

Spaces of Relational Opacity: Participatory Sense-Making and the Ethics of Being With Autistic People - An Educator-Friendly Reference Guide

This guide distils the key theoretical ideas from the paper and their practical implications for educational settings. It is intended as a standalone reference for practitioners.

1. Core Concepts at a Glance

The paper brings four theoretical frameworks into dialogue. Each one reframes how we understand autistic communication and participation in educational contexts.

Concept	What it means	What it means for educators
Participatory Sense-Making	Meaning is not transmitted from one person to another - it is co-created in the interaction itself, on the basis what matters to each participant, through movement, timing, and shared environment.	Participation is not about performing the right behaviours. It emerges when the conditions for coordination are right. Focus on the interaction, and on what matters to the individuals participating.
Relational Opacity	Not all communication needs to be immediately transparent or interpretable. Opacity is not a failure - it is a feature of genuine relational difference.	When you do not immediately understand an autistic student, slow down. Observe. Stay open. Not-yet-knowing is a legitimate and ethical position.
Being With	A relational stance of shared presence without the demand for immediate intelligibility. Meaning can emerge without interpretive mastery.	You do not need to understand everything a student does in order to connect with them. Presence and patience are themselves forms of support.
Embodied Flow Dynamics	Autistic individuals may more readily access flow states - deep, joyful absorption - through	Recognise moments of intense focus as positive engagement, not avoidance. Design tasks that allow

	hyperfocus and unique sensory routes.	sustained immersion and interest-led participation.
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2. Rethinking Common Assumptions

The paper challenges several widespread assumptions about autistic communication. These reframings have direct implications for everyday practice.

Common assumption	What the research shows instead
Autistic students lack social motivation or interest in others.	Autistic sociality exists and flourishes - often in autistic-to-autistic interaction. The issue is cross-neurotype mismatch, not absence of social interest.
Communication difficulties are located within the autistic student.	Breakdowns emerge from mismatched expectations between neurotypes – something often referred to as a „double empathy problem“. Both parties contribute to miscommunication.
Repetitive movements or withdrawal are problematic behaviours to be reduced.	These are often adaptive strategies for sensory regulation and world-stabilisation. They may signal overload, not defiance.
Inclusion means helping autistic students fit into existing classroom norms.	Inclusion is an ecological project. It requires redesigning environments, not reshaping students.

3. Practical Principles for Educators

These principles are drawn directly from the paper's conclusion. They are intended as starting points for reflection and practice, not as a checklist.

Interactional Pacing

- Allow slower rhythms, extended pauses, and nonlinear interaction.
- Do not interpret silence or delay as disengagement.

Perceptual Attunement

- Attend to micro-movements, sensory orientation, and emerging rhythms.
- Recognise gesture, posture, and object engagement as valid communicative contributions.

Ecological Responsibility

- Consider lighting, acoustics, spatial layout, and opportunities for movement.
- Co-design classroom spaces and routines with autistic students where possible.

Multiple Forms of Participation

- Recognise parallel activity, object-mediated attention, and rhythmic coordination as legitimate forms of engagement.
- Assessments need not rely solely on verbal or written responses.

Ethical Stance

- Approach ambiguity with patience. Not-yet-knowing is a legitimate position, not a deficiency.
- Avoid the impulse to immediately interpret, correct, or redirect.

Relational Calibration

- Continuously check and re-align. Pacing, perception, and participation are never fixed.
- Treat relational adjustment as an ongoing practice, not a one-time accommodation.

4. Where to Begin: Small Steps Toward Systemic Change

Systemic change does not require large-scale reform to begin. Local acts of institutional patience are the material through which broader reorientation becomes thinkable.

- One teacher who allows a student to rock, pace, or use a grounding object without intervention.

- One school that invites autistic students to help co-design a low-sensory space.
- One behaviour policy revised to recognise regulation strategies as legitimate.
- One lesson plan that offers multiple entry points - movement, drawing, object-based - alongside writing.
- One staff meeting that opens with the question: whose rhythms does our classroom currently support?

This supplementary material accompanies: Ahmetovic, M., De Jaegher, H., Williams, G., & Grace, J. Spaces of Relational Opacity: Participatory Sense-Making and the Ethics of Being With Autistic People. Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research.