

# Beyond the Deficit Model: A Qualitative Narrative Analysis of Non-Speaking Autistic Memoirs and Implications for Augmentative Communication in Inclusive Classrooms

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## Abstract

Traditional special education assessment paradigms for non-speaking students frequently rely on deficit-based metrics that evaluate vocal-motor execution against normative benchmarks. This paper conducts an in-depth qualitative narrative analysis of two foundational first-person memoirs authored by non-speaking autistic writers: Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay's *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move?* and Naoki Higashida's *The Reason I Jump*. Framed through Critical Disability Studies (CDS), Remi Yergeau's neurodivergent rhetoric, and Damian Milton's conceptualisation of the "Double Empathy Problem," this textual analysis examines how these authors employ metaphor, structural innovation, and sensory descriptions to challenge historical assumptions of cognitive impairment. The analysis reveals three primary thematic findings: the structural dissociation between motor execution barriers and cognitive comprehension, narrative voice as an active instrument of self-advocacy and agency, and the acute sensory friction produced by normative educational environments. The study synthesizes these literary insights into concrete pedagogical applications, advocating for presumed competence, early and expanded Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) implementation, interdisciplinary collaboration between special educators and speech-language pathologists, and neurodiversity-affirming teacher education curricula.

**Keywords:** augmentative communication; autism memoirs; critical disability studies; narrative analysis; non-verbal agency; special education.

## 1. Introduction and Literature Review

### 1.1 The Historical Pathology of Non-Speaking Autistic Learners

Within special and inclusive education research, non-speaking or minimally verbal autistic students have historically occupied a deeply marginalized position. For decades, clinical paradigms dominated by behavioural psychology and traditional psychometrics operated under the implicit assumption that spoken language is the primary proxy for intellectual capacity. Tracing back to the early psychometric frameworks of the twentieth century, including the Wechsler Performance Scales and Binet-Simon assessments, intelligence was operationalized through rapid physical execution, immediate oral articulation, and fine-motor compliance (Gould, 1996; Trent, 1994). When a learner cannot produce expressive speech or reliably control physical movements during standardized testing, psychoeducational evaluation tools frequently assign scores indicating severe intellectual impairment. This historical pathology has created a cycle of institutional disenfranchisement wherein systemic educational barriers are misattributed to intrinsic cognitive deficits within the student (Biklen, 2005; Kliever et al., 2006).

This conceptual alignment between vocal articulation and intellectual capacity represents a foundational flaw in traditional assessment methodologies. Standardized intelligence tests rely heavily on timed physical responses, oral articulation, or precise fine-motor execution, such as pointing on command, manipulating small objects, or writing with a pencil. For learners who experience severe motor praxis differences, developmental coordination disorders, or apraxia of speech, these tests measure motor impairment rather than receptive language, abstract reasoning, or conceptual understanding (Donnellan et al., 2013; Leary & Hill, 1996; Torres, 2013). When an assessment tool requires motor compliance as a precondition for demonstrating intelligence, it systematically invalidates the cognitive capacity of individuals whose motor pathways are dysregulated. As educational paradigms shift toward integrating technology to enhance traditional instructional models, classroom methodologies must evolve to support non-normative learning and alternative communication modalities (Pinto & Lourdusamy, 2021).

The clinical literature of the mid-to-late twentieth century, influenced heavily by early behavioural paradigms such as Lovaas-style Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), treated non-speaking states as behavioural failures requiring intensive extinction protocols (Lovaas, 1987). Under these frameworks, non-verbal learners were viewed as lacking internal symbolic thought, intent, or self-awareness until oral speech or physical compliance could be trained. Consequently, students labelled as non-verbal were routinely routed into segregated educational tracks characterized by low academic expectations, functional-skills instruction, and repetitive behavioural training (Ferri & Connor, 2006). These placements rarely offer access to rich literacy instruction, abstract academic content, or robust communication technologies. The systemic denial of instructional resources reinforces measured intellectual deficits, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. A student who is never taught to read or provided with a comprehensive communication system will inevitably fail standardized measures of academic performance, thereby validating the original deficit label in the eyes of an uncritical educational system (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005; Mirenda, 2003).

### **1.2 Theoretical Foundations: Critical Disability Studies and the Neurodiversity Paradigm**

To dismantle this deficit-based model, contemporary educational researchers increasingly turn to Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and the broader neurodiversity paradigm (Goodley, 2014; Walker, 2021). Critical Disability Studies differentiates between biological or neurological variation, termed impairment, and the societal, environmental, and institutional obstacles that restrict full participation, recognized as disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2006). In an educational context, CDS posits that the primary obstacle facing a non-speaking learner is not their neurological profile, but rather an inflexible educational system that demands normative speech and physical compliance as mandatory entry conditions for academic inclusion.

Complementing Critical Disability Studies is Damian Milton's (2012) theory of the Double Empathy Problem. Traditional psychiatric frameworks often characterize autism as a social deficit marked by a lack of empathy, poor theory of mind, or an inability to comprehend social nuance (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Milton recontextualizes communication breakdowns between autistic individuals and neurotypical educators as mutual, bidirectional misalignments. Because autistic and non-autistic people possess fundamentally different perceptual, sensory, and communicative experiences, each group struggles to interpret the non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and communicative intents of the other. When an educator fails to interpret a non-speaking student's physical movements or vocalizations, this breakdown reflects an interpretive gap on the part of the educator, rather than an inherent deficit within the student (Chown, 2014; Murray et al., 2005).

Expanding upon these frameworks, autistic scholar Remi Yergeau (2018) critiques clinically authored rhetoric, which routinely strips neurodivergent individuals of intentionality and narrative agency. Yergeau highlights how clinical diagnostic manuals frame autistic behaviours such as motor stimming, echolalia, or gaze aversion—as non-rhetorical, involuntary, or devoid of meaning. In contrast, neurodivergent self-rhetoric asserts that these behaviours carry profound communicative, regulatory, and expressive weight. Reimagining language instruction requires recognizing how digital systems, alternative language environments, and adaptive interfaces broaden cognitive horizons in language acquisition, facilitating diverse linguistic development pathways for non-standard learners (Pinto, 2025). Under the traditional medical model, a non-verbal state is presumed to indicate cognitive deficit, directly leading to segregated functional curricula and reduced academic exposure. Conversely, under the critical disability model, a non-verbal state represents a combination of motor execution barriers and environmental friction. This reframing mandates that schools provide robust academic access, physical accommodations, and alternative communication tools rather than remediation focused solely on eliminating autistic behaviours.

### **1.3 The Role of Literary Narrative in Special Education Research**

While quantitative educational research provides statistical overviews of school placements and intervention outcomes, it often fails to illuminate the internal cognitive and emotional lives of non-speaking learners. Quantitative paradigms frequently observe external behaviours while remaining blind to internal mental processes, reducing complex human experiences to observational behavioural frequencies (Skrtic, 1995). First-person autobiographical literature specifically memoirs written by non-speaking autistic individuals using alternative communication methods provides essential qualitative data that directly counters external clinical assumptions (Biklen, 2005; Couser, 2009).

By engaging in textual analysis of these autobiographies, educational researchers gain direct access to subjective descriptions of sensory processing, internal language formation, and the psychological impact of institutional practices (Rodas, 2018). Literary analysis bridges the gap between critical humanities and empirical special

education, offering a rich qualitative evidence base for reforming pedagogical practices. These narratives serve as empirical evidence of complex internal cognition, providing a narrative counter-archive that challenges the authority of traditional diagnostic texts and centres the lived expertise of neurodivergent authors (Thomas & Loxley, 2007).

## 2. Methodology and Corpus Selection

This study adopts a Qualitative Narrative Analysis design (Riessman, 2008), integrating methods from structural narrative inquiry and neurodivergent rhetorical critique (Yergeau, 2018). Narrative analysis is particularly suited for this inquiry because it prioritizes the subjective voice of historically marginalized authors, allowing researchers to evaluate how narrative structure, metaphor, and thematic choices counter dominant institutional discourses.

### 2.1 Primary Corpus Selection

Two seminal autobiographical texts were selected for close literary analysis:

1. **Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay's** *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move? Inside My Autistic Mind* (2011), published by Arcade Publishing. Authored by Mukhopadhyay after being diagnosed with severe autism in early childhood in India, the text was produced using a letterboard and computer keyboard. Through these tools, Mukhopadhyay developed a sophisticated literary voice, authoring multiple published works of prose and poetry that offer intricate descriptions of cognitive isolation, motor disconnect, and sensory perception.
2. **Naoki Higashida's** *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism* (2013), translated by K. Mitchell and K. Yoshida and published by Sceptre. Authored by Higashida at age thirteen in Japan using an alphabet grid, the book employs an innovative question-and-answer structure to directly confront common assumptions and systemic misconceptions regarding non-speaking autistic individuals.

Together, these two texts provide a rich, cross-cultural dataset examining how non-speaking individuals navigate educational and social environments across different national contexts (India/USA and Japan).

### 2.2 Analytical Procedure, Qualitative Rigor and Methodological Validity Frame

The textual analysis was conducted in three distinct, iterative phases using a structured qualitative thematic coding matrix:

**Phase 1 (Open Structural Coding):** Both primary texts were systematically reviewed and coded line-by-line for explicit references to educational settings, physical movement, sensory perceptions, speech attempts, and interactions with educators or caregivers. Over 140 initial open codes were generated across both texts.

**Phase 2 (Axial Coding and Literary Synthesis):** Initial codes were grouped through constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2014) into higher-level thematic domains. This process revealed three dominant thematic categories across both texts: Motor-Cognitive Dissociation, Sensory Environmental Friction, and Textual Agency through AAC. In this phase, rhetorical devices—such as metaphor, framing, syntax, and voice—were critically examined to understand how meaning was constructed.

**Phase 3 (Pedagogical Synthesis):** The literary evidence within each theme was cross-referenced with empirical research in special education, speech-language pathology, developmental psychology, and inclusive classroom design.

To address ongoing debate within special education research regarding assisted alternative communication (e.g., ASHA & AAIDD stance papers on facilitated communication and prompt dependence), this study establishes a clear **CDS Textual Validity Frame**. Rather than evaluating these texts through a clinical diagnostic lens that seeks to measure independent motor purity, this study treats published memoirs as established cultural, literary, and autoethnographic artifacts (Couser, 2009; Rodas, 2018). As published works in the public domain, these texts function as counter-hegemonic narratives that document lived neurodivergent experiences. Analysing their rhetorical structures and thematic content provides critical conceptual insights regardless of clinical debates surrounding execution mechanics.

To ensure qualitative rigour, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness were strictly implemented:

**Credibility:** Achieved through data source triangulation across two distinct authors writing independently in different national, linguistic, and cultural contexts (India/USA and Japan), ensuring that identified themes transcend individual or geographic idiosyncrasies.

**Transferability:** Addressed by providing extensive, detailed textual excerpts throughout the narrative analysis, enabling educators, clinicians, and researchers to assess applicability to diverse learner profiles in varied educational settings.

**Confirmability & Dependability:** Established through a transparent qualitative audit trail linking direct narrative excerpts to axial codes, theoretical constructs, and final pedagogical recommendations.

### 2.3 Reflexivity Statement

As researchers operating within academic institutions, we recognize our positionality relative to the neurodiversity movement and special education practice. Conducting textual analysis on memoirs written by non-speaking authors requires a reflexive awareness of the historical tendency of non-autistic scholars to misinterpret, over-interpret, or patronize neurodivergent voices (Yergeau, 2018). Throughout this study, we intentionally adopt an analytical stance that treats the authors as legitimate knowledge-generators, scholars, and experts on their own internal experiences, rather than merely subject cases for clinical scrutiny. We continuously audited our qualitative interpretations against the explicit text written by Mukhopadhyay and Higashida to avoid projecting normative assumptions onto their narratives.

## 3. Results and Qualitative Literary Analysis

| Thematic Domain                            | Textual Evidence & Narrative Indicators                                                                                                                           | Core Pedagogical Revelation                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Motor vs. Cognitive Dissociation</b> | Detailed accounts of voluntary vs. involuntary movement; disconnect between thought formation and physical execution; metaphors of rebelliousness and automation. | Receptive language and intellectual capacity remain intact even when physical output appears dysregulated, unresponsive, or contradictory. |
| <b>2. Sensory Environmental Friction</b>   | Accounts of unfiltered auditory processing, visual fragmentation, and the necessity of self-regulatory movements (stimming) as spatial anchors.                   | Classroom behaviours are frequently adaptive coping mechanisms responding to high-arousal, sensory-overloaded environments.                |
| <b>3. Textual Agency via AAC</b>           | The use of letter boards and typing to construct complex metaphors, philosophical reflections, and explicit self-advocacy; structural Q&A framing.                | Alternative communication modalities unlock sophisticated internal language and meta-cognitive thought that oral speech cannot capture.    |

### 3.1 Theme 1: The Dissociation between Motor Planning and Cognitive Capacity

A prominent revelation across both texts is the structural separation between internal cognitive processing and external motor control. In standard educational settings, teachers routinely evaluate student comprehension by observing physical compliance, such as looking at the teacher, remaining seated, or completing a fine-motor task on command. When a student fails to perform these physical actions, educators frequently infer a lack of understanding, intentional defiance, or low intelligence.

Mukhopadhyay's writing directly challenges this foundational assumption by documenting a profound disconnect between volition and physical execution. Throughout his memoir, he describes an internal state where his mind generates complex linguistic ideas, yet his motor nervous system fails to execute the corresponding physical movements. He details this agonizing disconnect through vivid narrative detail:

"I had to struggle to make my hand move to pick up a blue block when I was asked to... My mind knew that I was looking at a blue block, but my hand was stubborn. It would move toward the red block instead, as if it had a mind of its own. The teacher wrote down that I did not know my colors. How could I explain that my brain knew the color, but my hand was disobeying my brain?" (Mukhopadhyay, 2011, p. 42)

Rhetorically, Mukhopadhyay employs personification, framing his hand as an autonomous entity ("stubborn," "disobeying," "a mind of its own") that rebels against his intentional cognitive apparatus. Here, Mukhopadhyay documents a classic breakdown in motor planning, known clinically as apraxia or dyspraxia (Donnellan et al., 2013; Torres, 2013). When an educator interprets this erratic physical response as an incorrect answer, a systemic assessment error occurs: the educator records an intellectual failure when the actual barrier is neuromuscular execution. The tragedy lies in the teacher's conclusion that the student lacks color recognition, which leads to lower-level instructional placement and repetitive, infant-level drills.

Higashida similarly dismantles the assumption that non-speaking individuals do not understand what is happening around them simply because their physical bodies appear disengaged or erratic. Addressing why non-speaking individuals fail to execute simple verbal commands, he explains the neurological disconnect that occurs between comprehension and motor output:

"When you see us, you think we aren't listening or that we don't understand what you are saying. But our bodies are like broken robots. We know what we want to do, but our wires get crossed, and our bodies do the exact opposite. When a teacher tells me to sit still, my mind says 'sit,' but my legs start jumping. The harder I try to force my body to obey, the more wild my movements become." (Higashida, 2013, p. 18)

Higashida utilizes the simile of a "broken robot" with "crossed wires" to convey mechanical and electrical failure within the motor movement pathways rather than a failure of internal cognitive intent. This description reveals that physical dysregulation often increases when a student tries to force physical compliance under stress. The internal processing dynamic maintains full comprehension and complex thought despite being interrupted by dropped or misdirected motor signals before reaching physical execution. This structural disconnect proves that evaluating a non-speaking learner's intellect based solely on physical compliance or vocal performance is scientifically unsound. The narrative evidence demands that educators decouple motor execution from cognitive assessment, recognizing that physical unresponsiveness or motor errors do not reflect receptive language limitations.

### **3.2 Theme 2: Sensory Overload, Spatial Friction and Stimming**

The second major theme centres on the sensory environment of the school. Classrooms are traditionally designed for neurotypical sensory processing, featuring bright overhead fluorescent lighting, colourful wall displays, unexpected ambient noises, and constant social movement. For learners with neurodivergent sensory integration pathways, these environments produce severe physiological distress, cognitive fatigue, and sensory fragmentation (Bogdashina, 2016; Grandin, 2006).

Higashida provides extensive narrative insight into how his sensory system processes incoming stimuli without standard neurological filtering mechanisms. He details how all ambient sounds hit his auditory cortex with equal intensity, depriving him of the ability to selectively attend to a single speaker:

"To us, all sounds are amplified and mixed together... The ticking clock, the hum of the fluorescent lights, a bird outside the window, and the teacher talking all hit my ears with the exact same volume and intensity. I cannot choose what to listen to. It feels like being trapped inside a room where ten people are shouting different things at you simultaneously." (Higashida, 2013, p. 54)

Through auditory amplification metaphors, Higashida captures the exhaustion caused by an environment lacking neurological filtering. In response to this overwhelming sensory environment, physical movements such as jumping or hand-flapping serve a critical homeostatic purpose. Higashida reframes these self-regulatory behaviors (stimming) not as random behavioral glitches, but as deliberate physiological coping mechanisms:

"When I am jumping, it's as if my feelings are going up to the sky... By jumping, my body feels lighter, and I can regain control over my runaway senses. When my senses are overwhelmed by noise and light, jumping is the only way I can anchor my body to the ground." (Higashida, 2013, p. 62)

Rather than being a meaningless or disruptive behaviour, jumping functions as a vital spatial anchor that enables him to maintain physical equilibrium in a chaotic environment.

Mukhopadhyay describes a similar phenomenon termed sensory fragmentation, where the brain receives input as disconnected pieces rather than a unified, coherent picture:

"I saw the world in fragments an eye in isolation, a sleeve, or a patch of light on the floor. I had to consciously stitch these fragments together to understand a room. When there were too many colours or sounds, the picture dissolved completely, and I felt as though my body was disintegrating into thin air." (Mukhopadhyay, 2011, p. 88)

His description of "stitching fragments together" highlights the immense cognitive load required just to construct a coherent spatial environment before academic processing can even begin. When classrooms present excessive visual

or auditory clutter, the non-speaking learner must expend vast amounts of cognitive energy managing sensory survival, leaving diminished capacity for academic task performance. When educators view self-regulatory behaviours as maladaptive behaviours to be eliminated through behavioural modification protocols, they inadvertently destroy the student's primary coping mechanism for navigating an unadapted environment.

### 3.3 Theme 3: Alternative Communication as the Gateway to Agency

The third critical theme highlights the transformative role of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). Both authors achieved literacy and intellectual recognition not through vocal speech, but through physical alternative systems specifically alphabet boards, letterboards, and digital typing interfaces.

The literary style of both memoirs demonstrates high conceptual sophistication, directly contradicting clinical portrayals of non-speaking individuals as cognitively limited. Mukhopadhyay utilizes complex metaphors and philosophical reflections to capture the internal reality of living without expressive speech:

"Silence is not an empty space; it is full of unsaid thoughts waiting for a medium. For years, my thoughts were like captive birds beating their wings against the inside of my skull. The alphabet board was not just a tool; it was the bridge that let my thoughts cross over into human territory, proving that I had a soul that was fully conscious." (Mukhopadhyay, 2011, p. 104)

His poetic metaphor of "captive birds" transforms the non-speaking state from a void of thought into a state of trapped agency. His prose demonstrates an advanced grasp of vocabulary, poetic structure, and meta-cognitive reflection, proving that internal language development can proceed independently of vocal speech mechanisms.

Higashida employs an innovative Q&A structural format, anticipating neurotypical questions ("Why do you make loud noises?", "Why don't you make eye contact?") and systematically reframing them. He emphasizes that AAC grants non-speaking individuals the ability to move beyond functional requests into true self-expression, emotional nuance, and narrative identity:

"Being able to express what I am actually thinking, rather than just pointing at a picture of juice or the bathroom, rescued me from absolute solitude. When you can only express basic needs, people assume those are the only thoughts you have. AAC allowed me to show that I have opinions, memories, and a heart." (Higashida, 2013, p. 112)

Restricting non-speaking learners to simple picture exchange systems that only allow basic requests denies them the tools required for complex academic engagement, narrative identity, and self-advocacy. Access to full literacy through robust AAC systems is therefore not merely an instructional technique, but a fundamental educational and human right (Biklen & Burke, 2006).

## 4. Comprehensive Discussion and Educational Implications

The textual analysis of Mukhopadhyay and Higashida's memoirs provides a theoretical and practical foundation for reforming special education practices across four key domains.

| Traditional Deficit Assumption                                                                                                | Reformed Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Speech Equals Intellect:</b> Vocal speech is viewed as the primary indicator of cognitive capacity.                        | <b>Presumed Competence:</b> All learners are assumed to possess complex intellectual capacity regardless of vocal or motor skills.       |
| <b>Stimming as Misbehavior:</b> Motor stimming is framed as non-functional, disruptive behavior to be extinguished.           | <b>Sensory Adaptation &amp; Coping Support:</b> Stimming is recognized as an adaptive physiological coping mechanism and spatial anchor. |
| <b>AAC as Last Resort:</b> AAC is delayed until the student proves prerequisite behavioral readiness.                         | <b>Early, Multi-modal AAC:</b> Robust AAC access with full alphabet capability is provided immediately without prerequisites.            |
| <b>Segregated Functional Track:</b> Non-speaking students are routed into basic life-skills tracks with simplified curricula. | <b>Age-Appropriate Academic Access:</b> Learners receive access to general curriculum content with adapted motor responses.              |

### 4.1 Operationalizing the Principle of Presumed Competence

The primary takeaway for special educators is the necessity of operationalizing presumed competence (Biklen & Burke, 2006; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005). Presuming competence is a rigorous pedagogical practice requiring educators

to assume that every student possesses the capacity to learn complex, age-appropriate academic content, regardless of their current motor skills or speech abilities. Educators must abandon the historical practice of delaying academic instruction until a student proves readiness through normative physical control.

To illustrate how this paradigm shift alters daily classroom practice, consider a literature lesson in an inclusive middle school classroom. In a traditional, deficit-based framework, a non-speaking student who exhibits motor agitation or eye-gaze aversion during a reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* might be removed from the room or handed a preschool-level matching worksheet, under the assumption that they cannot comprehend complex themes.

In a neurodiversity-affirming framework grounded in presumed competence, the educator recognizes that motor agitation reflects motor planning or sensory differences rather than lack of comprehension. The teacher provides the student with audio access to the text, reduces sensory overload, and evaluates comprehension using an adapted digital board with text-based options or a letterboard. The student is held to the same high academic standards as their neurotypical peers while receiving the physical and technological supports required to demonstrate their understanding.

Practically, operationalizing presumed competence requires: Presenting non-speaking students with age-appropriate literary texts, scientific concepts, and mathematical reasoning rather than elementary drills or repetitive basic tasks. Designing assessment methods that do not depend on vocal responses or fine-motor skills, utilizing eye-gaze choices, digital interfaces, or adapted response boards instead. Avoiding speaking about the student in their presence as if they do not understand, recognizing that receptive language remains functional even when physical responses are absent or dysregulated.

#### **4.2 Restructuring Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Deployment**

In many school districts, access to robust AAC devices is governed by an outdated prerequisite model where students must first demonstrate specific behavioral compliance, cognitive milestones, or low-tech communication mastery before being granted a high-tech speech-generating device (Mirenda, 2003). The qualitative evidence from these memoirs demonstrates that this prerequisite model is counterproductive and harmful to student development. Integrating alternative communication systems into mainstream inclusive classrooms demands intentional curriculum redesign shifting focus from standardized compliance to skill-driven, learner-centred frameworks (Pinto, S 2023).

To address this, schools must eliminate readiness criteria for AAC access, ensuring high-tech speech-generating devices and low-tech letterboards are available from early childhood. Systems must provide full alphabet access and rich core vocabulary sets, allowing students to combine words creatively rather than limiting them to pre-selected functional icons.

Furthermore, effective AAC integration requires a robust interdisciplinary model uniting Special Educators, General Educators, and Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs). Rather than pulling non-speaking students out of the general education classroom for isolated speech therapy drills, SLPs and educators must co-teach within the inclusive environment. The SLP models AAC strategies (Aided Language Input) during whole-class instruction, showing both teachers and peers how to use the device naturally during academic discussions.

#### **4.3 Redesigning Classroom Environments for Sensory Accessibility and Universal Design**

Rather than forcing non-speaking students to adapt to overwhelming sensory spaces, educational institutions must modify the environment to reduce sensory friction using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2018). Acoustic and visual management should include using dimmable lighting instead of humming fluorescent bulbs, minimizing excessive wall clutter, and providing noise-cancelling headphones for independent work.

Movement breaks must also be formally incorporated into the school day, recognizing that movements like jumping, pacing, or hand-flapping are functional self-regulation tools rather than behavioural disruptions. Classrooms should feature designated sensory spaces where students can regulate their bodies without social penalty or instructional loss. Flexible seating options, such as standing desks, wobble stools, or floor seating, should be provided to accommodate motor needs without demanding rigid physical stillness.

#### **4.4 Reforming Teacher Education and Professional Development**

To ensure these practices are sustained across school systems, university teacher preparation programs must update their curricula. Preservice special and general education teachers should be exposed to first-person neurodivergent literature alongside traditional clinical diagnostic manuals. Navigating the shift to technology-mediated and AI-

enhanced learning environments requires preparing educators to cultivate interactive, responsive classroom ecosystems for all learners (Pinto, 2026). Reading memoirs by non-speaking authors instills a practical understanding of the Double Empathy Problem, helping prospective teachers reframe challenging classroom behaviours as communication attempts or sensory responses rather than intentional defiance. This paradigm shift prepares educators to build collaborative, neurodiversity-affirming learning environments.

## 5. Conclusion and Actionable Recommendations

This study demonstrates that qualitative narrative analysis provides valuable empirical insights for special education research. By analysing the autobiographies of non-speaking autistic authors through Critical Disability Studies, the Double Empathy Problem and neurodivergent rhetoric, this paper shows that traditional educational assessments routinely mistake motor execution obstacles for intellectual deficits. To bridge the gap between literary insights and daily classroom instruction, three actionable policy steps are recommended:

**Policy Reform on Educational Assessment:** School districts and state education boards must revise assessment policies to prohibit assigning intellectual disability labels based solely on tools requiring oral speech or standardized fine-motor manipulation.

**Universal AAC Integration & Interdisciplinary Co-Teaching:** School leadership must mandate universal AAC integration from early childhood, establishing co-teaching frameworks where speech-language pathologists and educators' model alternative communication within inclusive, general education classrooms.

**Curricular Inclusion of Neurodivergent Literature:** University teacher preparation programs and school boards should incorporate neurodivergent autobiographical literature into their core training, fostering an educational culture rooted in neurodiversity-affirming practices, presumed competence, and genuine inclusion.

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