



Exploring Self-Identity and Self-Esteem Among Secondary School Students: Challenges and Developmental Perspectives

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Abstract

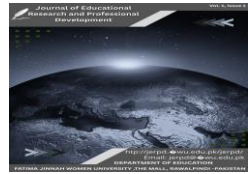
Self-identity and self-esteem are fundamental components of students' psychological and academic development, particularly during secondary school years. This study explores the development of self-identity and the challenges faced by secondary school students in maintaining a positive self-concept. Qualitative exploration research design was employed to gain in-depth insight into students' experiences. Data was collected through interviews and discussions with students from secondary schools. The findings indicate that many students struggle with low self-esteem, identity confusion, and social comparison, which negatively affect their academic performance and personal growth. Factors such as peer influence, classroom environment, and lack of self-awareness contribute to these challenges. The study highlights the importance of promoting self-awareness, confidence, and supportive educational environments to enhance students' self-identity. It is recommended that schools implement structured programs, workshops, and counseling services to support students in developing a strong and positive sense of self.

Keywords: Self-identity, Self-esteem, Secondary school students, Qualitative research, Student development

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Introduction

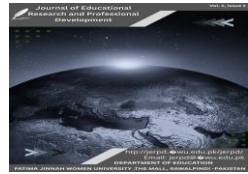
Self-identity refers to the way individuals perceive and define themselves based on their beliefs, values, abilities, and experiences. It plays a crucial role in shaping students' thoughts, behaviors, and interactions within their social and academic environments. During adolescence, particularly at the secondary school level, students undergo significant psychological and emotional changes that influence the development of their self-identity and self-esteem.

Self-esteem, closely linked with self-identity, reflects how individuals evaluate their own worth. A strong sense of self-identity and positive self-esteem contribute to confidence, academic success, and healthy relationships. However, many students experience confusion about their identity and tend to compare themselves with others, which can result in low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence. In educational settings, students are often influenced by peers, teachers, and societal expectations. These influences may either strengthen or weaken their sense of identity. Students who lack a clear understanding of themselves may adopt others' identities, leading to dependency, insecurity, and reduced academic motivation.

Despite the importance of self-identity in student development, limited research has explored this issue in the context of secondary school students. Therefore, this study aims to explore the development of self-identity, identify challenges faced by students, and understand the factors influencing their self-esteem.

Literature Review

Identity development during childhood and adolescence has been widely studied in psychology and education. Erikson's psychosocial theory emphasizes the stage of *identity versus role confusion*, where children begin to explore who they are and how they fit into social contexts (Erikson, 1968). When supportive environments are lacking, students may experience identity confusion, imitating peers rather than developing authentic self-concepts. This aligns with Coppersmith's (1967) foundational work on self-esteem, which highlights the role of external validation in shaping self-worth.



Self-esteem itself is closely tied to confidence and classroom participation. Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy suggests that students' belief in their abilities determines whether they attempt tasks and persist in the face of challenges. Low self-esteem, therefore, manifests as hesitation, fear of mistakes, and avoidance of participation — patterns observed in many classrooms. Dweck (2006) adds that students' "mindset" (fixed vs. growth) influences how they interpret failure and success, with supportive teacher feedback being crucial for fostering resilience.

Teacher–student interaction has consistently been shown to influence self-esteem and motivation. Hamre and Pianta (2001, 2006) demonstrated that early teacher–child relationships predict long-term academic and social outcomes. Cornelius-White's (2007) meta-analysis confirmed that learner-centered teacher–student relationships enhance achievement and self-esteem. Similarly, Roorda et al. (2011) found that affective teacher–student relationships significantly improve engagement and achievement. These findings are echoed by Wentzel (2010), who emphasized that positive teacher relationships act as motivational contexts.

Peer influence and classroom climate also play a critical role. Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007) showed that adolescents' perceptions of classroom social environments strongly affect motivation. Fraser (2012) highlighted that supportive learning environments foster both academic and emotional growth. Peer pressure, however, can lead to conformity and identity confusion, as students adapt behaviors to gain acceptance (Brehm & Kassin, 1993). Teachers, therefore, act as mediators, ensuring that peer dynamics contribute positively to identity development rather than undermining it.

Research Question:

1. What challenges do elementary students face in developing self-identity, and how do peer and teacher interactions influence their self-esteem?

Methodology

Research Design



This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate students' perceptions and experiences regarding self-identity and self-esteem.

Population and Sample

The population consisted of secondary school students. A sample was selected from a government secondary school in Rawalpindi using a convenience sampling technique.

Data Collection Methods

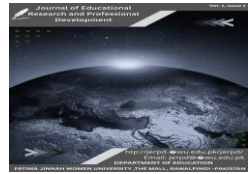
Data was collected through:

- Unstructured interviews
- Focus group discussions

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. This systematic framework ensured that themes were grounded in students' actual responses and that the analysis remained rigorous and transparent. The stages included

- Transcription** All student responses were transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and capture nuances in language.
- Familiarization** – The transcripts were read repeatedly to gain an in-depth understanding of the content and to identify initial impressions.
- Coding** – Meaningful segments of text were highlighted and assigned codes that represented key ideas, emotions, or experiences (e.g., “identity confusion,” “lack of confidence,” “peer influence”).
- Theme Development** – Codes were clustered into broader categories, allowing patterns to emerge across different participants' responses.
- Reviewing Themes** – The preliminary themes were refined by checking them against the data set to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.



- vi. **Defining and Naming Themes** – Final themes were clearly defined, named, and supported with illustrative quotations from students to capture the essence of their experiences.

Results

Theme 1: Identity Confusion Among Students

Many students reported uncertainty about their identity and personal abilities. They expressed difficulty in defining who they were and often relied on imitation of peers to feel accepted.

“Sometimes I don’t know who I really am. I try to act like others because they seem more confident. I feel confused about my future and what I want to become.” (P3)

These responses highlight a state of identity confusion, where students struggle to establish a stable sense of self.

“I copy others because I think they are better than me.” (P5)

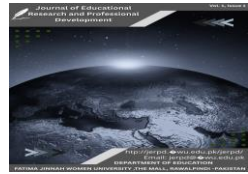
The tendency to imitate peers reflects a lack of confidence in personal abilities and a reliance on external validation. This suggests that during elementary years, students are vulnerable to identity diffusion, which can hinder the development of authentic self-concepts. Teacher guidance and supportive classroom practices are therefore critical in helping students navigate identity formation by affirming individuality and encouraging self-expression.

Theme 2: Low Self-Esteem and Lack of Confidence

Students expressed feelings of low confidence and self-doubt, often hesitating to participate even when they knew the correct answers.

“I don’t think I am good enough compared to other students. Even when I know something, I hesitate to speak in class. I feel nervous and afraid of making mistakes.” (P8)

The data reveal that low self-esteem manifests as hesitation, fear of failure, and avoidance of classroom participation. Students’ reluctance to speak despite knowing the answer indicates that



confidence, rather than knowledge, is the barrier to engagement. This aligns with psychological theories suggesting that self-esteem is a prerequisite for risk-taking and active learning. Without confidence, students remain passive, which can limit both academic growth and social development. Teacher encouragement, equitable recognition, and safe classroom environments are essential strategies to counteract these feelings of inadequacy.

Theme 3: Influence of Peer and Environment

Peer pressure and the broader school environment were reported as significant influences on students' identity and self-esteem.

“My friends influence how I behave and think about myself. If teachers appreciate us, we feel confident, otherwise we feel low. Sometimes I change myself just to fit in with others.” (P9)

Students' self-esteem was shown to be highly contingent on external factors, particularly peer approval and teacher feedback. Positive reinforcement from teachers boosted confidence, while lack of appreciation diminished it. Similarly, peer influence shaped behavior and self-perception, often leading to conformity rather than authentic self-expression. This underscores the dual role of social context: peers can either support or undermine identity development, while teachers act as powerful agents of affirmation. Creating inclusive, supportive environments is therefore vital to ensure that external influences contribute positively to students' self-esteem and identity formation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study resonate strongly with existing literature. The theme of identity confusion reflects Erikson's notion of role confusion, where students struggle to define themselves and often imitate peers. This finding underscores the importance of teacher affirmation in guiding students toward authentic identity formation. By validating individuality and encouraging self-expression, teachers can counteract the tendency to rely on imitation.

The theme of low self-esteem and lack of confidence aligns with Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Dweck's mindset framework. Students' hesitation to speak despite knowing the answer



illustrates how self-esteem, rather than knowledge, determines participation. This highlights the need for teachers to provide consistent encouragement and create safe spaces for risk-taking. Equitable praise and constructive feedback can help students develop confidence, shifting them from passive to active learners.

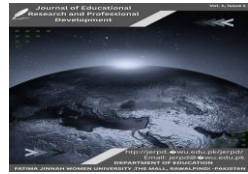
The theme of peer and environmental influence confirms the dual role of social context identified in prior studies. Peer approval and teacher feedback were shown to directly shape students' self-esteem. Positive reinforcement from teachers boosted confidence, while lack of appreciation diminished it. This finding supports Cornelius-White's (2007) meta-analysis and Roorda et al.'s (2011) work, which emphasize the motivational power of supportive teacher–student relationships. It also echoes Fraser's (2012) argument that classroom climate is central to both academic and emotional development. Taken together, these themes demonstrate that self-identity and self-esteem are not isolated constructs but are deeply embedded in relational and environmental contexts. Teachers act as pivotal agents in shaping these outcomes, while peers exert significant influence that can either support or hinder identity development. The study contributes to the literature by showing how these dynamics manifest in elementary classrooms, reinforcing the need for relational pedagogy that prioritizes affirmation, inclusivity, and psychological safety.

The study concludes that self-identity and self-esteem are critical for students' academic and personal development. Many secondary school students face challenges such as identity confusion, low confidence, and peer pressure. Addressing these issues requires a supportive and encouraging educational environment.

Recommendations

- Schools should conduct self-awareness and confidence-building workshops
- Teachers should provide positive feedback and encouragement
- Counseling services should be introduced
- Parents and teachers should work collaboratively

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