



RETHINKING COMMUNICATION FOR LEARNERS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS: AN INSTRUMENTAL CASE STUDY OF INTENSIVE INTERACTION IN A NEW ZEALAND SPECIALIST CLASSROOM

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Abstract:

This study examines the implementation and exploration of Intensive Interaction as a relational pedagogical approach in a New Zealand specialist classroom for learners with complex communication needs. Using an instrumental case study approach, data were collected over one year through video recordings, observational notes, professional reflections, and other supporting documents. The findings indicate three interconnected domains of learner engagement and participation: emotional attunement, responsiveness and agency, and sustained attention. Learners appeared to show stronger emotional connections, more active participation, and extended attention spans, suggesting the benefits of learner-led, relational practice for engagement and communication. The study highlights the value of embedding Intensive Interaction as a relational approach within educational and disability support settings. It also calls for further research that draws on international evidence and acknowledges cultural and contextual factors, including the Māori pedagogical concept of *ako*.

Keywords: intensive interaction; communication; emotional connection; relational pedagogy

1. Introduction

Intensive Interaction is a learner-centred approach designed to support communication development in individuals with social or communicative difficulties (Firth et al., 2020). It prioritises the 'Fundamentals of Communication' over formal language instruction, focusing on pre-verbal skills such as shared attention, eye contact, vocal responsiveness,

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and socially appropriate physical contact, such as holding hands (Nind & Hewett, 2001). At the heart of this approach is experiential learning: activities are learner-led, enjoyable, and cumulative. Instead of following rigid, pre-determined objectives, learners progress through experiences that naturally foster communication and social skills (Hewett, 2012). The foundations of Intensive Interaction are informed by the work of clinical psychologist Dr. Geraint Ephraim, who described his method as ‘augmented mothering’ (as cited in Firth, 2023). Practitioners engage closely with learners using proximity and, where appropriate, gentle touch, while responding to vocalisations and gestures to build connection and communication. These interactional practices, and the approach they constitute, are supported by established psychological and educational theories. Developmental psychology emphasises that early social interaction and shared experiences form the foundation for communication (Stern, 1985); attachment theory highlights the importance of secure and responsive relationships in supporting social-emotional growth (Bowlby, 1969); and humanistic principles advocate empathetic engagement that values the learner’s experience and intrinsic motivation (Rogers, 1961). Over the past four decades, Intensive Interaction has been associated with positive outcomes across diverse contexts, including schools, residential care, family homes, and community services. Evidence indicates outcomes such as increased eye contact, greater social participation, more intentional vocalisations, and improved emotional wellbeing (Barber, 2007; Hewett & Nind, 2013). Highly adaptable, Intensive Interaction supports children and adults with diverse conditions, including PMLD, autism, intellectual disabilities, and dementia (Caldwell, 2005; Heap & Wolverson, 2018). Its accessibility, requiring no specialised equipment or structured programme, facilitates integration into everyday practice and provides a sustainable means of supporting engagement and social-emotional development.

Despite strong international evidence, the use of Intensive Interaction in New Zealand specialist schools remains under-researched. The Māori concept of *ako*, which emphasises reciprocal and relational learning (Bishop & Berryman, 2009; Smith, 2017), offers an interpretive lens through which the relational nature of Intensive Interaction can be understood. *Ako* positions learning as a two-way process in which educators and learners shape each other’s understanding. Intensive Interaction aligns closely with this principle, as learners influence the direction of interaction and practitioners respond adaptively. As Hubrick (2019, p. 101) notes, this can become “*a coming together of voices*,” where learners and educators co-construct meaning through shared engagement. In this sense, Intensive Interaction can be understood not simply as a set of techniques, but as a relational pedagogy that values each learner’s contribution to communication and learning.

Supported by this conceptual framework, the present study explores how Intensive Interaction is applied in a specialist classroom and examines its contribution to learners’ communication, emotional connection, responsiveness, and sustained attention. The aim is to provide insights into both practice and outcomes, offering evidence to

support the broader adoption of Intensive Interaction in New Zealand educational and support settings.

2. New Zealand's Disability and Education Landscape

In 2024, approximately 1.1 million people in Aotearoa New Zealand were living with a disability, of whom around 440,000 with an intellectual disability, often co-occurring with autism (Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People, 2024; Stats NZ, 2025). Learners with disabilities participate across early childhood, school, and tertiary settings, including specialist provision. Around 4,000 learners attend 27 specialist schools, alongside many others supported in mainstream contexts (Johnston, 2024; Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People, 2024). Beyond schooling, individuals may also access disability support services such as respite, behaviour support, supported living, and residential care (Ministry of Health, 2019).

These figures illustrate both the scale of disability provision and the diversity and complexity of needs among this population. International research shows that many individuals with intellectual or multiple disabilities have limited opportunities for authentic interaction, as support often prioritises physical or medical needs over relational engagement (Griffiths & Smith, 2016; Nind, 2007; Nind & Grace, 2025). Within the New Zealand context, similar tensions have been noted in practice, where communicative and emotional needs may not always be fully supported. These gaps highlight the relevance of approaches such as Intensive Interaction and the need for professional learning that supports consistent, relational practice in this area.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted an instrumental case study approach, which examines a particular case in depth to gain insight into a broader phenomenon (Stake, 1995). Focusing on a single classroom allowed the study to explore how Intensive Interaction is implemented in its natural environment and how learners engaged within this context. A case study design is well suited to this research, as it enables close examination of subtle, context-dependent aspects of communication and engagement that are not easily quantified. These include non-verbal cues, individual responsiveness, and emerging social behaviours that vary across learners and interactions. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, this study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how relational processes unfold within a specialist classroom and how these insights may contribute to broader understandings of communication and engagement for learners with complex needs.

The study is situated within a practitioner-research approach, with data collection and reflection embedded within everyday classroom practice. This approach supported sustained engagement with learners' communicative behaviours over time while

requiring ongoing reflexivity regarding the researcher's role in the interpretation process. As a practitioner-researcher, the researcher's involvement in the classroom provided insight into learners' individual communication patterns and changes over time, but also required awareness of how established relationships and familiarity with learners could influence interpretation. Reflexive discussions with colleagues and repeated review of video recordings informed the development of alternative interpretations.

The study was guided by the following research question:

- How does Intensive Interaction support relational engagement and communication development for learners with complex needs within a specialist classroom?

3.2 Participants and Classroom Context

The study focused on one classroom at Oaklynn Specialist School, selected for its well-established Intensive Interaction practice, consistent data collection, and stable team of practitioners. Data were initially collected during ongoing sessions and later organised into a structured dataset, allowing systematic examination of interactions across the year. The classroom comprised six learners aged six to fourteen years, all of whom had cerebral palsy and used wheelchairs. Learners also had additional diagnoses, including Angelman syndrome, global developmental delay, or encephalopathy, each associated with profound or severe intellectual disability. Learners demonstrated varied sensory and communicative profiles, levels of responsiveness, mobility, and interactional styles. These individual differences were considered important contextual factors when interpreting patterns of interaction.

3.3 Implementation of Intensive Interaction

Planning for Intensive Interaction was completed before the start of the school year and was informed by learners' communication needs and the teacher's reflections on earlier classroom practice. The aim was to establish consistent and sustainable conditions for engagement throughout the year. Each learner participated in one Intensive Interaction session per day, scheduled during a designated morning period. These sessions were delivered on a one-to-one basis and were guided by core Intensive Interaction principles, such as following the learner's lead, imitation, and mutual enjoyment, with an emphasis on process over predetermined outcomes. One teacher and three teaching assistants were assigned on a weekly rotating schedule, which supported staff in developing a more nuanced understanding of learners' communication styles. Built-in systems for documenting practice and reviewing sessions supported continuous refinement of implementation.

Professional learning was embedded within this structure and included tailored training, in-class observation, session modelling followed by reflective discussion, and participation in Intensive Interaction Community of Practice (CoP) meetings and National Online Practice Groups that connected practitioners across different schools

nationwide. These opportunities strengthened staff capability to continue implementing Intensive Interaction in line with its core principles.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

A range of data sources was employed to capture different aspects of Intensive Interaction practice and learner engagement. These included daily video-recorded sessions of around 30 minutes, post-session observational notes, and weekly in-depth analyses of selected videos to examine changes in learners' engagement and interaction patterns. Assessment data were collected across the year using the Framework for Recognising Attainment (FRA) (Firth, 2004), drawing on the same video recordings to document emerging forms of engagement and communication in learners working below the conventional curriculum. By combining these methods, the study provided a more comprehensive understanding of practice and learners' interaction.

Data analysis was closely integrated with daily practice and followed an inductive, iterative approach, focusing on patterns of interaction over time through repeated viewing and comparison of recorded sessions. Observational notes were used to identify one session per week for more detailed review, prioritising those that appeared particularly salient for understanding engagement and responsiveness. Selected videos were re-watched alongside observational notes and practitioner reflections to examine the interactional context, learner positioning, preceding activity, and moments that appeared new, unexpected, or significant. Consideration was also given to how learners chose to engage: their preferred modes of interaction and how these patterns evolved over time. The analysis further explored how interactions might be extended to inform future practice.

Assessment data were analysed twice yearly by a group of experienced practitioners using the above-mentioned FRA. Each practitioner first considered learner engagement individually and then discussed their perspectives with others to reach a shared interpretation of the most appropriate level of communication engagement. Where interpretations differed across practitioners, video segments were re-reviewed and compared across multiple viewings to explore alternative interpretations and reduce individual bias. This process supported consistency in interpretation and informed the analysis presented in this study.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines and undertaken in accordance with the school's procedures for research involving learners with complex communication needs. All learners were anonymised and referred to using the generic label 'learner', with no personal identifiers included in reporting or analysis. Parental or guardian consent was obtained for the use of video, observational, and assessment data.

Assent was considered throughout the study based on behavioural and relational indicators: signs of comfort, engagement, or withdrawal during interaction and

recording. Given the non-verbal nature of communication in this context, careful attention was paid to interpretation to avoid over-meaning learners' behaviours. This presented an ethical challenge, as assent and dissent could not be determined through conventional verbal means and instead required sustained sensitivity to individual communicative cues over time. Observations and video recordings were reviewed in relation to each learner's established communication patterns and everyday interactions, with interpretations discussed across the practitioner team to reduce the risk of misinterpretation.

Video recordings, observational notes, and assessment data were stored securely on the school's password-protected system. Access was restricted to authorised staff for analysis, professional reflection, and assessment purposes.

4. Findings

The following findings illustrate how Intensive Interaction was implemented in a specialist classroom and the outcomes observed over the course of one year. The findings are presented through three interrelated domains: emotional attunement, responsiveness and learner agency, and extended attention. Each section presents examples of how learners engaged with staff and how these interactions contributed to their engagement and participation.

4.1 Developing Emotional Attunement

During Intensive Interaction sessions, learners made eye contact, smiled, oriented towards staff, and responded to gestures and vocalisations, as well as physical interactions like hugs. Staff often described these behaviours as communicating with someone who 'speaks the same language'. As sessions became embedded in the daily routine, learners began showing more consistent anticipatory responses. For example, one learner looked at the staff member expectantly, flapping her hands to express joy. Another began vocalising in a positive manner immediately as his standing frame was adjusted. Over time, similar forms of anticipation and responsiveness were observed across learners.

One learner, in particular, provided a powerful example of how Intensive Interaction opened up greater visibility of emotional expression. Before this approach was introduced, his expressions were limited and often difficult to interpret, leaving staff uncertain how to respond. Over time, Intensive Interaction offered a safe and predictable framework in which the learner displayed a broader range of observable emotional expressions. He expressed joy through smiles, laughter, and small body movements, such as attempts to move his shoulders to get closer. When he was sad, concerned, or deep in thought, he showed changes in tone, posture, and facial expression. These developments were associated with clearer emotional signalling, with adults appearing better able to interpret and respond to learners' cues.

A different learner provided insight into interaction at a more subtle, embodied level. She has since passed away and lived with severe, progressive health conditions that limited her ability to express herself overtly. Staff rarely observed her smiling, vocalising, or engaging in purposeful movement. During Intensive Interaction time, however, they noted consistent physiological and sensory markers of engagement. When a staff member slowly moved from one side of her wheelchair to the other, she would follow the movement with her eyes. Changes in her breathing were also observed, often shifting from shallow or irregular patterns to slower, more settled respiration. At times, her muscle tone softened, most noticeably in the shoulders and neck. These changes were described by staff as deeply meaningful and interpreted as moments of emotional connection.

Importantly, the impact of Intensive Interaction was not confined to designated sessions. Among learners, observations showed that relational changes gradually extended into everyday routines, including personal care, mealtimes, and transitions. Learners became more comfortable engaging with adults during these routines, spontaneously reaching out or vocalising expressively. These behaviours were suggestive of early communicative intent and appeared to reflect increased confidence in social interaction. What began as a communication intervention gradually permeated the micro-practices of teaching. Routine moments, often regarded as peripheral to 'real' instruction, became opportunities for shared presence.

4.2 Developing Responsiveness and Learner Agency

Initially, most learners displayed limited responsiveness, and staff relied primarily on basic cues to interpret their feelings or engagement. Interactions were largely one-sided, and learners were often guided throughout the day rather than actively participating. For this cohort, many of whom had significant physical impairments, opportunities to express their feelings were especially limited. Unlike their more physically mobile peers, who might, for instance, move away or push an adult's hand aside to signal refusal or disengagement, these learners often lacked such means, which increased the likelihood that their cues went unnoticed. The implementation of Intensive Interaction shifted this dynamic, encouraging learners to express themselves more clearly and respond more consistently. At the same time, practitioners became more sensitive and skilled at noticing and responding to these subtle cues.

For instance, one learner, who had previously been unresponsive and frequently distressed during transitions between equipment, began to listen to requests and actively attempted to assist by activating his muscles to make the movement easier. Another learner demonstrated engagement when offered choices, carefully observing options before selecting, such as choosing specific books, and interacting with them with evident enjoyment. Throughout the day, learners gradually displayed observable signs of social responsiveness: smiling in return, gently holding hands, sustaining eye contact, or reaching out to maintain connection. Many of these behaviours developed

spontaneously, suggesting initiation of reciprocal interactions rather than responses solely to direct instruction.

As learners became more attuned to their feelings and preferences, they engaged more willingly in activities and began to explore new encounters with curiosity. These changes may reflect increased learner agency and more intentional forms of engagement. Routine tasks became opportunities for participation, with learners seeming to more actively shape their own experiences.

4.3 Extending and Sustaining Attention

During regular Intensive Interaction practice, learners also showed improvements in sustained attention. One learner, who had initially struggled to remain engaged in interaction, provided an illustration of extended attention during Intensive Interaction sessions. In early 2022 session videos, she repeatedly attempted to reach her communication partner through specific actions, namely extending her fingers toward the adult's mouth or pushing with her legs. When the adult gently prevented these actions, her attention quickly waned, and she disengaged. Where connection did occur, it remained brief and difficult to maintain.

After three months of consistent practice, observational records indicated notable progress. The learner was able to sustain engagement for around ten minutes, a marked change from her starting point. By the end of Term 3, her attention extended for nearly the entire 30-minute session. Distractions still occurred but were brief, and she quickly re-established focus. Staff alternated her positioning between a wheelchair and a standing frame to support her partial mobility, and she maintained attention equally well in both contexts. Reflecting on these changes, staff noted that brief lapses in focus resembled natural fluctuations in communication among neurotypical individuals.

These developments across all three domains, documented in session recordings and observational notes, indicate the learner's increased ability to remain present in interaction and are associated with emotional connection and responsiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that Intensive Interaction is linked with changes in multiple aspects of communication and learning, allowing learners to engage beyond a rigid curriculum and participate more actively in everyday classroom experiences.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted influence of Intensive Interaction, showing its role in supporting emotional attunement, responsiveness, learner agency, and sustained attention. The Discussion is organised around three interrelated themes. First, the development of emotional attunement highlights how Intensive Interaction nurtures trust, reciprocity, and emotional visibility in learners. Second, the growth in responsiveness and learner agency demonstrates how learners actively participate in and shape their interactions. Third, sustained attention illustrates that consistent sessions may enhance focus, supporting learners' engagement and participation. Finally, the study

considers implications for professional practice, emphasising that while AAC remains a valuable tool, educators also need to respond to non-symbolic communicative acts and ensure that all learners' intentions and contributions are equally recognised and supported.

5.1 Interpreting Emotional Attunement

The findings indicate that Intensive Interaction is associated with strengthened emotional connections between learners and staff, where trust and reciprocity support emotional expression. Learners displayed comfort and anticipation, reflecting emerging relational patterns. Relational approaches are especially important for learners with complex needs, as they provide a foundation for social-emotional growth that may not unfold within the task-focused or structured interventions commonly used in special education. Such interventions have historically prioritised prescriptive methods and 'correctives' over reflective, relational, and tacit knowledge (Nind & Thomas, 2005). These findings are consistent with relational pedagogical perspectives that position learning as emerging in emotionally responsive and reciprocal interaction rather than directive, teacher-centred approaches (Lysaker & Furuness, 2011; Nind, 2007).

As noted earlier, for individuals with PMLD, this challenge is particularly pronounced, as support is often organised around physical health, medical needs, and basic functioning, with emotional wellbeing receiving comparatively less attention in both educational and healthcare contexts (Nind & Grace, 2025; Clegg et al., 2020). This prioritisation of functional outcomes is also evident in communication practices such as choice-making, which Rayner et al. (2014) describe as facilitating basic decisions but overlooking "*the client's need to express personality and develop a sense of social belonging*" (p. 64). The authors of this study also observed that choice-making is frequently used as the primary means of promoting learner agency, with limited opportunities for relational connection within communication programmes.

This perspective offers an alternative framework for interpreting the benefits of Intensive Interaction. Learners' interactions in this study reflect emotionally attuned exchanges and suggest that they were not only participating socially but also appearing to experience reciprocity with staff. Nind & Grace (2025) additionally note the interdependence of learner and staff wellbeing, highlighting the challenges of empathic understanding in special school contexts. Their focus on embodied, perceptual forms of empathy provides a theoretical foundation for these relational gains and demonstrates how Intensive Interaction supports attunement and mutual responsiveness in learners with complex needs.

These findings align with previous research and emphasise the importance of emotional attunement in Intensive Interaction. Zeedyk et al. (2009) explored how rapidly participants increased engagement during sessions, with a focus on the emotional responses that accompanied these developments. Participants often displayed heightened positive emotions: shared laughter, delight, and physical expressions of closeness such as hugging (warm hugs were also observed in this study and interpreted

as a strong expression of emotional connection). These moments reflect the reciprocity central to Intensive Interaction and are consistent with Stern's (1985) concept of a sense of *communion*, where two individuals sustain an ongoing emotional connection. This form of engagement underpins social understanding and learning. Similarly, Hobson (2002) argues that thinking develops in emotional involvement with others, reinforcing the role of reciprocity in supporting broader social and cognitive development.

5.2 Interpreting Responsiveness and Learner Agency

This study shows how learners responded in different ways during Intensive Interaction sessions, indicating a growing capacity to engage actively with both their surroundings and practitioners. Berry et al. (2009) note that a core mechanism of the approach involves practitioners responding to learners' behaviours as if they are intentionally communicative, using techniques such as echoing and the attribution of intentionality to establish psychological contact. These interactions can lead to observable behavioural changes, including increased initiation and agency. This is in line with Stern's (1985) work on early infant-caregiver interaction, which highlights that recognising others as intentional actors underpins the development of the self. In this study, learners' responsiveness was reflected in their increased initiation and greater influence within interactions.

These processes unfold in a dynamic, reciprocal exchange in which practitioners adjust their actions to match and extend learners' signals. This attunement supports emerging self-determination and encourages exploration within interaction. Over time, learners appeared more confident in initiating communication, suggesting that agency develops through sustained responsive engagement. These findings emphasise the importance of sensitive, ongoing interaction in helping learners shape their social and communicative experiences.

This relational understanding of agency resonates with Jordi's (2011) reconceptualisation of experiential learning as an embodied, emotional, and socially situated process, in which learning develops within lived interaction rather than abstract or instructional knowledge. From this viewpoint, learners' increasing initiation and sustained engagement in Intensive Interaction can be understood as forms of active participation within affectively rich experiences, where understanding develops in shared interaction and participation.

Similarly, relational pedagogical approaches (Nind et al., 2010) characterise agency as co-constructed within relationships, where learning is generated via reciprocal responsiveness between practitioner and learner. In this framework, agency is not viewed as an individual capacity residing solely within the learner, but as something that is enabled, recognised, and sustained by interactional partners.

5.3 Interpreting Extended Attention

Although research directly examining the effects of Intensive Interaction on attention span is limited, the present findings indicate an observed relationship between sustained

engagement and extended focus. Existing literature has primarily explored the impact of this approach on social responsiveness, emotional attunement, and communicative reciprocity (Argyropoulou & Papoudi, 2012; Nind & Grace, 2025; Samuel et al., 2008). However, the mechanisms underpinning attention remain largely implicit within these domains. It is plausible to infer that the learner's increased attention developed as part of the broader process of emotional connection and reciprocal engagement deepened within Intensive Interaction. As learners become more absorbed in shared moments of communication, their ability to maintain focus appears to strengthen correspondingly. This perspective positions attention not as an isolated cognitive skill but as an integral element of relationality – one that evolves in the context of mutual enjoyment and trust that Intensive Interaction is designed to nurture.

These findings indicate that as learners' capacity for sustained attention increased, their participation became more reciprocal and emotionally regulated. Rather than responding in brief, fragmented ways, they engaged in longer, more coordinated exchanges. These patterns are consistent with the emergence of co-regulation, in which both practitioner and learner influence the rhythm and flow of interaction. The observations from this study suggest a close relationship between sustained focus and deepened engagement. Practitioners' responsive pacing and emotional attunement appear to create conditions that support attention, regulate arousal levels, and maintain mutually engaging interactions.

Synthesising the findings from emotional connection, responsiveness and learner agency, and extended attention, Intensive Interaction appears to support holistic, interconnected development. Gains in one domain reinforce progress in others: emotionally attuned interactions support increased engagement and agency, which in turn facilitate sustained attention and active participation. This cumulative process highlights how relational, responsive practice enables learners with complex needs to shape their social and communicative experiences. Development in emotional, social, cognitive, and attentional domains is therefore mutually supportive rather than isolated. These interrelated gains emphasise the practical significance of Intensive Interaction for professional development and everyday practice.

5.4 Implications for Professional Practice

The findings highlight a need for professional learning that deepens practitioners' understanding of communication as a relational, rather than purely linguistic, process. Current training for supporting learners with complex communication needs often emphasises AAC systems, which are highly useful for many learners, yet tend to prioritise symbolic forms of expression. Many learners, however, also communicate non-symbolically (using body movement, facial expression, or shared rhythm) and benefit from approaches that attend to their communicative intent. Even for learners who use AAC, relational approaches remain essential, as they support the social-emotional aspects of interaction that AAC alone cannot fully address. Recognising and responding

to non-symbolic communication is therefore crucial for ensuring that learners' voices and meanings are understood (Bruce & Vargas, 2007).

Intensive Interaction provides a framework for interpreting subtle communicative signals and positioning non-symbolic expression as valid and meaningful. The findings of this study show how learners' emotional connection, agency, and sustained attention develop when their communicative acts are perceived as intentional and reciprocated. To support this, professional development should prioritise training in perceptual sensitivity and reflective engagement, skills that help practitioners notice and respond to learners' cues in the moment. Developing these capacities in school and service settings can help ensure that *all* communicators are meaningfully included and supported in their right to connect and be understood.

These observations correspond with previous research reporting similar outcomes when practitioners implement Intensive Interaction. Rayner et al. (2014), drawing on the 'Communities of Practice' model to inform training, found that carers supporting adults with severe learning disabilities reported highly positive experiences in learning and applying this approach. The authors emphasised the importance of coaching, supervision, and continued support in developing this practice. Participants described their experiences as "*a lightbulb moment*," likening it to "*someone speaking for the first time*" (p. 66). Moreover, the study demonstrated that Intensive Interaction enhanced the quality of person-centred care by cultivating empathic communication, strengthening relational bonds, and supporting improvements in individuals' wellbeing and self-worth.

Corroborating evidence comes from Berridge & Hutchinson (2020), who examined the literature on the implementation of Intensive Interaction in different settings and found that staff experienced a marked shift in their perceptions after observing its impact – the changes described in the Findings. The process challenged pre-existing assumptions that some learners were incapable of meaningful communication, prompting practitioners to recognise previously unseen responsiveness and engagement. Initial scepticism about the approach gave way to greater confidence as staff observed clear benefits for the individuals they supported. Both studies suggest how Intensive Interaction can reshape professional understanding and strengthen relational practice for individuals with complex needs.

6. Limitations

This study offers rich, context-specific insight into relational practice and communication development, but it is based on a single instrumental case within one specialist classroom and is therefore intended as a situated account rather than one designed for statistical generalisation. The longitudinal nature of the dataset and use of repeated video analysis provide depth of contextual understanding. Yet, the findings remain embedded within the specific organisational, relational, and staffing context in which the study took place. The interpretation of findings is also shaped by the researcher's dual role as both practitioner and researcher. This positioning enabled close, sustained access to everyday

interactional practice and supported a detailed, longitudinal understanding of learners' communicative behaviours. However, it may also have influenced interactional dynamics through established relationships with learners and staff, as well as the interpretive framing of engagement during analysis. Although steps were taken to support reflexive interpretation and consistency in analysis, the researcher's embedded position within the setting remains an important consideration when interpreting the findings.

In addition, the analysis of non-symbolic and pre-verbal communication necessarily involves interpretive judgement, as meaning is inferred from behavioural, physiological, and interactional cues rather than explicit verbal reporting. As a result, these constructs should be understood as contextually grounded interpretations of observable behaviour rather than direct measures of internal states.

7. Conclusion

When designing teaching programmes for learners with intellectual disabilities, it is crucial to create conditions that allow learners' voices to develop authentically, rather than assuming or pre-empting their needs. Intensive Interaction is a promising approach in this context, as it offers opportunities for learners to communicate intentionally using gestures, vocalisations, and other non-symbolic behaviours. It encourages educators to follow the learner's lead and respond to their choices. Hubrick (2019) reflects on similar classroom experience, noting that prioritising learners' voices and maintaining fluid, responsive communication enabled students to recognise the power of their own expression and use it confidently throughout daily activities. Observations from the present study echo these outcomes, reinforcing the value of learner-led, relational approaches in supporting communication and engagement.

The significance of Intensive Interaction extends beyond immediate classroom outcomes. It foregrounds the relational nature of learning, where emotional attunement and authentic communication are central. Reflecting principles aligned with Māori pedagogical values, it highlights education as a relational process grounded in reciprocal human connection, where learners are recognised as active participants in their own learning journeys rather than passive recipients of predetermined knowledge or skills. This perspective challenges conventional, goal-oriented models of special education and invites educators to reconceptualise success in human-centred terms. In this sense, the study can be understood as *relighting the torch of Intensive Interaction*, supporting its continued relevance and evolution in contemporary special educational practice.

8. Recommendations

Given these findings, schools may benefit from integrating Intensive Interaction explicitly into curriculum planning, ensuring it is seen not as an add-on but as a central element of teaching and learning. Ongoing professional development is vital to support

this, giving educators opportunities to deepen their understanding of this approach, develop practical techniques, and reflect on their practice. Consistency is also key; as with any teaching approach, Intensive Interaction is most effective when implemented regularly and with sustained commitment. Altogether, curriculum integration, staff development, and consistent practice create the conditions essential for learners' social, emotional, and communicative development.

Equally important is the need to strengthen the evidence base for Intensive Interaction, informed by both local and international research to capture its full impact in diverse contexts. Beyond empirical studies, greater attention should be given to documenting culturally responsive practices and the contextual factors that support effective implementation. Researchers and practitioners can contribute by systematically recording outcomes, sharing examples of successful practice, and critically reflecting on both challenges and enablers. These efforts will help consolidate the evidence for Intensive Interaction and promote inclusive and relationally grounded practice across educational and support settings.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Kieron Hubrick is based in Auckland, New Zealand, and is the Director of Intensive Interaction New Zealand (I.I.NZ), an extension of the global Intensive Interaction network that provides professional development, guidance, and support. Since its inception, I.I.NZ has supported schools across New Zealand to develop and implement

Intensive Interaction in their settings; providing training and coaching to help practitioners better understand the profound and multifaceted nature of this approach. With a career in special education spanning two decades, Kieron has been a passionate advocate for Intensive Interaction since being introduced to it in his first year of teaching. He has presented at conferences nationally and internationally, and his work has been featured in international publications and periodicals. Kieron currently facilitates an Auckland-based Community of Practice (CoP) for Intensive Interaction and a national online forum connecting Intensive Interaction practitioners and supporters from across New Zealand.

Dr. Galina Nam has worked in the education development sector and in special education. She is also a researcher, with a focus on disability equity at both policy and classroom practice levels. She currently works at Oaklynn Specialist School, supporting learners with complex needs and advancing Intensive Interaction as a core learner-centred approach that prioritises connection before curriculum and recognises communication in its most subtle, embodied forms.

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