Proceedings of ICEIPI 2026 Symposium: Inclusive Education, Cultural Transformation, and the Ethical Dimensions of Learning
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.LD34526

From Stigma to Diversity: Deconstructing the Label of Autism and the Path to Inclusion

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Abstract. Autism Spectrum Disorder is a common neurodevelopmental condition. Despite progress in clinical treatments and public awareness, people with autism still face persistent social exclusion in multiple aspects of life. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as stigmatization and labeling, and employing a methodology combining literature analysis with case studies, this paper conducts a qualitative analysis—centered on the film *Wonder* and contextualized by relevant educational policies and media reports—to explore how "labeling" leads to the marginalization of autistic children and restricts their long-term social mobility. This study concludes that "labeling," functioning as a social mechanism, serves as a primary root cause of the marginalization of autistic children across school, family, and societal spheres. Within schools, "labeling" acts as a barrier to the integration of autistic children; within the family, stigmatization translates into emotional and financial burdens; and within society, a singular standard of "normality" restricts autistic children's self-identity and social mobility. Consequently, society must redefine the binary opposition between "normal" and "abnormal," construct a more inclusive social environment, and demonstrate a stronger commitment to the acceptance, understanding, and integration of marginalized groups.

Keywords: autistic children, labeling, social marginalization, inclusive education

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)—also known as autism—is a neurodevelopmental disorder primarily characterized by impairments in social communication and interpersonal interaction, as well as restricted, repetitive behaviors and limited interests [1]. In the past few years, the global prevalence of autism among children has shown an upward trend, making it one of the disability categories with the highest incidence rates. Although clinical interventions have yielded some positive results, social marginalization—driven by "labeling"—remains a major practical challenge facing children with autism. Drawing upon sociological theories and centering on the film *Wonder* as a core case study, this paper explores the social processes—ranging from "labeling" to "isolation"—experienced by autistic children within the contexts of school, family, and society, and proposes viable strategies for fostering inclusivity. This paper introduces sociological theories—specifically those concerning labeling, stigmatization, and social identity—into the field of autism research, thereby exploring research pathways beyond the medical paradigm. Furthermore, in terms

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of practical significance, this study elucidates the impact of social-level dilemmas on the development of children with autism, offering a theoretical framework for the formulation of educational policies, the implementation of inclusive education practices, and the refinement of social welfare systems.

2. Real-life challenges faced by children with autism

2.1. Labeling and exclusion at the school level

2.1.1. Identity fixation under labeling theory

Labeling theory posits that the deficiencies of marginalized groups are often not inherent to them, but rather the result of definitions imposed by dominant groups—those who monopolize social resources and discourse power—a process known as "labeling" [2]. When the label "autism" transcends the clinical realm to become a generalized term for a specific group within society, educators may treat these individuals differently, while classmates may brand them as "freaks"; this very "label" leads to their exclusion from the school community, rendering them unable to integrate into the collective. Some school-aged children with autism are at risk of being bullied; furthermore, autistic students during adolescence and the transition to adulthood often exhibit low self-identity, struggle to gain acceptance from their peers, and engage in behaviors characterized by social withdrawal or rebelliousness. Furthermore, some students with autism exhibit insufficient classroom interaction and a weak capacity for adhering to classroom discipline, which may give rise to issues such as aversion to learning and test anxiety [3]. Furthermore, Goffman noted in "Stigma" that stigmatized individuals are often reduced to "blemished, contaminated persons," their full humanity obscured by a singular label; thus, labeling itself becomes a barrier to communication between autistic children and others, leading to their marginalization within the school setting [4].

Take the film *Wonder* as an example. Auggie's craniofacial deformity becomes the focal point of all his interactions, leading classmates and teachers to label him a "freak"; initially, no one is able to look past this label of his physical appearance to truly connect with him. Consequently, within the social microcosm of the school environment, the personal emotions, interests, and potential of children with autism are often overlooked—a neglect that gives rise to the symptoms of social avoidance associated with autism. Thus, a "label" serves as far more than a mere descriptive term; it acts as a barrier obstructing the social interaction of children with autism, effectively transforming their neurodiversity into a social deficit.

2.1.2. Institutional deficiencies in the education system

The current educational system lacks mechanisms for the inclusive education of children with autism; many countries simplify "inclusion" to mere placement, addressing the issue by introducing "special classes" within mainstream schools. This "special education" system itself physically segregates children with autism, thereby invisibly reinforcing the binary opposition between "normal" and "abnormal" and giving rise to "institutional exclusion. Graham Slee also points out that the traditional educational system views "students unable to adapt to mainstream school norms" as "problematic individuals," rather than reflecting upon the inherent lack of inclusivity within the school system, curriculum structure, and power dynamics themselves [5]. Even under the banner of inclusive education, autistic children are often merely "placed" within general education settings; yet, they do not genuinely participate in classroom activities or integrate into the collective, and their

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social interactions and sense of self-identity continue to be marginalized. Therefore, true inclusive education should redefine "normality" by restructuring school systems, pedagogical practices, and value orientations, thereby endowing the educational system itself with the capacity for inclusion and enabling everyone to integrate into the campus community in a truly meaningful sense.

2.2. Stigmatization and expanding pressures at the family level

2.2.1. Economic burden and emotional labor

Intervention therapy for children with autism entails substantial long-term costs—including expenses for speech training, daily living skills and cognitive development, and behavioral therapy—with average annual costs potentially exceeding tens of thousands of dollars [6]. Under the current welfare system, children with autism receive extremely limited annual financial subsidies and welfare support. Consequently, in order to care for their children, most families are compelled to sacrifice a significant amount of personal time; indeed, in many households, one parent even resigns to provide full-time care, thereby falling into a state of "care poverty." As a result, the financial burden of raising a child with autism exerts a certain impact on the personal development of family members as well as on the division of labor within the family. Moreover, what weighs even more heavily is emotional labor. Emotional labor requires workers to adjust their internal feelings and display appropriate emotions in accordance with the demands of their position, regardless of whether those emotions are genuinely felt. In families with autism children, parents typically face the scrutiny of others, must constantly explain their child's behavior, and are compelled to ceaselessly advocate for resources within the educational and healthcare systems. Yet, this prolonged and sustained emotional toll is often overlooked. Consequently, families living with autism face a dual burden of enduring emotional and financial pressures.

2.2.2. Internalization and transmission of stigma

Stigma theory posits that stigma is a socially constructed power process realized through labeling, stereotyping, separation, and discrimination [7]. In families affected by autism, parents are frequently subjected to the moral accusation of "parenting failure"—the belief that the behavioral differences exhibited by autistic children stem from parental upbringing issues, such as aloofness or an overly protective parenting style—simply because the majority of people have never truly understood that autism is, in fact, a physiological condition. Subjected to such commentary over the long term, parents may internalize social stigma—transforming external condemnation into self-doubt—which can lead families affected by autism to avoid venturing out into public spaces. Moreover, this interpretive approach—which individualizes structural problems—not only obscures the reality of insufficient support but also shifts the responsibility for social exclusion onto individual families.

Stigmatization is not only reflected in the parents' social class; it is also transmitted within the family. Throughout their development, children with autism are constantly exposed to their parents' sensitivities and shifting emotions; consequently, they gradually internalize external judgments, transforming them into the very definition of their own identity. This process of internalization causes these children to not only endure rejection from their external environment but also, on a psychological level, actively perceive themselves as "problematic subjects," thereby deepening their sense of social alienation.

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2.3. Expansion of identity segregation and barriers to mobility at the societal level

2.3.1. Boundary politics of social identity

Social Identity Theory reveals that individuals derive a sense of self-worth through group categorization and tend to glorify their ingroups while disparaging their outgroups [8]. Children with autism are categorized as a "special group" and labeled; while the underlying intention of this practice is to offer protection, it simultaneously serves to exclude this group from the boundaries of society. The binary opposition of "us" and "them" is thus established, casting autistic children as "them"—isolated and excluded from society. Therefore, from a sociological perspective, the act of labeling children with autism participates in the construction of social boundaries; even well-intentioned "special treatment" may inadvertently deepen isolation and exclusion, rendering inclusive education merely a formality rather than genuinely fostering mutual understanding and coexistence among different groups.

2.3.2. Structural constraints on mobility

From education to employment, marginalization is a dynamic process in which labeling accumulates continuously throughout the life course. Exclusion within the educational sphere prevents individuals from an early age from engaging in activities such as teamwork and social interaction; consequently, they are unable to cultivate tacit skills, which directly restricts their opportunities for higher education and the development of vocational competencies. The employment of children with autism is a significant issue of global concern. In first-tier cities such as Shanghai, some coffee shops have begun offering employment opportunities to individuals from special groups; however, research from the UK indicates that only 16% of autistic adults hold full-time jobs, and the majority are concentrated in low-wage, low-skill positions [9]. Social work not only results in income poverty but also deprives individuals of the opportunity to reshape their self-identity through their work.

3. Pathways toward an inclusive society

Faced with the marginalization of autistic children within schools, families, and society, relying solely on individual adaptation or familial efforts to maintain stability makes true integration difficult to achieve; therefore, change is required at both the institutional and conceptual levels to construct a truly inclusive society. Currently, some Western countries—such as the United Kingdom—have established a relatively comprehensive system for the education of children with autism. The UK has released the *Education, Health and Care Plan* [10-12], which integrates multi-sectoral collaboration to incorporate education, healthcare, and social services into a unified support system. The plan establishes three types of educational placements—attendance at mainstream schools, special needs educational institutions, or specialized schools for autism—and emphasizes the provision of effective, differentiated support rather than mere physical placement, thereby effectively enhancing the engagement of autistic children within the school environment. At present, my country still faces certain limitations regarding the educational placement of individuals with autism. Current support for the education of autistic children remains primarily focused on the preschool age group, while support for autistic adolescents and adults requires further strengthening. Therefore, future reforms to the educational system should shift from "compensatory placement" to "structural inclusion," drawing upon more mature national systems to provide sustained support

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throughout the stages of compulsory education, high school education, and even vocational education.

From a broader perspective, institutional reforms alone cannot fully address the root causes of the problem; the primary reason for the "marginalization" of children with autism remains society's singular standard of "normality." Therefore, social media should emphasize the inclusion of "diversity"—much like the adage that "no two leaves in the world are exactly alike"—by normalizing differences in perception, communication, and social engagement, thereby downplaying the label of "special groups" and achieving true social inclusion and integration.

4. Conclusion

By analyzing theories such as labeling, stigmatization, and social identity, this paper explores the causes of the social marginalization of children with autism, as well as potential solutions. Research indicates that "labeling," acting as a significant social mechanism, continuously exacerbates the marginalization of children with autism across various levels. Within schools, "labeling" acts as a barrier to the integration of autistic children; within the family, stigmatization translates into emotional and financial burdens; and within society, a singular standard of "normality" restricts autistic children's self-identity and social mobility. This paper still leaves some areas for improvement. For instance, the study primarily employed qualitative analytical methods and did not directly present findings through empirical means, such as interviews or questionnaires. Future research could further explore how media narratives, public discourse, and social norms collectively shape the understanding of neurodiversity, thereby providing more comprehensive theoretical support for the construction of a more inclusive society.

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