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Norm and stigma: autism, ableist discourses and the school as a territory of symbolic transformation

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Abstract: This article examines how ableist discourses operate in the production of stigma surrounding autism, analyzing them as symbolic devices that reduce identities and sustain social exclusion. The study aims to understand how recurrent statements in everyday social life function as social representations that undermine the dignity of autistic people, in order to reflect on the role of the school as a space capable of transforming such discourses into narratives of recognition. Methodologically, this is a qualitative, theoretical-analytical study grounded in critical discourse analysis of recurrent utterances found in social interactions and digital media, without systematic empirical data collection, and supported by interdisciplinary frameworks from social psychology, linguistics, sociology, philosophy, and theology. The analysis organizes ableist statements into six categories—denial of the condition, reduction of identity, infantilization, rigid stereotypes, romanticization, and spiritualization—highlighting how language becomes an instrument of exclusion. The discussion shows that such statements are not isolated, but rather constitute socially shared discursive practices that delegitimize autistic identity. At the same time, the study emphasizes the central role schools can play in dismantling symbolic violence: critical, dialogical, and inclusive pedagogical practices can reframe discourse, value diverse forms of communication, and affirm neurodiversity as a legitimate expression of the human condition, without overlooking tensions related to different levels of support and social inequalities. The article concludes that confronting ableism requires interventions in both discourse and institutional practices.

Keywords: autism; ableism; stigma; social representations; inclusive education.

1 Introduction

Autism, as a neurodevelopmental condition (APA, 2022; WHO, 2019), has been the subject of discourses that extend beyond the clinical domain and permeate everyday life, materializing in utterances that may at times appear trivial, yet are in fact imbued with ideological meanings. Such discourses contribute to shaping how autistic individuals are perceived and treated, revealing the power of language as a mechanism of inclusion or exclusion. Within this process, ableism becomes evident, understood as "[…] prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes that classify individuals according to the extent to which their bodies conform to standards of beauty and functional capacity" (Gesser; Block; Nuernberg, 2019, p. 1781). According to these authors, this phenomenon is instantiated through language and is both structural and structuring, insofar as it shapes subjects, institutions, and organizations, establishing forms of relation guided by a normative ideal. In relation to this ideal, certain groups — such as women, Black individuals, Indigenous peoples, older adults, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and persons with disabilities — are positioned, as noted by Foresti *et al*. (2024), as inferior, insufficient, or inadequate, both in their existence and in their social participation.

As highlighted by Moscovici (1981), social representations are forms of socially elaborated and shared knowledge that guide practices and meanings. Ableist utterances, therefore, do not merely express individual perceptions but rather crystallize collective images of autism, functioning as representations that are reproduced in social interactions and that directly and persistently permeate the everyday lives of autistic individuals.

These representations operate not only at the level of ideas but also structure behavioral expectations, institutional decisions, and forms of everyday interaction. As they are reiterated across different spheres — family, media, school, and healthcare services — they acquire the status of self-evidence, coming to function as tacit truths that no longer require questioning. In this way, ableism is sustained not only through explicit individual attitudes but also through the naturalization of categories that predefine what is expected of an autistic subject and which social positions are considered legitimate for them. In this sense, language does not merely describe social reality; it actively participates in its production and maintenance.

It is at this juncture that the analysis of ableist discourse gains particular relevance, especially when considered from the standpoint of lived experience. My positionality is grounded not only in my academic work on language within the Autism Spectrum but also in a late diagnosis of twice-exceptionality — in my case, Autism co-occurring with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and high abilities/giftedness — received in 2020, at the age of 47, following the diagnostic assessment of my adolescent son. Recognizing myself within this condition rendered more visible the everyday presence of utterances that, although often framed as casual remarks, function as mechanisms of exclusion. I therefore propose, in this article, to present some of these recurrent utterances, widely reported by autistic individuals in social interaction. These utterances are organized into categories that make more visible the ways in which language participates in the production of stigma, understood as a social mark that reduces identities.

From a methodological standpoint, this study is qualitative in nature and adopts a theoretical-analytical approach grounded in critical discourse analysis. The utterances examined here do not derive from systematic empirical data collection; rather, they consist of recurrent statements circulating in everyday social life, widely shared in face-to-face interactions, digital media, and accounts by autistic individuals, and are analyzed as discursive material representative of social practices. The perspective adopted articulates interdisciplinary reflection with elements of situated analysis, understanding these utterances as expressions of social representations operating in the symbolic constitution of stigma.

This methodological choice is based on the understanding that certain utterances become socially crystallized, circulating in relatively stable forms regardless of identifiable authorship. Their force lies not in a specific empirical origin but in their recurrence and the familiarity with which they are recognized by different interlocutors. Analyzing them thus enables access not merely to isolated statements but to discursive patterns that permeate the social imaginary and guide concrete practices of inclusion or exclusion.

For the purposes of this reflection, I propose grouping these utterances into six analytical categories: (1) *denial of the condition*, expressed in statements such as “You don’t even look autistic,” “Autism is trendy now,” or “Everyone is a little autistic”; (2) the *reduction of identity and subjective complexity to the diagnosis*, as in “He is autistic, don’t expect much,” “Autistic people cannot get married,” or “You, autistic? But you’re so intelligent!”; (3) *infantilization*, manifested in constructions such as “Autistic people are eternal children,” “Autistic people are very innocent,” “Autistic people have no malice/do not lie,” or “Autistic people live in their own little world”; (4) *rigid stereotypes*, which either exaggerate abilities, as in “All autistic people are geniuses,” or deny human qualities, as in “Autistic people lack empathy” or “Autistic people have no emotions”; (5) *misleading romanticization*, in statements such as “Autistic people are special beings who came to teach us how to love”; and, finally, (6) the *spiritualization of the diagnosis*, which associates autism with punishment, mission, or miracle, as in “Autistic people are a burden the family must bear,” “Autistic people are elevated souls,” “Autism results from demonic influence,” “Autistic people are angels sent to special individuals,” or “Faith alone can cure it.”

Table 1 – Categories of ableist utterances directed at autistic individuals

Analytical categories	Common utterances	Predominant discursive operation	Effect of meaning
Denial of the condition	“You don’t even look autistic”; “Autism is trendy now”; “Everyone is a little autistic”	Presupposes a single, visible model of autism, thereby invalidating diagnoses or experiences that do not conform to stereotypical expectations	Invisibility of differ-rence and ques-tioning of the legitimacy of the diagnosis
Reduction of identity and subjective complexity to the diagnosis	But you’re so intelligent!”	Defines the subject exclusively in terms of the clinical condition, as if it determined capacities and life trajectories	Restriction of expectations, autono-my, and recognition of subjective complexity
Infantilization	“Autistic people are eternal children”; “Autistic people are very inno-cent”; “Autistic people have no malice / do not lie”; “Autistic people live in their own little world”	Attributes characteristics associated with permanent childhood, denying emotional, social, or intellectual maturity	Delegitimization of agency and main-tenance of the sub-ject in a position of dependence
Rigid stereotypes	“Autistic people are geniuses”; “Autistic people lack empathy”; “Autistic people have no emo-tions”	Generalizes extreme traits as if they were universal, erasing the heterogeneity of the spectrum	Production of unrealistic expectations or dehumani-zation through the denial of human qualities
Misleading romanticization	“Autistic people are special beings who came to teach us how to love”	Idealizes the condition as a source of purity or moral mission, displacing attention from concrete needs	Erasure of real support needs and rights
Spiritualization	“Autistic people are a burden the family must bear”; “Autistic people are elevated souls”; “Autism results from demonic influence”; “Autistic people are angels sent to special individuals”; “Faith alone can cure it”	Mystifies autism by interpreting it as punishment, trial, or miracle, shifting it from the social and political domain to the transcendental	Social disengage-ment and naturali-zetion of suffering

Source: The Author.

The table synthesizes the analytical categories adopted, which will be discussed below in light of the theoretical frameworks mobilized. These utterances reveal how language operates in the construction of social meanings surrounding autism. To say, for example, “You don’t even look autistic” presupposes a stereotyped standard of what a “typical autistic person” would be, denying the diversity of the spectrum in the name of the normalization of bodies — a logic similar to that applied to other disabilities. Likewise, expressions such as “Autism is trendy now” or “Everyone is a little autistic” trivialize the diagnosis and delegitimize singular experiences, functioning as discursive strategies of invisibilization that relativize difference and erase the long history of exclusion to which autistic individuals have been subjected. Statements such as “He is autistic, don’t expect much” or “Autistic people cannot get married,” in turn, reduce identity to the clinical condition, denying autonomy and even the capacity for development, as if the diagnosis were an immutable destiny — when, in fact, there is wide variability in developmental trajectories and significant potential for the expansion of abilities through targeted interventions.

Other categories reiterate this process of reducing the human subject through distinct yet socially effective mechanisms. Infantilization produces a condition of permanent minority and, in doing so, renders it acceptable to speak for the autistic individual, to decide on their behalf, and to suspend their autonomy. Rigid stereotypes function as closed interpretive frames: they either overvalue or dehumanize and, in both cases, prevent the subject from being perceived beyond the label. Romanticization and spiritualization, in turn, shift the debate to a moral or transcendental grammar that neutralizes the political dimension of inclusion, converting support and accessibility into “trial,” “mission,” or “cure.” The strength of such utterances lies precisely in their appearance of benignity: they produce exclusion without presenting themselves as exclusion.

It may thus be concluded that the ableist utterances organized into these categories operate as symbolic devices that delineate boundaries of belonging. As they circulate, they function as stigmas in the Goffmanian sense, disqualifying subjects and reducing complex identities to singular marks — the diagnosis, infantilization, stereotypes — in a process of social deterioration (Goffman, 1981). This movement echoes what Bourdieu (1989) describes as the effect of symbolic power: the imposition of classificatory schemes that reproduce inequalities. These utterances, therefore, do not constitute isolated opinions but rather expressions of cultural structures that naturalize hierarchies and consolidate inequalities. Understanding them requires an interdisciplinary approach that considers the subject in their complexity, not only in biopsychosocial terms but also in spiritual dimensions.

It is within this horizon that the present article is situated: to analyze ableist utterances directed at autistic individuals as social discourses that produce and stabilize exclusionary representations, converting difference into deficit and legitimizing recurring forms of disqualification. Furthermore, the article seeks to reflect on the role of the school as a site of symbolic transformation, capable of interrupting the circulation of these meanings, displacing tacit criteria of "normality," and sustaining practices of recognition that expand the possibilities for the social participation of autistic individuals. This focus is further justified by the fact that, within the educational field, such representations affect not only students and their families but also shape conceptions of inclusion and guide pedagogical and institutional decisions — often implicitly — regarding who is perceived as "educable," "autonomous," or "belonging".

Far from being limited to enrollment or the student's physical presence, inclusion entails a structural transformation of school practices, cultures, and policies. As Mantoan (2004) argues, inclusion does not mean adapting the subject to the school as it currently exists, but rather reinventing the school itself so as to embrace human diversity as a constitutive principle. From this perspective, the challenge is not to "integrate" the autistic student into a pre-existing standard, but to question the standard itself, recognizing that difference is not an exception to be tolerated, but an ordinary condition of social life.

In light of these initial analyses, it becomes necessary to advance toward an understanding of how such discourses are rooted in historical traditions that define what is assumed to be "normal" and what is considered "deviant". The following sections revisit the social construction of normality and its implications for autistic experience, problematize stigma as a process that deteriorates identities, and discuss recognition as a condition of dignity. Finally, they examine the role of the school not merely as a site for the reproduction of prejudice, but as a terrain of symbolic contestation and possibility for transformation, capable of reconfiguring ableist discourses and, in doing so, impacting the social practices they sustain. In this sense, discursive change is not confined to the level of language: as demonstrated by Fairclough (2001) and Orlandi (2007), discourse is a form of social practice, such that its re-signification entails shifting representations, altering power relations, and opening new horizons of belonging and recognition for autistic individuals.

2 Normality and difference: constructions and reductions of the human

The biomedical tradition, structured since the nineteenth century, has largely constructed mental difference through the logic of pathologization and exclusion. As demonstrated by Foucault (2020) in *History of Madness*, modern psychiatry emerged in close association with confinement, establishing the asylum as a space for the normalization of deviant bodies and minds. In Brazil, this rationality materialized in institutional practices that have deeply marked cultural life: until only a few decades ago, autistic individuals, when diagnosed, were often classified as schizophrenic or "mad," and consequently excluded from social and family life. In his analysis of the Brazilian psychiatric reform, Amarante (1994) argues that the asylum-based logic was sustained by a reductionist view of psychic suffering, in which medicalization and confinement replaced any understanding of singular experience. Within this context, autism was frequently subsumed under the generic label of madness, erasing its specificities and reinforcing exclusion.

This historical panorama resonates with my own experience: when visiting the *Memorial da Loucura (Memorial of Madness)*, I encountered records of prolonged institutionalization based on diagnoses now recognized as inadequate. This memory renders more visible how class, race, and access to services may operate as risk or protective filters in relation to practices of medicalization and confinement — and how the asylum-based past continues to cast shadows over the social and institutional imaginary concerning difference. Scientific advances in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in developmental psychiatry, brought important changes. The introduction of autism as a diagnostic category in the DSM-III (APA, 1980) marked a turning point, distinguishing it from childhood psychoses and schizophrenia. Since then, scientific research has expanded the understanding of the spectrum, now situating autism as a neurodevelopmental condition (APA, 2022; WHO, 2019). However, as Ortega (2008) critically observes, conceptual changes have not eliminated prejudice: even as science refines its classifications — contrary to discourses such as "Every autistic person is a genius" — social representations that associate autistic individuals with incapacity, deficit, or unproductivity persist.

It is at this point that the relevance of the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977) becomes evident, as it shifts the focus of human suffering away from a purely organic plane to include psychological and social factors. Nevertheless, by not incorporating the spiritual dimension, this paradigm also reveals its limitations, particularly in societies strongly shaped by religiosity, such as Brazil. The World Health Organization (WHO, 1998) itself recognizes spirituality as a component of well-being; for this reason, I propose the notion of the biopsychosocial-spiritual subject as a conceptual key to understanding how ableist discourses traverse and reduce autistic experience.

In *Abnormal*, Foucault (2001) demonstrated how medicine and psychiatry have played a central role in the historical production of categories of normality and deviance, classifying bodies and minds that deviate from established norms. Thus, when one says, “He is autistic, don’t expect much,” the utterance mobilizes this tradition: it reduces the subject to a diagnosed body, construed as a deficit in relation to an ideal of normality. This framing reinforces the notion that normality is a given and universal parameter; yet, as Canguilhem (2009) argues, it is in fact a historical and value-laden concept, used to define who conforms to expectations and who must be corrected. What, ultimately, does it mean to be “normal”? And whom does this definition serve?

Normality is not merely a statistical average, but a normative ideal that guides practices of correction and exclusion. By establishing standards of behavior, productivity, and sociability deemed desirable, society implicitly delineates the limits of acceptability. Subjects who do not conform to such expectations come to be perceived as problems to be adjusted, treated, or compensated for, rather than as legitimate expressions of human diversity. In the case of autism, this logic manifests in the constant pressure to adapt to neurotypical modes of communication and interaction, often without reciprocity or recognition of autistic forms of functioning.

Another axis of exclusion lies in the construction of the autistic mind as eternally childlike. Statements such as “Autistic people are eternal children” or “they live in their own little world” exemplify how stigma is inscribed in subjectivity. As Goffman (1981) has argued, stigma operates as a mark that deteriorates identities, transforming differences into signs of incapacity. At the psychological level, stigma thus functions by denying the agency and complexity of the autistic individual, fixing them within an image of innocence or naivety, as though their neurodivergent condition implied incapacity to develop skills and competencies.

This framing produces concrete effects in social life, as infantilization tends to justify exclusion from spaces of decision-making, qualified employment, and political participation. By presuming permanent incapacity, it restricts the possibility of autonomy and legitimizes continuous tutelage, even in the absence of impairments that would warrant it. It thus constitutes a subtle form of erosion of autonomy, whereby the subject is maintained in a position of dependence not due to intrinsic limitations, but rather as a result of diminished social expectations.

These individual perceptions do not remain confined to the private sphere: as they circulate socially, they become collective images that guide conduct and expectations. In this process, as analyzed by Moscovici (1981), individual perceptions are transformed into widely shared social representations. Thus, when it is asserted, for example, that “autistic people lack empathy,” such a statement reinforces an image that disregards the diversity of ways of feeling, expressing affect, and building relationships.

Vygotsky (1997b, 2000) offers a fundamental contribution by demonstrating that difference should not be understood as a natural deficit, but as a social construction, produced and reinforced through interactions. In this sense, development is not limited by the condition itself, but by the barriers imposed by the environment. It is precisely for this reason that cultural mediation proves essential: by enabling new forms of interaction and learning, it can transform inequalities into potentialities. The school, as a privileged space of mediation, plays a central role in this process, as it can either reproduce stigma — by sustaining discourses that infantilize and deny autonomy — or deconstruct it, by creating conditions for recognition and the valorization of singularities. Thus, when autonomy or understanding is denied to an autistic person, what is at stake is not the identification of an intrinsic limitation, but the reinforcement of social barriers that could be transformed, for instance, through critical and emancipatory pedagogical practices.

At the social level, ableism is inscribed through classificatory schemes that separate the pure from the impure, the “normal” from the deviant. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas (1991) demonstrated how societies construct symbolic systems to define belonging and exclusion. To say “Autism is trendy now,” “Everyone is a little autistic," or "Autistic people cannot get married" not only denies the specificity of the condition but also delegitimizes the social position of autistic individuals, framing them as excess or as a threat to order. In my own diagnostic trajectory, a psychiatrist once stated that although I presented characteristics consistent with Autism Spectrum Disorder level 1 support needs, I could not be autistic because I was married and had published books. Such a statement not only ignores the heterogeneity of the spectrum but also reveals the strength of social representations that associate autism with infantilization and incapacity, demonstrating how even healthcare professionals may reproduce ableist conceptions. Bourdieu (1989) describes this process as symbolic violence: inequalities are naturalized through categories of perception that appear self-evident. Thus, such discourses — even when articulated within contexts of clinical authority — translate invisible social norms that delimit who is recognized as a full subject.

Language is central to this process. For Bakhtin (1997), every utterance is ideological, imbued with values. Fairclough (2001), in turn, shows that everyday discourses reproduce power relations. In Brazil, Orlandi (2007) further emphasizes that discourse constitutes the materialization of ideologies. Accordingly, statements such as "Autistic people have no emotions" or "Autistic people have no malice / do not lie" create symbolic boundaries that reinforce non-belonging. This discursive mechanism is not exclusive to ableism: it is also evident in the field of linguistic prejudice, for instance, as analyzed by Bagno (1999) and Bortoni-Ricardo (2005), when certain ways of speaking are disqualified as "incorrect." In both cases, difference is converted into a marker of inferiority, and language functions to reinforce exclusion.

At the spiritual level, utterances that associate autism with punishment, mission, or miracle shift the debate from the domain of rights to narratives of purity and guilt, distancing the subject from their shared humanity. Contemporary theological perspectives critique magical or blame-oriented interpretations and reposition disability as part of the human experience that calls for concrete social responsibility (Tillich, 1957; Boff, 1985; Moltmann, 2005). From this standpoint, referring to an autistic individual as a "proof," "angel," or "demonic action" does not validate the real subject; rather, it transforms difference into metaphor and sustains symbolic hierarchies. As these utterances traverse biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions, they reduce the autistic condition to multiple forms of symbolic dehumanization. They thus operate as discursive mechanisms that naturalize hierarchies and sustain practices of exclusion (Bourdieu, 1989; Foucault, 2001, 2020). Considering the subject from a biopsychosocial-spiritual perspective makes it possible to understand how such discourses operate across multiple layers, producing both normality and difference.

Understanding ableism in its complexity, therefore, entails understanding how language becomes an instrument of human hierarchization. Across all these dimensions, what is at stake is not merely difference, but the reduction of the autistic person to categories that strip them of their humanity: a deficient body, an infantilized mind, an inadequate social being, or a spiritualized entity. This is a process in which the autistic individual ceases to be recognized in their wholeness and is instead framed within partial and stigmatizing images.

This perspective opens the way for analyzing not only the historical classifications of difference, but also their contemporary effects on social life. It is within this horizon that the following discussion is situated, focusing on how ableism operates as stigma, silencing the voices of autistic individuals and making the struggle for recognition necessary. This perspective engages critically with the notion of neurodiversity (Singer, 2017), which affirms the legitimacy of diverse forms of neurological functioning.

The concept of neurodiversity has played a fundamental role in shifting autism from the exclusive domain of pathology to that of legitimate human variation, contributing to the affirmation of rights and to the recognition of different ways of being, communicating, and existing. However, as Botha and Gillespie-Lynch (2022) problematize, the neurodiversity movement is neither homogeneous nor free of internal tensions. An overly celebratory reading risks rendering invisible the experiences of autistic individuals with higher support needs, whose demands for care, accessibility, and targeted public policies remain urgent. By emphasizing an intersectional approach, the authors highlight that factors such as social class, race, gender, and level of support profoundly shape how autism is experienced and recognized.

Recognizing these tensions does not entail abandoning the neurodiversity perspective; rather, it involves complexifying it and treating it as an ethical-political horizon that guides critique of pathologizing reductionism without erasing concrete inequalities among autistic individuals. In this sense, the defense of neurodiversity must coexist with the material guarantee of rights, individualized support, and social protection policies, particularly for those facing greater barriers to access, communication, and autonomy. Neurodiversity, therefore, should not function as a merely celebratory label, but as a framework that requires articulation between symbolic recognition and public responsibility.

3 Stigma and recognition: the struggle to exist fully

In light of Goffman (1981), stigma operates as a social process that transforms differences into markers of inferiority, producing what he terms “spoiled” identities. When someone states, “Autistic people cannot get married” or “You, autistic? But you’re so intelligent!”, the implicit message is that autistic life is incompatible with autonomy or with projects of personal fulfillment, reducing the subject to a position of exception.

This mechanism of exclusion, however, is not confined to immediate interactions; it becomes institutionalized. The school, for instance, may consolidate such representations when it infantilizes, silences, or restricts autistic students to their diagnosis. Yet it may also become a space of transformation, particularly when it recognizes that disability, while grounded in biological factors, is shaped and exacerbated by social barriers that can be mitigated through cultural mediation. In this regard, Vygotsky (1997b) offers a decisive interpretive key: denying participation does not merely acknowledge incapacity, but actively reinforces barriers that hinder the development of abilities. Conversely, pedagogical mediation can reveal potentialities and open pathways for recognition.

Such recognition, as proposed by Honneth (2003), constitutes a condition of dignity and unfolds across three dimensions: love, which sustains affective bonds; rights, which secure legal autonomy; and solidarity, which confers social value. Ableism, in turn, threatens all three spheres: it undermines affective relations by insisting on infantilization; restricts rights by presuming incapacity for self-determination; and weakens solidarity by sustaining images of unproductivity or naivety. To recognize, therefore, is more than to accept — it is to affirm positively the value of differences as constitutive of social life.

The absence of recognition does not merely entail invisibility; it may also produce moral suffering and feelings of devaluation that affect self-esteem and social participation. When autistic individuals are consistently perceived through the lens of deficits or stereotypes, their identities tend to be constructed under the depreciative gaze of others, hindering the formation of a positive self-image. In this sense, the struggle for recognition is not only political but also existential, as it involves the possibility of perceiving oneself as a legitimate subject of rights, affections, and life projects.

This structural dimension of ableism, as defined by Gesser, Block, and Nuernberg (2019), resonates with Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1989), insofar as it reveals how inequalities are naturalized under the guise of self-evidence. By classifying autistic individuals as an out-group (Tajfel; Turner, 1979 *apud* McLeod, 2023), ableist utterances reinforce crystallized social representations (Moscovici, 1981), shaping expectations and conduct. In the Latin American context, this struggle acquires even greater complexity when examined through the lens of Social Psychology. As argued by Silvia Lane ([19--] *apud* Sousa, 2009), Patto (1997), and Martín-Baró ([19--] *apud* Souza, 2024), exclusion cannot be understood apart from the historical and structural web of inequalities. In the Brazilian context, shaped by historical inequalities of race, class, and gender, as well as by the remnants of an asylum-based culture, ableism intersects with other forms of oppression, thereby multiplying barriers.

Within this process, language becomes a space of symbolic contestation. Discourses shape social relations and delineate boundaries of belonging, functioning both as mechanisms for the production and the contestation of meaning. The same language that excludes may be reappropriated as a form of resistance, reconfiguring meanings and expanding possibilities for recognition. Within this horizon, the struggle to exist fully extends beyond the refusal of stigma: it entails affirming autism as a legitimate expression of human diversity, and calls for public policies, pedagogical practices, and everyday narratives that recognize the singularity of each subject.

4 The School as a space of symbolic transformation

The school occupies a central place in the contestation of meanings surrounding autism. Far from being a neutral institution, it may either reinforce stigma or constitute a space for transformation. Historically, pedagogical practices have often reproduced prejudices present in society, infantilizing, silencing, or reducing students with disabilities to their clinical condition. In recent years, the growing presence of formally diagnosed autistic students in schools has increased the visibility of the issue, although this should not be conflated with the notion of an epidemic.

This scenario stems primarily from the decline of segregative practices and from diagnostic advances that have made visible subjects who were previously overlooked. This movement also helps explain the rise in late diagnoses among adults, as in my own case, made possible by greater clinical precision and increased social openness. Nevertheless, it coexists with misdiagnoses and with the disqualification of some professionals, which reinforces ableist discourses and stigmatizing beliefs. Within this context, the school may either reproduce such beliefs or act as a site of resistance, capable of deconstructing symbolic boundaries and constructing narratives of recognition.

Conceiving the school as a territory is particularly appropriate, as territory is not reducible to physical space, but constitutes a field of relations, identities, and symbolic disputes (Lane, [19--] *apud* Sousa, 2009; Montero, 2006). As Milton Santos (2006) reminds us, every territory is socially produced and traversed by power relations; thus, to recognize the school as a territory is to acknowledge that hierarchies are reproduced within it, but that possibilities for transformation also emerge (Martín-Baró, [19--] *apud* Souza, 2024).

This conception requires shifting the focus from the classroom to the school as a whole. Teachers play a fundamental role, but the production of meaning also involves management, pedagogical and technical teams, staff, and families. If ableist discourse circulates in hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds, and meetings, its deconstruction must reach all actors who constitute this territory, requiring collective commitment. Such responsibility entails reexamining not only teaching practices, but also institutional routines, assessment criteria, and forms of school coexistence.

Inclusion encompasses both pedagogical adaptations and the promotion of a school culture that values diverse modes of communication, learning, and social interaction, preventing difference from being perceived as an obstacle to institutional functioning. In this direction, the literature on inclusive education emphasizes that inclusion is not reducible to the student's physical presence in school; rather, it entails transforming institutional practices, cultures, and policies. For Mantoan (2004), inclusion means reorganizing the school based on the diversity of its subjects, rather than adapting the subject to a pre-established model of normality. Accordingly, the focus shifts from individual deficit to institutional barriers that limit participation, recognizing that it is the school that must become accessible to human plurality, not the student who must approximate a single standard.

Within this framework, the contribution of Paulo Freire (1982, 1987) is foundational. In proposing a dialogical and emancipatory education, Freire critiques the “banking” model of education, which imposes content and silences voices. Applied to autism, this perspective repositions the teacher from a “savior” figure to that of a mediator — in the sense attributed by Vygotsky (1997a) to sociocultural mediation — someone who does not speak for the autistic student, but rather creates the conditions for their voice to be heard and valued. This entails confronting statements such as “Autistic people live in their own little world” and transforming them into opportunities to recognize communicative competence in its multiple forms, including nonverbal ones.

The school, as a privileged space of mediation, bears the responsibility of fostering practices that render emerging capacities visible and recognize students’ competence beyond narrow standards of performance and communication. From this perspective, the aim is not to deny that some students require support, but to affirm that pedagogical support is not synonymous with the substitution of autonomy. On the contrary, to support means to calibrate mediation, remove barriers, and provide resources so that each subject may participate fully, with their own voice, based on their potentialities and real needs.

This perspective also allows for a critical examination of forms of inclusion that, although well-intentioned, leave intact the structures that produce exclusion. Slee (2011) warns that many inclusive policies operate as processes of assimilation, in which the student is admitted into the school on the condition that they conform to dominant norms of behavior, learning, and communication. In such cases, difference is tolerated only insofar as it does not disrupt institutional functioning, thereby perpetuating ableism in more subtle forms, marked by expectations of unilateral adaptation.

It is at this point that Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) contributes with the notion of an ecology of knowledges: different forms of knowledge, often marginalized, can enter into dialogue and mutually enrich one another. Applied to the school context, this perspective invites the recognition of autistic modes of expression — whether verbal, visual, musical, or technological — as legitimate forms of knowledge. Pedagogical practice thus shifts away from a single normative standard and opens space for a plurality of voices.

The linguistic dimension is particularly fertile for this work. In the classroom, exercises of discursive analysis and reformulation may be proposed — for instance, transforming “autistic people lack empathy” into “autistic people express empathy in diverse ways.” Such exercises are not merely linguistic, but political: they demonstrate that language can either reinforce stigma or open possibilities for recognition.

From the perspective of social representations (Moscovici, 1981), the deconstruction of ableism does not occur solely through the correction of information, but through the transformation of shared meanings that organize perceptions and expectations. Social representations are dynamic and are reconfigured when confronted with new narratives, experiences, and meaningful interactions. Thus, by promoting critical discourse analysis, the production of counter-utterances, and the visibility of diverse autistic trajectories, the school acts directly in the symbolic reorganization of the collective imaginary. In doing so, it shifts representations from deficit-based images to those grounded in legitimacy and agency. Cultural transformation, therefore, depends on ongoing processes of dialogue, reflection, and the circulation of new representations.

From the standpoint of Bakhtinian dialogism (1997), each utterance is constituted in relation to the other. The school, by welcoming diverse voices, may subvert discursive hierarchies and enable autistic students to occupy the position of subjects of enunciation. When a student has their narrative validated — even when expressed through non-conventional modes — the cycle of silencing is disrupted, and space is opened for the production of new social representations.

Among the possible practices, the following may be highlighted: (a) critical analysis and reformulation of ableist statements, engaging students in the deconstruction of ideological presuppositions; (b) the production of alternative narratives that give visibility to diverse autistic trajectories; (c) interdisciplinary projects in which autistic students may express their singularities and interact on equal terms with their peers; and (d) training initiatives involving not only teachers, but also administrators, support staff, and the broader school community, so that all are engaged in the process of deconstructing ableist beliefs.

These practices aim to build a critical and dialogical space in which all voices are valued. An inclusive school, in this sense, is not guided by a logic of tolerance, but by the recognition of the student as a subject of rights and a producer of knowledge. This entails abandoning practices that, under the guise of protection or support, ultimately limit participation and authorship, replacing the student's voice with decisions made on their behalf. Transforming ableism into narratives of recognition requires pedagogical courage and collective commitment. It involves shifting from a logic of normalization to one that values diversity, recognizing that the role of the school is not to fit subjects into pre-established molds, but to create the conditions for each individual to recognize themselves — and to be recognized — in their singularity. In this way, by breaking with discourses that deny autonomy and belonging, the school affirms itself as a site of symbolic transformation, capable of lifting the veil of ableism and constructing more just and plural horizons of coexistence.

5 Conclusion

The analyses developed in this article support the assertion that ableist utterances directed at autistic individuals are neither naive nor episodic statements, but rather symbolic devices that delineate boundaries of belonging and sustain inequalities. By denying the diversity of the spectrum, reducing subjects to diagnoses, infantilizing, stereotyping, romanticizing, or spiritualizing autism, such discourses operate as social practices that deteriorate identities and restrict possibilities for recognition.

This study contributes by organizing these utterances into analytical categories that make visible the discursive materiality of ableism, demonstrating that exclusion is sustained not only by institutional barriers, but also by the everyday circulation of representations that naturalize the norm and transform difference into deficit. By understanding the subject in their biopsychosocial-spiritual complexity, it becomes evident that confronting ableism requires simultaneous intervention in language, social representations, and institutional practices.

Within this horizon, the school emerges as a decisive symbolic territory. More than a space for the transmission of content, it constitutes a field of contestation over meanings, where it is determined whether difference will be reaffirmed as limitation or recognized as a legitimate expression of human plurality. By adopting critical, dialogical, and inclusive pedagogical practices, the school can displace stigmatizing discourses and foster forms of recognition that expand belonging, agency, and social participation.

By articulating discourse analysis, social representations, and the biopsychosocial-spiritual dimension of the subject, this study contributes to understanding ableism not merely as individual prejudice, but as a symbolic system that organizes perceptions, expectations, and social practices. This approach highlights that transforming the living conditions of autistic individuals depends both on institutional change and on the revision of shared meanings that guide everyday interactions.

By linking the critique of ableism with contemporary frameworks of inclusion, it becomes clear that the recognition of autistic individuals depends not only on changes in individual attitudes, but also on the reconfiguration of social institutions, particularly the school. A truly inclusive education, as argued by Mantoan (2004) and Slee (2011), requires transforming curricula, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures, so that diversity is no longer treated as a problem to be managed, but rather recognized as a foundation of democratic life.

Confronting ableism, therefore, entails not only refuting isolated statements, but also producing new narratives and consolidating practices that affirm the dignity of autistic individuals. It is a task that involves teacher education, educational policies, and ongoing research on language and exclusion. By intervening in discourse, one also intervenes in the structures it sustains — thus opening space for a more just society, capable of recognizing neurodiversity as a constitutive dimension of human experience.

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