.

Institutional Barriers and Teacher Training Needs

Lack of Specialized Teacher Training. One of the most pressing challenges in inclusive education is the lack of specialized training for teachers handling non-verbal autistic learners. Many professional development programs focus on general special education strategies but fail to provide in-depth training on non-verbal communication methods, assistive technologies, and sensory learning techniques.

"Dili kasagaran sa mga training naka-focus sa non-verbal autistic learners. Maglisod mi sa pagpangita ug saktong paagi tungod kay wala mi igong pagbansay." (Most training programs do not focus on non-verbal autistic learners. We struggle to find the right methods because we lack adequate training.) – Participant 1

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that effective inclusive education depends on educators' ability to modify teaching approaches based on students' needs. They emphasize that when teachers receive targeted training on adaptive communication strategies, they are better equipped to create structured and engaging learning environments for non-verbal autistic students.

Limited Institutional Support and Resources. Many schools face financial and logistical challenges that limit their ability to provide necessary communication tools, sensory learning materials, and assistive technology for non-verbal autistic learners. Without these resources, teachers must improvise strategies that may not always be effective.

"Lisod ang pagpangita ug mga materyales ug teknolohiya para sa mga non-verbal nga estudyante. Wala mi igo nga suporta gikan sa eskwelahan." (Finding materials and technology for non-verbal students is difficult. We lack adequate support from the school.) – Participant 4

Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012) highlight that a lack of institutional funding directly impacts the success of inclusive education programs. Their study suggests that when schools allocate funding for speech-generating devices, structured learning aids, and teacher development, educators can implement more effective interventions, leading to higher student engagement.

Need for Policy Improvements and Advocacy. Institutional policies play a crucial role in shaping inclusive education practices. Many educators advocate for policy changes that prioritize teacher training, funding for assistive tools, and structured learning support for non-verbal autistic students.

"Kung adunay mas daghang programa para sa mga magtutudlo ug suporta gikan sa gobyerno, mas maayo unta ang inclusive education alang sa mga autistic learners." (If there were more programs for teachers and government support, inclusive education for autistic learners would be better.) – Participant 2

Denworth (2020) argues that government policies must address the unique needs of students with disabilities by ensuring that schools have the necessary infrastructure to support inclusive learning environments. His study highlights that without institutional reforms, educators struggle to implement effective strategies, leaving many non-verbal autistic students disengaged and underserved.

Impact on Teaching Approaches

Shift Toward Experiential and Hands-On Learning. Educators who previously relied on lecture-based or verbal-centered teaching methods adapt to more experiential and interactive learning strategies when working with non-verbal autistic students. These adjustments include incorporating visual schedules, interactive learning tools, physical demonstrations, and structured routines to ensure that students can engage in lessons without verbal communication barriers.

"Sa wala pa ko magtudlo sa non-verbal autistic learners, kasagaran sa akong mga leksyon kay puro verbal instructions. Karon, mas nag-focus ko sa hands-on ug visual nga mga pamaagi." (Before teaching non-verbal autistic learners, most of my lessons relied on verbal instructions. Now, I focus more on hands-on and visual methods.) – Participant 3

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasize that effective inclusive education requires teachers to adopt flexible and student-centered instructional approaches, allowing learners to interact with content in ways that suit their unique abilities. Their research highlights the importance of hands-on learning, which enhances participation, comprehension, and retention among non-verbal autistic students.

Increased Patience and Adaptability in Educators. Teaching non-verbal autistic learners cultivates greater patience, adaptability, and observational skills in educators. Since these students communicate in non-verbal ways, teachers must be attentive to behavioral cues, adjust lesson pacing, and be flexible with instructional methods.

"Nakakat-on ko nga ang pagtudlo dili lang puro instruksyon. Kinahanglan ko nga magpasensya ug mosabot sa ilang mga paagi sa pagkat-on." (I learned that teaching is not just about giving instructions. I need to be patient and understand their ways of learning.) – Participant 5

Sharma et al., (2012) discuss how teachers who modify their instructional methods based on student responses experience higher success rates in fostering engagement. Their study underscores the importance of adjusting strategies dynamically, reinforcing that a rigid approach does not accommodate diverse learning needs.

Stronger Focus on Inclusivity in Lesson Planning. Educators working with non-verbal autistic learners develop a deeper awareness of inclusivity, ensuring that lessons are accessible to all students, regardless of communication ability. Lesson planning shifts toward multi-sensory approaches, reducing barriers and promoting engagement for students who require non-verbal instructional methods.

"Sa akong mga leksyon, karon mas gisiguro nako nga ang tanang estudyante makasabot ug makaapil. Mas daghan na akong gigamit nga visual aids ug mga structured routines." (Now, I make sure all my students can understand and participate in lessons. I use more visual aids and structured routines.) – Participant 2

Denworth (2020) asserts that inclusive education succeeds when teachers design lesson structures that accommodate diverse learning needs, integrating visual, tactile, and interactive elements to create a more accessible and engaging environment. His findings highlight that intentional inclusivity in lesson planning fosters positive learning outcomes, benefiting both autistic learners and their neurotypical peers.

Conclusion

This study concludes that teaching non-verbal autistic learners presents multifaceted challenges that demand patience, adaptability, and a deep understanding of individualized communication needs. Teachers face significant barriers in interpreting non-verbal cues, managing emotional responses, and accessing specialized tools and institutional support. However, through the consistent use of visual aids, sensory-friendly strategies,

and alternative communication methods, educators develop more inclusive, hands-on, and flexible teaching approaches. The experience not only transforms instructional practices but also deepens educators' commitment to fostering equitable learning environments. Ultimately, the study underscores the urgent need for targeted teacher training, improved resource allocation, and policy reforms to support the full inclusion and development of non-verbal autistic learners in mainstream classrooms.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, the study recommends that educational institutions and policymakers prioritize specialized training programs focused on non-verbal communication strategies, sensory integration techniques, and the use of assistive technologies for teachers handling non-verbal autistic learners. Schools should invest in accessible communication tools such as PECS, visual schedules, and speech-generating devices to support student engagement. Additionally, creating sensory-friendly classrooms and providing consistent institutional support can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness. Policymakers are urged to strengthen inclusive education policies that allocate sufficient resources and ensure regular monitoring and evaluation of implementation efforts, fostering a more supportive and inclusive learning environment for non-verbal autistic students.

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