

Identity Construction of Students with Special Needs on an Inclusive Campus: A Study of the Role of the LSBA Vocational Training Center

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the process of identity construction among students with special needs within an inclusive higher education context, with a focus on the role of a specialized vocational training center. Situated in a mainstream university committed to inclusive education, the London School Beyond Academy (LSBA) serves as a critical site for understanding how institutional support facilitates positive identity development. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The study is analytically grounded in Michael Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity, which conceptualizes identity across personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers. The findings demonstrate that LSBA operates as a communicative scaffold that enables students to shift from deficit-oriented self-perceptions toward skill-based professional identities. Vocational activities allow students to enact competence and agency, while supportive interactions with faculty and peers validate these performances and bridge identity gaps between self-perception and social recognition. At the communal level, LSBA fosters a strong sense of belonging and collective purpose, reinforcing a resilient shared identity. This study argues that specialized vocational centers function as "third spaces" for communicative identity work, helping students navigate and resist ableist structures within higher education. By framing vocational training as a form of identity communication, this research contributes to inclusive education scholarship and highlights the importance of sustained, communication-based programs that empower students with disabilities to claim their identities with dignity and confidence.

KEYWORDS
Identity construction; Autism; Vocational School; inclusive campus; LSBA

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions worldwide are increasingly adopting inclusive education policies, signaling a commitment to providing equitable learning opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities (Akademik Amerika, 2025). This philosophical shift is rooted in principles of social justice and human rights and aims to dismantle barriers and foster a sense of belonging for every member of the academic community (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). However, a significant paradox persists: the rhetoric of inclusion often clashes with the lived reality of students with disabilities, who continue

to encounter profound systemic, attitudinal, and environmental barriers (Morina, 2017). These challenges, ranging from inaccessible physical spaces and technologies to negative faculty attitudes and social stigma, can profoundly undermine a student's academic journey and, more fundamentally, their process of identity negotiation and sense of belonging. Moving from policy to meaningful practice requires a deeper understanding of the institutional structures that can effectively support students in navigating this complex terrain.

This paper addresses the research problem of how students with special needs construct, negotiate, and express their identities within an ostensibly inclusive but practically challenging university environment. While a substantial body of research documents the barriers to inclusion, less is known about the specific mechanisms by which supportive "micro-environments" within larger institutions actively facilitate positive identity development. The very presence of such barriers forces students into a constant state of negotiation, where they must reconcile how they see themselves with how they are seen or fear they are seen by others. This study posits that understanding the function of dedicated supportive spaces is critical to resolving the paradox of inclusion. Such spaces may function not merely as service providers but as sites of resistance to the pervasive ableism that can characterize broader campus cultures. By creating a counter-space, they may offer an environment in which dominant societal narratives of disability as deficit are actively challenged and replaced by narratives of competence, professionalism, and value.

To explore this dynamic, this study presents a qualitative case study of the London School Beyond Academy (LSBA), a vocational training center uniquely embedded within the London School of Public Relations (LSPR) Institute of Communication & Business, a mainstream higher education institution in Indonesia committed to inclusive practices. LSBA offers students with special needs specialized training in fields such as Digital Imaging and Printing Technology, Office Administration, Bread & Cookie making programme, and Crafts. Its unique position at the intersection of vocational empowerment and inclusive higher education makes it an ideal site for investigating the communicative processes of identity construction. This paper is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do students with special needs construct and communicate their identities through their participation in the LSBA vocational training center? (2) In what ways does the LSBA program, as a communicative and social environment, mediate the identity construction process across the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers as conceptualized by the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)? (3) What are the broader implications of such a program for advancing genuine inclusion and sustainable human development in higher education?

This paper's central thesis is that the LSBA functions as a crucial third space, a communicative scaffold, where students with special needs can mitigate identity gaps, perform competence in a supportive setting, and construct positive personal, relational, and communal identities. In doing so, it offers a powerful model for re-theorizing vocational training as communicative identity work, which is essential for the holistic development of students with disabilities. The following sections will first review the

relevant literature on disability models, vocational training, and communication theory. Subsequently, the analytical framework and methodology will be detailed, followed by a presentation of the findings structured around CTI's layers of identity. The discussion will then interpret these findings, theorize LSBA's role in mediating identity, and conclude with implications for theory, policy, and practice in higher education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to conduct an in-depth, holistic investigation of identity construction in its real-world context (Yin, 2003). This methodology is particularly appropriate, as the research seeks to answer "how" and "why" questions about a complex social process in which the boundaries between the phenomenon (identity) and the context (the LSBA program) are not clearly delineated but are intrinsically linked (Yin, 2003). The London School Beyond Academy (LSBA) constitutes a "bounded system," a specific program with a defined purpose, population, and location, making it an ideal "case" for intensive and focused inquiry (Becker, 1968). This approach enables a rich exploration of participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and interactions within their natural setting, providing the depth necessary to understand the nuances of identity negotiation (Katz, 2015). The research site was the London School Beyond Academy (LSBA), a vocational training center situated within the larger campus of the London School of Public Relations (LSPR) in Jakarta, Indonesia (Rachmawati et al., 2024). LSBA's mission is to empower students with special needs through targeted training programs in media design, food production, and office administration, [a1] and to operate under the umbrella of LSPR's institutional commitment to inclusive education (Rachmawati et al., 2024). This embedded structure provides a unique opportunity to study the interplay between a specialized support environment and a mainstream university setting.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit participants from three key groups to ensure a multi-perspectival view of the phenomenon (Rachmawati et al., 2024): (1) Students with special needs enrolled in LSBA, representing a range of disabilities including autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, and speech impairments (Rostami et al., 2021; Siuty, 2019). (2) Faculty members and instructors at LSBA are responsible for designing and delivering the vocational curriculum and providing mentorship. (3) Non-disabled peers from the broader LSPR student body who interact with LSBA students through campus activities, collaborative projects, or social encounters.

To ensure the credibility and richness of the findings, data were collected from multiple sources, facilitating triangulation (Yin, 2003). These sources included: (1) In-depth, semi-structured interviews: Conducted with participants from all three groups to capture their personal narratives, interpretations of their experiences, and feelings about identity, inclusion, and the role of LSBA. (2) Participant observation: Researchers observed activities within LSBA, including classroom instruction, practical training

sessions, the student-run kiosk, and public exhibitions of student work. [a3] This allowed for the direct documentation of enacted behaviors and relational interactions in their natural context. (3) Documentary analysis: A range of documents was analyzed, including official LSBA program materials, mission statements, curriculum outlines, student-produced media, and the public-facing social media presence of LSBA initiatives (e.g., the Instagram account for the student kiosk, @kiossahabat.id) (Suskarwati et al., 2023). This provided insight into the institutional and communal framing of identity.

The data analysis employed a rigorous thematic analysis approach, which involves systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (or themes) across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed the widely recognized steps of (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes; (2) generation of initial codes that captured salient features of the data; (3) searching for, reviewing, and refining broader themes from the codes; (4) defining and naming the final themes; and (5) producing the analytical narrative (Nowell et al., 2017).

Crucially, this was a hybrid inductive-deductive process. While themes were allowed to emerge inductively from the data, the analysis was deductively guided by the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as a sensitizing framework (Carlone & Johnson, 2007). The core theoretical constructs of CTI—the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers of identity—served as an a priori analytical lens. This theory-driven approach ensured that the analysis was not merely descriptive but explicitly focused on testing, elaborating, and refining CTI within the specific context of disability and vocational training, thereby enhancing the study's theoretical rigor. Throughout the process, the researchers engaged in reflexive practice, acknowledging their own positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation, a key component of ethical qualitative inquiry (Charmaz, 1999).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data from interviews, observations, and documents reveals that the London School Beyond Academy (LSBA) is a dynamic, multifaceted environment for identity construction. Through the lens of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), it is clear that the program systematically fosters positive identity development across all four layers. The following table provides a heuristic summary of the key themes that emerged within each layer, which are then elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

Table 1: The Four Layers of Identity Construction at LSBA

CTI Layer	Definition	Key Themes at LSBA	Illustrative Evidence
Personal	The individual's self-concept, self-image, and feelings about the self (Hecht, 1993).	1. From Deficit to Skill: Reframing self-worth around competence. 2. Developing Agency and Future Orientation: Cultivating a sense of purpose and independence.	"At first, there were a lot of positive and negative comments, but I learned from the experience. Now, I'm more confident and flexible I selling. I've met a lot of new people. (Student Interview)
Enacted	Identity as a performance, expressed through communicative messages and actions (Goffman, 1959; Hecht, 1993).	1. Performing Professionalism: Engaging in real-world work simulations. 2. Communicating Competence: Using vocational skills as a medium for self-expression.	Observation: A student at the LSBA bread & cookie baking programme confidently explains product ingredients to a customer from the main LSPR campus, using practiced sales language and making direct eye contact.
Relational	Identity as co-created and negotiated in relationships with others (Hecht et al., 1993; Baxter, 2004).	1. Ascription of Competence: Faculty and mentors framing students as capable professionals. 2. Negotiating Acceptance: Building positive peer relationships based on shared tasks and mutual respect.	"We look at their potential, not their limitations. With the right training, they've shown that they are capable of so much more." (Faculty Interview)
Communal	Identity derived from group membership and a shared understanding of belonging (Hecht et al., 1993).	1. The "LSBA Family": Creating a safe and supportive micro-community. 2. Collective Efficacy and Shared Purpose: Fostering a group identity centered on achievement and mutual support.	"We all help each other here. At times, they struggle to explain things in detail. But we make sure not to judge them and assist by promoting their bread to others." (Student Interview)

The Personal Layer: Forging a Positive Self-Concept

The data strongly indicate that one of LSBA's most profound impacts occurs at the personal layer of identity. Many students entered the program with a self-concept heavily

influenced by societal narratives of disability as a deficit. Their interviews revealed initial feelings of limitation and uncertainty about their future. LSBA systematically works to dismantle this internalized stigma by shifting the basis of self-worth from disability to ability. As one student articulated, "At first, there were a lot of positive and negative comments, but I learned from the experience. Now, I'm more confident and flexible when selling. I've met many new people. This quote encapsulates a core theme: the reframing of identity around acquired skills and competence.

This shift fosters greater self-esteem and agency, a key benefit of vocational training (Vocational Training and Employment for People with Disabilities, 2025). By mastering tangible skills in food production, students develop a concrete sense of accomplishment that directly counters feelings of inadequacy. This skill-building is not just technical; it is deeply personal. It provides students with a new, positive label, "designer," "baker," "administrator," that they can internalize. This process cultivates a stronger future orientation, as students come to see themselves as capable professionals with viable career paths, thereby fostering the independence and self-worth that are crucial to human development (Rachmawati et al., 2024).

The Enacted Layer: Performing Competence and Professionalism

CTI posits that identity is not just an internal state but is actively performed through communication and behavior (Hecht, 1993). LSBA provides a structured and safe stage for this performance. The program's emphasis on practical, real-world activities, such as organizing bread sales, catering campus events, and participating in public exhibitions, is central to this process (Chrisdina, 2019). These are not mere simulations; they are authentic opportunities for students to enact a professional identity.

Observations at the LSBA, for instance, revealed students engaging in complex communicative tasks: greeting customers, explaining products, handling transactions, and managing inventory. In doing so, they were not just selling snacks; they were performing the identity of a competent and responsible business operator. This enactment serves to solidify their personal identity. Research on CTI has shown that higher communication competence is associated with smaller identity gaps (Stitt, 2022). LSBA provides the training and the platform to build this competence. By successfully performing these professional roles, students provide tangible evidence of their capabilities, both for themselves and for others, thereby making their desired professional identity a lived reality.

The Relational Layer: Co-Constructing Identity Through Interaction

Identity is always co-constructed in the space between self and other (Hecht et al., 1993). The relational dynamics within LSBA are critical to affirming the positive identities students are building. A key theme emerging from the data is the "ascription of competence" by faculty and mentors. Unlike environments where students may feel defined by their disability label, LSBA instructors consistently frame them as capable professionals-in-training. As one faculty member stated, "We look at their potential, not their limitations. With the right training, they've shown that they are capable of so much

more." This relational affirmation is powerful. It provides external validation for students' burgeoning personal identity, helping to close the potentially damaging "personal-relational identity gap," in which a positive self-view is undermined by perceived negative judgments from others (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Interactions with non-disabled peers from the wider LSPR campus are also crucial. While social integration challenges exist in any inclusive setting (Ainscow, 2020), LSBA facilitates positive peer relationships by grounding them in shared tasks and contexts. When an LSPR student purchases a product from the LSBA kiosk or attends an exhibition of LSBA student work, the interaction is framed as a professional exchange rather than disability. This enables negotiation of acceptance grounded in mutual respect and shared campus life, rather than in preconceived notions or stigma.

The Communal Layer: Fostering a Shared Sense of Belonging

Finally, the analysis reveals that LSBA functions as a powerful micro-community, fostering a strong communal identity among its students. Interviewees frequently referred to the program as the "LSBA family," highlighting a sense of safety, trust, and mutual support that provides a crucial buffer against the potential isolation and anxieties of navigating the larger university environment (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017). This aligns with the Social Identity Approach, which posits that a strong group identity can be a significant psychological resource for members of marginalized groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

This communal identity is built through shared experiences, rituals, and a collective purpose (Wenger, 1998). Students work on projects together, support each other through challenges, and celebrate collective achievements. One student captured this sentiment perfectly: "We all help each other here. At times, they struggle to explain things in detail. But we make sure not to judge them and assist by promoting their bread to others." This shared identity fosters collective efficacy and belonging, thereby reinforcing each individual's personal identity. Within the LSBA community, being a student with a disability is normalized and reframed as a source of shared understanding and strength, rather than a marker of difference.

The findings from this study of the LSBA program offer significant insights into the mechanisms underlying the construction of positive identity among students with disabilities in higher education. This section interprets the broader significance of these findings, situates them within the literature, and advances a more nuanced understanding of inclusive practice and the role of vocational training.

LSBA as a 'Third Space': Mediating Identity Gaps in Higher Education

The analysis demonstrates that students with disabilities often enter higher education facing a potential "personal-relational identity gap" (Jung & Hecht, 2004). They may be working to cultivate a positive personal identity (a sense of self as a capable student) while simultaneously navigating a social environment where they fear being perceived through a lens of ableism and stigma (a negative ascribed relational identity). This study

argues that LSBA functions as a critical mediating environment, or "third space," that helps students bridge this gap.

The mechanism for this bridging lies in the enacted layer of identity. LSBA provides a safe, supportive, and authentic context where students can practice, perform, and refine a competent, professional identity. By successfully managing the kiosk, baking bread and cookies, creating media content, or organizing an event, they provide clear evidence of their capabilities. This successful enactment has a dual effect. Internally, it reinforces their positive personal identity, giving them confidence and a stronger sense of self-worth. Externally, it provides a positive script for their interactions with the wider campus community. When they engage with non-disabled peers and faculty in their professional roles, they communicate from a position of strength and competence. This process actively reduces the discrepancy between how they see themselves and how others see them, effectively closing the identity gap and fostering greater communication satisfaction and social integration.

Re-theorizing Vocational Training as Communicative Identity Work

This study challenges the often reductive view of vocational training as merely skill acquisition for employment (Number Analytics, 2025). While the skills learned at LSBA are valuable, the program's primary function appears to be communicative and identity-based. Building on the literature that frames vocational rehabilitation as "identity work" (van der Ploeg et al., 2012), this research uses the precision of CTI to argue that the "work" at LSBA is fundamentally about constructing a viable and positive identity. The process of learning to be a media designer is not merely about mastering software; it is about learning to embody the identity of a media designer.

This re-theorization has profound implications. It suggests that the success of such programs should not be measured solely by traditional economic outcomes, such as employment rates, which can be influenced by discriminatory market forces beyond the program's control (Disability Evidence Portal, 2025). Instead, a more holistic evaluation should include developmental and communicative outcomes, such as increases in self-esteem, reductions in identity gaps, enhanced communication satisfaction, and a strengthened sense of belonging. From this perspective, vocational training is not a remedial track but a central component of holistic student development.

The existence of a specialized program like LSBA, however, presents a paradox within the philosophy of inclusive education. On one hand, the principles of full inclusion advocate against separate programs, arguing that they can lead to segregation and reinforce the "othering" of students with disabilities (Jorgensen et al., 2012). Critical Disability Studies rightly cautions against any practice, however well-intentioned, that separates and potentially stigmatizes students (Eilers, 2019). On the other hand, the findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the "safe," communal, and specialized nature of LSBA is precisely what creates the conditions necessary for positive identity work, shielding students from the very ableism that can be prevalent in mainstream settings (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017). This program is effective because it is a protected space. This leads to a nuanced conclusion: in a university system that is not yet truly

inclusive, such specialized "third spaces" are not a contradiction of the inclusive ideal but a necessary and pragmatic bridge toward it. They are not the end goal of inclusion, but a vital transitional structure that equips students with the identity resources, resilience, and communicative competence needed to navigate, and ultimately challenge, the non-inclusive aspects of the mainstream environment.

Extending CTI: The Materiality, Intersectionality, and Power of Disability Identity

Applying CTI to this case highlights both the theory's strengths and its areas for growth. The findings, rooted in the lived experiences of students with diverse physical, sensory, and cognitive profiles, lend strong empirical support to the proposed "material frame" of identity (Kuiper, 2021). The physical accessibility of the LSBA space, the use of assistive technologies, the students' embodied experiences of impairment, and their overall health are not mere backdrops to their identity negotiation; they are central, constitutive elements. A comprehensive communication theory of identity, particularly when applied to disability, must account for this material dimension where the body and environment shape and are shaped by communication.

This study also illuminates its own limitations and points toward crucial avenues for future research. While the data capture the experiences of students with various special needs, it did not analyze in depth the intersectional nature of their identities (National Disability Center for Students with Disabilities, 2024). Future research must ask: How does the experience of identity work at LSBA differ for a young woman with autism versus a young man with a learning disability? How do race, class, and gender intersect with disability to shape a student's navigation of the program and the wider university? An intersectional lens is essential for a more complete picture. Furthermore, CTI has been criticized for insufficiently theorizing power dynamics (Dunbar, 2015). While LSBA is clearly an empowering space for its students, it operates within the broader power structures of the university and society. Future studies could benefit from integrating CTI with a more explicitly critical framework, such as CDS, to analyze how these broader power dynamics are resisted, reproduced, or negotiated within such programs.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study of the London School Beyond Academy (LSBA) demonstrates how a specialized vocational center within a mainstream university can serve as a critical site for the construction of positive identity among students with special needs. By analyzing the program through the lens of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), this paper argues that LSBA's success lies in its facilitation of communicative identity work. It provides a structured "third space" where students can develop a positive personal identity, practice a competent enacted identity, receive affirming relational feedback, and cultivate a supportive communal identity. In doing so, it offers a powerful, evidence-based model for how higher education can move beyond the rhetoric of

inclusion to build institutional practices that genuinely empower students with disabilities.

The implications of this research are threefold. Theoretically, this study contributes to the evolution of CTI by applying it to the underexplored context of disability identity in higher education. It provides strong empirical support for the recent call to integrate a "material frame" into the theory and highlights the need for future scholarship to more explicitly connect CTI with critical theories of power and intersectionality to better account for the complex social realities of marginalized individuals.

For policy, the findings offer a clear directive to university administrators and policymakers. Investing in and supporting dedicated, communication-based centers like LSBA is a high-impact strategy for fulfilling an institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) mission Building Neurodiversity-Inclusive Postsecondary Campuses, 2025). Such programs should not be viewed as peripheral or merely remedial. Rather, they should be recognized as integral components of student development that contribute directly to retention, well-being, and the creation of a more genuinely inclusive campus culture.

For practice, this research underscores the vital role of educators and practitioners in creating supportive relational and communal environments. The findings call for comprehensive faculty training in disability studies, inclusive pedagogy, and asset-based approaches that focus on students' strengths rather than their deficits (Ainscow, 2020). Furthermore, it highlights the value of promoting peer mentorship and collaborative projects that bridge social distance between students with and without disabilities, thereby fostering a campus community grounded in mutual respect and shared goals.

Ultimately, achieving the ambitious goals of sustainable human development, particularly those related to ensuring quality education and reducing inequalities for all, requires more than good intentions (Vaccaro et al., 2015). It demands the creation of concrete, evidence-based, and communicatively attuned institutional structures. The LSBA model demonstrates that by focusing on the fundamental human need to construct and claim an identity with dignity, higher education can play a transformative role in empowering all students to realize their full potential.

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