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Research Article

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Posted Date: October 26th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11119269/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Learning Identity Across Individual Relational and Contextual Experiences among Pre-service Teachers in Uganda

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Abstract

This study explored learning identity among pre-service teachers at a university in Uganda, focusing on how they perceived themselves as learners, responded to learning challenges, and experienced influences on their confidence, motivation, and engagement. A qualitative exploratory design was used. Open-ended responses were collected from 51 pre-service teachers through a self-administered KoboToolbox questionnaire and analysed thematically. Five interconnected themes emerged: learning identity as active, and future-directed; challenge and feedback as sites of identity development; learning identity as relationally and pedagogically constructed; engagement as dependent on meaningful and psychologically safe participation; and learning identity as shaped by material and contextual conditions. The findings showed that participants could experience difficulty while remaining persistent and help-seeking, while confidence and motivation did not necessarily guarantee participation where learners feared embarrassment or faced contextual constraints. Learning identity therefore emerged as personally interpreted, behaviourally enacted, socially negotiated and contextually conditioned. The study concludes that supporting pre-service teachers' learning identity requires attention not only to individual motivation and agency but also to feedback, relationships, psychologically safe participation and material conditions that enable learning.

Keywords: learning identity, learner identity, pre-service teachers, teacher education, learner agency, Uganda

1.1 Background to the Study

Higher education globally is expected to develop learners who can take responsibility for their learning, respond constructively to challenges, and continue learning beyond formal instruction. However, students do not engage with university learning in the same way. Their participation is influenced not only by knowledge and ability, but also by how they understand themselves as learners and how they interpret experiences of success, difficulty, feedback and interaction with others. Research has shown that university students differ in their agency, self-regulation, help-seeking, confidence and engagement, and that these experiences are shaped by relationships and learning environments (Navarro-Ibáñez et al., 2026; Prananto et al., 2025; Titus & Roman, 2019; Vilppu et al., 2024). This makes understanding the learner, rather than academic performance alone, an important concern in higher education.

One way of understanding these differences is through learning identity. In this study, learning identity concerns how students understand and position themselves in relation to learning and is examined through the concept of learner identity. Coll and Falsafi (2010) conceptualise learner identity as the meanings individuals construct about themselves as learners through participation in learning activities. These meanings are not fixed but may change as learners encounter different learning experiences (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Coll, 2025). They are also socially shaped because recognition from teachers, peers and other significant people can influence how individuals come to see themselves as learners (Falsafi & Coll, 2015; Olivos & Engel, 2026). Learning identity therefore provides a broader way of understanding why learners may interpret and respond differently to similar academic experiences.

Globally, studies illustrate how this identity-related problem appears in different learning contexts. Students' responses to difficulty can involve persistence, self-regulation and help-seeking, but may also involve withdrawal or reluctance to seek support (Cubero-Pérez et al., 2024; Navarro-Ibáñez et al., 2026). Feedback can strengthen learners' sense of competence, voice and belonging, but it can also generate anxiety or constrained participation depending on how it is experienced (Fernández, 2026; Rose et al., 2025). Among pre-service teachers specifically, differences have been identified in learning strategies, self-regulation and self-efficacy (Vilppu et al., 2024), while learner identities have been found to interact with emerging identities as future teachers (Caviness & Masingila, 2026; McLay & Reyes,

2019). Thus, the issue extends beyond whether students succeed academically to how their experiences contribute to who they understand themselves to be as learners.

The concern is also evident in African higher education, although much of the available research has examined particular dimensions of learning rather than learning identity as a whole. In South Africa, students' agency has been associated with learning support, learning experiences and lecturer–student relationships (Titus & Roman, 2019), while belonging has been shown to influence willingness to seek academic help (Sithaldeen et al., 2022). In Ghana, persistence has been connected with future aspirations, family support and socioeconomic circumstances (Abukari, 2018). Studies from Somalia and Zambia have similarly demonstrated that engagement and self-regulation operate within conditions of teacher support and material constraints (Kangwa et al., 2024; Mohamud et al., 2026). Among South African pre-service teachers, learning experiences and academic identity were also influenced by academic, social, psychological and infrastructural conditions (Mphuthi & Tshelane, 2022). Collectively, these studies indicate that African university students' experiences as learners are embedded within relational, institutional and material contexts.

In Uganda, research provides evidence of several related concerns but gives less attention to how university students understand themselves as learners. Matovu (2020) found an association between academic self-efficacy and academic performance among university students. Kabakyenga et al. (2026) reported relationships between university support services and students' academic self-efficacy in Southwestern Uganda. Tumuheki (2025) further showed that university students' motivation can be shaped by personal aspirations, family expectations, economic circumstances and institutional arrangements. These studies demonstrate that confidence and motivation among Ugandan university students are influenced by more than individual ability. However, they mainly address particular constructs such as self-efficacy, motivation and support rather than the broader meanings students construct about themselves as learners.

This gap is particularly important in pre-service teacher education. Pre-service teachers occupy a dual position: they are university students developing their own ways of learning while preparing to become teachers who will influence how others learn. International research suggests that experiences of being a learner can interact with the development of professional teacher identity (Caviness & Masingila, 2026; McLay & Reyes, 2019; Seward & Renwick, 2013). Yet, within the Ugandan literature reviewed for this study, there is limited evidence showing how pre-service teachers themselves understand who they are as learners, how they position themselves when learning becomes difficult, and how their university experiences influence their confidence, motivation and engagement.

The problem, therefore, is not simply whether pre-service teachers are motivated, confident or academically successful. Rather, there is insufficient contextual understanding of how these different experiences come together in the construction of their learning identity. Constructs such as self-efficacy, motivation, resilience, agency, engagement and help-seeking provide important insights, but each captures only part of the learner's experience. A learning-identity perspective brings these experiences together by examining the meanings learners construct about themselves through participation in learning (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Falsafi & Coll, 2015). Without such understanding, teacher education may respond to observable behaviours such as participation, persistence or disengagement without adequately understanding how pre-service teachers interpret themselves and their experiences as learners.

Against this background, the present study explored learning identity among pre-service teachers at a university in Uganda, focusing on how they saw themselves as learners, how they responded to learning challenges, and what they perceived as influencing their confidence, motivation and engagement in learning.

1.2 Problem Statement

Pre-service teachers are expected to become capable and engaged learners as they prepare to facilitate the learning of others. However, within the Ugandan literature reviewed for this study, there is limited understanding of how pre-service teachers see themselves as learners, how they respond to learning challenges, and what shapes their confidence, motivation and engagement. Existing Ugandan studies have largely examined particular dimensions of university learning, such as self-efficacy, academic performance, motivation and institutional support (Kabakyenga et al., 2026; Matovu, 2020; Tumuheki, 2025), rather than how these experiences contribute to students' broader understanding of themselves as learners.

This leaves an important gap in teacher education because observable behaviours such as persistence, participation, help-seeking or disengagement may not fully reveal how pre-service teachers interpret themselves and their learning experiences. Yet, such meanings are central to the construction of learner identity (Coll & Falsafi, 2010). This study therefore explored learning identity among pre-service teachers at a university in Uganda to understand how they

perceived themselves as learners, responded to learning challenges, and experienced the factors influencing their confidence, motivation and engagement.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore learning identity among pre-service teachers at a university in Uganda by examining how they saw themselves as learners, how they responded to learning challenges, and what influenced their confidence, motivation and engagement in learning.

1.4 Research Questions

The study was guided by three research questions: How do pre-service teachers at a university in Uganda see themselves as learners? How do they respond to learning challenges? What influences their confidence, motivation, and engagement in learning?

1.5 Scope of the Study

The study focused on learning identity among pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Science with Education (BSc.Ed) and Bachelor of Arts with Education (BA.Ed) programmes at a university in Uganda. Participants were drawn from Years One, Two and Three of study. The study specifically explored three aspects of learning identity: how the pre-service teachers saw themselves as learners, how they responded to learning challenges, and what they perceived as influencing their confidence, motivation and engagement in learning. The study was qualitative and focused on participants' own accounts of their learning experiences. It did not seek to measure learning identity using a standardised scale or to establish statistical relationships between learning identity and academic performance. Its scope was therefore limited to understanding how the participating pre-service teachers described and made sense of themselves and their experiences as learners within their university context.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study may contribute to teacher education by providing insight into how pre-service teachers understand themselves as learners and how their experiences of challenge, confidence, motivation and engagement shape their participation in learning. For teacher educators, the findings may inform learning environments, feedback practices and learner-support approaches that strengthen positive learning identities. For pre-service teachers, the study may encourage reflection on their own learning practices and responses to academic challenges. At the institutional level, the findings may inform support practices that recognise the relational, pedagogical and contextual conditions influencing students' learning experiences. The study also contributes context-specific evidence to the limited literature on learning identity among pre-service teachers in Ugandan higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Learning Identity

Learning identity concerns how individuals understand and position themselves in relation to learning. It is grounded in the concept of learner identity, which Coll and Falsafi (2010) describe as the meanings individuals construct about themselves as learners through participation in learning activities. Rather than being a fixed personal characteristic, learner identity develops through experiences across learning situations. Coll (2025) further emphasises the subjective nature of these experiences, including learners' motives, goals, expectations and emotions. Learning identity can therefore be understood as an evolving interpretation of who one is, and who one may become, as a learner.

Importantly, this interpretation develops through interaction with others and within particular contexts. Recognition from significant others can influence how individuals recognise themselves as learners (Falsafi & Coll, 2015), while teacher actions and classroom interactions may become identity-shaping experiences depending on how learners interpret them (Olivos & Engel, 2026; Stables, 2003). Likewise, Lian and Zheng (2023) highlight the situated nature of learner identity, showing that learners may position themselves differently across learning environments. Thus, learning identity is personally interpreted, socially negotiated and contextually situated.

This perspective distinguishes learning identity from related constructs such as self-efficacy, motivation, resilience, agency and engagement. Although these constructs illuminate particular aspects of learning, none alone captures the broader meanings learners construct about themselves. Instead, confidence, motivation, persistence, help-seeking and participation may represent ways through which learners express and reconstruct their identities as learners (Coll &

Falsafi, 2010; Coll, 2025). The question then becomes how such understandings of self are expressed when learners encounter different learning experiences.

2.2 Learner Self-Positioning and Responses to Learning Experiences

How learners understand themselves becomes particularly visible in how they approach learning and respond when it becomes difficult. Self-positioning may involve perceptions of competence, agency, self-regulation, persistence and future aspirations. Cubero-Pérez et al. (2024), for instance, found that learners could recognise weaknesses in their learning habits while still seeing themselves as responsible and capable of improvement. Similarly, pre-service teachers demonstrate different combinations of self-regulation, learning strategies and self-efficacy (Vilppu et al., 2024). Future aspirations may also sustain motivation and persistence, as reported in African higher education contexts (Abukari, 2018; Tumuheki, 2025). These studies suggest that learner self-positioning includes both present understandings of oneself and perceptions of what one can become.

Such positioning is tested when learners encounter challenges. Some persist, adjust strategies or seek assistance, whereas others may avoid help or disengage. Help-seeking among pre-service teachers is associated with self-regulation and self-efficacy but is also shaped by social conditions (Navarro-Ibáñez et al., 2026). Sithaldeen et al. (2022), for example, found that embarrassment and fear of judgement could discourage students from seeking assistance. Similarly, feedback can strengthen confidence, voice and belonging or contribute to anxiety and constrained participation depending on how learners experience it (Fernández, 2026). Learner identity has also been associated with how students perceive and engage with feedback (Rose et al., 2025).

Consequently, persistence, help-seeking and responses to feedback are more than isolated learning behaviours; they can reveal how learners understand and enact themselves in learning situations. Yet these responses are not produced by the learner alone. They occur within relationships, pedagogical practices and wider conditions that can either support or constrain learning.

2.3 Relational, Pedagogical and Contextual Influences on Learning Identity

Relationships are central to the conditions within which learners construct and express their identities. Recognition from lecturers and other significant people can contribute to how learners understand their competence and possibilities for learning (Falsafi & Coll, 2015; Olivos & Engel, 2026). In higher education, lecturer–student relationships and learning support have also been associated with student agency (Titus & Roman, 2019). Similarly, a sense of belonging can encourage help-seeking, whereas fear of embarrassment or judgement may discourage participation (Sithaldeen et al., 2022). These findings position learning as a relational experience rather than an entirely individual undertaking.

Pedagogy further shapes these experiences. Informational teacher support can strengthen pre-service teachers' confidence in responding to academic demands (Feng & Hu, 2026), while active learning environments can promote responsibility, cooperation and participation (Dağ et al., 2019). More broadly, teacher support has been associated with student engagement through factors such as motivation, self-efficacy and interpersonal relationships (Prananto et al., 2025). Pedagogical practices may therefore create opportunities for learners to experience themselves as capable and active participants.

However, participation also depends on conditions beyond the immediate classroom. African studies identify family support, socioeconomic circumstances, access to technology and institutional arrangements as important influences on university learning (Abukari, 2018; Kangwa et al., 2024; Mphuthi & Tshelane, 2022). In Uganda, institutional support has been associated with academic self-efficacy (Kabakyenga et al., 2026), while students' motivations have been linked to financial circumstances, family expectations and institutional arrangements (Tumuheki, 2025). Learning identity is therefore enacted within interconnected relational, pedagogical and material conditions. This interaction is especially important in teacher education, where students are simultaneously learners and future teachers.

2.4 Learning Identity in Pre-Service Teacher Education

Pre-service teachers occupy a distinctive position because they are developing as university learners while preparing to facilitate the learning of others. Evidence suggests that these two identities can intersect. McLay and Reyes (2019) found learner and emerging professional identities to be intertwined among pre-service teachers, while Caviness and Masingila (2026) demonstrated relationships between mathematics learner identities and developing mathematics teacher identities. Experiences of oneself as a learner may therefore have significance beyond immediate academic participation.

Teacher education may also challenge established ways of being a learner. Seward and Renwick (2013) identified tensions between student teachers' expectations of lecturer-directed learning and higher education expectations of independence and personal responsibility. Similarly, differences in self-regulation, learning strategies and self-efficacy indicate that pre-service teachers enter teacher education with varied orientations towards learning (Vilppu et al., 2024). Their development is further influenced by pedagogical, social and material conditions (Feng & Hu, 2026; Mphuthi & Tshelane, 2022; Navarro-Ibáñez et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, much of this research addresses particular dimensions or contexts, including mathematics, digital and remote learning, self-efficacy, learning strategies and help-seeking (Caviness & Masingila, 2026; McLay & Reyes, 2019; Mphuthi & Tshelane, 2022; Vilppu et al., 2024). What remains less developed is an integrated understanding of how pre-service teachers make sense of themselves as learners across these experiences, particularly within African teacher-education contexts.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

Across the reviewed literature, learning identity emerges as an understanding of self that develops through participation in learning and is expressed through agency, responses to challenge, feedback, help-seeking and engagement (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Fernández, 2026; Navarro-Ibáñez et al., 2026). At the same time, these experiences are embedded within relationships, pedagogical practices and wider institutional and material conditions (Falsafi & Coll, 2015; Olivos & Engel, 2026; Titus & Roman, 2019).

The central limitation is fragmentation. Existing studies frequently examine particular dimensions such as self-efficacy, motivation, resilience, agency, feedback, belonging or help-seeking rather than how learners bring these experiences together in understanding themselves as learners. This limitation is particularly relevant in Uganda, where the reviewed studies provide evidence on self-efficacy, institutional support and motivation (Kabakyenga et al., 2026; Matovu, 2020; Tumuheki, 2025), but provide limited insight into the broader learning identity of pre-service teachers.

The present study responds to this gap by exploring learning identity among pre-service teachers at a university in Uganda. It brings together three interconnected questions: how pre-service teachers see themselves as learners, how they respond to learning challenges, and what they perceive as influencing their confidence, motivation, and engagement. In doing so, the study examines learning identity as an experience of self that is expressed through learning practices while being shaped by the social, pedagogical and contextual conditions of teacher education.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Study Setting

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to examine learning identity among pre-service teachers. The design enabled participants to describe, in their own words, how they perceived themselves as learners, responded to learning challenges, and experienced factors shaping their confidence, motivation and engagement. The study was conducted at a university in Uganda offering teacher-education programmes. The institution is reported anonymously to protect the study setting and participants.

3.2 Participants, Sampling and Recruitment

The study population comprised pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts with Education (BA.Ed) and Bachelor of Science with Education (BSc.Ed) programmes across Years One, Two and Three. A voluntary-response sampling approach within this purposively defined population was used.

Because the researcher had previously taught the eligible students, recruitment was mediated by a faculty administrator to reduce the potential influence of the prior lecturer–student relationship. The researcher did not approach individual students or distribute the questionnaire link directly. Instead, the faculty administrator shared the KoboToolbox link through the existing BA.Ed and BSc.Ed WhatsApp groups across the three years of study, allowing students to decide independently whether to participate. The final sample comprised 51 participants, including 31 BSc.Ed students (60.8%) and 20 BA.Ed students (39.2%). The sample was intended to provide contextual accounts of learning identity rather than statistical representation of all pre-service teachers.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected using a self-administered open-ended questionnaire developed in KoboToolbox. The instrument contained demographic items and open-ended questions aligned with the research questions. These explored learner self-perceptions, experiences of successful learning, responses to challenges, mistakes, and feedback, influences on confidence and motivation, engagement, support for growth, and learner agency. An optional final question allowed participants to provide additional experiences they considered relevant.

Participants completed the questionnaire independently using internet-enabled devices. The self-administered format provided participants with space to reflect on and describe their experiences without researcher-led questioning. However, unlike interviews, it did not allow follow-up probing or clarification of responses, and this was considered when interpreting the depth of the accounts. Submitted responses were exported from KoboToolbox, screened, and prepared for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative responses were analysed using a predominantly inductive–interpretive thematic approach. Analysis began with familiarisation with participants’ accounts, followed by initial semantic coding. Questions 6–13 constituted the core qualitative dataset, yielding 408 substantive responses from the 51 participants. The teaching-experience item was excluded because responses suggested inconsistent interpretation of the item.

Initial descriptive codes were generated from participants’ explicit accounts rather than from predetermined learning-identity categories. Multiple codes were assigned where a response contained more than one meaningful idea. Related codes were subsequently compared, refined, and organised into 11 analytic categories, one of which concerned data quality and was excluded from substantive interpretation. Relationships among the remaining categories were examined to develop candidate themes. These were reviewed against the coded data and original responses for coherence and distinctiveness, with contrasting cases deliberately retained to preserve variations in participants’ experiences. This iterative process resulted in five final themes. Figure 1 illustrates the analytic process from participants’ open-ended responses to the development of five final themes.

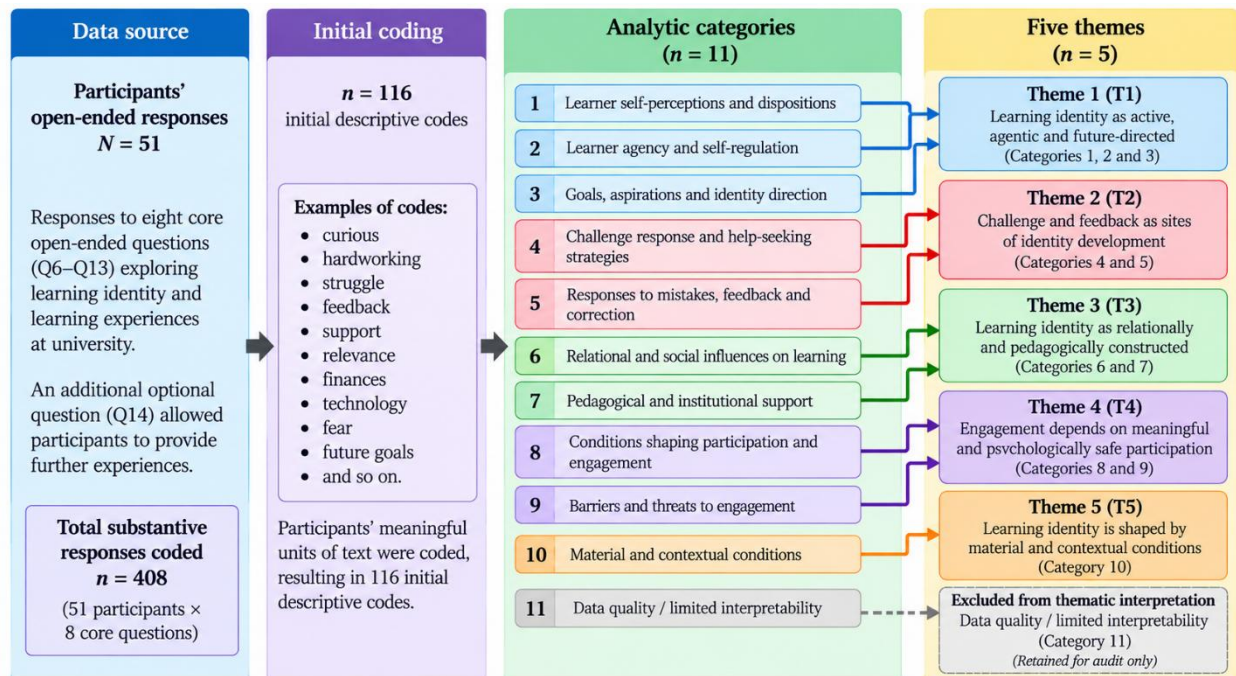


Figure 1. Development of the Five Themes from Participants' Open-Ended Responses

As illustrated in Figure 1, a total of 408 substantive responses from 51 participants across eight core open-ended questions (Q6–Q13) were coded, generating 116 initial descriptive codes. These codes were progressively organised

into 11 analytic categories. Ten categories informed the development of the five final themes, while one category, data quality/limited interpretability, was retained for audit purposes but excluded from substantive thematic interpretation.

Having established the thematic structure, the analysis then considered whether the dataset provided sufficient information to support the patterns identified. Information sufficiency was examined retrospectively by assessing code accumulation and the emergence of new codes across successive participant blocks. The first 10 cases generated 70 of the final 116 descriptive codes, increasing cumulatively to 95 by P20, 105 by P30, 109 by P40, and 116 by P51. The analysis also considered the number of additional codes and the number of participants contributing new codes within successive blocks. Although later cases continued to introduce some descriptive nuances, these largely elaborated or extended established patterns rather than requiring additional themes. Code accumulation was therefore used as a supplementary transparency check on information sufficiency, rather than as a statistical test or evidence of absolute saturation. Figure 2 illustrates the declining emergence of new codes across the analytic sequence.

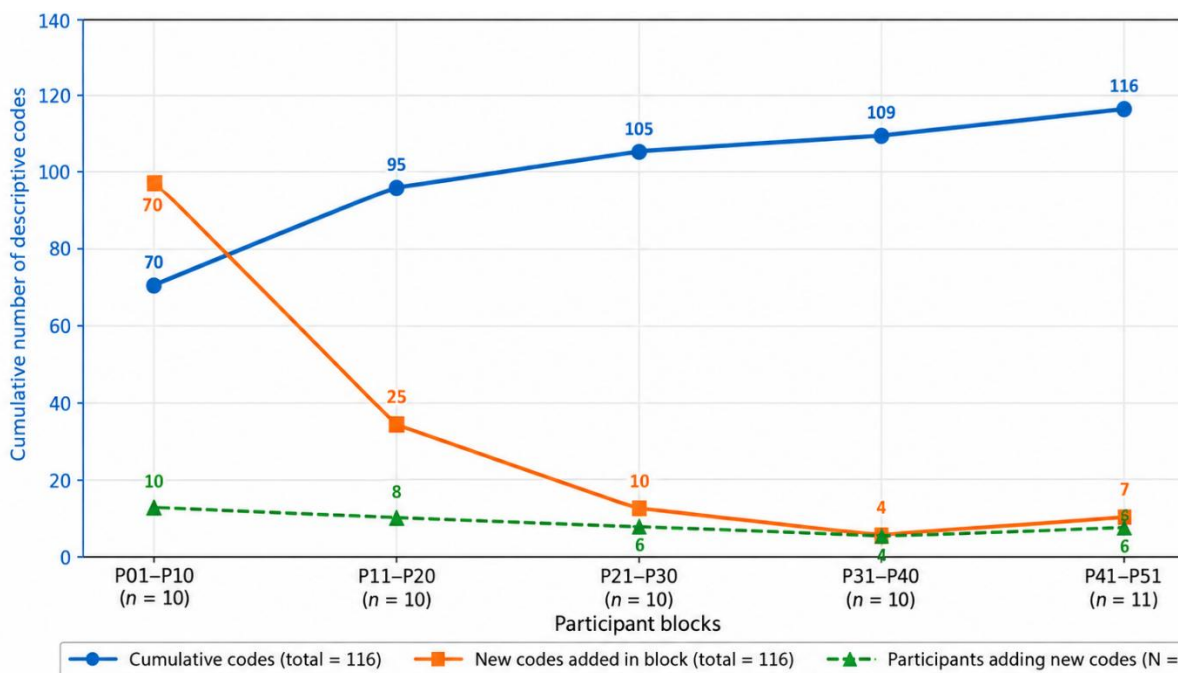


Figure 2. Cumulative Code Development across Participant Blocks

Note. Participant blocks reflect the analytic ordering of cases. The figure was used to assess information sufficiency retrospectively and does not imply that saturation determined the sample size.

The analysis subsequently moved from semantic description to interpretive analysis. The themes were examined to understand how participants positioned themselves as learners, enacted their learner identities through learning practices, and experienced social, pedagogical and contextual conditions that enabled or constrained those identities. Learning-identity theory was introduced at this stage as an interpretive lens rather than an a priori coding framework.

3.5 Trustworthiness, and Researcher Reflexivity

Trustworthiness was strengthened through an audit trail linking participants' original responses to codes, categories and themes. Developing interpretations were repeatedly checked against the original accounts, including contrasting cases, while verbatim quotations were retained to demonstrate the grounding of the findings in participants' experiences.

The researcher's previous teaching relationship with the eligible students was recognised as a potential source of power imbalance and socially desirable responses. Separating the researcher from recruitment was therefore an important reflexive safeguard: the faculty administrator distributed the questionnaire link, students responded independently, and the researcher neither selected nor directly solicited individual participants. During analysis, both favourable and critical accounts were retained rather than privileging responses consistent with the researcher's

expectations. These measures reduced, although could not eliminate, the possible influence of the prior lecturer–student relationship.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the institution where the participants were enrolled. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically before participants proceeded to the substantive questions. Participant identifiers (P01–P51) were used during analysis and reporting. Potentially identifying information contained in responses was anonymised, and the institution is reported generically to further protect confidentiality.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Participant Characteristics

The study involved 51 pre-service teachers from the BA.Ed and BSc.Ed programmes across the three years of study. As shown in Figure 3, participants represented both programmes, both sexes, different age groups, and all three years of study, providing variation in the backgrounds represented in the qualitative accounts. BSc.Ed students constituted the larger programme group. These characteristics are presented to describe the participants and contextualise the findings rather than to support population-level comparisons.

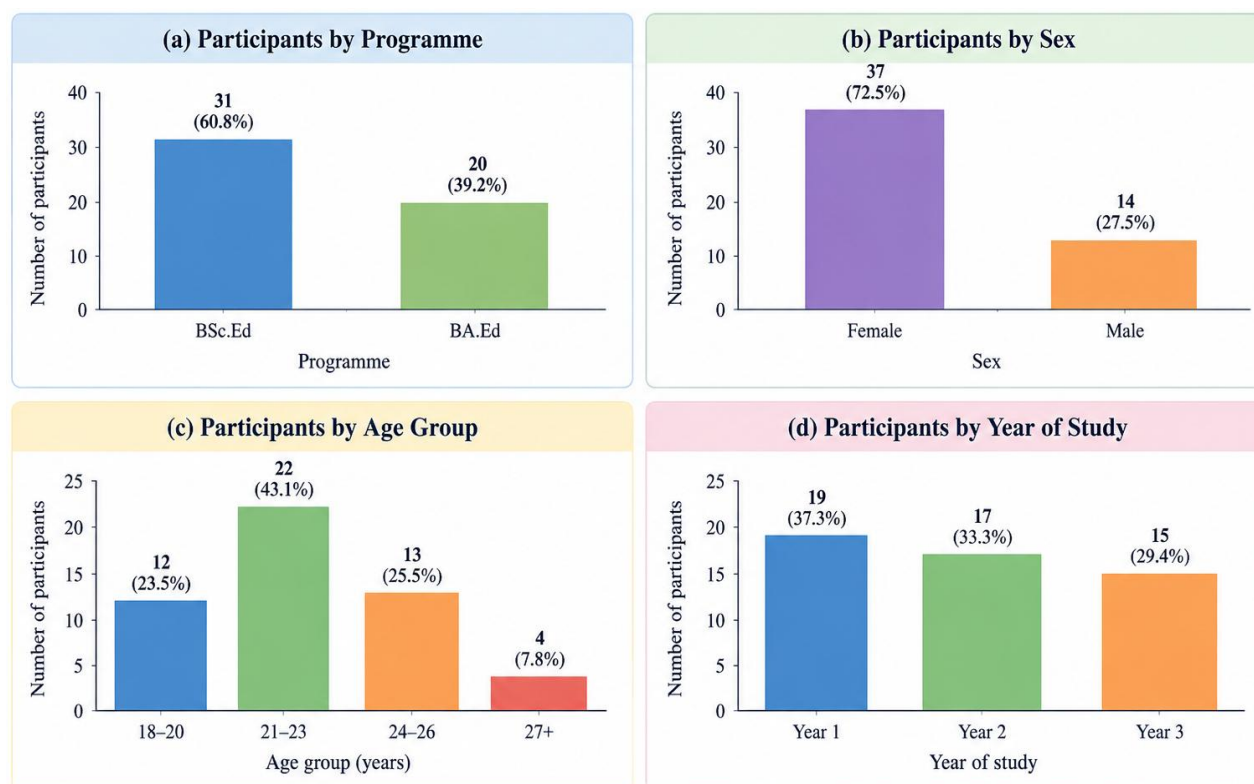


Figure 3. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants (N = 51)

4.2 Overall Thematic Structure

Analysis of participants' accounts generated five interconnected themes. Together, the themes indicate that learning identity involved not only how participants described themselves as learners, but also what they did when learning, how they interpreted challenge and feedback, and the conditions under which they participated; these are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Themes, Participant Coverage, and Alignment with Research Questions

Theme	Central pattern	Participant coverage, n (%)	Research question(s)
Learning identity as active, agentic and future-directed	Self-understanding through dispositions, practices and aspirations	50 (98.0%)	RQ1
Challenge and feedback as sites of identity development	Difficulty, mistakes and feedback prompted persistence and adjustment, but also disappointment and avoidance	51 (100%)	RQ2
Learning identity as relationally and pedagogically constructed	Lecturers, peers, family and teaching practices shaped learner experiences	51 (100%)	RQ1 & RQ3
Engagement depends on meaningful and psychologically safe participation	Relevance, understanding and supportive interaction enabled participation; fear and ridicule constrained it	48 (94.1%)	RQ3
Learning identity is shaped by material and contextual conditions	Finances, resources and technology affected opportunities to engage and persist	21 (41.2%)	RQ3

Note. Participant coverage indicates the number of participants whose responses contributed to each theme. Participants could contribute to more than one theme; therefore, percentages are not mutually exclusive and should not be interpreted as measures of thematic importance.

A notable pattern across the themes was that participants could not be neatly classified as simply strong or weak learners. Some expressed difficulty or low confidence while simultaneously reporting persistence, help-seeking, practice and attempts to improve. Conversely, expressions of confidence did not mean that participants were unaffected by challenge, feedback or their learning environment. Learning identity therefore appeared to be negotiated through the interaction between how participants saw themselves, what they did as learners, and the experiences and conditions surrounding their learning.

4.3 Learning Identity as Active, Agentic and Future-Directed

The first theme concerned how participants positioned themselves as learners and enacted those positions through their learning practices and aspirations. Almost all participants (50 of 51) contributed accounts relevant to this theme. Three closely connected patterns were evident: learner self-conceptions and dispositions, self-directed learning practices, and future-oriented purpose.

Participants frequently described themselves using dispositions such as commitment, curiosity, and hard work. P14 explained:

“I would describe myself as a committed, curious, and hardworking learner. I see myself in this way because I am willing to learn new things, ask questions when I don't understand, and make an effort to improve my knowledge and skills.” (P14)

Such descriptions were often accompanied by accounts of practising, revising, asking questions, conducting further research, managing study time and seeking assistance. Learning identity therefore appeared not only as a self-description but also as something enacted through learning practices. Future aspirations also gave meaning to present learning efforts. P06 stated:

“My current family status is not very okay; it is the only motivation that pushes me to succeed so that I can make my home a better one” (P06)

Positive and agentic descriptions were not universal. P13 described the self as:

“I am a struggling learner / It's because I perform not to my and parents' expectations” (P13)

This contrasting account indicates that learning identity was also shaped by perceived performance and expectations from significant others. Overall, learner identity involved an ongoing relationship between self-perception, learner action, and future purpose rather than simply whether an individual considered themselves a good or poor learner.

4.4 Challenge and Feedback as Sites of Identity Development

The second theme showed that learning identity became particularly visible when participants encountered difficulty, made mistakes, or received feedback. All 51 participants contributed accounts relevant to this theme. Their responses reflected persistence through difficulty, help-seeking and strategy adjustment, as well as emotional responses to mistakes and feedback.

For many participants, difficulty prompted further effort rather than immediate withdrawal. P42 described challenging situations positively:

"I like difficulties because they make me think beyond." (P42)

Help-seeking was also recurrent, with participants turning to classmates, lecturers and other learning resources when individual efforts were insufficient. Mistakes and corrective feedback produced more complex responses. P15 captured the coexistence of disappointment and learning:

"I feel disappointed but happy at the same time because the feedback helps to go and learn more..." (P15)

Responses were not uniformly adaptive. P48 acknowledged that difficulty could sometimes lead to avoidance:

"Sometimes I ignore the work and stay in my comfort zone..." (P48)

Taken together, challenge, mistakes, and feedback functioned as identity-relevant learning experiences. What appeared important was not merely success or failure, but how participants interpreted and acted upon these experiences.

4.5 Learning Identity as Relationally and Pedagogically Constructed

The third theme demonstrated that participants did not experience learning identity as an entirely individual matter. All 51 participants referred, in different ways, to lecturers, peers, family members or pedagogical experiences when explaining their confidence, motivation, participation or development as learners.

Peers were described as sources of explanation, encouragement and collaborative problem-solving. Lecturers shaped learning experiences through opportunities, expectations and feedback. Participants nevertheless distinguished between interactions that supported learning and those that could undermine it. P03 preferred:

"Helping me by giving me remedial and guiding me instead of embarrassing me in public by commenting badly" (P03)

Family relationships also provided encouragement, expectations and purpose. Overall, confidence, motivation and perceptions of capability developed through repeated interactions involving support, recognition, correction and expectations, while participants remained active interpreters of these experiences.

4.6 Engagement Depends on Meaningful and Psychologically Safe Participation

The fourth theme concerned the conditions under which participants felt able and willing to engage in learning. Accounts from 48 of the 51 participants contributed to this theme. Engagement appeared to depend particularly on interest and relevance, understanding and supportive interaction, and the perceived safety of participating and making mistakes.

Participants described greater willingness to participate when learning was interesting, relevant, and understandable. They also described an interpersonal dimension to participation. P32 indicated that participation could decrease because of:

"Fear [of being] laughed at" (P32)

Repeated experiences of difficulty or failure could similarly affect engagement. P17 noted that:

"Constant failure keeps [the] learner down." (P17)

Psychological safety therefore emerged as an interpretive pattern rather than a directly measured construct. The accounts suggest that a learner may be curious and motivated yet participate less when contribution carries the risk of embarrassment or negative judgement.

4.7 Material and Contextual Conditions Shape Opportunities to Learn

The fifth theme extended the analysis to the material conditions within which learning occurred. Twenty-one of the 51 participants explicitly referred to financial pressures, access to learning resources, technology or related material circumstances. Although less widespread than the other themes, these accounts revealed an important contextual constraint on participants' ability to enact their learning intentions.

P14 explained that participation could be limited because learning was:

"Financially expensive." (P14)

Other accounts showed how academic engagement competed with rent and other material responsibilities, while limited access to data and financial resources could hinder assignment completion. Participants also proposed institutional responses. P18 suggested:

"Bursaries, loans [and] reduced tuition" (P18)

This theme does not imply that material constraints characterised every participant's experience. Rather, it demonstrates that for a substantial group, learning identity was enacted under unequal material conditions.

4.8 Integrating the Findings: Learning Identity as a Dynamic Process

When the five themes were considered together, learning identity appeared less as a fixed personal characteristic and more as a dynamic process of positioning, enactment, and reinterpretation. Participants made claims about who they were as learners, but these positions were not always equivalent to their reported learning practices. A participant could perceive the self as struggling while continuing to practice, seek help, and pursue improvement.

The integration of the five themes suggests that learning identity develops through a continuous and recursive process rather than as a fixed learner characteristic (Figure 4). Social relationships, the teaching and learning environment, and material conditions shape the learning experiences available to participants. Learners interpret experiences such as success, difficulty, mistakes and feedback, and these interpretations contribute to how they position themselves as learners. Their learner identity is subsequently enacted through study practices, help-seeking, persistence, withdrawal and classroom participation. These actions generate further learning experiences that may reinforce, challenge or reshape how learners see themselves. Thus, as illustrated in Figure 2, learning identity in this study emerged as personally interpreted, behaviourally enacted, socially negotiated and contextually conditioned.

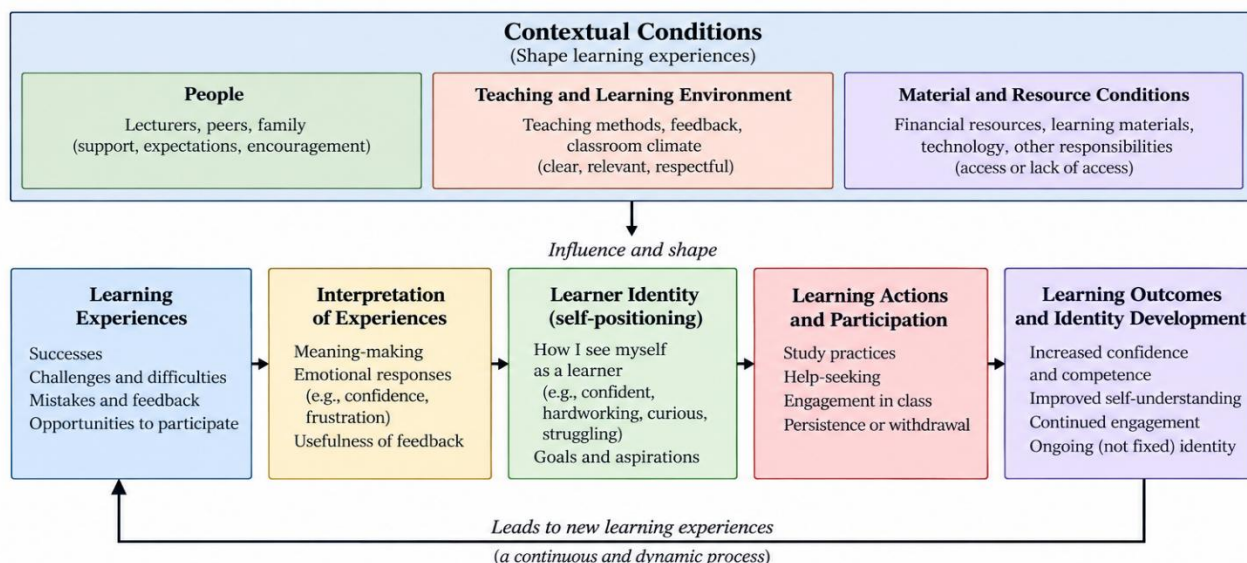


Figure 4. Dynamic Process of Learning Identity Development among Pre-Service Teachers

Note. The arrows in Figure 2 represent relationships interpreted from participants' accounts and should not be understood as statistically tested causal pathways.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored learning identity among pre-service teachers by examining how they saw themselves as learners, responded to learning challenges, and experienced influences on their confidence, motivation and engagement. The findings portray learning identity as more than a judgement of being a good or poor learner. Participants' accounts connected self-perceptions with what they did when learning and with the relationships and conditions surrounding their participation. Overall, the findings largely converge with the sociocultural view that learner identity develops through participation in learning experiences (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Falsafi & Coll, 2015), but they also extend this literature by showing how identity was enacted under the particular pedagogical and material conditions of Ugandan teacher education.

5.1 Learning Identity as Self-Positioning, Agency and Future Direction

Participants generally positioned themselves through dispositions such as commitment, curiosity and hard work, but these identity claims were accompanied by practices such as revision, research, help-seeking and time management. Future aspirations, including improving family circumstances, also gave purpose to present learning. Importantly, positive self-positioning was not universal: some participants described themselves as struggling, particularly in relation to performance and expectations. The finding suggests that learning identity involved an interaction between how participants described themselves, what they did as learners, and what they hoped learning would enable them to become.

This pattern converges with Coll and Falsafi's (2010) conception of learner identity as constructed through participation rather than existing as a fixed personal attribute. It also resembles Cubero-Pérez et al. (2024), whose participants could recognise weaknesses in their learning while still expressing responsibility and capacity for improvement, and Vilppu et al. (2024), who found varied combinations of self-regulation, learning strategies and self-efficacy among pre-service teachers. The future-oriented accounts also correspond with African evidence linking persistence and motivation to aspirations and personal development (Abukari, 2018; Tumuheki, 2025).

A notable point of divergence, however, concerns the relationship between self-perception and learner action. Whereas studies organised around constructs such as self-efficacy may imply that stronger beliefs about competence accompany more adaptive learning behaviour (Negassa & Weldmeskel, 2026; Vilppu et al., 2024), the present accounts were not always so aligned. A participant could identify as a struggling learner while continuing to practise, seek assistance and attempt improvement. This difference may partly reflect the present study's qualitative identity lens. Rather than locating learners within predetermined levels of self-efficacy or strategy use, it allowed apparently contradictory experiences to coexist within the same learner. Learning identity may therefore be better understood as negotiated rather than internally uniform: feeling unsuccessful at a particular moment does not necessarily eliminate agency.

The participants' strong future orientation also deserves contextual interpretation. In some accounts, educational success was connected not only with individual achievement but with improving family circumstances. This echoes Tumuheki's (2025) Ugandan findings and Abukari's (2018) Ghanaian evidence that educational persistence can be embedded in family, economic and future aspirations. Thus, among these participants, becoming a successful learner could carry meanings extending beyond the individual to family responsibility and anticipated social mobility.

5.2 Challenge and Feedback as Moments of Identity Negotiation

Learning identity became especially visible when participants encountered difficulty, mistakes and feedback. Most described persistence, further effort, help-seeking or strategy adjustment, although some reported disappointment, avoidance or retreat into a comfort zone. The important finding was therefore not that challenge produced one dominant response, but that learners interpreted and acted upon challenge differently.

This largely converges with Navarro-Ibáñez et al. (2026), who conceptualise academic help-seeking among pre-service teachers as a contextually influenced regulatory process, and with resilience research showing persistence and adaptive responses to academic adversity (Abukari, 2018; Meher & Bariha, 2025). It also supports Fernández's (2026) finding that feedback may strengthen confidence and belonging when experienced constructively but contribute to anxiety or constrained participation when experienced negatively. Rose et al. (2025) similarly associated learner identity with perceptions of and engagement with feedback.

The present findings nevertheless complicate a simple adaptive–maladaptive distinction. Participants could experience disappointment and learning simultaneously; difficulty could threaten confidence while also stimulating further effort. One participant even described liking difficulties because they prompted deeper thinking. Thus, difficulty itself was

neither inherently identity-strengthening nor identity-threatening. Its significance depended on the meaning attached to it and the action that followed. This interpretation is consistent with the broader learner-identity perspective of Coll (2025), in which subjective interpretation is central to how learning experiences acquire personal meaning.

There was also an important qualification to literature portraying help-seeking predominantly as an adaptive strategy. Although help-seeking was common, some participants described avoidance, while later findings showed that fear of embarrassment or ridicule could constrain participation. This is not necessarily a contradiction with Navarro-Ibáñez et al. (2026) or Sithaldeen et al. (2022); rather, it helps explain why adaptive help-seeking may not always be enacted. Knowing that assistance would be useful is different from feeling socially safe enough to seek it. The findings therefore connect individual responses to challenge with the relational environment in which those responses occur.

5.3 Learning Identity as Relationally and Pedagogically Negotiated

Participants repeatedly located their confidence, motivation and learning development within relationships with lecturers, peers and family. Peers provided explanation and collaborative support, families provided encouragement and purpose, while lecturers influenced learning through feedback, guidance and expectations. Participants also distinguished supportive correction from interactions that exposed them to embarrassment. Learning identity was therefore personal, but it was not privately constructed.

This finding strongly converges with Falsafi and Coll's (2015) recognition perspective and Olivos and Engel's (2026) finding that teacher actions can become meaningful experiences through which learners recognise themselves. It is also consistent with Titus and Roman (2019), who associated lecturer–student relationships and learning support with student agency, and Feng and Hu (2026), who found informational teacher support important to pre-service teachers' academic self-efficacy.

However, the findings add an important qualification to the idea of educational support: support is not defined only by what the lecturer intends to provide, but by how the learner experiences it. Correction intended to improve performance may support learning when experienced as guidance, yet undermine participation when experienced as public embarrassment. This helps explain why Olivos and Engel (2026) caution against assuming a direct correspondence between teacher action and learner recognition. The same pedagogical act can acquire different identity meanings depending on its form, context and interpretation.

This distinction has particular relevance in teacher education. Pre-service teachers are simultaneously experiencing pedagogical practices as learners and developing understandings of teaching. Previous research has found learner and emerging teacher identities to be interconnected (Caviness & Masingila, 2026; McLay & Reyes, 2019). The present study did not directly examine whether participants would reproduce their university learning experiences in their future classrooms, so such an effect cannot be claimed. Nevertheless, their sensitivity to guidance, recognition and public embarrassment suggests that teacher education itself provides experiences through which future teachers encounter the consequences of different pedagogical relationships from the learner's position.

5.4 Engagement Requires both Meaning and Psychological Safety

Participants reported greater engagement when learning was interesting, relevant and understandable, but participation could decline where they anticipated ridicule, embarrassment or repeated failure. This indicates that engagement depended on both the academic meaning of an activity and the interpersonal safety of participating in it.

The finding converges with Prananto et al. (2025), who connect teacher support and engagement through motivational and relational mechanisms, and with Sithaldeen et al. (2022), who show that belonging and perceived judgement influence help-seeking. It also corresponds with Dağ et al. (2019), whose active-learning environment promoted participation, responsibility and cooperation among pre-service teachers.

The present study, however, adds an important contextual nuance: a learner could be motivated or curious yet remain less visibly engaged when participation carried a perceived risk of ridicule. Thus, observable participation should not automatically be treated as a direct indicator of motivation or learning identity. Silence or withdrawal may sometimes reflect the social conditions of participation rather than lack of interest in learning. This may explain why studies measuring engagement behaviourally can capture only part of the learner's experience. The qualitative accounts reveal the interpretation occurring behind the behaviour.

Psychological safety was not directly measured in this study and should therefore remain an interpretive concept rather than a measured outcome. Nonetheless, participants' accounts of fear, embarrassment and public correction consistently point towards the importance of learning environments in which mistakes can be exposed without

threatening the learner's social standing. This interpretation reinforces the relational character of learning identity while providing a practical explanation for why apparently motivated learners may participate differently.

5.5 Material Conditions as Boundaries to Enacting Learning Identity

Although material conditions appeared in fewer accounts than the other themes, 21 participants explicitly referred to finances, resources, technology or related constraints. Their accounts reveal a distinction between wanting to engage in learning and having the conditions necessary to enact that intention.

This finding converges strongly with African evidence. Kangwa et al. (2024) identified internet, electricity and socioeconomic barriers affecting university learning in Zambia, while Mphuthi and Tshelane (2022) documented infrastructural constraints among South African pre-service teachers. Abukari (2018) likewise situated resilience within socioeconomic circumstances, while Ugandan research links student motivation and self-efficacy with financial and institutional conditions (Kabakyenga et al., 2026; Tumuheki, 2025).

Where the present study extends much of the psychologically oriented literature is in showing that agency has material limits. A learner may identify as hardworking, motivated and responsible but still struggle to participate when faced with tuition demands, rent, and data costs or limited learning resources. This helps explain why learning identity should not be reduced to confidence, resilience or personal responsibility. The relatively lower coverage of this theme should also be interpreted cautiously: it does not establish that material conditions were unimportant to the remaining participants, only that they were explicitly raised by fewer respondents.

The prominence of material concerns may also reflect the Ugandan university context and broader socioeconomic circumstances represented in participants' accounts. This offers one possible explanation for differences from studies conducted in settings where material access is less visible in discussions of learner identity. The finding therefore strengthens the argument for treating learning identity as contextually conditioned, particularly when applying theories developed largely outside African higher education.

5.6 An Integrated Understanding of Learning Identity

Taken together, the findings suggest a recursive process: relationships and learning conditions shape experiences; learners interpret those experiences; those interpretations contribute to how they position themselves; and those positions are enacted through practices such as persistence, help-seeking, participation or withdrawal. These actions then generate further experiences that may reinforce or reshape learner identity. This interpretation emerged from the integration of the five themes rather than from a statistically tested causal model.

The model substantially converges with Coll and Falsafi's (2010) conception of learner identity as dynamic and situated and with Falsafi and Coll's (2015) emphasis on recognition. It also accommodates the empirical literature on agency, feedback, help-seeking, engagement and contextual support. Where the present study contributes further is by bringing these usually separated dimensions into a single account of learning identity among Ugandan pre-service teachers. Confidence, motivation, resilience, engagement and help-seeking did not appear as separate learner characteristics; they intersected within participants' accounts of who they were, what they did, how others responded to them, and what their circumstances enabled them to do.

The findings therefore support understanding learning identity among these pre-service teachers as personally interpreted, behaviourally enacted, socially negotiated and contextually conditioned. Importantly, this formulation avoids dividing participants into fixed categories of strong and weak learners. A learner could struggle and persist, feel disappointed and learn from feedback, be motivated but remain silent through fear of ridicule, or possess strong aspirations while facing material constraints. Such apparent contradictions are not weaknesses in the concept of learning identity; rather, they demonstrate its dynamic character.

For teacher education, this means that strengthening learning identity cannot be approached solely by asking individual students to become more motivated, confident or resilient. Attention is also required to the experiences through which those identities are constructed: how challenge is framed, how feedback is communicated, how safely students can make mistakes and seek help, how lecturers and peers recognise them, and whether material conditions permit meaningful participation. This integrated interpretation is the principal contribution of the study to understanding learning identity within Ugandan pre-service teacher education.

5.7 Conclusion

The study found that learning identity among pre-service teachers was not a fixed judgement of being a strong or weak learner. Rather, it developed through the interaction of self-perceptions, learning practices, responses to challenge and feedback, relationships, and contextual conditions. Participants could experience difficulty while remaining persistent and help-seeking, or be motivated yet participate less because of fear of embarrassment or material constraints. Overall, learning identity emerged as personally interpreted, behaviourally enacted, socially negotiated, and contextually conditioned.

5.8 Recommendations

Teacher educators should create supportive learning environments where mistakes and challenges are treated as opportunities for learning and feedback is constructive and respectful. Pre-service teachers should be given opportunities to reflect on themselves as learners and strengthen self-regulation, help-seeking and adaptive responses to difficulty. Universities should also promote psychologically safe participation and strengthen academic, financial and learning-resource support for students whose circumstances constrain engagement. Future studies should examine learning identity across institutions and follow pre-service teachers over time to understand how it develops and relates to their emerging teacher identity.

5.9 Limitations

The study involved 51 pre-service teachers from one university; therefore, the findings provide contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire, which allowed independent reflection but did not permit follow-up probing. The researcher's previous teaching relationship with eligible students may also have influenced responses, although recruitment was mediated by a faculty administrator. Finally, the findings were based on self-reported experiences rather than observed learning practices.

Declarations

1. **Data Availability:** The data supporting this study's findings can be accessed on request.
2. **Conflict of Interest:** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.
3. **Funding Statement:** The study did not receive any funding.
4. **Informed Consent:** Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants before they proceeded to the substantive study questions. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the study purpose and their right to withdraw.
5. The parents or legal guardians of the minors provided consent, and assent was obtained from the students.
6. **Statement Regarding Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals:** This study involved human participants, specifically Pre-service teachers. No animals were involved in any phase of the research.
7. **Clinical Trial Number:** Not applicable, given that this is in education.
8. **Accordance statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring respect for participants' rights, dignity, autonomy, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent throughout the research process.
9. **Consent to participate:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation in the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw.
10. **Consent to publish:** Participants consented to the use and publication of their anonymised responses. No personally identifying information is reported in the manuscript.

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