

Exploring the Identity Development of Teenagers with Learning Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to explore the identity development of teenagers with learning disabilities (LD). This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth data from participants. Nineteen teenagers (10 males and 9 females) aged 13-18 years, diagnosed with LD and enrolled in special education programs at three urban high schools, were purposively sampled. The interviews, lasting 45 to 60 minutes each, were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a thematic approach to identify key themes and subthemes. Four main themes emerged from the data: personal experiences, social interactions and relationships, self-perception and identity, and coping strategies and support systems. Participants reported significant academic challenges, leading to emotional distress and lowered self-esteem. Social interactions varied, with positive relationships providing crucial support and negative interactions exacerbating feelings of isolation. Identity development involved navigating dual identities and coping with internal conflicts. Effective coping strategies, such as seeking help and using assistive technology, contrasted with less adaptive methods like avoidance. Supportive family and educational environments were essential for positive identity development and emotional resilience. The study highlights the complex interplay of factors influencing the identity development of teenagers with LD. Academic challenges, social interactions, and coping strategies significantly impact their self-perception and overall well-being. The findings underscore the need for inclusive educational practices, supportive teacher-student relationships, and comprehensive mental health resources to foster positive identity formation and improve outcomes for adolescents with LD.

Keywords: Learning disabilities, identity development, teenagers, social interactions, coping strategies, educational support, emotional resilience.

1. Introduction

Learning disabilities are neurodevelopmental disorders that significantly impact academic performance and daily functioning. Adolescents with LD often face challenges in reading, writing, mathematics, and other academic areas, which can lead to stress, depression, and even suicidal tendencies (Aghaziarati et al., 2023; Bender et al., 1999; Bulut et al., 2024). The impact of these challenges extends beyond academic performance, affecting the overall emotional and psychological well-being of these individuals (Aghaziarati et al., 2023; Aghaziarati & Nejatifar, 2023; Aghaziarati et al., 2021).

The prevalence of learning disabilities among adolescents necessitates a deeper understanding of their unique experiences and identity development. According to Shifrer (2016), stigma and educational stratification significantly limit the academic progression of adolescents with LD, particularly in subjects like mathematics. This stigmatization can create a barrier to accessing higher-level courses and achieving educational aspirations, ultimately influencing their self-concept and future goals (Shifrer, 2016).

Emotional adjustment is another critical aspect of the lives of adolescents with LD. Martín-Ruiz (2023) highlights that students with specific learning disabilities often struggle with emotional adjustment compared to their peers without LD. These emotional challenges can manifest as anxiety, low self-esteem, and difficulty in social interactions, further complicating their identity formation (Martín-Ruiz, 2023).

Coping strategies play a vital role in how adolescents with LD manage their daily challenges. Firth, Greaves, and Frydenberg (2009) conducted a comparative study on the coping styles of adolescents with and without LD, revealing that those with LD tend to employ different strategies, often less effective, than their peers. Understanding these coping mechanisms is essential for developing targeted interventions that can support their emotional and academic resilience (Firth et al., 2009).

Identity development in adolescents is a crucial developmental milestone, significantly influenced by their social environment and personal experiences. Forber Pratt et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of the literature on disability identity development, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and supporting the unique identity formation processes of individuals with disabilities. Adolescents with LD often experience dual identities—one shaped by their disability and the other by their abilities—which can lead to

internal conflicts and a fragmented self-concept (Forber Pratt et al., 2017).

The exploration of disability identity among adolescents has been further expanded by Forber Pratt et al. (2021), who investigated how young people with disabilities perceive and internalize their identities. Their findings suggest that a positive disability identity can enhance self-esteem and overall well-being, underscoring the need for supportive environments that foster positive identity development (Forber Pratt et al., 2021).

Social interactions and relationships are pivotal in the identity development of adolescents with LD. McVittie, Goodall, and McKinlay (2008) explored how adolescents with LD resist stigmatization by managing their relative abilities, indicating that social contexts significantly influence their self-perception and identity. Positive relationships with peers, family, and teachers can provide essential support, while negative interactions, such as bullying and exclusion, can exacerbate feelings of isolation and low self-worth (McVittie et al., 2008).

Family dynamics and parental support are particularly influential in the lives of adolescents with LD. Forber Pratt et al. (2021) highlight the role of family in shaping the disability identity of adolescents, noting that supportive family environments can promote resilience and positive self-concept. Conversely, family conflict and lack of understanding can contribute to emotional distress and hinder identity development (Forber Pratt et al., 2021).

Educational and occupational aspirations are also affected by the presence of a learning disability. Rojewski (1996) found that high school seniors with LD often have lower educational and occupational aspirations compared to their peers, largely due to the limitations imposed by their disabilities and the stigma associated with them. This diminished aspiration can impact their motivation and future planning, making it essential to address these barriers through supportive interventions (Rojewski, 1996).

The psychological well-being of adolescents with LD is a critical area of concern, with research indicating higher rates of episodic psychiatric disorders among this population. Bradley and Bolton (2006) identified a higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders among teenagers with LD, with and without autism, compared to their non-disabled peers. This underscores the importance of providing comprehensive mental health support to address the unique psychological challenges faced by adolescents with LD (Bradley & Bolton, 2006).

Forber Pratt, Mueller, and Andrews (2019) emphasized the importance of disability identity and allyship in promoting psychological well-being. Their research suggests that fostering a positive disability identity and encouraging allyship can create more inclusive environments that support the mental health and well-being of individuals with disabilities (Forber Pratt et al., 2019).

Coping strategies are essential for adolescents with LD to navigate their daily challenges and build resilience. Firth, Greaves, and Frydenberg (2009) found that adolescents with LD employ various coping styles, often resorting to avoidance or emotional coping strategies that may not be as effective as problem-focused approaches. Developing tailored interventions that enhance adaptive coping strategies is crucial for improving their emotional and academic outcomes (Firth et al., 2009).

The role of educational support services, such as special education programs and tutoring, cannot be overstated. These services provide the necessary accommodations and modifications to help students with LD succeed academically. However, the effectiveness of these supports is contingent upon the understanding and dedication of educators. Forber Pratt et al. (2021) stress the need for teacher training and awareness to better support students with disabilities, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment (Forber Pratt et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the identity development of teenagers with learning disabilities is a multifaceted process influenced by academic challenges, emotional adjustment, social interactions, and coping strategies. The existing literature underscores the importance of supportive environments, both at home and in school, to foster positive identity development and psychological well-being among adolescents with LD. By understanding and addressing the unique experiences and needs of these individuals, educators, psychologists, and policymakers can develop targeted interventions that promote resilience, academic success, and positive identity formation. This study aims to contribute to this understanding by exploring the lived experiences of teenagers with LD, providing insights into their identity development processes and highlighting the areas that require further support and intervention.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study was designed to explore the identity development of teenagers with learning disabilities.

The study employed a phenomenological approach, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Participants were recruited from three high schools in urban areas, each with established special education programs.

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant data on the topic. Inclusion criteria were:

- Teenagers aged 13-18 years old.
- Diagnosed with a learning disability.
- Enrolled in a special education program.

The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, where data collection continued until no new themes emerged.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in probing and exploring participants' responses while maintaining a focus on key areas related to identity development. An interview guide was developed, covering topics such as:

- Personal experiences with learning disabilities.
- Social interactions and relationships.
- Self-perception and identity.
- Coping strategies and support systems.

Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet, private setting at the participants' schools or homes, depending on their preference. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy in data capture. Detailed field notes were also taken during and after the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved several steps:

familiarization: Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion in the data.

Generating Initial Codes: Significant statements and phrases were identified and coded systematically across the entire dataset.

Searching for Themes: Codes were collated into potential themes, and all relevant data were gathered under each theme.

Reviewing Themes: Themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring they accurately reflected the data. This involved checking the coherence of themes within and across transcripts.

Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and named, capturing the essence of the participants' experiences.

Writing the Report: A detailed narrative was developed, illustrating each theme with rich, vivid examples from the data.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary themes with a subset of participants for validation. Additionally, peer debriefing with colleagues knowledgeable in qualitative research was employed to review and refine the analysis process.

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
Personal Experiences	Academic Challenges	Difficulty with reading, Struggling with math, Slow writing pace
	Impact on Self-Esteem	Feeling inferior, Fear of failure, Self-doubt
	Learning Strategies	Use of assistive technology, Seeking help, Time management techniques
	Emotional Responses	Frustration, Anxiety, Relief from support
	Motivational Factors	Desire to improve, Parental encouragement, Teacher support
Social Interactions and Relationships	Peer Relationships	Feeling isolated, Peer support, Bullying experiences
	Family Dynamics	Parental support, Sibling understanding, Family conflict
	Teacher Relationships	Positive reinforcement, Lack of understanding, Advocacy by teachers
	Social Skills Development	Making friends, Communication barriers, Social activities participation
	Extracurricular Involvement	Sports participation, Club memberships, Volunteer work
Self-Perception and Identity	Sense of Belonging	Inclusion in groups, Exclusion experiences, Seeking acceptance
	Self-Image	Perception of abilities, Body image concerns, Self-confidence
	Identity Conflicts	Struggle between abilities and disabilities, Dual identity, Role confusion
	Coping Mechanisms	Humor, Avoidance, Seeking reassurance
	Future Aspirations	Career goals, Educational ambitions, Personal aspirations
Coping Strategies and Support Systems	Academic Support	Special education services, Tutoring, Classroom accommodations
	Emotional Support	Counseling, Peer support groups, Family encouragement
	Social Support	Friendships, Mentor relationships, Community programs
	Personal Coping Strategies	Journaling, Meditation, Physical exercise

3.1. Personal Experiences

Academic Challenges: Teenagers with learning disabilities often face significant academic challenges. These include difficulties with reading, struggling with math, and a slow writing pace. One participant shared, "I always get stuck on math problems, and it takes me forever to finish my writing assignments."

3. Findings and Results

The study included a total of 19 participants, comprising 10 males and 9 females. The age of the participants ranged from 13 to 18 years, with a mean age of 15.5 years. Participants were selected from three urban high schools with established special education programs. In terms of grade levels, 4 participants were in the 8th grade, 5 in the 9th grade, 3 in the 10th grade, 4 in the 11th grade, and 3 in the 12th grade. The ethnic composition of the sample was diverse: 9 participants identified as Caucasian, 5 as African American, 3 as Hispanic, and 2 as Asian. All participants had a formal diagnosis of a learning disability, with specific diagnoses including dyslexia (7 participants), ADHD (5 participants), dysgraphia (4 participants), and dyscalculia (3 participants). Socioeconomic status varied, with 6 participants coming from low-income households, 8 from middle-income households, and 5 from high-income households.

Impact on Self-Esteem: The academic difficulties directly affect their self-esteem, leading to feelings of inferiority, fear of failure, and self-doubt. A participant expressed, "I feel like I'm always behind everyone else. It makes me doubt if I can ever catch up."

Learning Strategies: To cope with these challenges, participants employ various learning strategies such as using assistive technology, seeking help from teachers or peers, and implementing time management techniques. "Using a

speech-to-text app has made a huge difference for me. I can keep up better in class now," mentioned one student.

Emotional Responses: The emotional responses to their learning disabilities vary, with many experiencing frustration and anxiety, while some find relief from the support they receive. "It's really frustrating when I don't understand something, but my teacher is always there to help, and that makes it a bit easier," said a participant.

Motivational Factors: Despite the challenges, there are strong motivational factors that drive these teenagers, including a desire to improve, encouragement from parents, and support from teachers. One student noted, "My mom always tells me I can do anything if I try hard enough, and that keeps me going."

3.2. *Social Interactions and Relationships*

Peer Relationships: Social interactions are crucial, with many experiencing feelings of isolation, yet some find peer support and share experiences of bullying. "Sometimes I feel like an outsider, but I have a few friends who understand me and help me through," shared a participant.

Family Dynamics: Family dynamics play a significant role, with parental support being a common theme, while sibling understanding varies and family conflict can arise due to misunderstandings about the learning disability. One teenager stated, "My parents are great, but my brother just doesn't get why I need extra help."

Teacher Relationships: Relationships with teachers are also pivotal, involving positive reinforcement from some, a lack of understanding from others, and instances where teachers advocate on their behalf. "My teacher really supports me and always tells me I'm doing a good job, which helps a lot," said one participant.

Social Skills Development: Development of social skills includes making friends, overcoming communication barriers, and participating in social activities. "Joining the school club helped me make friends and feel more confident," remarked a student.

Extracurricular Involvement: Participation in extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, and volunteer work also contributes to their social experiences. One participant noted, "Playing on the basketball team has given me a sense of belonging and accomplishment."

Sense of Belonging: The sense of belonging varies, with experiences of inclusion in some groups and exclusion in others, leading to a constant search for acceptance.

"Sometimes I feel like I belong, but other times it's hard to fit in," shared a participant.

3.3. *Self-Perception and Identity*

Self-Image: Self-perception among these teenagers includes their view of their abilities, concerns about body image, and overall self-confidence. "I feel confident in some things but not so much in others," said one student.

Identity Conflicts: Many face identity conflicts, struggling between their abilities and disabilities, experiencing dual identities, and role confusion. A participant mentioned, "It's like I'm two different people, one who can do things and one who can't."

Coping Mechanisms: To manage these conflicts, they use coping mechanisms such as humor, avoidance, and seeking reassurance. "I try to joke about my struggles. It makes it easier to deal with," shared one participant.

Future Aspirations: Despite their challenges, these teenagers have clear future aspirations, including career goals, educational ambitions, and personal aspirations. One student expressed, "I want to go to college and become a teacher. I know I can do it if I work hard."

3.4. *Coping Strategies and Support Systems*

Academic Support: Academic support is crucial, involving special education services, tutoring, and classroom accommodations. "The extra help I get in my special ed class makes a big difference," said one participant.

Emotional Support: Emotional support comes from various sources, including counseling, peer support groups, and family encouragement. "Talking to my counselor helps me sort through my feelings and stay positive," noted a teenager.

Social Support: Social support includes friendships, mentor relationships, and community programs that provide a network of understanding and assistance. "Having a mentor has been really helpful. They understand what I'm going through," shared a participant.

Personal Coping Strategies: Personal coping strategies employed by these teenagers include journaling, meditation, and physical exercise, which help them manage stress and maintain mental well-being. "I write in my journal every day. It helps me process my thoughts," said one student.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the identity development of teenagers with learning disabilities (LD). Four main themes emerged from the data: personal experiences, social interactions and relationships, self-perception and identity, and coping strategies and support systems.

Participants frequently reported significant academic challenges, including difficulties with reading, writing, and mathematics. These challenges often led to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem. However, the use of assistive technologies and tailored learning strategies were seen as beneficial in mitigating some of these difficulties. These findings align with the work of Bender, Rosenkrans, and Crane (1999), who highlighted the prevalence of stress and emotional distress among students with LD (Bender et al., 1999).

Social interactions were another critical area, with many participants experiencing both supportive and negative interactions. Positive relationships with family, friends, and teachers were crucial for emotional support and social development, while negative experiences, such as bullying and isolation, had detrimental effects. This supports the findings of McVittie, Goodall, and McKinlay (2008), who noted that social contexts play a significant role in shaping the self-perception of individuals with LD.

In terms of self-perception and identity, participants often struggled with dual identities—one shaped by their disabilities and the other by their abilities. This internal conflict often led to a fragmented self-concept. The importance of a positive disability identity, as discussed by Forber Pratt et al. (2021), was evident in our findings, with those having a stronger sense of disability identity demonstrating better emotional resilience (Forber Pratt et al., 2021).

Coping strategies varied widely among participants, with some employing effective methods such as seeking help and using assistive technology, while others resorted to less adaptive strategies like avoidance. This echoes the findings of Firth, Greaves, and Frydenberg (2009), who observed that adolescents with LD often use different and sometimes less effective coping strategies compared to their peers without LD (Firth et al., 2009).

The academic challenges reported by participants are consistent with the existing literature, which frequently highlights the significant barriers faced by students with LD in academic settings. Shifrer (2016) noted that stigma and

stratification within educational systems often limit the progression of students with LD, particularly in subjects like mathematics. Our findings support this, showing that many participants experienced similar limitations and stigmatization, which hindered their academic progression and contributed to feelings of inferiority and self-doubt (Shifrer, 2016).

Emotional adjustment remains a critical issue for adolescents with LD. Martín-Ruiz (2023) emphasized that students with LD often struggle more with emotional adjustment than their peers, experiencing higher levels of anxiety and depression (Martín-Ruiz, 2023). This was evident in our study, where participants reported significant emotional distress related to their academic challenges and social interactions. The presence of supportive family members and teachers was found to be a crucial factor in mitigating these emotional challenges, aligning with the findings of Forber Pratt et al. (2021) regarding the importance of a supportive environment in fostering positive disability identity (Forber Pratt et al., 2021).

The dual identity conflict observed in participants is well-documented in the literature. Forber Pratt, Lyew, Mueller, and Samples (2017) discussed how individuals with disabilities often experience dual identities, which can lead to internal conflicts and a fragmented self-concept. Our study supports this, showing that participants often struggled to reconcile their abilities with their disabilities, leading to identity conflicts and role confusion. However, those who developed a positive disability identity demonstrated greater emotional resilience and self-esteem (Forber Pratt et al., 2017).

Coping strategies and support systems were varied among participants, with some utilizing effective strategies and others relying on less adaptive methods. Firth, Greaves, and Frydenberg (2009) found that adolescents with LD often employ different coping strategies than their peers, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Our findings corroborate this, showing that while some participants benefited from adaptive coping strategies like seeking help and using assistive technology, others relied on avoidance and emotional coping, which were less effective (Firth et al., 2009).

The importance of comprehensive support systems was highlighted by Bradley and Bolton (2006), who found that adolescents with LD are at a higher risk of episodic psychiatric disorders. Our study supports this, showing that participants with stronger support systems, including family, friends, and educational resources, demonstrated better

emotional and psychological outcomes (Bradley & Bolton, 2006).

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, there are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 19 participants, while sufficient for a qualitative study, limits the generalizability of the findings. The experiences of these participants may not fully represent the broader population of teenagers with LD. Additionally, the study relied solely on self-reported data, which can be subject to bias and inaccuracies. Participants' perceptions and recollections of their experiences may be influenced by various factors, including social desirability bias and memory recall issues.

Furthermore, the study was conducted in urban high schools with established special education programs, which may not reflect the experiences of students in different educational settings, such as rural areas or schools with less comprehensive support systems. The cultural and socioeconomic diversity of the sample was limited, which may also affect the generalizability of the findings to other demographic groups.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in understanding the long-term identity development and coping strategies of adolescents with LD. Such studies could track participants over time to observe changes and developments in their identity, self-perception, and emotional adjustment.

Additionally, future research should explore the impact of different educational settings and support systems on the identity development of students with LD. Comparative studies between urban, suburban, and rural schools, as well as schools with varying levels of special education resources, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the experiences of students with LD.

Incorporating mixed-methods approaches could also provide a more holistic view of the identity development process. Combining qualitative interviews with quantitative measures of psychological well-being, academic performance, and social adjustment would allow for a more nuanced analysis of the factors contributing to identity development in adolescents with LD.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made to support the identity development and overall well-being of teenagers with LD. Educators and school administrators should prioritize

creating inclusive and supportive educational environments that address both the academic and emotional needs of students with LD. This includes providing tailored learning strategies, assistive technologies, and access to specialized educational resources.

Teacher training programs should include comprehensive modules on understanding and supporting students with LD. Educators who are well-informed about the challenges and strengths of students with LD are better equipped to provide effective support and foster positive relationships. As Forber Pratt et al. (2021) noted, supportive teacher-student relationships can significantly enhance the self-esteem and emotional resilience of students with LD.

Schools should also implement programs that promote social inclusion and address bullying and stigmatization. Peer support groups and mentorship programs can provide valuable emotional and social support for students with LD, helping them develop positive relationships and a sense of belonging. Encouraging participation in extracurricular activities and creating opportunities for social interaction can further support the social and emotional development of these students.

Finally, mental health support should be an integral part of the educational experience for students with LD. Counseling services, peer support groups, and family involvement can help address the emotional challenges faced by these students. Providing resources and training for families can also enhance the support system available to students outside of school.

In conclusion, the identity development of teenagers with learning disabilities is influenced by a complex interplay of academic challenges, social interactions, self-perception, and coping strategies. By understanding and addressing these factors through targeted interventions and supportive environments, educators, psychologists, and policymakers can help foster positive identity development and improve the overall well-being of adolescents with LD.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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