

"SHADOWS OF DENIAL TO THE LIGHT OF ACCEPTANCE: A PARENT'S EMOTIONAL JOURNEY IN RAISING NON-VERBAL AUTISTIC LEARNERS"

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Abstract

This study explored the emotional journey of parents raising non-verbal autistic children in Tagum City, focusing on their experiences of denial, acceptance, and resilience amidst social stigma and limited support systems. Anchored on Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the study aimed to understand how relational dynamics, societal perceptions, and coping strategies shape the caregiving experiences of these parents. Using purposive sampling, twelve parents participated in semi-structured interviews, and the data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Results revealed the Emotional Challenges, Societal Perceptions, and Support Systems experienced by parents in raising non-verbal autistic learners. These findings illustrate how coping strategies, external perceptions, and available resources shape the parents' caregiving journey. The study concludes that while emotional burdens are significant, parents demonstrate profound resilience through adaptive strategies and strong familial bonds. It is recommended that local government units and educational institutions develop inclusive programs, increase autism awareness campaigns, and invest in parent-focused interventions to strengthen support for families raising non-verbal autistic children.

Keywords: Non-verbal autism, Parental emotional journey, Family Systems Theory, Phenomenological research, Caregiving resilience

Introduction

Parents raising non-verbal autistic learners face profound emotional and social challenges due to the unique needs of their children, which are compounded by the lack of adequate support systems and awareness. According to Ramos and Torres (2021), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects approximately 1 in 100 children worldwide, and the prevalence of non-verbal autism presents significant care giving difficulties, particularly in resource-limited communities. Furthermore, Lewis and Malhotra (2020) highlight that parents of non-verbal autistic learners often experience heightened emotional stress due to communication barriers and societal stigmas, which hinder their ability to accept and support their children effectively.

The emotional challenges faced by parents raising non-verbal autistic learners are recognized as critical concerns in the global educational and care giving landscape. According to Lewis and Malhotra (2020), the absence of comprehensive support systems in the United States has highlighted the urgency of addressing the struggles of families managing autism, particularly in cases where children are non-verbal. These challenges not only affect the family's emotional resilience but also limit access to specialized interventions crucial for fostering developmental progress. Mason et al. (2021) assert that parental stress and isolation are compounded by limited availability of resources and cultural stigmas, emphasizing the need for targeted support programs to help parents navigate this emotional journey effectively.

The challenges faced by parents raising non-verbal autistic children have been highlighted in numerous studies, emphasizing the importance of addressing these concerns globally. According to Garcia (2022), families

in Canada often encounter heightened emotional stress due to limited access to autism-specific interventions and therapeutic resources. This gap in support systems leaves parents struggling to meet their children's unique needs while navigating societal stigma, further delaying acceptance and resilience. Similarly, Lewis and Malhotra (2020) point out that the lack of structured community-based programs in Canada exacerbates feelings of isolation among parents, emphasizing the critical need for comprehensive services tailored to support families managing autism.

The rising prevalence of autism spectrum disorder in the Philippines, coupled with the unique challenges faced by parents of non-verbal autistic learners, underscores a critical need for attention and action. According to Miguel (2020), Filipino families often grapple with limited access to specialized care and therapeutic programs, especially in rural areas, due to socio-economic constraints and a lack of autism-focused facilities. Similarly, Andoy and Aberin (2021) emphasize that cultural stigma and insufficient public understanding of autism compound these difficulties, isolating parents and delaying essential interventions. In Tagum City, these problems are particularly pronounced, as local support systems remain underdeveloped, leaving families to navigate the emotional journey of raising non-verbal autistic children with minimal assistance.

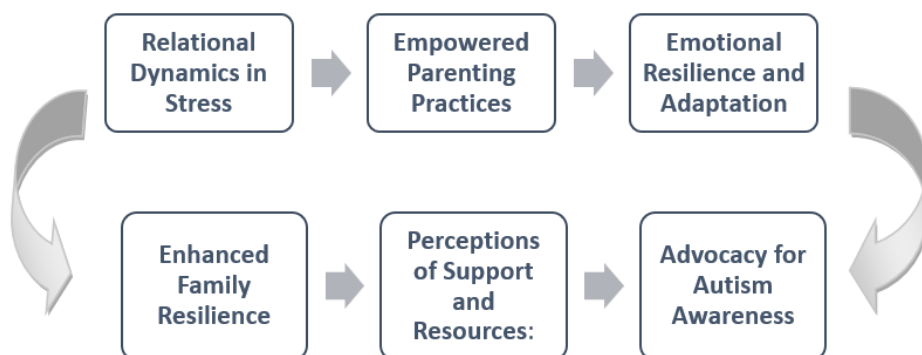
1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explore the emotional journey of parents raising non-verbal autistic children, focusing on their experiences of denial, acceptance, and resilience amidst these challenges. The research seeks to understand the coping mechanisms and support structures that influence their journey, addressing the following questions:

1. What emotional challenges do you face in raising your non-verbal autistic child, and how do these challenges affect your daily life?
2. How do societal perceptions or stigmas influence your ability to accept and support your child's unique needs?
3. What specific types of support or interventions do you feel are lacking, and how might these improve your care giving journey?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study is anchored on Family Systems Theory, as it focuses on the interconnected dynamics within families, emphasizing relational communication, coping mechanisms, and emotional adaptation. The Family Systems Theory was developed by Murray Bowen (1978), who emphasized the interconnectedness of family members and their influence on the emotional and relational balance of the family unit. The principles of Enhanced Family Resilience, Empowered Parenting Practices, and Advocacy for Autism Awareness align with Bowen's foundational ideas, as further elaborated by Kerr and Bowen (1988) in their work on family dynamics and emotional adaptation.



1. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a phenomenological approach, which was guided by the principles outlined in the works of Husserl (1931) and Creswell (2013). This approach was particularly suited for exploring the emotional journey of parents raising non-verbal autistic learners, as it aimed to uncover the essence of their lived experiences. Phenomenology allowed an in-depth examination of how denial transitioned into acceptance, capturing the subjective realities of participants. To ensure authenticity and minimize bias, the process of "bracketing" was employed, setting aside preconceived notions to focus on participants' narratives. The interpretive dimension of phenomenology further emphasized the interplay between individual experiences and broader social and cultural contexts, providing rich insights into their coping strategies and emotional resilience. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were utilized to amplify the voices of parents and understand their perspectives on caregiving challenges and societal support.

The study involved twelve parents from Tagum City who were actively raising non-verbal autistic children. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they had substantial caregiving experience and were able to articulate their emotional journeys. Key variables, including the age of the children, availability of therapeutic interventions, and socio-economic status, were considered to ensure a diverse range of perspectives that enriched the findings.

This research adhered to strict ethical guidelines to protect the rights, safety, and privacy of participants. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring participants were aware of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms and coded data in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. All digital records were encrypted, and physical records were responsibly secured and disposed of. The principles of fairness and justice guided the selection of participants, ensuring inclusivity and equity throughout the research process.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to share their emotional journeys in depth while remaining focused on the research objectives. An interview guide was developed, integrating concepts from Family Systems Theory to explore participants' perspectives on relational dynamics, perceptions of societal support, and coping mechanisms during stress. Rapport-building techniques were employed to create a comfortable environment where participants felt safe and open. Audio recordings, along with detailed field notes, ensured the accuracy of collected data. Follow-up questions were posed to clarify narratives and expand on emerging themes. To enhance the reliability of findings, data triangulation was employed by cross-referencing participant narratives with community records, local autism advocacy reports, and relevant scholarly literature.

The data obtained from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was particularly effective in identifying recurring themes while preserving the depth of participants' emotional narratives. The analysis began with data familiarization, where interview transcripts were reviewed in detail to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Initial coding organized data into segments related to communication barriers, perceptions of cultural stigma, and resilience-building strategies. These codes were grouped into broader themes such as "emotional transitions from denial to acceptance," "navigating support gaps," and "relational strength and resilience."

Constant comparison techniques were employed to identify patterns and variations across participants' responses, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the caregiving challenges faced. Family Systems Theory guided the interpretation of themes, linking individual emotional strategies to relational and societal factors. Additionally, the socio-economic and cultural realities of Tagum City were considered to situate participants' experiences within their unique context. Validity was enhanced through data triangulation, cross-referencing interview findings with local autism support initiatives and scholarly references, generating actionable insights to strengthen family support systems and advocate for autism awareness.

2. Results and Discussion

This chapter elaborates the themes and subthemes of this study.

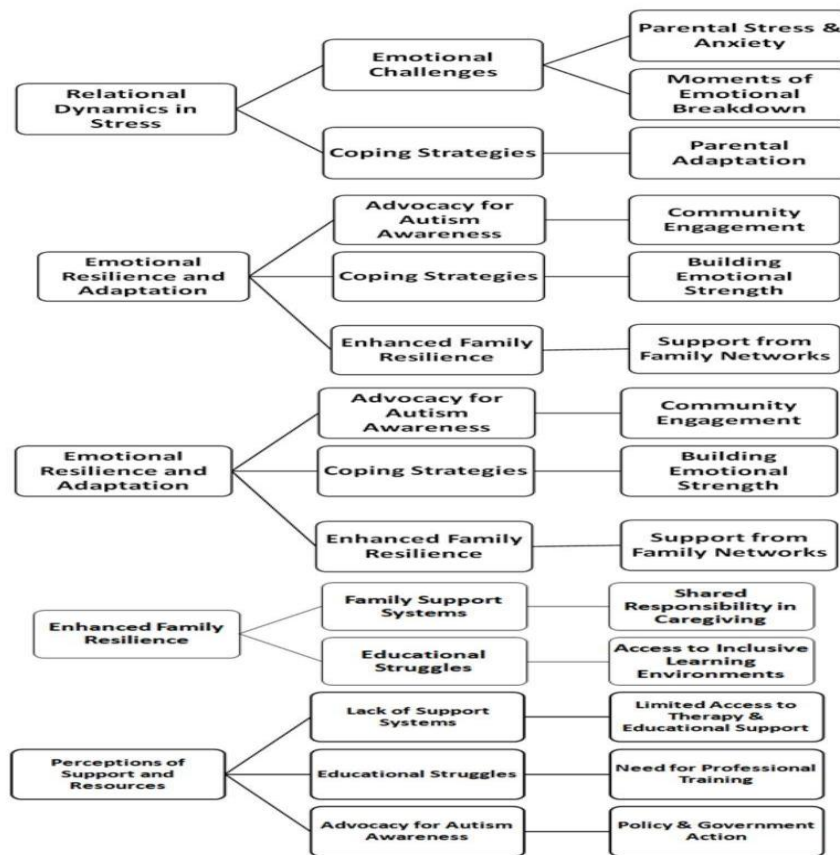


Figure 2. Modified Conceptual Framework

Relational Dynamics in Stress

3.1.1 Emotional Challenges

Parental Stress & Anxiety. Stress and anxiety are significant emotional challenges faced by parents raising non-verbal autistic children. Participant 1 expressed, *"I feel overwhelmed sometimes, especially when I don't know why my child is upset or frustrated. The stress builds up because communication is difficult."* This aligns with Ramos & Torres (2021), who found that caregivers often experience high psychological distress due to difficulties in interpreting non-verbal cues. According to Bowen's Family Systems Theory, parental anxiety is not an isolated experience but rather an interconnected emotional response that affects the entire family unit (Bowen, 1978). The inability to understand a child's needs increases psychological tension within the household, reinforcing stress cycles that influence parental well-being and communication patterns.

Moments of Emotional Breakdown. When stress escalates, parents experience moments of emotional breakdown. Participant 2 recalled, *"There was a day when my child cried nonstop, and nothing I did helped. I felt powerless and didn't know how to comfort him."* Similarly, Participant 4 noted, *"It's heartbreaking when you know your child wants something but can't express it. I feel like I should understand, but sometimes I just don't know what to do."* These moments reflect Bowen's principle of emotional fusion, where heightened stress disrupts an individual's ability to maintain self-regulation within the family system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Garcia (2022) also supports this perspective, stating that emotional burnout in caregivers often results from feeling isolated and lacking effective coping mechanisms. Bowen's theory emphasizes the need for differentiation of self, where caregivers must develop emotional independence to maintain stability in high-stress situations.

3.1.2 Coping Strategies

Parental Adaptation. Family Systems Theory highlights adaptive coping mechanisms as essential for maintaining emotional balance within caregiving families. Participant 3 shared, *"Over time, I have learned to observe my child's body language and facial expressions to understand what they need. It's not perfect, but it helps ease the frustration."* Participant 6 similarly reflected, *"I had to change my mindset and approach. Instead of expecting my child to communicate the way I do, I learned to enter his world and see things from his perspective."* Bowen's concept of family emotional functioning suggests that adaptation occurs through experiential learning and interpersonal feedback (Bowen, 1978). Families refine coping strategies by adjusting their expectations, learning non-verbal cues, and developing patience—ultimately strengthening emotional resilience and fostering deeper connections between parents and children (Lewis & Malhotra, 2020).

3.1.3 Support Systems and Advocacy

Enhanced Family Resilience. Bowen's Family Systems Theory highlights the importance of relational support networks in managing caregiving stress. Participant 5 emphasized, *"My family helps me when I feel overwhelmed. Without their support, this journey would be much harder."* Studies by Miguel (2020) affirm that familial resilience improves emotional stability, reducing caregiver burnout and strengthening family unity. Enhanced family resilience is crucial in caregiving dynamics, as it aligns with Bowen's principle that emotional interdependence within the family system fosters greater adaptability and well-being (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Advocacy for Autism Awareness. Societal perspectives on autism influence caregiver experiences, shaping public support networks and access to autism-related resources. Participant 2 shared, *"I wish there were free programs to help families like ours. More education and awareness would make a difference."* Similarly, Participant 3 emphasized, *"People don't understand autism. Educating the public will help reduce judgment and make life easier for families like mine."* Bowen's framework highlights that external support systems influence family stress levels, reinforcing the need for community advocacy and institutional interventions (Bowen, 1978). Andoy & Aberin (2021) found that government-funded autism programs in Singapore significantly reduced caregiver burden, whereas Miguel (2020) identified barriers in the Philippines due to limited financial and therapeutic accessibility.

Empowered Parenting Practices

3.2.1 Adaptive Parenting Strategies

Parental Learning and Adjustment. Parents of non-verbal autistic children must continuously adjust their caregiving approaches to meet their child's unique needs. Many rely on self-education, observations, and trial-and-error methods to understand their children's behaviors. Participant 3 shared, *"I read everything I can about autism and tried different ways to connect with my child. Over time, I found what works."* This reflects Bowen's principle that family members actively shape their emotional and relational responses through ongoing learning and adjustment (Bowen, 1978). Garcia (2022) supports this view, noting that parents who actively engage in self-directed learning experience lower levels of caregiving distress, as increased knowledge leads to more effective caregiving practices.

Educational Engagement and Advocacy. Parental advocacy plays a critical role in educational settings, ensuring that non-verbal autistic children receive appropriate learning accommodations. Participant 5 emphasized, *"I always talk to my child's teachers to make sure they understand how he learns best."* Studies by Lewis & Malhotra (2020) indicate that consistent parental involvement in school environments leads to better educational outcomes, reinforcing Bowen's principle of relational interdependence—where advocacy strengthens a child's capacity to function successfully in broader social contexts (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

3.2.2 Emotional Resilience and Self-Efficacy

Building Emotional Strength. Empowered parenting requires emotional resilience, enabling caregivers to manage stress, frustration, and external pressures effectively. Participant 6 explained, *"It took time, but I learned that I have to stay strong for my child. If I feel defeated, how can I help him?"* This aligns with Bowen's theory, which emphasizes the development of emotional regulation within the family unit (Bowen, 1978). Miguel (2020) highlights that parents who cultivate emotional resilience report higher overall well-being, as they develop sustainable coping mechanisms to manage caregiving stress.

Mutual Support and Emotional Growth. Parenting non-verbal autistic children requires mutual emotional growth within the family system. Participant 2 noted, *"Seeing my child's small achievements keeps me motivated. He teaches me patience and resilience every day."* Bowen's theory emphasizes the reciprocal emotional influence within families, where caregivers and children engage in shared emotional experiences that shape their coping mechanisms and relational stability (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Yusof et al. (2022) found that families who emphasize mutual emotional growth experience deeper parent-child bonds and improved caregiving satisfaction.

3.2.3 Advocacy for Autism Awareness

Community Engagement and Social Support. Effective parenting extends beyond the home—community engagement and social advocacy play critical roles in reducing stigma and improving autism support systems. Participant 1 stated, *"People don't understand autism. The more we educate them, the better support our children will receive."* Bowen's framework suggests that external community networks influence family stress and emotional adaptation (Bowen, 1978). Andoy & Aberin (2021) reinforce this concept, highlighting how public awareness programs in Singapore have significantly improved community support for families raising autistic children.

Policy Advocacy and Systemic Change. Parents also advocate for policy improvements, ensuring accessible autism-related resources and government-funded interventions. Participant 4 expressed, *"I wish there were more free therapy programs. If support is available, families like mine wouldn't struggle so much."* This reflects Bowen's principle that systemic factors influence family well-being, where policy structures impact the emotional and financial resilience of caregiving households (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Studies from Miguel (2020) confirm that policy-driven autism interventions significantly reduce caregiver stress, reinforcing the need for expanded governmental support systems.

Perceptions of Support and Resources

3.3.1 Lack of Support Systems

Limited Access to Therapy & Educational Support. Many parents struggle with inadequate autism therapy options and high financial costs for specialized services. Participant 5 emphasized, *"There aren't enough therapy services, and the ones available are too expensive."* Similarly, Participant 2 shared, *"I wish there were free programs to help families like ours. If support is available, families like mine wouldn't struggle so much."* In contrast, Andoy & Aberin (2021) noted that Singapore's structured intervention programs reduce caregiver stress, reinforcing the notion that systemic autism policies directly impact family resilience. Bowen's concept of family adaptability suggests that caregivers who receive adequate institutional support experience greater emotional stability, making comprehensive autism-focused policies a crucial factor in family systems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

3.3.2 Educational Struggles

Need for Professional Training. Parents often advocate for better teacher training to ensure non-verbal autistic children receive appropriate educational accommodations. Participant 4 expressed, *"Schools should have trained professionals who know how to handle children with autism. Without this, learning environments are stressful for both the child and the parent."* In contrast, Yusof et al. (2022) explored Malaysia's early intervention programs, which include teacher training on autism-specific strategies, leading to improved classroom environments and greater parent satisfaction. Bowen's principle of systems thinking suggests that collaborative learning models between schools and families foster stronger support networks, ultimately reducing stress within caregiving households (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

3.3.3 Advocacy for Autism Awareness

Policy & Government Action. Parents express the urgent need for policy reforms to improve autism resource accessibility. Participant 1 stated, *"Government support would change everything for families like mine. Therapy, schools, and social inclusion should be priorities."* Bowen's framework highlights the role of social institutions in shaping family stress levels, reinforcing that government action influences systemic caregiving challenges (Bowen, 1978). Ramos & Torres (2021) found that families with access to government-funded autism programs experience lower caregiving distress, supporting the call for expanded policy-driven intervention efforts. While challenges persist in regions such as the Philippines (Miguel, 2020), where autism support is scarce, countries like Singapore (Andoy & Aberin, 2021) demonstrate successful policy-driven autism care models, proving that government interventions significantly enhance family resilience.

Enhanced Family Resilience

3.4.1 Family Support Systems

Shared Responsibility in Caregiving. Raising a non-verbal autistic child requires collective family involvement, where responsibilities are distributed among parents, siblings, and extended family members. This shared approach helps alleviate emotional strain and caregiving exhaustion. Participant 5 shared, *"My family plays a huge role in helping me take care of my child. Without their support, I would feel completely overwhelmed."* Bowen's Family Systems Theory underscores the importance of relational interdependence, where caregiving is not the burden of a single individual but a collective effort within the family unit (Bowen, 1978). Research by Garcia (2022) further supports this claim, noting that families who practice shared caregiving strategies experience lower stress levels, reinforcing the importance of strengthening emotional connections among family members.

3.4.2 Educational Struggles

Access to Inclusive Learning Environments. Parents advocate for greater access to autism-inclusive learning environments, ensuring their children receive appropriate academic accommodations and social engagement opportunities. Participant 4 emphasized, *"Schools should offer better learning environments for autistic children. If the right systems are in place, they can thrive academically and socially."* Bowen's framework highlights that external institutional influences shape the emotional stability of families, reinforcing that barriers to education create additional stress within caregiving households (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Miguel (2020) reports that families with access to autism-focused educational settings experience increased satisfaction and reduced anxiety, suggesting that expanding inclusive learning frameworks significantly enhances caregiver and child well-being.

Perceptions of Support and Resources

3.5.1 Lack of Support Systems

Limited Access to Therapy and Educational Support. Many families raising non-verbal autistic children struggle with insufficient access to therapy and specialized educational programs, often citing high financial costs and geographic limitations as barriers to care. Participant 5 shared, *"There aren't enough therapy*

services, and the ones available are too expensive." The lack of affordable services places an additional emotional and psychological strain on caregivers, limiting their ability to access interventions that could improve their child's developmental progress. Research by Miguel (2020) reinforces this concern, highlighting that families in low-resource areas frequently encounter difficulties in obtaining autism-related therapy, resulting in increased caregiver stress. Bowen's Family Systems Theory suggests that external constraints on institutional support negatively affect intra-family emotional stability, demonstrating the critical need for expanding accessible therapy services to alleviate parental burden (Bowen, 1978).

3.5.2 Educational Struggles

Need for Professional Training. Parents advocate for improved teacher training, emphasizing that educators often lack the skills necessary to support non-verbal autistic students effectively. Participant 4 expressed, "Schools should have trained professionals who know how to handle children with autism. Without this, learning environments are stressful for both the child and the parent." Bowen's theory underscores that educational preparedness directly influences family stress levels, suggesting that schools must adopt more inclusive teaching frameworks to foster adaptive learning environments (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Garcia (2022) supports this finding, noting that educators trained in autism-inclusive strategies report improved student engagement and reduced parental concerns. Similarly, Yusof et al. (2022) found that structured teacher training programs enhance classroom inclusivity, reinforcing the importance of integrating autism-specific methodologies into professional development curricula.

3.5.3 Advocacy for Autism Awareness

Policy and Government Action. Families raising non-verbal autistic children frequently call for stronger policy reforms and government-backed initiatives to improve autism services, reduce financial barriers, and ensure better institutional support. Participant 1 emphasized, "Government support would change everything for families like mine. Therapy, schools, and social inclusion should be priorities." Bowen's framework suggests that institutional structures significantly affect family resilience, highlighting the impact of policy-driven interventions on parental stress and caregiving stability (Bowen, 1978). Ramos and Torres (2021) found that families who receive structured government support experience lower anxiety and improved caregiving satisfaction, reinforcing the need for financial assistance programs and policy-driven autism advocacy efforts. Comparative studies by Andoy and Aberin (2021) reveal that countries with well-developed autism policies, such as Singapore, demonstrate stronger parent-child educational engagement, showcasing the potential impact of institutional reform on long-term caregiving experiences.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical role of external support systems in shaping caregiving experiences, reinforcing Bowen's Family Systems Theory. Strengthening institutional accessibility, teacher training, and government intervention efforts will be essential in improving the wellbeing of families raising non-verbal autistic children. Policy-driven initiatives that expand therapy access, professional education, and autism advocacy programs are vital in fostering more resilient and emotionally stable caregiving environments.

Recommendation

This study establishes the urgent need for holistic support systems in autism caregiving, affirming the necessity for enhanced family resilience, empowered parenting practices, and increased advocacy for autism awareness. According to Bowen (1978), family dynamics play a crucial role in shaping emotional stability, requiring adaptive coping strategies and community-driven support to improve caregiving experiences. Kerr and Bowen (1988) emphasize that systematic emotional adaptation within the family unit leads to stronger parent-child interactions and improved overall well-being. Garcia (2022) reinforces that caregivers refine their approach through direct engagement and experiential learning, aligning with Bowen's Family Systems Theory in fostering collaborative resilience within family networks. This study calls for immediate advancement in autism advocacy, demanding targeted parent support programs, evidence-based intervention strategies, and policy-driven initiatives to equip families with the necessary resources for sustained caregiving. According to Bowen (1978), future research should focus on enhancing family-based resilience models, ensuring parents receive psychosocial support, adaptive learning resources, and mentorship-driven training. In line with Garcia (2022), educational policies must shift beyond traditional approaches, advocating for community-led autism awareness campaigns, structured therapy access, and integrative social inclusion programs that emphasize longterm familial stability and adaptive caregiving methods

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