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**Understanding the Lived Experiences of Teachers in Communicating with
Autism Spectral Disorder (ASD) Students**

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UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN COMMUNICATING WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) STUDENTS

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Acceptance Page:

This paper prepared by **EARL B, GICANA** with the title: “**Understanding the Lived Experiences of Teachers in Communicating with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Students**” is hereby accepted by the Faculty of Information and Communication Studies, U.P. Open University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Program.

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Biographical Sketch

My name is Earl B. Gicana, age 27, from Lucena City, Quezon. I graduated from Sacred Heart College (SHC) of Lucena City, Inc., with a degree in Bachelor of Arts in Communication, and am currently pursuing a master's degree in Development Communication at the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU).

My professional journey began in June 2018, when I was hired as the Promotion and Public Relations Assistant at SHC. In June 2021, I was promoted to the position of Promotion and Public Relations Officer. I am in charge of the marketing and public relations arm of the school, and since 2018, I have been teaching as a part-time instructor at the same school under the College of Liberal Arts, specifically in the AB Communication program. I was also a social media manager and consultant to a principal at the House of Representatives, a role that lasted for a year. I have also been part of various concert productions in the institution and here in Quezon Province.

I currently live with my grandparents, who raised me side-by-side with my Mom and her siblings. Currently, my mom works as an Overseas Filipino Worker in Dubai, and her siblings are happily married, with one employed locally and the other overseas. I also have a younger brother with a ten-year age difference, who is diagnosed with mild Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). He was born in Sta. Mesa, and later moved to Quezon Province, so my mom could continue to be an OFW.

My commitment towards my family, my students, and serving the community drove me to continue my studies so that I may better serve them. Being honed as a Cordian, centered in Vincentian excellence and service not only to stakeholders but

also to the poor and God's Creation, drives me to continue striving to be the best version of myself.

My work background sparked my interest in Development Communication, utilizing various forms of communication to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future. Connecting this with my personal experience with my brother's condition, this drove me to do research on understanding the lived experiences of teachers in communicating with ASD students. Wherein my brother was somewhat discriminated against because of his condition and not quite understood by many. Over time, this slowly changed as he progressed with the help of the Harvest of Hope Foundation Inc., which opened the doors to his development. Transitioning from their foundation towards regular schooling, he has started his Senior High School (SHS) Grade 11 at SHC.

Looking ahead, and having journeyed through this research, I aspire to continue my work in development communication. Addressing inequality and inclusivity, especially when it comes to education and environmental sustainability. In addition to this, I wish to inspire my students to do more and be more, piquing their interest in development work.

Acknowledgement

This journey toward completing my Master of Development Communication has been one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life. It would not have been possible without the support, understanding, and inspiration of many individuals and institutions.

Above all, I offer my deepest gratitude to **the Almighty**, whose guidance and grace have sustained me through every obstacle. Amidst the demands of multiple jobs and academic commitments, I found strength and perseverance that I thought were beyond what I thought possible.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to **Sacred Heart College of Lucena City, Inc.**, for your endless support, understanding, and prayers throughout my graduate studies. Your flexibility in allowing me time to focus on my coursework and research made it possible for me to pursue my degree without compromising my professional responsibilities.

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To my **co-administrators, co-teachers and colleagues and DC sisters** in the institution. Thank you for believing in me, especially during the times I didn't believe in myself. It has been one of my strengths in completing this.

I am also grateful to my classmates at the **University of the Philippines Open University – Faculty of Information and Communication Studies – Master in Development Communication**, who became both colleagues and friends. The camaraderie we shared, the insights we exchanged, and the collective resilience we demonstrated have enriched this experience immeasurably.

Lastly, to my **family** everyone who believed in me and offered encouragement along the way, thank you for reminding me of my purpose and potential.

This achievement is not mine alone, but a testament to the community of support that has surrounded me throughout this MDC journey.

Dedication

To the Almighty, whose strength and wisdom have guided me through this journey.

To my mom, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, for your unwavering support and for sharing your invaluable insights, which have been instrumental in helping me write this thesis.

To my brother, Eid Jaden Balbarosa, for his gift of a person. This study is not just for me, but for you and children like you, who have endless possibilities, deserve trust, guidance, and unending love and support. I hope that with this, we can go one step closer to building a brighter and inclusive future for everyone.

To my adviser, Dr. Benjamina Paula G. Flor, for your invaluable guidance, patience, and understanding throughout this journey. Your dedication has been crucial in shaping my manuscript and guiding me through the complexities of my study.

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To the SHC–AB Communication program, you have been one of the reasons that kept me going and finally enabled me to complete my MDC journey.

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Abstract

The study entitled “Understanding the Lived Experiences of Teachers in Communicating with Autism Spectral Disorder (ASD) Students” is a hermeneutic phenomenological study on how educators at the Harvest of Hope Foundation in Lucena City, Quezon, Philippines, experienced and made sense of communication with learners on the autism spectrum. Guided by the interpretive traditions of Heidegger and van Manen, the research explored the subjective meanings that teachers attributed to their interactions and how these shaped their day-to-day practices.

Semi-structured interviews with nine teachers revealed seven themes, namely: Understanding ASD students, Adaptive and Collaborative Teaching Practices, Teacher Motivation and Satisfaction, Family Engagement and Student Progress, Managing Professional Challenges and Well-being, Nurturing Future Readiness, and Pursuing Lifelong Learning and Professional Growth.

The study concluded that effective communication is not a fixed skill but a transformative process rooted in a teacher's willingness to understand each student's unique perspective. By documenting how teachers navigate this process, the research offers practical advice for creating more compassionate and context-sensitive educational environments. This ultimately contributes to a broader understanding that inclusive education is fundamentally about understanding the diverse needs of every learner.

Keywords: *hermeneutic phenomenology, autism spectrum disorder, inclusive education, teacher experiences, communication, development communication.*

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Communication is one of the basic actions of humans. It is fundamental for both social interaction and the development of inclusive societies. From the philosophical roots of Isocrates' view of rhetoric as fundamental to civilization to modern points of view that frame communication as co-constructed meaning, its value remains vital in education across the centuries. Communication meets physical, emotional, and relational needs; it promotes understanding and nurtures connection, both of which are absolutely essential in the classroom, especially in varied learning environments, as Floyd (2018) points out. In the context of education, communication is not only the dissemination of knowledge but also a dynamic, interpretive process that gets particularly challenging when attending to the various needs of neurodivergent students. Particularly, students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) challenge teachers to reconsider conventional approaches to interaction. Persistent communication, social interaction, and behavior problems define ASD as a developmental disorder. Even if many people with ASD have normal to above-average intelligence, they often need tailored help to flourish socially and academically (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.; Garnett & Attwood, n.d.).

Globally and domestically, ASD has grown to be a public health and educational issue of increasing visibility in recent years. Global estimates, though, such as those from the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), show a consistent increase in diagnoses in the Philippines. The Autism Society Philippines (ASP) estimates that over 1.2 million Filipinos today fall on

the autistic spectrum. However, given underdiagnosis, social stigma, and a weak national tracking system, this number is probably conservative. The nation does not have an inclusive education audit or centralized educational register to track the number and distribution of students with ASD across public and private sectors. Without a complete database, policy development and resource allocation can become challenging (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025).

Many institutions also still struggle structurally and systemically to provide neurodiverse students with support. While the Department of Education (DepEd) has made progress with laws, including the Inclusive Education Bill and the strengthening of SPED centers, actual ground-based implementation is still uneven. Often left to negotiate the complex communication needs of students with ASD under minimal training, limited support systems, and packed classrooms, teachers are (Chan, 2025). These facts emphasize the urgent need to prioritize teachers' actual communicative experiences, as they not only act as teachers but also as the primary enablers of inclusion.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, knowledge of how teachers themselves interpret these communicative interactions remains limited. Few studies have looked at their internal reflections, the strategies they improvise, and the affective labor they perform when working with children with ASD, even while many educators claimed being undertrained and overwhelmed in inclusive classrooms (Alharbi et al., 2019; Gomez et al., 2021).

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological lens in order to close this disparity. Rooted in the interpretive traditions of Heidegger and van Manen, this framework enabled an investigation of the subjective and lived experiences of teachers, not only what they do but also how they interpret, embody, and change

communication as a human act. It gives meaning over method, experience over prescription, and thought over habit.

Communication is a cornerstone of effective education, particularly for students with ASD. By enhancing teacher training, promoting collaboration, and embracing individualized approaches, this can bridge the existing gaps and create a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape for all learners (Aba, 2024).

In the Philippines, inclusive education is both a growing pedagogical movement and a constitutional mandate. Many teachers still feel unprepared, though, in meeting the complex needs of students with ASD. Training remains uneven, and the most frequently cited difficulty is communication (Rance, 2025).

Therefore, this study sought to provide a grounded, practice-based knowledge of communication within inclusive classrooms by closely listening to the stories of educators. It aimed to highlight the daily meaning-making that teachers do and, in doing so, contribute to the larger conversation on development communication, inclusion, and education.

My interest in the topic stemmed from growing up with my brother, who was diagnosed with mild autism spectrum disorder. I witnessed firsthand how communication can be both an everyday struggle and an extraordinary act of connection. Like many others, we initially struggled to understand him. After his diagnosis, learning about ASD helped us become better for him, so we could truly support him on his journey to the future.

I often looked ahead and wondered how he would navigate life without us. From his transition from the Harvest of Hope Foundation, Inc., to a regular small class, and eventually into a larger classroom setting, I hope and pray that his educational journey will be one of support, growth, and understanding.

This personal journey became the foundation of this study. I have come to realize how communication becomes the greatest anchor in the teaching-learning process between teachers and learners on the autism spectrum. Witnessing the endless patience, compassion, and empathy of teachers has strengthened my conviction that an inclusive society is truly attainable if we commit to listening, reflecting, and accepting the differences of every learner.

Research Questions

In this study, I explored the experiences of teachers handling ASD students specifically in the phenomena of conceptualizing chronic difficulties with social communication, limited interests, repetitive conduct, compulsive or ritualistic behaviors, dealing with ASD students' different abilities, and communicating with ASD students daily. The goal of this study is to adopt a phenomenological approach to understanding and seek understanding and knowledge by answering the main research questions:

1. How do teachers of Harvest of Hope Foundation describe their experience in communicating with ASD students?
2. How do these descriptions of communicating with ASD students define their actions?

Objectives/ Purpose of the study

This phenomenological study explores how teachers interpret and apply their understanding of communication with students on the autism spectrum. The research aims to describe their experiences and how those experiences influence their professional decisions and actions. The following are the objectives of this study:

1. Discuss how teachers of Harvest of Hope Foundation describe communication with ASD students; and
2. Explain how these meanings of communication define their actions.

Significance of the Study

This study offers significant findings for educators, educational institutions, families, government agencies, and scholars involved in inclusive education, particularly for those supporting learners on the autism spectrum (ASD). By exploring how teachers interpret and describe their communication experiences with ASD learners, the research provides a deeper understanding of how their meaning-making processes inform and shape pedagogical praxis. The study will be beneficial to the following groups:

For Classroom Teachers. The findings will provide reflective insights into the nuances of interacting with students on the autism spectrum, highlighting communication as a co-constructed, responsive process that requires adaptability, patience, and self-awareness.

For Families and Caregivers. The study will offer a better understanding of how school-based communication practices are developed and sustained, emphasizing that alignment between school and family communication is essential for creating consistent, nurturing environments where children with ASD can thrive.

For School Leaders and Administrators. The study will help them gain practical knowledge that can guide efforts to build inclusive, responsive, and well-supported educational settings, underscoring the importance of providing adequate training, collaborative spaces, and emotional support systems for educators.

For Government Agencies and Institutions. The study will serve as a valuable resource for designing communication-driven programs that promote awareness, understanding, and inclusion of individuals with ASD in both educational and community contexts.

For the Field of Development Communication. The study will show a new perspective on communication as a transformative, relational act through which teachers and learners co-create meaning, build trust, and shape new possibilities for learning.

Study Area

This study focused on the lived experiences of educators who worked with students diagnosed with ASD within an inclusive educational setting. It explored how teachers described their interactions with ASD learners and how these descriptions shaped their teaching approaches and communicative behavior.

The emphasis was on uncovering how educators understood communicating with ASD students not merely as a function of delivering instruction but as a relational and interpretive process shaped by empathy, awareness, and adaptability. By examining these lived experiences, the study provided insight into how communication contributed to shaping the learning environment, responding to student needs, and fostering inclusive practices in the classroom.

The research was conducted at the Harvest of Hope Foundation, Inc., in Lucena City, Quezon, which provides services for students with ASD. Participation was limited to educators from the foundation who voluntarily agreed to participate in the research during the mid-year term of the 2024–2025 school year.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

This chapter reviews literature and studies on communication, inclusive education, and teacher experiences with students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It provides the theoretical foundation for the research by highlighting the multifaceted role of communication in education, the nuances of autism, and the experiences of teachers in inclusive settings.

Communication and its role in inclusive education

Communication is a complex process that goes beyond simply exchanging information. It involves creating shared meaning through various signs, symbols, and behaviors (Fatimayin, 2018). This process is fundamental to human life, as being unable to communicate can negatively impact both mental and physical health. Communication serves several essential purposes, including fulfilling physical, relational, identity, spiritual, and instrumental needs (Floyd, 2018).

Messages, which are the core of communication, consist of spoken words, visual cues, and nonverbal behaviors. When a person creates a message, they are encoding it. The recipient then decodes the message to interpret its meaning. The response to this message is known as feedback, which shows how well the message was understood (Verderber et al. 2017).

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas noted that while perfect communication is unattainable, people can get closer to that ideal by considering the context of their interaction (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010). The communication context includes a wide range of factors, such as the physical environment, social and historical situations, psychological states, and cultural backgrounds. Understanding these elements is crucial for effective communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010).

For educators, these concepts are particularly important. By recognizing the intricate nature of communication—including the various needs it fulfills and the influence of context—teachers can better adapt their methods to create an inclusive, supportive, and responsive learning environment, especially in classrooms with diverse students (Gerber & Murphy, 2021).

Health and development communication in disability contexts

Understanding why people act the way they do is essential for creating successful development programs (Vargus-Adams and Majnemer, 2014). The social and health outcomes of a program's beneficiaries and stakeholders are directly affected by their behaviors and practices. Fields like sociology, psychology, and anthropology offer valuable insights into the motivations, fears, social pressures, and environmental factors that shape both individual and group behavior. For development professionals, it's vital to identify and comprehend these influences to design effective interventions and improve program outcomes (Vargus-Adams and Majnemer, 2014).

The Department of Health (DOH) designed a Medium-Term Strategic Plan (2013-2017) to improve its health program for persons with disabilities (PWDs) (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). The UN defines PWDs as individuals with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, along with other barriers, limit their full and equal participation in society. An evaluation of the DOH's plan identified several operational challenges and gaps that needed to be addressed. These issues included the need to improve collaboration among different sectors and government agencies, clarify roles and responsibilities, enhance national capacity for rehabilitation services, improve access to health facilities, and strengthen the PWD registration database (United Nations General Assembly, 2006).

Understanding ASD

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a major public health concern, particularly in the Philippines, where an estimated 1.2 million Filipinos are on the spectrum (Philippine News Agency, 2023). This high number highlights the urgent need for government action and resources. Senator JV Ejercito has actively championed this cause, filing Senate Bill 2062, "An Act Establishing Centers for Autism," to ensure individuals with autism and other intellectual disabilities receive the specialized care they need (Abasola, 2023).

The need for comprehensive support is further emphasized by national statistics. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports a global prevalence of about 1 in 68 people, the rate in the Philippines is even higher, with 1 in 100 Filipinos having ASD (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). This statistic underscores the importance of creating dedicated centers and support systems to help people with autism thrive and contribute to society.

The American Psychiatric Association defines ASD as a complex, lifelong developmental disorder marked by persistent challenges in social communication, along with restricted interests and repetitive behaviors (Hodis, et al., 2025). While these difficulties can cause varying degrees of functional impairment, early signs may be noticed by parents and pediatricians before a child is a year old, though symptoms typically become more obvious around age two or three. In some cases, challenges may not become apparent until a child starts school and interacts with their peers (American Psychiatric Association, 2025).

While ASD is a developmental disability, it is distinct from a learning disability. ASD is characterized by issues with socializing, repetitive motions, and compulsive

behaviors, whereas learning disabilities like dyslexia involve problems with language, math, and attention. However, there is a significant overlap, as 31% of children with ASD also have an intellectual disability (Autism Speaks, 2018). While not a learning disability, ASD can still affect a child's academic performance by impacting their communication and socialization skills.

Social skills are a critical factor in a person's life success, encompassing the ability to relate to and form emotional bonds with others (Bailey and Montgomery, 2012; Daraeea et al., 2016). People with autism often struggle with these skills because they lack "theory of the mind"—the ability to understand the beliefs, feelings, and intentions of others (Silverman, 2012). This can make it difficult for them to form close friendships and relationships.

Additionally, many individuals with ASD have limited verbal communication skills, including a lack of reciprocal conversation. They may also use echolalia, which is the repetition of words or phrases spoken by others. Nonverbal communication is also often impaired, with individuals displaying unusual eye contact, facial expressions, or body postures, as well as stereotypical repetitive movements (Murdymooto et al., 2017).

Teacher communication competence in ASD contexts

Despite research-backed strategies for including students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream classrooms, there are still major gaps in putting these practices into action. A key part of helping these students succeed is understanding their unique communication styles. Many students with ASD have trouble communicating with both their classmates and teachers (Hyman et al., 2020; Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012).

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), a form of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), has shown significant promise in helping students with autism express their ideas and participate more in school. Research consistently confirms its effectiveness, with studies showing that AAC, including PECS, can even encourage the development of spoken language rather than simply serving as an alternative (Nazri and Alias, 2018). This aligns with findings from Abono et al. (2023), who found that teachers agreed on PECS's ability to help children communicate their needs, wants, and feelings. Specifically, PECS's structured, visual approach helps simplify non-verbal communication, which leads to greater student engagement in class. These findings highlight how vital it is for educators to meet students where they are, using proven communication methods that are tailored to each student's specific needs. When this is done, it not only improves academic learning but also gives every student a real chance to connect and thrive.

The role of the teacher is crucial for the success of students with ASD. It's essential that teachers receive adequate training to work with this group of students. Classrooms need to become more inclusive and child-centered to meet the needs of both neurotypical and atypical learners. Beyond traditional lectures, teachers should use various methods to encourage active participation, such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and other differentiated instruction strategies (Rabi et al., 2018).

The importance of teacher preparation cannot be overstated. Studies have revealed that many educators feel unprepared to teach students with ASD due to a lack of resources and training (Alharbi et al., 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Nazari, 2020). Professional development programs that focus on inclusive teaching, alternative communication methods, and specific strategies for ASD are necessary to

give teachers the tools they need (Gomes et al., 2021). Furthermore, including students with ASD in research can provide valuable insights into their preferences and needs, which can help create more effective teaching approaches (White et al., 2016; Sagers, 2015).

Communication barriers in teaching students with ASD

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often face teasing and bullying in school because of their unique traits, such as limited facial expressions and uncoordinated movements. These behaviors can cause them to feel isolated or overlooked by their peers. A fully inclusive school environment can greatly benefit these students by fostering a more respectful atmosphere for those with special educational needs. Building close relationships between students with ASD and their teachers and classmates helps everyone better understand and accept their situation (Holmes, 2022). To encourage friendships, schools and families should promote social interactions and communication patterns that can lead to positive relationships (Mc Mahon et al., 2012). It is crucial that classroom activities are designed to affirm and reinforce the acceptance of all students.

Teaching and communicating with children who have ASD require special strategies to improve their learning experience. Research shows that teens with ASD often struggle with social skills, communication, and behavioral regulation, which can hinder their academic progress and social integration at school (Cai & Richdale, 2015; Brahim, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021). Decades ago, many individuals with disabilities were institutionalized and had limited opportunities for education or community participation. In contrast, today's focus is on empowering individuals with complex communication needs to play a more active role in their communities and their own care (Mirenda, 2014; Williams, 2000)..

Learner-centered approaches and teacher responsiveness

For students with ASD, instructional strategies that improve social and communication skills are essential for a positive learning experience. Activities that encourage verbal communication and allow them to learn by imitating appropriate behaviors are particularly effective (Vidal, 2012).

One important method is explicit instruction, which helps students grasp difficult concepts by breaking down material into clear, manageable parts (Knight et al., 2011; Barnett et al., 2017). Using visual aids like picture-based stories or communication systems such as PECS can also significantly boost a student's comprehension and engagement (Simmons et al., 2020). These techniques not only improve understanding but also promote independence and focus, which are critical for academic success (Simmons et al., 2020; Sparapani et al., 2015).

To ensure that students with disabilities receive the best possible education, it's vital to identify and use evidence-based practices (EBPs). The idea behind EBPs is that special educators need reliable methods—supported by rigorous research—to improve student outcomes. This isn't a vague concept; it means a practice is backed by thorough research, not just any study. To be considered an EBP, a method must meet strict criteria, including having a sufficient number of high-quality studies and demonstrating a clear, positive effect. This systematic approach ensures that the practices used in special education are truly effective and can be applied reliably in real-world settings (Evidence-Based Practice in Special Education – Division for Research, Council for Exceptional Children, n.d.)

A study by Gonzaga (2022) revealed several challenges in preparing general education teachers for inclusive education, highlighting the urgent need for a long-term, multi-level strategy to improve teacher skills and address a lack of resources.

Gonzaga recommended several key actions to tackle these issues. First, teacher training programs should be rethought to include specialized lessons and hands-on practice in inclusive education. Second, there needs to be a continued investment in professional development to teach educators how to collaborate, create Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and use specific teaching methods. Third, overall support should be increased through sufficient funding for special education teachers, adapted classrooms, and necessary learning tools. Finally, Gonzaga emphasized the importance of fostering collaboration among teachers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to create lasting plans, suggesting the creation of groups where teachers can share experiences and tips to maintain inclusive education over time.

The body of literature mentioned above lays the basis for understanding communication, provides insights into the unique nature of ASD, highlights the many factors that shape interactions, and brings to light the real-world challenges that teachers face. Together, these viewpoints emphasized the importance of this study, which sought to explore the lived experiences of teachers in communicating with students with ASD. By doing so, the study aimed to bridge the gap between communication theory, the realities of ASD, and the practical needs of schools, ultimately helping to create more effective and inclusive learning environments.

Lived experiences and meaning-making in teacher practice

Research highlights three key areas for improving communication and education for autistic children: strengthening the partnership between parents and schools, using new teaching methods, and better training for teachers (Khatab et al., 2024).

Effective teaching involves actively engaging students in the learning process, which requires teachers to have strong subject matter knowledge and an understanding of how students learn (Stellenbosch University, 2018). However, this can be especially challenging with students who have ASD. Studies show that teachers often struggle with communication issues stemming from the neurological basis of autism (Brahim, 2022). Unique behaviors exhibited by these students, such as a need for specialized support and difficulty with peer interaction, also present significant classroom challenges (Maysuroh et al., 2024).

Despite these difficulties, a teacher's positive attitude toward inclusion is crucial for effective communication with autistic students. A study by Engstrand and Roll-Pettersson (2012) found that teachers who have a positive view of inclusion feel more confident and competent in meeting the needs of autistic children in their classrooms.

The number of people with autism is rising in the Philippines, and teachers, particularly those in Special Education (SPED), face a major challenge in educating students with unique physical behaviors (Kurata, 2018). Given that many Filipino students with autism rely on and prefer technology for communication and learning (Kurata, 2018), visual and video-based instruction is highly effective. In fact, a study by Quejado et al. (2022) advocated for an ergonomically designed Learning Management System that uses technology to help students overcome physical habits that can interfere with their ability to learn. This system would make lessons more accessible and reduce the need for constant teacher assistance.

The benefits of such a system extend beyond students. A notification-based platform can improve communication between teachers and parents by providing updates on a child's progress (Kurata, 2018). Additionally, visual learning tools, such as video models, are particularly effective for autistic children, who often learn and communicate best through this medium (Kurata, 2018).

In summary, current research emphasizes the importance of using technology-based, visual learning resources, fostering collaborative communication between schools and families, and providing specific social skills training to meet the unique needs of students with ASD. These findings highlight the critical need for creating technology that supports both academic learning and social communication for autistic children, helping them thrive in inclusive settings.

Theoretical Lens

This study was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, an interpretive approach developed from the philosophical works of Martin Heidegger and further advanced by Max van Manen. This framework provided the foundation for exploring how educators experienced and interpreted communication with students diagnosed with ASD and how these interpretations shaped their actions in the classroom. Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected over other qualitative frameworks because it emphasizes the interpretation of participants' lived experiences, making it suitable for understanding the process of teacher-student communication.

Given that the study's central questions focused on the meaning of communication and how these meanings shaped their action, hermeneutic phenomenology was particularly appropriate. By centering on interpretation rather

than mere description, this lens allowed the study to examine not just what teachers did, but how they understood and made sense of their actions in relation to their ASD students.

Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology moved beyond simple description to understand how individuals create meaning within their realities, in which they are embedded. In this study, the teachers' life world included the classroom environments, institutional cultures, prior knowledge, emotional responses, and interactions with students diagnosed with ASD. Within this context, communication was practiced, lived, and experienced, shaping both teachers' perceptions and decisions. The students' unique needs formed how teachers interpreted their efforts to communicate with the learners.

Van Manen (2014) extended this view by emphasizing that phenomenological inquiry must attend to the essence of lived experience and the interpretive act of making meaning from those experiences. This approach supported the study's aim to explore not just what teachers did when communicating with ASD students but also how they made sense of those actions and how those meanings guided their teaching and communication strategies.

By applying this theoretical lens, the study illuminated the subjective and context-dependent understanding that educators developed over time through their relationships with ASD learners. The hermeneutic phenomenological framework provided a rigorous lens for interpreting teachers' experiences, ensuring that findings captured both the richness of individual narratives and the broader meanings embedded in their day-to-day practices.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This inquiry was grounded in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition to understand how educators constructed meaning from their communication experiences with students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This methodology, drawing from the works of Martin Heidegger and Max van Manen, centers on the interpretation of lived experiences to uncover how individuals understand their actions and realities within specific contexts. The framework's objective is not to generalize findings but to engage deeply with personal narratives to reveal the essence of their meaning.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method to achieve this aim. This approach allowed participants, the teachers, to reflect openly on their experiences, actions, and interpretations without being confined by rigid questioning. The interviews followed a conversational tone, enabling participants to share stories, insights, and emotional responses related to their communication with ASD students.

Teachers were selected from the Harvest of Hope Foundation, an inclusive education setting where educators regularly interact with children on the autism spectrum. Their lived experiences provided a valuable lens for understanding how communication unfolds in inclusive classrooms and how meaning-making shapes their actions.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using an interpretive approach. Through multiple readings and reflective engagement with the

transcripts, I identified recurring themes and patterns that revealed how meaning was constructed and how these meanings shaped behavior.

By exploring these lived experiences, the study provided a deeper understanding of how communication with ASD learners is experienced and embodied by teachers, ultimately contributing to more empathetic and responsive practices in inclusive education.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at the Harvest of Hope Foundation, Inc., located at B-7, L-11, Antipolo St., Inmaculada Concepcion Village, Isabang, Lucena City.

The said foundation is a social welfare and development agency implementing Center-based (Non-Residential) programs and services for children with ASD, Global Development Delay, Down Syndrome, and Communication Disorder, and Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder.

Research Participants

The primary sources of data in this research were the nine educators from the Harvest of Hope Foundation, Inc., who voluntarily participated in the study. These teachers were purposefully selected because they had direct and sustained experience communicating with students diagnosed with ASD in an inclusive educational setting. Participant selection continued until data saturation or maximum variation was reached, meaning that no new themes or substantial information emerged from additional interviews. This approach ensured that the findings were grounded in the depth and diversity of the participants' lived experiences.

Data were gathered through qualitative interviews, which were conducted in a conversational manner, creating an atmosphere where teachers could speak comfortably and describe their experiences in their own words. This approach provided space for participants to reflect openly and to share insights, stories, and emotions related to their communication with ASD learners. Each session was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. The resulting narratives served as the primary material for analysis.

The use of a semi-structured, open-ended format was consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenological framework guiding this study. This design emphasized not only the description of events but also the interpretation of their meaning, allowing a richer understanding of how teachers made sense of communication as a relational and evolving process within the inclusive classroom.

Method of Analysis

Analysis was guided by using Saldaña's (2021) coding process, which involves organizing and making sense of qualitative data. Understanding emerged through a recursive process of interpreting the parts (individual experiences) in relation to the whole (overall meaning), and vice versa. The following steps were taken during the analysis phase:

1. Initial Reading and Immersion: I read and re-read the interview transcripts to develop a deep understanding and familiarity with each participant's narrative.

2. First Cycle Coding: I used descriptive and in vivo codes (open codes), which then formed into meaningful segments of narratives, which were labeled to capture the lived experience and phrases as expressed by the participants.

3. **Second Cycle Coding:** The codes were refined and grouped into categories and patterns (axial codes), enabling the identification of themes that reflect the teachers' lived experiences.

4. **Reflective Interpretation:** Throughout the coding process, I engaged in hermeneutic reflection, interpreting the meanings these teachers gave in the context of communicating with the ASD students and how these meanings formed into action.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this research, several ethical considerations were taken into account to ensure that the study was carried out with integrity and respect for the participants. The following principles are essential to the ethical framework of this study:

Confidentiality. I was committed to maintaining the confidentiality of all participants throughout the study. All personal information, responses, and data collected were treated with the utmost confidentiality. No identifying details, such as names, were published in any part of the research. Data was stored securely. The confidentiality of participants was upheld during all phases of the research.

Anonymity. No personally identifiable information was included in the study reports, publications, or any other documentation resulting from this research. This measure ensured that participants' personal details and contributions remained completely anonymous.

Voluntary Participation. Participation in this research was voluntary. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives and procedures, and they were given the freedom to choose whether to participate or not. I made it clear that refusal to participate or withdrawal from the study at any time would not affect their

relationship with the foundation or the researcher. Participants were asked to read the informed consent form before the interview process began to confirm their willingness to participate in the study.

Non-maleficence (Do No Harm). The principle of non-maleficence ensured that no participant experienced physical, psychological, or emotional harm as a result of their involvement in the study. I took all the necessary precautions to minimize risks and prevent any harm to participants. Participants were informed of their right to skip any questions or stop the interview at any point if they felt uncomfortable. Additionally, I ensured that the interview environment was safe and supportive, with appropriate measures in place to address any distress that might arise during the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study delves into the lived experiences of teachers communicating with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), providing crucial insights into the communication process within special education. A deep exploration into the world and journeys of these educators was both essential and timely.

The research was conducted at an intervention center that caters to students with ASD. Following the study's approval, nine female teachers, aged 24 to 35, were introduced as participants. Given their age and varying levels of experience, which ranged from one month to 14 years, their predisposition, maturity, patience, and passion were subjects of the study's inquiry.

The First Encounters

Participant 1 (P1), a 24-year-old female teacher who had been with the foundation for one month at the time of the interview, described her early encounters with ASD students as profoundly shaped by her personal lifeworld. Having a six-year-old cousin diagnosed with autism, who was also enrolled in the same foundation, she experienced a sense of familiarity and purpose that infused her interactions with meaning and a feeling of shared journeying.

Participant 2 (P2), aged 27, had been part of the foundation for two years and three months. In narrating her lived experience, she conveyed that love and care were not merely adjuncts to communication but the foundation upon which authentic connections with ASD learners could arise. She described a conviction that genuine progress depended on parents being willing to invest sustained effort in carrying learning into the fabric of the child's daily life, beyond the classroom.

Participant 3 (P3), aged 35, had been teaching ASD students for 14 years, with her practice spanning both her time in the foundation and her prior work as a special education teacher. She described how years of immersion in the daily struggles and small triumphs eventually led her to experience deep burnout. From this, she recognized the necessity of detachment not as indifference but as a way to sustain herself while remaining present to her learners' needs.

Participant 4 (P4) had not entered teaching through the conventional path, having graduated instead with a degree in social work. In her six months at the foundation, she described her first two months as a time of quiet observation and adjustment. Without formal training in education, she relied on what she witnessed, watching how seasoned teachers navigated the complexities of each child. Little by little, she began to adjust herself to the subtle cues of her students with ASD, discovering that understanding often emerged not from instruction alone but from being present, receptive, and willing to learn alongside them.

Participant 5 (P5) described her experiences as anchored in routine and predictability. She shared how journeying alongside her students with ASD was often a struggle marked by uncertainty, especially as many of them were non-verbal and relied on visuals and gestures to make themselves understood. Over time, she realized that observation was not a passive act, but a vital form of adjustment, watching closely for subtle shifts in expression or movement that revealed meaning. For her, flexibility was not just a skill, but a mindset—a readiness to adapt and reshape her methods to meet the children's diverse and often unspoken needs.

Participant 6 (P6), a 26-year-old teacher with two years and two months of experience, expressed how guiding her students often hinged on using physical prompts, gentle gestures, and clear cues that anchored the children in each moment.

She emphasized that goal setting and predictable scheduling were essential scaffolds for helping her learners stay on a path of progress. However, despite careful preparation, she was transparent about the moments when self-doubt would surface. Her reflections traced the ongoing effort of calibrating her communication, adjusting her voice, simplifying her words, and reading each child's signals so that understanding could gradually take root.

The experiences of Participant 7 (P7), a 27-year-old teacher with two years and two months of immersion, began with a striking sense of unpreparedness. She recalled entering the classroom without any real understanding of ASD, a blank slate onto which every new experience was etched. As a naturally reserved and conservative person, she was initially shocked by the level of intimate care her role required, including helping students to the restroom and assisting them with their most private routines. That early discomfort became a test of her assumptions and limits. However, over time, she described how daily exposure dissolved her unease, transforming those moments of care into ordinary acts of support and acceptance.

Participant 8 (P8), aged 25, with nearly two years of experience (1 year and 11 months), the path into special education was not one she had envisioned. Even if her academic background was rooted in education, she had never imagined herself guiding children with ASD. However, as she described it, the gravity of that responsibility gradually opened her heart, as if she had been placed in this role as God's instrument to nurture and shape young lives. Her reflections revealed a growing awareness that communication for many of her students hinged on visual support, icons, and picture cues, which provided structure to their understanding. She also observed that echolalia, often seen as a limitation, could be harnessed as a bridge to

connection. It is a small but meaningful way for students to process language and participate in their learning.

Participant 9 (P9), aged 30, her experiences became an unfolding discovery that even children with ASD could lead the way in shaping how learning unfolds. She spoke of listening intently to the subtle cues, gestures, preferences, and patterns that revealed how each child wished to be taught. Over time, she came to believe that student-led formation was not just possible but essential, allowing her to place the learners at the center of her practice. This responsiveness, she shared, demanded humility and openness, as well as continuous growth through seminars and training that deepened her understanding of the children's unique ways of communicating and learning.

Their day-to-day battles to overcome the countless communication barriers their students presented were deeply moving, insightful, and profoundly human. From offering everything they had, time, patience, and unrelenting care to embracing continuous learning and personal growth, each teacher's journey was marked by doubt, burnout, and the courage to rise again. They returned to the classroom each day, determined to nurture independence and the most basic forms of communication for children whose lives hold endless possibilities.

The Harvest of Hope Foundation teachers showed that their communication approaches were not just techniques but living expressions of empathy, respect, and hope. Their stories offered a window into how awareness can be raised and how collective efforts can truly serve these diverse learners.

The narratives of these nine teachers, who struggled, survived, and grew, gave a more profound meaning to what it means to communicate with students on the

autism spectrum. Each insight and breakthrough informed the subsequent action, all in service of helping their learners develop skills for the future.

Table 1. Participant's profile as ASD teachers.

Participant's Code	Age	Sex	Teaching experience as ASD teacher
P1	24	Female	1 month (she has a cousin with ASD)
P2	27	Female	2 years and 3 months
P3	35	Female	14 years
P4	25	Female	6 months
P5	25	Female	11 months
P6	26	Female	2 years and 2 months
P7	26	Female	2 years and 2 months
P8	25	Female	1 year and 11 months
P9	30	Female	2 years and 11 months

Meaning of Communicating with ASD Learners

Participants described what communicating with learners with ASD meant to them, based on their lived experiences. Using thematic analysis, themes were identified to explain their lived experiences (Table 2). From these experiences, the themes that emerged reflected how communication begins with understanding, how trust is built, and how teachers and families share the journey of helping these children adapt and flourish. Beyond every strategy and routine, the teacher's quiet, unwavering commitment remains, and the child's steady unfolding.

Theme 1: Understanding ASD Students

To have a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), I realized that it is also to enter a world where the usual assumptions of what learning looks and sounds like no longer apply. These teachers shared how each day felt like stepping into a different world, leaving behind common indicators of progress, standard cues, and familiar ways of confirming whether their communication style was reaching anyone. Adapting to the students' perspective, addressing and adjusting to the communication challenges, and recognizing the different needs of ASD, especially when they show different emotional states, formed the meaning of how they understand and communicate with these learners.

At first, I thought the same; I did not understand what he needed and wanted. I was unsure how to connect with him. We did not know that my brother had ASD, and before he entered the institution, he also showed such signs of indifference.

One teacher (P1) described it in a simple phrase that echoed through every account:

“Sila kasi ay parang, may sariling mundo and kailangan ko ipasok yung sarili ko sa mundo nila Hindi ko siya basta pwedeng biglang ialis doon, kundi ipapasok ko yung sarili ko.”

(They're in their own world, and I need to enter their world. I can't just suddenly pull them out of it; I have to dive myself into it.)

Hearing this experience, I realized that I was no different when I described my brother back then; the same disconnection and hardship arose from the fact that we

would not understand his world if we did not journey with him. We could have done better back then, as these teachers do every day with their ASD learners. They have made me realize, now and even before, that communication is not merely about transferring information to these learners, but rather about the willingness to enter their world and the persistence to reach out. Communication here was not just about the techniques they used, but rather communication as a relational experience, so we could enter their world.

Their description was not just a figure of speech. The teachers described moments that felt like there was a barrier between them and the ASD students, where they were trying to reach a child whose looks and gestures seemed different from what was conventional.

The phrase from P1 stuck to me as not just a description or metaphor, but the lived experience of the distance between the teachers and the learners., I was struck by how communication is also experiencing otherness itself, that feeling of standing in front of these learners, whose inner world they may never be allowed to enter fully, and yet choosing to cross over and journey with them every day.

This sense of separation was not an abstract frustration; it was a tangible reality. It was the reality of their work. It shaped how they entered the foundation and the classroom daily and realized what mutual understanding could mean. Reflecting on it shows that communicating with ASD students is really a process of meaning-making, and the patience and understanding that these teachers pour into the invitation of the learners to enter their world. Realizing that understanding their “own world” more deeply, perhaps back then, was a missed sign of invitation, and I needed

patience and the willingness to enter it. A chance for meaning-making through patience and understanding.

At this point, what seemed like a barrier was reframed as an invitation to a relationship.

P2 also described that they are forming this learning relationship with:

“Mga non-verbal.”

(Non-verbal individuals.)

I remember when my brother first moved here in the province. On the night he arrived, he did not want to leave the car and simply hugged my mother's thigh, neither speaking nor looking. He was unable to verbalize his feelings at the time. His silence carried a considerable weight for us, as did what the P2 described.

The “Non-verbal” description was not simply the absence of speech. It was the weight of all the unsaid, the cries whose meaning stayed hidden, the small hand that tugged a sleeve and tapped your shoulder without knowing what these learners were saying. The teachers knew they were being asked to read the cues daily, which had no dictionary, map, or guide. Understanding the needs of learners who cannot voice their thoughts highlights the need to better appreciate the importance of non-verbal communication, which teachers must adapt to, aligning teaching and communication approaches as multimodal.

As I reflected on this further, I realized that perhaps this is the core of what it means to communicate with individuals with ASD: to accept that communication is never complete, never entirely certain, yet always necessary. These teachers reflect

and live with the same uncertainty every day, just as we do, not knowing if we are understood.

Uncertainty was not a sign of weakness, but the condition that required patience and openness.

Looking back on the shared experience, our family always remembered my brother's signs when he tried to communicate with us what he wanted and needed, gestures, tugging of body parts, and deep glances. These gestures were his way of reaching out to us, to be understood despite the communication barrier, and we constantly tried to understand the same with the teachers as the foundation. Communication was not just the simple ability to speak, but the non-verbal cues that mattered, so we can connect more.

In the context of Development Communication, this meant learning to decode the different forms of meaning through verbal utterances and the smallest gestures that come in simple eye contact, steaming, and sudden uncontrollable outbursts.

P6 echoed this in her experience:

“Talagang physically prompted sila.”

(They are indeed physically prompted.)

I also experienced this: when my brother would always go to where I was and pull me to something he wanted, he would not point out which item, but instead, I had to physically retrieve each item and give it to him until he accepted it. This became his first language when he moved in, and he would always pull us around the house, prompting us to try to interpret what he wanted to communicate with us. It was hard

work, but we managed to do it. We needed to understand and give him our complete patience, even if we already had none.

Listening to them, I began to appreciate how physicality became a form of dialogue, pointing, guiding, and modeling action step by step, and listening not just with my ears, but observing their physical prompts to communicate. However, even with such techniques, progress never followed a straight line.

P3 shared the truth that haunts many of these teachers:

“Hindi sila maka-adjust.”

(They are unable to adjust.)

This was the reality that no amount of planning could fully erase. The gap between the regular dynamics in a classroom and the unpredictable actions of these learners can spark a different meaning when handling such students.

Here, adjustment moved beyond teaching and communication strategies. However, it reshaped our understanding of the deeper meaning of journeying with ASD students, adjusting their lesson plans and redefining what counts as learning and progress.

P8 shared this recognition with quiet acceptance:

“Alam naman natin yung talagang sobrang layo nila sa mga typical na student.”

(We know they are significantly different from typical students.)

These experiences served as a reminder that communication is never instantaneous. It was always about understanding who you are trying to communicate with and building a relationship to connect. I also felt the same way. I initially thought that he just didn't like me or that I was unwelcome. Hearing their stories, I understood that it was the same for our family. However, the difference for these teachers is that communication shifts from mere instruction to forming that necessary relationship towards progress, so that they, too, may journey with them.

Their honesty was not born of pity, but of respect; their readiness to meet the ASD learners as they were, rather than forcing them to become something they were not. The teachers spoke of the exhaustion in their bodies, repeating a single instruction dozens of times, watching a child look right through them without knowing if they understood.

P5 shared the feeling plainly:

“Hindi talaga nakakaintindi.”

(They truly don't understand.)

P6 also described the ASD learners:

“Mukhang normal yung mga bata.”

(The kids looked ordinary)

In these moments, I understood how communication became less about passing on information and more about surrendering, slowing down, lowering their urgency, and staying present. They had to learn to accept the days when ASD learners' world remained closed to them and to trust that showing up and trying mattered anyway.

Gradually, the strangeness from the learners' point of view softened. The separation began to feel less like rejection and more like an invitation to unlearn, to listen without expectation, and to celebrate minor signs of understanding as significant achievements. What once seemed impossible to enter became a shared environment where teacher and student built their unique way of understanding each other through gestures, routines, and patience.

P1 also shared the aggressive tendencies of the ASD students:

“Minsan nag-aattempt sila mag-bite or scratching kasi hindi naman nila sinasadaya pero yun yung way nila para ma-release yung stress. Minsan steaming palakpal ng palakpak hindi niya yun ititgil. Meron naman ikot ng ikot pero steaming na yun pag paulit ulit na niya ginagawa. Which is yun na yung way para ma regulate niya yung stress nila ganon at maiabas yung stress lalo na pag ina-anxiety sila.”

(Sometimes they attempt to bite or scratch, not because they really mean to, but because that's their way of releasing stress. Sometimes they engage in steaming, such as clapping repeatedly without stopping. Others spin around and around, and when it's done repeatedly, that's also a form of steaming. It's their way of regulating and releasing stress, especially when they're feeling anxious.

P4, P5 and P6 also shared:

“Biglang na lang silang iiyak without knowing kung bakit”

(They just suddenly cry without anyone knowing the reason)

“Ang ASD, hindi lang sarili ang sinasaktan, pati ikaw”

(With ASD, it's not only themselves they hurt, but also you)

“Hindi mo din naman sila masisisi kung bakit sila ganon”

(You can't really blame them for being that way)

Hearing this, I recalled our struggles in the past. My brother would also cry nonstop, and we just let him. We understood, at the same time that we did not, and we understood his way of communicating, but the reason behind that frustration always left a question mark in our heads. His sudden punching and head banging against the wall was a clear sign of distress and disconnection, unable to understand what he was trying to say and make us understand.

These actions, often mistaken as behavioral incidents, were also forms of communication, their own way of expressing their needs.

Reflecting on these stories, I realize that communication here is not about fixing or normalizing; it is about understanding. It is about witnessing. It is about entering someone else's reality and acknowledging its truth.

These glimpses into the first, often disorienting, encounters with their ASD students show how the teachers began to redefine the meaning of connection. This foundational understanding of respecting differences and releasing preconceptions set the stage for the next part of their journey, learning to respond, adapt, and build strategies in real-time. This theme resonated with Floyd's (2018) explanation that communication is not merely the exchange of words, but also the fulfillment of relational identity needs.

The teachers' lived experiences illustrate how these needs are amplified when working with students whose communication style varies from the typical norms. Littlejohn and Foss (2010) further emphasize that communication always unfolds

within rich contexts, including cultural, psychological, and social situations, which also encompass the learners' developmental realities.

Lastly, the stories of these teachers also mirror Silverman's (2012) observation that children with ASD face barriers in understanding, since they struggle to imagine others' mental states, reinforcing why teachers must enter the world of the ASD learners to build meaningful connections.

Theme 2: Adaptive and Collaborative Teaching Practices

In rooms filled with unpredictability, teachers often discovered that communication with ASD learners could never be fully planned. Each day, they were called to step into an unknown communication situation. They could not simply rely on checklists or textbooks. Instead, they learned to watch closely, to listen to gestures, to feel out the silent cues of frustration and acceptance. Identifying best-fit practices, testing out strategies, monitoring learners, and modeling co-teachers' techniques revealed an impact on how to communicate with ASD learners.

P7 shared her experience in monitoring the ASD students:

“Parang every day mo sila, i-observe.”

(You observe them every day)

At this point, I realized that observation was more than just a routine; it was the first language of care towards the learners.

Remembering the journey with my brother, especially during the first months we lived together, the experience of P7 brought me back to it. Remembering how we needed to closely observe my brother. He was different, but back then, we didn't mind

it; we just thought, as any family would, that we needed to familiarize ourselves with his daily routine, assuming it was just a boy enjoying his childhood.

Until the time came when he exhibited extreme behaviors. This is where things got out of hand, and our observation became a practice to avoid him hurting himself and us getting hurt.

P1 shared that in her first month, she decided that observation itself would become her first strategy. Rather than rushing to impose methods, she held back and chose to learn from the example of others:

“Ino-observe ko ang co-teachers ko. Kung nakikita ko kung paano yung way niya. Tina-try ko rin yun.”

(I observe my co-teachers. If I see how they do it, I also try it.)

While P4 reflected the same tactic:

“Pinapanuod ko yung BMT niya”

(I watch how they do BMT).

This is where observation was not just a passive act, but also a participatory one. Co-creating with fellow educators in their community of learning.

Hearing their insights, the challenges that we experienced before my brother entered the foundation were something that these teachers deal with every day. Their lived experiences reflected that while we struggled at home, they had to deal, observe, and adapt each day. I was also struck by how

observation became more than preparation; it became a quiet act of respect. To pause and watch was to acknowledge that no one arrived at this work already knowing how to connect. It was an admission that communication here is not owned by the teacher alone but co-created by them, their little community, and the learner.

This story, shared by P4, reveals humility at the heart of teaching ASD students. The willingness to admit what you do not know and to turn to your co-teachers as guides. This approach aligns closely with Development Communication principles, where shared learning and the co-creation of knowledge can be effective in the development process.

P2 described this dynamic not as a sign of inexperience but as a deliberate practice:

“Tingnan natin ito, try tayo ng ganito. Yung ibang trial and error kasi talaga ang kailangan.”

(Let’s look at this, let’s try this. Sometimes, trial and error is really needed.)

At this point, trial and error was reframed from failure to communicate, but the persistence was to let the communication process flow between the teacher and the learner.

In this simple line, I heard the freedom to experiment and fail. Before, I only heard this term during my high school days when discussing math and science, but here, trial and error was not just a fundamental principle in specific subjects. It was the method itself. To these teachers, each attempt, whether successful or not, became another step in building understanding and trust.

Listening to her story, I silently looked back when we were trying to help my brother be comfortable with all of us. My brother first opened his arms to my grandmother, after countless attempts to get him to acknowledge that we are his family, she was the first to receive that acceptance. From just trying out phrases like “come to lola” and others, such as “do you want to come with me outside?” From that, I related to the experience as I too saw how she tried and tried every time and finally was able to form that necessary relationship start.

From the teacher's perspective, trial and error was not a sign of failure to communicate, but a necessary part of their teaching and learning process. When what worked for one child did not work for another, teachers learned to start again without holding back. The process taught them to hold expectations lightly and to respect the unique way each learner makes sense of the world.

P3 spoke plainly about how different this was from the image many have of teachers as all-knowing authorities:

“We’re figuring out parang the best practices we can find. Pero hindi kasi sila textbook.”

(We are figuring out the best practices we can find. But they are not textbook.)

This was the moment when the description of teaching was revisited from instruction to shared discovery.

I found this statement powerful in its honesty. In saying, “Hindi kasi sila textbook,” she was also saying that we are not textbook teachers; we are not here to impose perfect plans, but to discover imperfect paths together. In this discovery,

communication stopped being a performance and became a deeper process towards conversation, even if that conversation took the form of repeated gestures, visual prompts, or patient silence.

ASD learners are not typically found in textbooks. Back then, when the internet was not yet a necessity and hard to access, we had to rely on stories, suggestions, and what we already knew about handling children; that is what we did. Just a year of understanding why my brother was like that. Adjusting to his communication style and responding accordingly.

Looking back, this practice of observation, adaptation, and trial and error was also what my family experienced.

Their words reflected the essence of this theme: trying, failing, adjusting, and then trying again. This rhythm, so different from the linear progress that schools often expect, was its own kind of success. It was evidence that learning was happening on both sides.

This openness to experimentation was directed outward to their co-teachers and inward toward each learner's unpredictable cues. P3 described how she came to see that her students were often the true teachers, showing her ways that textbooks could never predict:

This theme shows that to communicate with ASD learners is to commit to lifelong learning, but one that moves beyond techniques into the realm of shared discovery. The responsiveness and adaptability of these teachers mirror the learner-centered approaches described by Vidal (2012), who argued that modeling and practice are key in helping ASD students build social communication. Similarly, Nazri

and Alias (2018) affirm that structured tools, such as PECS, developed through observation and repetition, can serve as bridges toward meaningful expression.

Theme 3: Teacher Motivation and Satisfaction

In the daily lives of the teachers at the Harvest of Hope Foundation, communication was not only the exchange of gestures, words, and other cues, but also the exchange of emotions. It was a test of service and the passion of showing up, again and again, for these ASD students whose progress came in unpredictable ways. These educators described moments of fulfillment so delicate they often went unnoticed by anyone else. Despite this, these teachers found their purpose and sense of achievement, celebrating even the smallest student progress and encouraging it.

P1 shared how something as seemingly ordinary as securing a child's focus felt like a rare triumph:

“Sobrang fulfillment ba yung makuha yung attention nila. Yung kahit minsan hindi pa sila magsalita pero alam mo na nakuha yung attention nila sobrang fulfilling.”

(It's such a great fulfillment to get their attention. Even if sometimes they don't speak yet, but you know you've caught their attention, it feels fulfilling.)

At this point, attention itself meant much more; it was a sign that we are communicating and getting through, a sign of bridging the gap together.

P5 echoes also how simple acts of processing can be fulfilling:

“Kapag napro-process na nila yung mga sinasabi mo, talagang fulfilling na yun sa’yo.”

(When they are able to process what you are saying, that is truly fulfilling for you.)

and P6 also reflected that even the smallest achievements were encouraging:

“Worth it talaga kapag nagkakaroon ng improvement yung bata. Yung kahit sobrang little na improvement...Nabubuhayan din ako ng loob kapag yung mga magulang is natutuwa din sa improvement nung bata.”

(It’s really worth it when the child shows improvement, even a very small improvement...I feel renewed when the parents are happy about it.)

As I listened to their encounters of fulfillment and progress, I was reminded of my own experience with my brother, how happy we were when we discovered the Harvest of Hope Foundation. Remembering how he journeyed with his teachers and later on accepted that we are also journeying with him. I remember seeing him do schoolwork at home and enjoy it. Even if it was simple drawings for us, it was a clear sign of development, from scribbles to actual images of objects and even cartoon characters.

These stories shaped the lived experience of the teachers, showing that fulfillment was not defined by leaps of progress, but could also be defined as small steps and everyday recognition of development.

In these classrooms, where many learners could not easily express their thoughts or emotions, teachers learned to recognize eye contact or simple gestures

as a declaration of understanding and trust. Those cues became reminders that their efforts mattered.

P8 first shared how watching these ASD learners shift from them to a regular classroom brought a mix of pride and quiet sadness:

“Nakakatuwa kapag ililipat na sila ng regular, running for regular school...Yun yung nagiging motivation mo to continue your passion.”

(It's heartwarming when they are transferred to a regular school...That becomes your motivation to continue your passion.)

I was truly touched by this story from P8. I never thought before that one of their goals is for the ASD learners to grow out of them and be recommended for regular schooling. Back then, I thought that my brother would probably be there for years, never fully understanding that his development could get this far. Hearing this now, I felt a wave of appreciation for these teachers; their commitment and passion really are a beacon of progress and hope for these learners. I never had the chance to fully thank them for their resilience and effort, and perhaps this is one of the reasons why they are quietly content with our happiness.

That silent acknowledgement the teachers felt, and the exciting feeling that we are moving forward together. Their patience and commitment were truly remarkable.

Theme 4: Family Engagement and Student Progress

For these teachers, learning did not end within the foundation. They recognize that for the ASD learners, there was a significant need to continue at home what they

started at school. This need for continuity brought both fulfillment and frustration, as teachers often found themselves reminding parents that collaboration was a cornerstone in the learners' progress. Reflecting the concepts of building rapport with parents, school-to-home continuity, and establishing ownership in learning. Their stories revealed that to achieve a common goal, partnership, patience, and advocacy would become equally important as teaching itself. Showing that communication with parents was not about just giving out instructions, but a shared journey with the families.

P2 described the exhaustion when parents did not see teachers as partners:

“Hindi kami yung kalaban niyo dito...Gusto po naming tulungan kayo.”

(We are not your enemy here...We really want to help you.)

Hearing this, I tried to recall if we had ever thought the same way as the teacher shared her experience on the parents' positioning. In our family, we knew that there had to be a way for my brother to learn and grow in an environment where he could feel comfortable. When we discovered the Harvest of Hope Foundation, we were willing to try to see if he would attend school there. Because we were once clueless ourselves, we always saw the teachers as our partners in helping him develop.

These words show that, despite the struggle of getting through to some parents, the teachers' resilience and advocacy for the students were not just a natural trait, but a daily rebuilding of hope.

This reflects the positioning of parents, where teachers continually try to shift their point of view from doubt to collaboration.

For P3, this burden was compounded by the feeling that families didn't always understand the effort:

“Yung parents or guardians would always kinda doubt my skills...Bakit ka mahahagard dun sa nangyayari sa studyante mo? Eh hindi ka nga naman siguro naaalala eh...More than that we can only do so much, the parents will always have the last say.”

(The parents or guardians would always kind of doubt my skills...Why would you get stressed about your student? They probably don't even remember you. So even if you want to help them so much, you do it in the time you have with them. But beyond that, we can only do so much...the parents will always have the last say.)

Working together with parents is tainted by doubt. The meaning teachers made was that even their best efforts are limited without the trust of the parents.

As a teacher too, I know how doubt gives weight to the teachers' effort inside the classroom, while as a son, as a parent, doubt tends to cause the same thing. Reflecting on this, there is a limit to what teachers can do, and despite doing everything, students might not even remember you. I never realized this harsh reality about these teachers, as it was masked by the happiness of being acknowledged by students, parents, and families. Back then, I never thought that it mattered to them. I was too busy enjoying myself for my brother to recognize me as “kuya,” in his words.

The teachers' experiences highlight how they learned to detach, not because they stopped caring, but because they needed to preserve their strength to care tomorrow.

P8 emphasized that consistency across settings was essential:

“Consistently, kailangan follow-up sa bahay. Kung ano ginagawa ni teacher sa school, ganon din ginagawa ng parents sa bahay.”

(There has to be consistent follow-up at home. What the teacher does at school, the parents should do at home.)

P3 voiced a plea for partnership:

“We can’t really do it by ourselves. It has always to be a collaborative effort. The parents on their end should also know the goals and the effort we are doing here.”

Together, P8 and P3 emphasized that school-to-home continuity only works when sustained in parent and teacher collaboration.

When they shared this, I remembered how the same practice was introduced to us when my brother was still in the foundation. Since he often showed behavioral issues when he could not communicate his needs, his teacher modeled to us how they managed him at school. Later, we tried to adapt the same way at home. At first, he resisted, sometimes showing frustration and confusion because it felt different when done outside Harvest of Hope. However, with time and effort, we were able to communicate that it could also be done at home, and he began to accept it.

This experience revealed to me what P3 and P8 described about school-to-home continuity. Progress did not come only from the classroom, but also from the shared effort to continue the learning process at home. Yet not all

partnerships could be instructed, as P7 shared that this collaboration cannot be forced:

“Hindi ako yung dapat magpapamukha sa kanya na kailangan rin nung anak niya ng tulong niya. Dapat siya rin mismo maka-discover nun.”

(I'm not the one who should force them to see that their child needs their help. They themselves need to discover it.)

This statement showed the weight of responsibility in guiding the parents towards self-realization.

It made me recall how fortunate we were to realize that my brother not only needed outside help, but also our love and understanding. I think things would have gone differently if the teachers had not helped us understand him better and if we had refused the opportunity to journey with them.

P3's words emphasize the teacher and parents' trust, which is not just supportive but essential for communication and progress. Without this partnership, teachers would be left to struggle alone, and the learner's development would slow. This balance between respecting a parent's pace and advocating for the child's growth demanded patience that most people never possessed.

P6 shared how this collaborative effort inspired her to keep guiding families:

“Nag-e-encourage tayo sa mga parents...kung ano yung follow-up na kailangan gawin para mag-improve pa yung bata.”

(We encourage the parents about what follow-up is needed for the child to improve.)

Her lived experience highlighted how teachers continue to guide families in sustaining learning beyond the foundation and P2 pointed out the reality that without reinforcement at home, learning could stall:

“Walang follow-up sa bahay, mas mapapatagal dito...Kailangan niyo po talaga mag-effort, hindi lang po sa amin.”

(If there's no follow-up at home, progress takes longer... You really have to put in the effort too, not just us.)

In contrast, the sentiment of P2 expressed frustration when these efforts of school-to-home continuity are absent, revealing that a large portion of the learners' progress also depends on their parents.

Together, these lived experiences revealed that involving the parents and ensuring home continuity was not optional, but essential for the learner's progress. Encouragement from teachers to parents and commitment from parents to their children. Without this shared responsibility of bridging school-to-home learning, the progress of ASD students stalls.

These highlighted that communication is not complete inside the classroom. It needs to extend into the homes of the learners, where parents also become co-teachers. The meaning-making process here involved recognizing that teaching ASD learners is about guiding both families and students.

This theme clearly illustrates the “shared meaning-making” process that Floyd (2018) describes, as well as the critical role of social context emphasized by Littlejohn and Foss (2010). Teachers here recognized that effective communication extends beyond the classroom walls, requiring partnership and mutual understanding with families.

Gonzaga (2022) emphasizes the importance of family involvement and coordinated follow-ups for sustainable inclusion, underscoring why these teachers must continually coordinate with parents to establish a relational continuity between school and home.

Theme 5: Managing Professional Challenges and Well-being

However, between these milestones, teachers often questioned themselves in silence. When other students’ growth stalls, when strategies seem to fail, self-doubt becomes part of their struggles. Beyond family engagement, teachers also carried the weight of their own professional challenges, including doubts about their professional effectiveness and how to manage their personal well-being.

P6 shared the rawness of that uncertainty:

“May mga moment talaga na hindi mo na alam, nagiging effective ka paba dito sa batang to? Worth it paba yung ginagawa mo? Kasi wala naman nangyayari.”

(There are really moments when you don’t know anymore—are you still being effective with this child? Is what you’re doing still worth it? Because nothing seems to be happening.)

P9 admitted:

“Masyado ba akong ano? Hindi ba ako magaling?”

(Am I too much? Am I not good enough?)

At this point, I also asked myself similar questions. When my brother showed no signs of development. I'm wondering if anything I did mattered at all. The heavy question is whether we are doing enough or if we are doing something wrong, because we have made an effort, but progress seems so distant. In those moments, we did not doubt my brother, but rather ourselves.

In these reflections, communication was never just an action. It was a question of faith: could they continue to believe in the value of what they were doing when results came so slowly, or not at all?

P4 offered this reflection:

“Aalagaan mo rin yung sarili mo...Nakaka-burnout kasi talaga.”

(You have to care for yourself...because it really is draining.)

P6 echoed:

“Kailangan mo talagang i-detach din yung sarili mo dun sa situation.”

(You really have to detach yourself from the situation.)

Hearing these stories mirrored our experience with my brother. On a day-to-day basis, we juggled our emotional states. In all honesty, there are times when you reach the peak of understanding and patience for the day, one where you cannot understand him more because that is what your energy can accommodate. I

remember when my grandmother was not feeling well, she would always tell him, “dun ka muna sa kuya mo, sobrang sakit lang ng ulo ni mommy, please lang tutoy”. These instances never meant we loved my brother less; looking into it deeper, it was an opportunity to recharge and better understand him the next day.

In the same way, these teachers showed me that detachment was not about leaving your responsibility, but also an act of care, a way of protecting not only the learners, but also their own well-being, so they can try again tomorrow.

These teachers gave meaning to communication as a patient, unseen discipline. It was how they witnessed and accompanied the growth others could not see and held faith in children whose progress unfolded in quiet, private ways.

Together, these lived experiences highlight how teachers manage professional challenges and well-being. Revealing that to be able to communicate with ASD learners daily, teachers are challenged to redefine burnout and detachment, showing their emotional investment in journeying with the learners and their commitment to providing the necessary care for them.

Their emotional investments resonate with Brahim’s (2022) reflection that communication with ASD learners is often fraught with ambiguity and unseen effort. The need to detach to preserve their mental health also aligns with Cai and Richdale’s (2015) findings on how the burden of managing communication challenges can lead to burnout.

Theme 6: Nurturing Future Readiness

Amid the daily challenges and setbacks, one reality kept these teachers moving forward: the hope that their students could one day stand more

independently. For these educators, every lesson was more than a short-term goal. It was an investment in each child's unfolding future. Recognizing their potential growth and building future-oriented skills so that they may be able to handle themselves and also be productive members of society.

P6 shared her experience:

“Hindi mo namamalayan na nag i-improve pala yung bata. Malalaman mo na lang pag sinabe na nag fe-feedback na din sayo yung magulang”

(You don't immediately notice that the child is actually improving. You only realize it once the parent gives you feedback.)

This reminded me of the milestones my brother achieved toward his independence, learning how to cook rice with the rice cooker, hanging and folding clothes, and contributing to simple chores. It may be difficult at times to give instructions, but we know that these routines will show him doing better in the future.

This resonates with P3, wherein she spoke with conviction about why the smallest routines mattered so much:

“Parang, in the long run, if you're not going to be at school at all, what are you doing majority of your time? Dapat kalma ka, dapat you know the work around in your house, how to use the proper things, na sumusunod ka sa mga utos ng mga taong mas matanda sayo...So yun yung generally na gusto kong matutunan ng mga students namin

kahit anong level nila.”

(In the long run, if you're no longer going to school, what will you be doing most of the time? You should be calm, know how to manage your home, use things properly, follow instructions from elders...That's generally what I want our students to learn, whatever their level.)

Both in our home and in the classroom, these routines were not just school tasks, but building blocks of independence towards the ASD learners' development.

Here, the meaning of communication became clear: to give children the tools to manage themselves, to lessen dependence, and to help them claim dignity in the everyday tasks others take for granted.

P2 described the frustration of seeing a child's possibilities limited not by their capacity, but by adult assumptions:

“May times kasi yung bata, nakakalimutan natin magaling yung bata. Pero dahil akala natin hanggang dun lang siya...parang may isang malaking, ‘oh ito lang yung kaya niya gawin.”

(There are times when we forget the child is capable. Because we assume this is all they can do...as if there's this big limitation set around them.)

This reminded me of the moments in our family and home where we underestimated what my brother could do, assuming he couldn't do other things. I, too, was guilty of the same thing. Before, when my brother failed at activities or even with schoolwork and was being scolded, I used to think that maybe we were forcing him into tasks he couldn't handle, and that perhaps we needed to accept his limits. However, journeying with the foundation and hearing the

teachers' insights humbled me; it was not my brother who was limited, but rather my own perspective.

P7 echoed this belief, reminding that what was taught in the classroom would ripple into every part of a child's life:

“Kailangan niya rin po talaga to sa buhay...May skills pa rin ang anak nila na pwede nilang ma-enhance, na magamit ng anak nila in the near future.”

(They really need this in life... Their child still has skills that can be enhanced and used in the near future.)

Together, the perspectives of P2 and P7 show that communication was never simply about school lessons. It was also about challenging the narratives that parents and society placed around ASD students, narratives that could judge their potential before it was ever tested.

In these words, you can hear the teachers' fierce conviction that no learner is beyond growth, no matter how small or slow the steps.

What stood out in their accounts was how much planning and hope these educators poured into every small routine, such as cueing a child to wash their hands, prompting them to respond to their name, and teaching them to follow simple instructions. These were not just isolated skills. They were building blocks for a life with more choices. Their commitment echoed the spirit of development communication — that education is a collective act of empowering individuals to participate more fully in their families and communities. Teachers described how they had to remind themselves, and sometimes their parents, that progress did not always manifest as

academic achievement. Sometimes, it was the quiet triumph of a child learning to dress themselves or sit calmly at the table.

And even when faced with unpredictability and slow progress, they held onto the belief that preparing ASD students for the future was worth every effort and repetition. In their eyes, it was about ensuring that they had every chance to contribute in their own way to the world beyond the classroom.

The educators' vision for their students' long-term independence speaks to the developmental dimension of communication. It echoes Daraee et al.'s (2016) insight that social skills are foundational to future success. This theme illustrates how teachers view every small communicative interaction as a preparation for life beyond the classroom, a testament to their unwavering commitment to unlocking every child's potential.

While this vision anchored their work, the teachers knew they could not walk this path alone. Their final reflections reveal how their growth as educators was shaped not only by their students but by the constant learning and shared support they found in each other and in every new experience.

Their reflections showed me that nurturing future readiness is never done alone; it is built through patience, shared hope, and the belief that each skill prepares the ASD learners for a progressive and independent life.

Theme 7: Pursuing Lifelong Learning and Professional Growth

The teachers' journey did not end with any single strategy or a short moment of connection. As they worked day by day, many discovered that teaching children with ASD was also transforming them. The work demanded constant learning, humility, and the courage to admit what they did not know. Reflecting on the

importance of collaborating with co-teachers to build confidence and passion, and also the teachers' perseverance toward lifelong learning.

P4 shared how essential it was to rely on others instead of pretending to have all the answers:

“Nagtatanong din ako sa kanila. May mga bagay na hindi ko alam, ina-ask ko yung in-assist ko na teacher...Sabihin ko, ano po ba dapat gawin sa ganito? So tinutulungan naman nila ako. Ang maganda kasi dito, nagtutulungan talaga sila. Kapag hindi mo alam, pwede kang magtanong sa kanila.”

(I also ask them questions. There are things I don't know, so I ask the teacher I assist... I'd say, 'What should I do in this situation?' They really help me. The good thing here is that everyone helps each other. If you don't know something, you can ask them.)

Reflecting on this, I remembered we always had a lot of questions for the teacher on what to do for my brother. Looking back, they were always happy to answer them and teach us how we could better journey with him. From asking how they were able to let him try out different food to putting his shoes on. This demonstrates their deep commitment to working in collaboration, not just with parents, but also within their own little learning community at the foundation.

This openness to seek help was more than a technique. It was a sign of respect, a recognition that no teacher could walk this path alone. It showed that vulnerability was not a weakness, but rather part of what made their work human.

P6 recalled how seminars and training shaped not just what she did in class, but who she was becoming as an educator:

“Nalaman ko na lang din is nung nag-attend ako ng seminars and trainings...Encouraging na mag-attend sila ng mga seminars and trainings. Kasi, ah, hindi nila alam na may ganito pa lang sitwasyon, or may mga ganito pa lang bata.”

(I only learned about these things when I attended seminars and trainings... It's encouraging to attend seminars and trainings because they don't realize there are situations like this, or there are children like this.)

P9 echoed how much professional development broadened her understanding:

“Ang ginawa ko is, based na din sa mga training na na-attend ko.”

(What I did was based also on the training I attended.)

The experiences of professional growth through training and seminars of P6 and P9 were true for all professions, but they valued them deeply. Having to adapt daily to the unpredictable learning environment with these ASD students they shed light on how it is a necessity that, as learners progress, they themselves should not stop learning.

In these words, it becomes clear that the teachers saw themselves not just as professionals, but as part of a larger community effort, one that demanded compassion, humility, and the courage to keep inviting parents into shared commitment.

Listening to them, it became clear that these teachers never stopped being learners themselves. Their reflections revealed a humility too often missing from the public stories of education: that knowledge is provisional, and that no amount of experience exempts one from questioning oneself.

This mindset demonstrates that development communication is not merely about transferring information to students, but also about changing oneself. These teachers were called to absorb new insights, let go of old assumptions, and continually refine what it meant to care and teach. Each training, each conversation, each moment of doubt and learning, was another step in becoming the educator their students needed.

Their stories suggested that some of the most important transformations were not visible to anyone else, such as the quiet reflection after a workshop, the courage to ask a colleague for guidance, or the realization that no single method would ever be enough. In these private moments, they were reshaping themselves to be more attuned to their students, more willing to experiment, and more confident that they could grow alongside the children they served.

This theme underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of the teacher. Nazari (2020) and Gomes et al. (2021) affirm that professional development and training exposure empower teachers to continually refine their practice. The teachers' stories of learning from colleagues and seeking out seminars reflect the hermeneutic view that meaning is never final but emerges through reflective engagement with experience (Van Manen, 2014). Gonzaga (2022) further emphasizes that collaboration and collective problem-solving are vital in sustaining inclusive education.

Through this continuous process of learning and unlearning, these educators were not only teaching, they were being transformed. These interpretations enabled teachers to construct effective teaching strategies, refine their communication styles, and respond empathetically to the needs of neurodiverse students. While the primary intent of this study was to explore and articulate the lived experiences of teachers in communicating with students with ASD, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach inevitably illuminated deeper implications. By focusing on the meaning-laden, evolving nature of teacher-student and teacher-parent communication, the study revealed how such interactions are rooted in the personal and professional lives of educators. Rather than presenting a set of prescribed techniques, this perspective emphasized communication as a reflective and dynamic practice. As such, while the aim was not to generate recommendations, the findings point toward more responsive, inclusive, and meaningful approaches to teaching, highlighting that understanding lived experience can and often does lead to important pedagogical insights.

Table 2. Exemplar Thematic Analysis

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
P1, P9	<p><i>"Sila kasi ay parang, may sariling mundo and kelangan ko ipasok yung sarili ko sa mundo nila. Hindi ko siya basta pwedeng biglang ialis doon, kundi ipapasok ko yung sarili ko."</i></p> <p><i>(They're in their own world, and I need to enter their world. I can't just suddenly pull them out of it; I have to dive myself into it)</i></p> <p><i>"Pumpapasok ako sa mundo ng isang bata kasi sila yung nagtuturo sa akin kung paano ko dapat sila turuan. Ganon, pinapakita nila kung ano yung dapat."</i></p> <p><i>(I enter the child's world because they are the ones teaching me how I should teach them. They are the ones showing me what needs to be done.)</i></p>	<p>have their own world</p> <p>enter the child's world</p> <p>teach me how I should teach them</p>	Adapting to student's perspective	<p>Theme 1: Understanding ASD students</p>
P2	<p><i>"Mga non-verbal."</i></p> <p><i>(Non-verbal individuals)</i></p>	can't speak	Addressing communication challenges	
P5	<p><i>"Hindi talaga nakakaintindi"</i></p> <p><i>(They truly don't understand)</i></p>	have hard time understanding		
P3	<p><i>"Hindi sila maka-adjust."</i></p> <p><i>(They are unable to adjust)</i></p>	have hard time adjusting		

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
P6	<p><i>"Talagang physically prompted sila"</i></p> <p><i>(They are indeed physically prompted)</i></p>	rely on physical guidance/ prompts	Adjusting physically and socially	
P8	<p><i>"Sobrang layo nila sa typical na student."</i></p> <p><i>(They are significantly different from typical students)</i></p>	<p>atypical</p> <p>different</p>		
P6	<p><i>"Hindi mo din naman sila masisisi kung bakit sila ganon."</i></p> <p><i>(You can't really blame them for being that way)</i></p>	can't be blamed for actions	Recognizing developmental differences	
P5	<p><i>"Bigla na lang silang iiyak without knowing kung bakit"</i></p> <p><i>(They just suddenly cry without anyone knowing the reason)</i></p>	suddenly cry for no reason		
P1	<p><i>"Minsan nag-aattempt sila mag-bite or scratching, kasi kahit hindi namman nila siyasadaya pero yun lang way nila para ma-release stress. Minsan steaming, palakpak ng palakpak hindi niya yun ititigil. Meron naman ikot ng ikot pero steaming na yun pag paulit ulit na niya ginagawa. Which is yun na yung way para ma regulate niya yung stress nila ganon at mailabas yung stress lalo na pag ina - anxiety sila."</i></p> <p><i>(Sometimes they attempt to bite or scratch, not because they really mean to, but because that's their way of releasing stress. Sometimes they engage in stimming, like clapping repeatedly and not</i></p>	<p>can have compulsive or repetitive movements</p> <p>involuntary repetitive movements</p> <p>can harm others when feeling anxious</p> <p>can be aggressive</p> <p>actions done to release stress</p>	Recognizing behavioral expression of stress to communicate their needs	

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
	<i>stopping. Others spin around and around, and when it's done over and over, that's also a form of stimming. It's their way of regulating and releasing stress, especially when they're feeling anxious.)</i>			
P4	<i>"Ang ASD, hindi lang sarili ang sinasaktan, pati ikaw." (With ASD, it's not only themselves they hurt, but also you)</i>	can harm self and others		
P2	<i>"Tingnan natin ito, try tayo ng ganito. Yung ibang trial and error kasi talaga ang kailangan." (Let's look at this, let's try this. Sometimes, trial and error is really needed.)</i>	trial and error of ways that work	Identifying adaptive practices	Theme 2: Adaptive and collaborative teaching practices
P3	<i>"We're figuring out parang the best practices we can find. Pero hindi kasi sila textbook." (We are figuring out the best practices we can find. But they are not textbook)</i>	figuring out best practices from examples		
P7	<i>"Parang every day mo sila i-o-observe." (You observe them everyday)</i>	observing the children everyday	Collaborating with learners and teachers	
P1	<i>"Ino-observe ko co-teachers ko. Kung nakikita ko kung pano yung way niya. Tina-try ko rin yun." (I observe my co-teachers. If I see how they do it, I also try it.)</i>	observing co-teachers		

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
P4	<p><i>"Pinapanuod ko yung BMT niya."</i></p> <p><i>(I watch how they do BMT)</i></p>	<p>watching for examples</p>		
P1	<p><i>"Sobrang fulfillment ba yung makuha attention nila. Yung kahit minsan hindi pa sila magsalita pero alam mo na nakuha yung attention nila, sobrang fulfilling"</i></p> <p><i>(It's such a great fulfillment to get their attention. Even if sometimes they don't speak yet, but you know you've caught their attention, it feels so fulfilling.)</i></p>	<p>enjoying the children's attention</p>	<p>Satisfaction from student improvements</p>	<p>Theme 3: Teacher motivation and satisfaction</p>
P5	<p><i>"Kapag na-pro-process na nila sinasabi mo, talagang fulfilling na yun sayo"</i></p> <p><i>(When they're able to process what you're telling them)</i></p>	<p>fulfilling when the students start thinking</p>		
P6	<p><i>"Worth it talaga kapag nagkakaroon ng improvement yung bata. Kahit sobrang little na improvement... Nabubuhayan din ako ng loob kapag yung mga magulang is natutuwa din sa improvement nung bata."</i></p> <p><i>(It's really worth it when the child shows improvement. Even the tiniest progress... it gives me encouragement and joy, especially when the parents are also happy with the child's improvement.)</i></p>	<p>encouraged with students' progress</p> <p>parents happy with child's improvement</p>	<p>Motivation from student progress</p>	

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
P8	<p><i>"Nakakatuwa kapag ililipat na sila ng regular, running for regular school. Yun yung nagiging motivation mo to continue your passion."</i></p> <p><i>(It's heartwarming when they are transferred to a regular school. That becomes your motivation to continue your passion)</i></p>	<p>happy they become regular students</p> <p>motivated to continue teaching</p>		
P2	<p><i>"Hindi kami yung kalaban niyo dito...Gusto po naming tulungan kayo."</i></p> <p><i>(We are not your enemies. We want to help you)</i></p>	<p>declaring teachers as allies not enemies</p>		
P3	<p><i>"Yung parents or guardians would always kinda doubt my skills...Bakit ka mahahagard dun sa nangyayari sa studyante mo? Eh hindi ka nga naman siguro naaalala eh...More than that we can only do so much, the parents will always have the last say."</i></p> <p><i>"Parents or guardians would often kind of doubt my skills... Why would you get stressed out over what's happening with your student? They probably don't even remember you anyway... Beyond that, there's only so much we can do, the parents will always have the final say."</i></p>	<p>caring for students like parents</p> <p>building rapport with parents</p>	<p>Positioning parents as partners</p>	<p>Theme 4: Family engagement and student progress</p>
P8	<p><i>"Consistently, kailangan ng follow-up sa bahay Kung ano ginagawa ni teacher sa school, ganon din"</i></p>	<p>consistent follow-up at home</p>		

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
	<p><i>ginagawa ng parents sa bahay."</i></p> <p><i>(There has to be a consistent follow-up at home. What the teacher does at school, parents should do at home)</i></p>	<p>parents do what teachers do at home</p>	<p>School-to-home continuity of learning</p>	
P6	<p><i>"Nag-iencourage tayo sa mga parents din kung ano dapat yung gawin sa bahay. I-encourage naming sila kung ano yung mga follow-up na kailangan gawin para mag improve ang bata"</i></p> <p><i>(We also encourage the parents on what they should do at home. We guide them on the follow-ups that need to be done so the child can improve)</i></p>	<p>guide parents on home follow-up</p>		
P2	<p><i>"Walang follow-up sa bahay, mas mapapatagal dito...Kailangan niyo po talaga mag-effort, hindi lang po sa amin."</i></p> <p><i>(Without follow-up at home, the progress here will take longer... You really need to make an effort too, not just us.)</i></p>	<p>need follow-up and effort at home</p> <p>parents should also make effort at home</p>		
P3	<p><i>"Collaborative effort."</i></p> <p><i>"Will you help me also? I can't do it by myself."</i></p>	<p>teaching is not solely the teacher's job</p>	<p>Collaboration of parents and teachers</p>	
P7	<p><i>"Hindi ako yung dapat magpapamukha sa kanya na kailangan rin nung anak niya ng tulong niya. Dapat siya rin mismo maka discover nun."</i></p> <p><i>(I'm not the one who should force them to see that their child needs their help. They</i></p>	<p>parents need to know their roles as co-teachers at home</p>		

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
	<i>themselves need to discover it).</i>			
P2	<p><i>"Walang follow-up sa bahay, mas mapapatagal dito...Kailangan niyo po talaga mag-effort, hindi lang po sa amin."</i></p> <p><i>(Without follow-up at home, the progress here will take longer... You really need to make an effort too, not just us.)</i></p>	<p>lack of follow-up and effort at home will prolong progress</p>		
P6	<p><i>"May mga moment talaga na hindi mo na alam, nagiging effective ka pa ba dito sa batang to? Worth it pa ba yung ginagawa mo? Kasi wala naman nangyayari."</i></p> <p><i>(There are really moments when you start to wonder, am I still being effective with this child? Is what I'm doing still worth it? Because it feels like nothing is happening.)</i></p>	<p>teachers questioning their abilities</p> <p>teachers asking if it is worth it</p>	<p>Doubting professional effectiveness</p>	<p>Theme 5: Managing professional challenges and well-being</p>
P9	<p><i>"Hindi ba ako magaling?"</i></p> <p><i>(Am I not good?)</i></p>	<p>teachers questioning their competence</p>		
P4	<p><i>"Aalagaan mo rin yung sarili mo... Nakaka-burnout talaga."</i></p> <p><i>(You have to care for yourself...because it really is draining)</i></p>	<p>teacher burnout due to pressure</p>	<p>Teacher well-being management</p>	
P6	<p><i>"Kailangan mo talaga i-detach din yung sarili mo dun sa situation"</i></p> <p><i>(You really have to detach yourself from the situation"</i></p>	<p>teacher detachment from work pressure</p>		

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
P2	<p><i>"May times kasi yung bata, nakakalimutan natin magaling yung bata. Pero dahil akala natin hanggang dun lang siya... parang may isang malaking oh ito lang yung kaya niyagawin"</i></p> <p><i>(There are times when we forget the child is capable. Because we assume this is all they can do... as if there's this big limitation set around them)</i></p>	<p>forgetting the learners' skills</p> <p>assuming the children's limitations</p>	Recognizing the potential and growth of learners	Theme 6: Nurturing future readiness
P6	<p><i>"Hindi mo namamalayan na nag i-improve pala yung bata. Malalaman mo na lang pag sinasabe na nag fe-feedback na din sayo yung magulang"</i></p> <p><i>(You don't immediately notice that the child is actually improving. You only realize it once the parent gives you feedback.)</i></p>	<p>missing signs of improvement</p> <p>learning from parents' feedbacks</p>		
P3	<p><i>"Parang in the long run, if you are not going to be at school, at all. What are you doing majority of your time?... Kailangan mong effort in now, kaysa hindi mo sya simulan at all"</i></p> <p><i>(In the long run, if you're not going to be at school at all, what are you doing with most of your time?... You need to make an effort now, rather than not starting at all)</i></p>	early efforts for the future	Teachers building future-oriented skills of children	
P7	<p><i>"Kailangan niya rin po talaga to sa buhay. May skills pa rin ang anak nila, na pwede nila ma-enhance, na magamit ng anak nila in the near future"</i></p>	skills enhancement of children		

Participant's Code	Exemplars	Open Code	Axial Code (Sub theme)	Theme
	<i>(They need this in life. Their child still has skills that can be enhanced and used in the near future)</i>			
P4	<p><i>“Nagtatanong din ako sa kanila. May mga bagay na hindi ko alam, ina-ask ko yung in-assist ko na teacher...Sabihin ko, ano po ba dapat gawin sa ganito? So tinutulungan naman nila ako. Ang maganda kasi dito, nagtutulungan talaga sila. Kapag hindi mo alam, pwede kang magtanong sa kanila.”</i></p> <p><i>(I also ask them questions. There are things I don't know, so I ask the teacher I assist... I'd say, 'What should I do in this situation?' They really help me. The good thing here is that everyone helps each other. If you don't know something, you can ask them.)</i></p>	co-teachers provide professional support	Teachers engaging in self-improvement	<p>Theme 7: Pursuing lifelong learning and professional growth</p>
P6	<p><i>“Encouraging na sumali sa mga seminars”</i></p> <p><i>(We encourage them to join seminars)</i></p>	teachers encouraged to join seminars	Teachers engaging in lifelong learning	
P9	<p><i>“Based din sa mga training na-attendan ko”</i></p> <p><i>(This is also based on the trainings I have attended)</i></p>	Teachers learn from- trainings		

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of nine teachers from the Harvest of Hope Foundation, Inc., as they navigated the intricate and emotionally demanding process of communicating with students diagnosed with ASD. The study showed that teachers gradually changed the way they thought about connection, progress, and success by truly engaging with their students' stories. Through their stories, it became clear that communication was not a fixed set of strategies, but rather a meaning that evolved into a layered, changing practice based on humility, presence, and shared meaning-making.

Seven main themes emerged from the data analysis. "Understanding ASD Students" demonstrated how teachers navigated the initial meetings with students with ASD and began to learn how to let go of their preconceptions about how people with typical communication styles interact. "Adaptive and Collaborative Teaching Practices" demonstrated their commitment to observing, experimenting, and collaborating with their students and co-teachers to develop effective strategies. "Teacher Motivation and Satisfaction" revealed that teachers were content with small successes, even though they harbored doubts that they did not express out loud. "Family Engagement and Student Progress" showed that while it is hard to build trust and work together with families, everyone needs to be committed in and out of the school for development to happen. "Managing Professional Challenges and Well-being" explores how these teachers care deeply for their learners, yet know when to

detach, especially during periods of burnout. “Nurturing Future Readiness” demonstrated that teachers viewed every lesson as an opportunity to help students progress and become independent. Lastly, “Pursuing Lifelong Learning and Professional Growth” illustrated the transformation of teachers as a result of their professional experiences. They acquired greater humility, thoughtfulness, awareness, and reflection on each child's uniqueness.

Together, these themes illustrate that teaching and communicating with ASD students was not only about the academic process, but about co-creating meaning with the students and their families, everyone thriving on hope despite the daily uncertainty, and preparing these learners for their future readiness.

Conclusions

In relation to the research questions, the findings revealed how teachers described communication with ASD students and how these meanings guided their actions in practice.

The study showed that communication for these teachers was not just an instructional act. It was adaptive, built on relationships, and they looked forward to reshaping how they understood their ASD students, themselves, the families, and their role as lifelong educators of the foundation. This collective insight into how communication is linked to meaning-making reveals that the teachers of the Harvest of Hope Foundation view communication as both a practice and a means of becoming. Where the teachers' professional roles, patience, and hopes for the future of their students meet in understanding.

More than strategies, their actions reflected the meanings they attached to each encounter, whether with the learner, the parents, their co-teacher, or even themselves. This interpretative process not only defines their daily actions, but also their commitment to shaping how they continue to teach, care, and grow together.

Recommendations

For the school

1. Establish structured, regular opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative reflection. Through facilitated debriefing circles or organized reflection sessions, educators can collectively process their professional successes and challenges. This approach directly supports the theme of managing professional challenges and well-being by providing essential emotional and peer support, which is critical for preventing burnout and promoting teacher resilience.
2. Strengthen the connection between families and schools to bridge the existing communication gap. This can be achieved through implementing home-school learning agreements, conducting regular case conferences, and creating consistent opportunities for parent-teacher communication. This recommendation aligns with the theme of family engagement and student progress, highlighting that effective communication extends beyond the classroom and is enhanced through collaborative partnerships.
3. Design professional development programs that are flexible and informed by teachers' lived experiences. While workshops and seminars are useful, training can be made more impactful by incorporating teachers' personal narratives and context-specific strategies. This supports the theme of lifelong learning and

professional growth, suggesting that professional development should build on practical experiences to empower educators to meet the diverse needs of their students. Additionally, providing financial and technical support for communication tools like the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and other visual aids directly aligns with nurturing future readiness by fostering student independence and communication skills.

4. Incorporate development communication principles into inclusive education policies and teacher training. This involves a deliberate focus on dialogue, participation, and context-sensitivity to create a more supportive and adaptable school environment. This approach underscores that communication is not merely transactional but a relational process of building shared understanding. Ultimately, these recommendations collectively aim to foster a learning environment where teachers feel supported, student needs are acknowledged, and communication becomes a shared and empowering process, leading to a more compassionate and effective educational setting.

For development communication as a discipline

1. Educational interventions for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) must be tailored to their specific characteristics and needs. Educational communication is a vital discipline in this process, as it is often more effective than traditional instructional materials alone. While the development of instructional materials is typically based on learner needs, the unique requirements of students with ASD necessitate a distinct, communication-focused approach.

2. Educational communication with ASD learners must be considered as it's vital for development communicators to know how different senses work together. By integrating visual, tactile, auditory, and other sensory elements, they can more effectively connect with students and become a true part of their learning journey.

For policy making for the Department of Education

1. The Department of Education (DepEd) should increase its support for Special Education (SPED) facilities and learning strategies. Since the education of students with special needs is a core function of the department, it is responsible for ensuring SPED programs receive the resources they urgently require.
2. Department of Education (DepEd) should prioritize training its teachers in effective communication strategies for students with diverse abilities to ensure that all students are treated as individuals, rather than just as members of a group. This training is essential for creating an inclusive learning environment where every student is seen and valued as a unique human being.

For future studies

1. A mixed-methods research design, specifically an exploratory sequential approach, is well-suited to deepen the understanding of the communication phenomenon. This design begins with a qualitative phase to explore the communication process, followed by a quantitative phase to generalize the findings. For instance, interviews can be conducted to understand the meaning of communication among teachers handling ASD students, and a subsequent survey can then be developed, based on the qualitative themes, to measure these experiences across multiple schools.

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