

Spiritual-Integrated Interpersonal Communication in Mentoring Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

This study examines interpersonal communication practices in mentoring children with special needs conducted by the ALMA Sisters at Bhakti Luhur Orphanage in Langgur, Southeast Maluku. Children with special needs often experience communication barriers, limited social interaction, and social stigma within their communities. Effective interpersonal communication therefore becomes a crucial element in the mentoring process. This research employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving sisters who directly assist children with special needs. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of interpersonal communication that emerge in the mentoring process. The findings reveal six dominant forms of interpersonal communication in mentoring practices: openness, empathy, supportiveness, equality, contextual awareness, and sacrifice. These communication practices function not only as interaction mechanisms but also as relational strategies that foster emotional security, self-confidence, and social development among the children. Furthermore, the religious spirituality embraced by the sisters strengthens the interpersonal relationships established during the mentoring process. This study contributes to interpersonal communication scholarship by highlighting the integration of spiritual values within mentoring practices for children with special needs.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, children with special needs, spirituality, mentoring

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication constitutes a fundamental process through which individuals construct meaning, negotiate relationships, and develop social identity. Within communication scholarship, interpersonal communication is commonly defined as a transactional and relational exchange occurring between individuals who are mutually interdependent and who influence one another through verbal and nonverbal interaction (DeVito, 2019). This definition emphasizes relational reciprocity, psychological involvement, and contextual embeddedness. Contemporary scholars further argue that interpersonal communication is not merely message transmission but a dynamic process shaped by relational perception, emotional regulation, and power negotiation (West & Turner, 2020). Thus, communication quality has a direct impact on relational stability and developmental outcomes.

For children with special needs, interpersonal communication plays an even more critical role. Children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, hearing impairment, or developmental delays often experience expressive and receptive communication challenges that influence social integration and emotional development (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Empirical studies consistently show that limited communicative competence may lead to social exclusion, reduced peer attachment, and lower self-efficacy (Keen et al., 2019; Carter et al., 2020). In inclusive educational settings, relational communication quality significantly predicts classroom engagement and adaptive behavior (Symes & Humphrey, 2018; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). These findings indicate that communication is not peripheral but central to empowerment and developmental inclusion.

In the Indonesian context, challenges are intensified by uneven access to inclusive services and persistent social stigma. National reports and recent field studies indicate that children with special needs in peripheral regions often receive limited psychosocial mentoring beyond formal instruction (Ministry of Education Indonesia, 2021; Pratiwi & Rahardjo, 2022). Communication

between caregivers and children frequently adopts directive patterns rather than dialogical engagement, potentially limiting relational growth. While several recent studies have examined instructional communication in special schools (Rahman & Sari, 2023; Hidayat et al., 2024), fewer investigations explore relational communication within residential care institutions where mentoring occurs continuously in daily interaction.

Residential mentoring environments present a distinct communicative ecology. Unlike formal classrooms, communication unfolds across routine activities, informal conversations, emotional crises, and long-term companionship. Such sustained relational proximity may transform communication patterns from functional exchange into relational formation. However, most interpersonal communication studies continue to focus on dyadic effectiveness or pedagogical technique without adequately examining long-term relational immersion in caregiving institutions (Manning, 2020; Floyd, 2021).

Interpersonal communication theory, particularly as articulated by DeVito, identifies openness, empathy, supportiveness, and equality as key relational constructs shaping effective interaction (DeVito, 2019). These constructs have been widely validated in educational and counseling contexts (Burlison, 2018; Jones & Wirtz, 2019). Nevertheless, their application within vulnerable residential populations requires contextual reconsideration. Communication with children who experience cognitive or emotional limitations demands adaptive sensitivity, patience, and sustained relational commitment that may exceed classical relational descriptors. Existing frameworks insufficiently address how moral orientation and long-term caregiving vocation influence communication consistency.

A further conceptual limitation lies in the marginalization of spirituality within communication analysis. Although spirituality has been examined in social work and caregiving research as a source of resilience and ethical motivation (Pargament, 2018; Crisp, 2019), communication scholarship rarely theorizes spirituality as an operational relational dimension. In faith-based institutions, spirituality may function not only as personal belief but as a normative structure shaping communicative intention, emotional regulation, and sacrificial commitment. The absence of integrative analysis between interpersonal communication and spirituality reveals a significant theoretical gap.

Role theory provides an additional analytical lens for understanding communication within caregiving institutions. Social roles consist of normative expectations attached to particular positions, and individuals frequently perform multiple roles simultaneously (Biddle, 1986). In residential special needs mentoring, caregivers often function as educators, guardians, counselors, and spiritual mentors. Role multiplicity may generate strain or ambiguity if not supported by adaptive communication competence. Recent organizational communication studies demonstrate that communicative clarity and relational trust mediate successful role integration (Ashforth et al., 2018; Vantilborgh et al., 2020). However, limited research has examined how communication mediates role execution in spiritually grounded caregiving contexts.

Several recent empirical studies have investigated communication in special needs settings, including nonverbal adaptation strategies in autism mentoring (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021), caregiver-child attachment communication patterns (Siller & Sigman, 2019), and relational communication as a predictor of resilience (Ungar, 2021). While these studies contribute valuable insights, they primarily conceptualize communication as technique, intervention, or developmental support. Few studies analyze communication as a holistic relational model embedded within spiritual value systems in residential institutions. Moreover, research focusing on Eastern Indonesian contexts remains scarce, leaving contextual diversity underexplored.

The Bhakti Luhur Orphanage in Langgur, managed by members of the ALMA Congregation, represents a distinctive mentoring environment characterized by shared living, continuous relational engagement, and value-based caregiving. Within this setting, communication is embedded in daily routines, emotional accompaniment, and spiritual formation. Understanding how interpersonal communication is enacted in such a context is

crucial for extending communication theory beyond psychological interaction toward value-embedded relational practice.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study addresses the following research questions. First, how is interpersonal communication constructed and practiced by members of the ALMA Congregation in mentoring children with special needs at Bhakti Luhur Orphanage, Langgur Branch? Second, what impacts do these communicative practices have on the emotional, social, spiritual, and independence development of the children? Third, how can these findings contribute to theoretical enrichment by integrating spirituality into interpersonal communication within residential mentoring contexts?

This research positions itself within a clear research gap: the limited integration of interpersonal communication theory, role multiplicity analysis, and spirituality as an operational relational dimension in special needs residential mentoring. By incorporating recent empirical findings (2018–2024) and situating them within a contextual Indonesian case, the study seeks to extend existing relational constructs and propose a spiritually integrated mentoring communication framework. Through this positioning, the introduction establishes both conceptual urgency and contextual relevance for advancing communication scholarship.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore interpersonal communication practices in mentoring children with special needs. A qualitative case study enables an in-depth understanding of communication interactions, relational dynamics, and contextual meanings that emerge in real-life mentoring situations.

The research was conducted at Bhakti Luhur Orphanage in Langgur, Southeast Maluku, an institution managed by the ALMA Sisters that provides care and mentoring for children with special needs. Informants in this study consisted of sisters who are directly involved in daily mentoring activities with the children. Participants were selected purposively based on their active role and experience in mentoring practices.

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to understand the experiences and perspectives of the sisters regarding interpersonal communication in mentoring. Participant observation was carried out to observe communication interactions during daily caregiving activities. Supporting documents related to institutional practices were also examined to enrich the data.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method allows the researcher to identify recurring patterns and themes related to interpersonal communication practices in mentoring children with special needs. The analysis involved data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation of communication patterns that emerged from the field data. To ensure the credibility of the findings, several validation strate.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that interpersonal communication in the mentoring of children with special needs at Bhakti Luhur Orphanage, Langgur Branch, is not merely an exchange of messages but a sustained relational process embedded in shared daily life.

To systematize the analytical structure of the findings, the thematic categorization is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Categorization of Interpersonal Communication in Mentoring Children with Special Needs

Theme	Interpersonal Element	Form of Communication	Impact
Openness	Relational transparency	Verbal dialogue, patient listening, simplified language	Emotional security and trust formation

Empathy	Affective attunement	Nonverbal validation, adaptive gestures	sensitivity, statements, and social participation	Emotional regulation and social participation
Supportiveness	Strength-based affirmation	Encouragement, constructive feedback, resilience framing		Self-confidence and task persistence
Equality	Relational dignity	Inclusive language, shared routines, participatory interaction		Sense of belonging and reduced power distance
Contextual Awareness	Adaptive communication intelligence	Strategy modification based on cognitive and emotional condition		Increased comprehension and engagement
Spiritual Sacrifice	Value-based relational commitment	Consistent presence, patience, ethical modeling		Long-term relational trust and holistic development

The table clarifies that each theme operates not only as an observable behavior but as a structured interpersonal element linked to specific developmental impacts. The analysis generated six dominant themes that characterize communicative practices within the ALMA Congregation: openness, empathy, supportiveness, equality, contextual awareness, and spiritual sacrifice. These themes are interconnected and collectively form a relational model that contributes to the children’s holistic development.

Openness emerged as a foundational communicative quality. Mentors intentionally create safe conversational spaces where children are encouraged to express emotions, frustrations, and aspirations without fear of judgment. Openness is manifested not only through verbal dialogue but also through the willingness of mentors to disclose appropriate aspects of their own experiences to reduce psychological distance. This relational transparency aligns with DeVito’s conceptualization of openness as reciprocal self-disclosure and honest interaction. However, in this context, openness is adapted to the communicative capacities of each child. For children with limited verbal ability, openness is expressed through patient listening, simplified language, and attentive presence. Such practices foster emotional security and strengthen trust, which is crucial for children who have previously experienced neglect or stigma.

Empathy constitutes the second dominant theme and is operationalized through both verbal affirmation and nonverbal sensitivity. Mentors demonstrate active efforts to interpret children’s body language, facial expressions, and behavioral cues, particularly for those with autism spectrum disorder or hearing impairments. Physical gestures such as gentle touch, eye contact, and proximity are used carefully to communicate acceptance and reassurance. These findings resonate with research emphasizing the importance of adaptive verbal and nonverbal strategies in special needs communication (Zuroida et al., 2024). Empathy in this setting extends beyond cognitive perspective-taking and becomes an embodied responsiveness shaped by long-term relational familiarity. Through consistent empathic engagement, children exhibit improved emotional regulation and increased willingness to participate in social interaction.

Supportiveness is reflected in communicative behaviors that emphasize encouragement, affirmation of strengths, and constructive guidance. Rather than focusing on deficits, mentors highlight children’s abilities and incremental achievements. This strength-based communication fosters intrinsic motivation and resilience, supporting previous findings that open and supportive interpersonal communication enhances engagement among children with special needs (Junaidin & Firdaus, 2025). Supportive messages are conveyed in everyday contexts such as learning assistance, skill training, and routine tasks. The communicative tone remains patient and affirming, even when correcting mistakes. As a result, children demonstrate gradual improvement in self-confidence and task persistence.

Equality represents another central communicative pattern. Unlike hierarchical caregiver–recipient models, the mentoring approach in this institution emphasizes shared living and participatory interaction. Children and mentors share meals, living spaces, and communal activities, embodying a relational principle of togetherness. Equality is expressed

communicatively through inclusive language, invitation to express opinions, and involvement in simple decision-making processes appropriate to developmental capacity. This egalitarian interaction reduces social distance and supports children's sense of belonging. In theoretical terms, equality reinforces DeVito's assertion that effective interpersonal communication requires recognition of relational parity, even within asymmetrical roles.

Beyond the four relational qualities identified in classical interpersonal communication theory, the findings indicate two additional dimensions. Contextual awareness refers to the mentors' capacity to adapt communication methods to each child's cognitive, emotional, and cultural condition. Communication strategies vary depending on whether a child responds better to visual aids, tactile guidance, repetition, or structured routines. This adaptive competence reflects an understanding that communication effectiveness depends on situational sensitivity rather than rigid technique. Contextual awareness strengthens the practical application of interpersonal theory by emphasizing flexibility as a relational necessity in special needs mentoring.

Spiritual sacrifice constitutes the sixth theme and represents the distinctive contribution of this study. Mentors interpret their caregiving role as a spiritual vocation characterized by long-term commitment, patience, and willingness to prioritize the children's well-being over personal comfort. This spiritual orientation shapes communication by sustaining consistency, emotional availability, and resilience during challenging situations. Spirituality functions not as doctrinal instruction imposed upon children but as an ethical framework guiding relational behavior. In line with perspectives that conceptualize spirituality in social care as embodied praxis (Moltmann, 2019), sacrificial commitment translates into communicative perseverance. This dimension extends interpersonal communication theory by introducing spiritual intentionality as a motivating force underlying relational qualities.

The developmental impacts of these communicative forms are observable across four domains. Emotionally, children demonstrate increased stability, reduced anxiety, and greater confidence in expressing feelings. Socially, they show enhanced participation in group activities and improved peer interaction. These findings correspond with international evidence linking social communication competence to classroom integration and reciprocity (Soto-Icaza et al., 2025). Spiritually, children internalize values such as gratitude, cooperation, and empathy, not through formal instruction alone but through daily relational modeling. In terms of independence, gradual progress is observed in self-care routines, responsibility for shared tasks, and exploration of individual talents.

Integrating these findings with Role Theory provides additional analytical clarity. Mentors enact multiple roles simultaneously, and effective communication serves as the mechanism through which these roles are harmonized. The spiritual understanding of caregiving reinforces role consistency and reduces burnout, enabling sustained relational engagement. The interaction between role expectations and communicative practice creates a stable mentoring environment that supports holistic development.

The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing interpersonal communication in special needs mentoring as a spiritually integrated relational model. While previous research has examined specific communication strategies or educational outcomes, this study demonstrates how relational qualities, contextual adaptation, and spiritual commitment interact dynamically within a residential care setting. The proposed model suggests that openness, empathy, supportiveness, and equality are strengthened when grounded in contextual awareness and spiritual intentionality. Communication thus becomes transformative practice rather than technical exchange.

Dialogue with Previous Studies

To position these findings within broader scholarly discourse, this study engages in thematic dialogue with recent research on communication in special needs contexts. First, regarding empathy and social development, previous studies in special education settings have emphasized that empathic teacher-student interaction improves social adjustment and classroom participation. Earlier research primarily framed empathy as cognitive perspective-

taking and affective sensitivity. This study confirms the centrality of empathy but extends the understanding by distinguishing between empathy as perceptual attunement and emotional validation as explicit communicative acknowledgment. Unlike studies that measure empathy as an individual trait, the present findings conceptualize it as a sustained relational process embedded in daily cohabitation. Thus, empathy operates not only as a psychological disposition but as a structurally maintained interactional climate.

Second, research on nonverbal communication among children with autism spectrum disorder and hearing impairments has highlighted the importance of gesture adaptation, visual cues, and structured routines. While earlier studies emphasized technique and pedagogical strategy, this study reveals that nonverbal sensitivity becomes more effective when supported by long-term relational familiarity. Nonverbal communication in this context is not merely compensatory but relationally embedded, functioning as a trust-building mechanism. This finding deepens the understanding of adaptive communication by situating technique within relational continuity.

Third, studies linking interpersonal communication to resilience among vulnerable children often stress encouragement and positive reinforcement. The present study confirms that supportive communication enhances confidence and task persistence. However, it challenges deficit-oriented intervention models by demonstrating that resilience emerges from communicative consistency rather than isolated motivational messages. Supportiveness here operates as identity reconstruction, where repeated affirmations reshape children's self-perception over time.

Fourth, inclusive relational models in caregiving institutions frequently promote equality and participatory engagement. While earlier research emphasized inclusion as structural access to activities, this study shows that equality must also be analyzed in relation to power distance. Unlike purely hierarchical caregiving structures, the shared living arrangement reduces symbolic separation between mentor and child. Equality in this model reflects perceived relational dignity rather than identical authority. This conceptual distinction refines inclusive communication theory by clarifying how asymmetrical. This conceptual distinction refines inclusive communication theory by clarifying how asymmetrical caregiving structures can still cultivate perceived relational equality through communicative dignity.

In addition to confirming and extending previous findings, this study also enters dialogue with recent international scholarship. For instance, a longitudinal study on teacher-student communication in inclusive classrooms found that relational warmth predicted adaptive behavior primarily through trust mediation mechanisms. While that study emphasized instructional settings, the present research expands the scope by demonstrating that trust in residential mentoring contexts is reinforced not only through warmth but through spiritually grounded consistency. Similarly, research on resilience communication among vulnerable youth highlights the role of narrative reframing in strengthening self-efficacy. This study supports that insight yet advances it by showing that resilience is sustained when supportive communication is embedded in shared daily life rather than delivered as episodic intervention. Furthermore, recent European research on inclusive residential care stresses professional boundaries and emotional regulation to prevent caregiver burnout. In contrast, the ALMA model suggests that spiritual intentionality functions as a stabilizing framework that transforms potential role strain into vocational meaning, thereby sustaining communicative patience.

Theoretically, these comparative insights generate three implications. First, interpersonal communication theory must move beyond dyadic effectiveness toward longitudinal relational immersion. Second, empathy requires differentiation between perceptual attunement and explicit emotional validation as separate yet interconnected processes. Third, equality should be analyzed through the lens of symbolic power distance rather than formal authority alone. By integrating these distinctions, the present study strengthens the analytical precision of relational communication constructs.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that mentoring programs for children with special needs should prioritize relational continuity over technique-based intervention alone. Training modules for caregivers may incorporate reflective exercises on communicative

climate, validation practices, and adaptive sensitivity. Institutions may also consider integrating value-based orientation—religious or secular ethical frameworks—as stabilizing mechanisms that sustain communicative consistency in long-term caregiving environments.

Conceptual Contribution of the Study

This study proposes the Spiritual-Integrated Interpersonal Mentoring Model as its primary conceptual contribution. Unlike previous studies that examine isolated communication strategies or educational techniques, this model conceptualizes interpersonal communication as a layered relational system. At the foundational level, classical relational constructs—openness, empathy, supportiveness, and equality—serve as primary interactional drivers. These are reinforced by contextual awareness as adaptive intelligence and spiritual intentionality as normative commitment. Together, these dimensions mediate relational trust formation, which subsequently facilitates holistic development encompassing emotional stability, social integration, spiritual internalization, and independence.

The distinctiveness of this model lies in positioning spirituality not as supplementary moral discourse but as a structural communicative dimension shaping consistency, endurance, and sacrifice. While earlier research in special education emphasizes adaptive technique and inclusive access, this study demonstrates that long-term relational trust emerges from value-embedded interaction sustained across time. Thus, the contribution of this research is threefold: it confirms the relevance of classical interpersonal constructs, extends them through contextual and spiritual integration, and proposes a transferable framework for analyzing mentoring communication within residential inclusive institutions. Future studies may empirically test this model in different cultural or non-religious caregiving contexts to evaluate its broader applicability and refine its mediating variables.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that interpersonal communication in mentoring children with special needs at Bhakti Luhur Orphanage, Langgur Branch, is constructed as an integrated relational practice grounded in openness, empathy, supportiveness, equality, contextual awareness, and spiritual sacrifice. While the first four dimensions correspond to established interpersonal communication theory, the findings reveal that contextual awareness and spiritually motivated sacrifice function as reinforcing mechanisms that sustain relational quality in long-term residential mentoring. Communication in this setting is not limited to instructional exchange but operates as a transformative process embedded in shared daily life, where relational consistency and ethical commitment shape emotional security, social participation, spiritual internalization, and growing independence among the children. The study therefore, extends interpersonal communication theory by demonstrating that relational effectiveness in special needs contexts requires both adaptive competence and value-based intentionality.

Theoretically, this research contributes a spiritually integrated model of interpersonal communication that situates relational qualities within a broader framework of role enactment and caregiving vocation. The model, conceptualized as the Spiritual-Integrated Interpersonal Mentoring Model, explains mentoring communication as a dynamic process in which interpersonal communication forms operate through spiritual integration to generate relational trust, which subsequently mediates holistic developmental outcomes. In this configuration, openness, empathy, supportiveness, and equality represent core relational forms. Contextual awareness functions as adaptive communication intelligence that calibrates these forms according to individual child conditions, while spiritual sacrifice operates as a structural stabilizer that ensures consistency and long-term relational commitment. Together, these components create a communication ethos that sustains emotional security and relational continuity.

Conceptually, the model proposes a directional yet recursive interactional flow. Interpersonal communication forms initiate relational engagement; spiritual intentionality reinforces their ethical depth and consistency; relational trust emerges as the mediating mechanism; and trust facilitates emotional stability, social participation, spiritual internalization, and progressive independence. Developmental progress, in turn, strengthens trust and deepens

communicative openness, producing a reinforcing cycle. This articulation advances interpersonal communication theory by expanding its psychological orientation into a value-embedded relational framework applicable to vulnerable populations.

By bridging interpersonal communication theory, Role Theory, and spirituality in social care, the study offers structured theoretical advancement. First, it confirms the relevance of classical relational constructs in mentoring contexts. Second, it extends the framework by introducing contextual awareness as adaptive competence required in asymmetrical and vulnerability-based relationships. Third, it newly proposes spirituality as a normative communicative structure that shapes consistency, sacrifice, and resilience in role performance. Practically, the findings suggest that mentoring institutions and caregiver training programs should prioritize relational competence, contextual sensitivity, and ethical commitment as core communication capacities. These implications indicate that structured caregiver development programs integrating relational communication training and reflective spiritual-ethical orientation may enhance mentoring effectiveness in residential special needs institutions. Future research may expand this model through longitudinal designs, comparative institutional studies, and cross-cultural analysis to empirically validate its components and assess its transferability across diverse special needs settings. Further empirical investigation employing mixed-method or experimental designs is recommended to test the mediating role of relational trust and to examine the applicability of the model in non-faith-based caregiving environments.

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