Pertanika Proceedings 2 (2): 57 - 62 (2026)

PERTANIKA JOURNALS

PERTANIKA PROCEEDINGS

Journal homepage: http://www.pertanika.upm.edu.my/

Beyond Teaching: A Phenomenological Study of Empathy and Moral Responsibility Among Autism Special School Teachers in Indonesia

Ima Hidayati Utami* and Yuyun Agus Riani

Department of Communication Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, 65145 Jawa Timur, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how empathy, moral responsibility and reflective communication help teachers at an autism-special school shape professional meaning. The study considers teaching as multivocal moral and communicative practice formed through teachers' engagement with students by interpreting their verbal, nonverbal, and emotional expressions. Using a descriptive phenomenological design with eighteen teachers from an autism special school as research informants, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Moustakas's epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis of essences. The findings reveal five interconnected themes: pedagogical practice as a moral calling and communicative responsibility; emotional ambivalence and the redefinition of success; empathy and communication as a fundamental pedagogy; adaptive modes of communication in times of behavioural, emotional, and institutional adversity; and an ontological shift through reflective dialogue. Interpreted in light of Heidegger's being-with, Buber's I–Thou relation, Schutz's intersubjectivity, and van Manen's pedagogical tact, the study reveals empathy as a dialogic practice such that trust fosters emotional safety and mutual understanding. This study presents autism-to-special-school teaching as embodied relational communication situated within particular cultural constructions of ethics.

Keywords: Autism education, adaptive communication, communicative competence, empathy, moral responsibility, phenomenology, reflective communication, teacher experience

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received: 09 July 2026
Published: 21 September 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47836/pp.2.2.010

E-mail address:
imadayati.u@ub.ac.id (Ima Hidayati Utami)
yuyunriani@ub.ac.id (Yuyun Agus Riani)
* Corresponding author

e-ISSN: 3083-9475

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) needs more than just using instructional strategies. Teachers need to develop communicative competence, encompassing the ability to listen, interpret, and respond empathetically, since students with ASD have modes of expression that diverge from neurotypical norms. Still, Indonesia faces challenges in providing access to education for students with special needs (UNICEF , 2023) and qualified special education teachers (Haryati, 2023). It implies that teachers of autism-special schools in Indonesia are frequently working in low-resource settings while providing individualised, emotionally responsive, accessible communication support.

Previous research has focused on evidence-based practices and forms of inclusion, such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), and other systematic supports for communication and participation (Sam et al., 2021). Though valuable, these approaches wrest the relational and ethical work of teachers-including making sense of student responses; negotiating classroom affect; coordinating with others; and making real-time communicative choices that depend on trust, patience, and responsiveness (Erlani et al., 2026; Roberts & Simpson, 2016).

Autism education needs to be understood through a wider communicative ecology. Integrating stakeholder attitudes, knowledge, social communication difficulties, perceived challenging behaviour and access to support networks is necessary for shaping students' educational experience (Roberts & Simpson, 2016). What autism means and how alternative communication behaviours are responded to by teachers, families, peers and institutions would also be a challenge. Such an interpretive view is related to the teachers' daily practice as they continually negotiate through verbal, nonverbal, behavioural, emotional, and institutional boundaries.

From a communication theory perspective, the transactional communication model regards interaction as co-created meaning, feedback, and mutual adaptation (Littlejohn et al., 2017). It is relevant to autism education, where meaning emerges through tone, timing, gesture, visual support, movement, repetition, silence, and emotional attunement. Inter-subjective theories such as those developed phenomenologically and dialogically broaden this understanding to the empathic involvement with others. The concepts of 'being-with' (Heidegger, 1962), 'I-Thou' relation (Buber, 1996), intersubjectivity (Schultz, 1967) and Pedagogical tact (Manen, 1997) are used together as lenses to ensure that teaching students with ASD is seen as the practice of presence, interpretation and response in ways that dignify students.

Using a descriptive phenomenological design, 18 teachers with teaching experience ranging from 2 to 21 years in an autism-special school in Malang, Indonesia, participated in the study. The data were analysed using Moustakas's (Moustakas, 1994) four steps:

epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of essences—deriving core meanings across experiences. Peer debriefing and member checking helped establish credibility. Anonymity was guaranteed and informed consent and ethical approval were acquired.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Empirical understanding of empathy as communication remains limited in teachers' lived experiences, non-Western autism-special-school contexts, and relational meaning-making in autism education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do teachers in autism-special-school experience and construct empathy, moral responsibility and reflective communication through everyday communication with students with ASD?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenological analysis yielded five interrelated themes illustrating how teachers construct a professional sense of meaning through empathy and moral responsibility.

The first theme, moral calling as communicative ethics, demonstrates how teachers rationalise their work as a moral endeavour. When teachers characterise teaching as a "calling of the heart" or "an obligation to help autistic children communicate", they treat students as individuals who need to be read. It is consistent with "I–Thou" relation (Buber, 1996) that ethical communication may not be possible until the other is encountered as a subject. Earlier evidence also shows that autism education barriers are influenced by student characteristics and how school actors construct understandings of autism, social communication and behaviour (Roberts & Simpson, 2016). This finding contributes to the expansion of communicative competence: competence does not consist exclusively of sending clear messages but also entails the ethical capacity to see meaning in weak, atypical and corporeal signs.

The second theme indicates that teachers' emotional ambivalence develops into a communicative process for redefining pedagogical success. Emotional experiences (e.g. joy, fatigue, anxiety, frustration, tenderness and fullness) determined how teachers did sense-making about teaching as interaction among students. Teachers associated success with behavioural signs: calmness, eye contact, the ability to follow the routine, smiling and applying a learned behaviour at home. It indicates that pedagogical success was not formal assessment, but rather affectively resonant communication that re-construed sense of success. It confirms previous finding, that students and school

environment interaction crucial factors in effective inclusion (Roberts & Simpson, 2016). Thus, emotion constructs communication and emerges as a primary element in defining pedagogical success.

The third theme, empathy and communication as a fundamental pedagogy, demonstrates that empathy is not only a predisposition but also a dialogic practice realised through communicative decisions. Teachers expressed empathy through calm tone, patience, simplified language, visual support, gestures, and sensitivity to students' sensory and emotional states. Consistent with Erlani et al. (2026), communication devices can strengthen students' communicative competence, but this study adds that AAC, PECS, visual schedules, and gestures become meaningful only through teacher sensitivity, trust, and responsiveness. As described by Schultz (1967), this is an intersubjectivity process, where meaning is co-constructed through repeated interpretations between teacher and student. Hence, empathy serves as the method, content, and ethos of relational pedagogy.

The fourth theme, adaptive communication within institutional and relational constraints, reveals that teachers continually adapt their responses to their constraints, such as behavioural barriers, sensory overload, parental expectations, limited resources, and institutional pressures. Through their responses (e.g. lowering voice, taking a pause, changing routines, attending to body language, clarifying to parents, discussing with colleagues), they showed that communication is being continuously mediated within a larger ecology of relationships. This is consistent with earlier evidence for networks, autism knowledge, social communication, and stakeholder perspectives (Roberts & Simpson, 2016) but structure on its own is not sufficient, as evidenced through structured visual learning (Erlani et al., 2026). This research points out that teachers must constantly adjust when to use visual support, repeat instructions, pause, or shift to emotional regulation. This reflects the ability to decide what communicative response is needed in an unpredictable human situation (Manen, 1997).

The fifth theme, ontological shift through reflective dialogue, demonstrates that teachers develop patience, humility, empathy and an awareness of nonverbal behaviours when teaching students with autism. From mechanistic instruction toward communicative awareness, such that teachers learn to suspend normative assumptions about communication and progress and success. Building on Roberts and Simpson's (2016) call for autism knowledge translation into practice and school capacity development, this study illustrates how translation is delivered via teachers' transformative reflection. Communication becomes not only "what teachers do", but also "how to be professionals" through cycles of interpretation, adaptation, failure, reflection and response.

CONCLUSION

Interpreting through the concepts of "being-with" (Heidegger, 1962), "I-Thou" relation (Buber, 1996), "intersubjectivity" (Schultz, 1967), and "pedagogical tact" (Manen, 1997), this research reveals a more complex understanding of empathy merely as an affective disposition rather than as a dialogic practice expressed in gesture and timing, tone, silence, visual support, embodied presence and reflective responsiveness. It adds to communication studies by characterising autism-special-school teaching as embodied, ethical, mediated and culturally situated relational communication where meaning is co-created through verbal-visual-emotional-reflective interaction. Theoretically, it supports the significance of reflective communication, emotional literacy, AAC-informed pedagogy, family-school dialogue and ethical responsiveness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to extend their gratitude to the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Brawijaya, for its financial and administrative support, which significantly contributed to facilitating this research. The authors also thank the BCIC Publication Team for their administrative support, and the Pertanika reviewers for their valuable feedback for the manuscript improvement.

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