

Analytical Model of Identity in Middle School Students

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of the present study was to provide an analytical model of identity for middle school students.

Methods and Materials: The research method was applied in terms of purpose, mixed (qualitative-quantitative) in terms of data type, exploratory in terms of data collection time, cross-sectional, and according to data collection methods and the nature of the research, a combination of meta-synthesis and content analysis in the qualitative part, and descriptive-survey in the quantitative part. In the qualitative section, the statistical population included all theoretical foundations and related literature from both domestic and international databases, which were studied using a systematic elimination method based on the PRISMA model and non-random purposeful sampling. For content analysis, theoretical and empirical experts were involved, with 19 experts selected through non-random purposeful sampling as participants. In the quantitative section, the population comprised middle school students, from which 272 students were selected using a multi-stage cluster random sampling method, calculated based on structural equation modeling. Data collection tools in the qualitative section (meta-synthesis) included a systematic literature review, and in the content analysis stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In the quantitative section, a researcher-made questionnaire derived from the indicators identified in the qualitative section was used to measure the internal validity of the model, and another researcher-made questionnaire derived from the model components was used to measure the external validity. In the qualitative section, the validity was checked using the PRISMA model checklist, and reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa coefficient. In the Delphi and content analysis sections, validity was assessed through alignment with prior research, researchers, and participants, while reliability was checked by recording the research process and ensuring consistency within and between researchers. In addition, in the quantitative section, validity was examined through content and construct validity ($AVE < 0.5$), and reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability coefficients (α and $CR > 0.7$). The results from both the qualitative and quantitative sections indicated that the instruments were both valid and reliable. Data analysis methods in the qualitative section included thematic analysis using Maxqda-V2018

software, while in the quantitative section, statistical and inferential analyses were performed using SPSS-V23 and Smart PLS-V3 software.

Findings: The research findings revealed that identity in middle school students encompasses scientific identity (specialized knowledge, membership in the academic community, research skills, and commitments), social identity (group membership, social mapping, interaction, nationalism, political and social identity), and personal identity (self-awareness, roles, experiences, and historical identity). Strategies for improving identity included skill development and support provision. Based on the identified dimensions, components, and indicators, an identity model for middle school students was developed, alongside strategies for enhancing it.

Conclusion: The results of this study contribute not only to students' personal growth and development but also to the improvement of their mental health, academic success, and social relationships. Given the identity challenges adolescents face at this stage, providing effective and practical strategies to improve their identity is of great significance.

Keywords: *Identity, identity formation, middle school students.*

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, humans have sought to define and recognize themselves, their tribes, ethnicities, and nationalities, as well as to discover their distinctions from others. In fact, identity originates from the natural human need to be recognized and introduced to something or somewhere. This sense of belonging is an inherent need present in every individual. Identity is initially divided into two levels: individual and social. One of the fundamental types of identity necessary for members of a society is having an identity. It is evident that identity is situated alongside collective identity. Collective identity is the group identity that distinguishes one group from another. In other words, it is a set of characteristics that separates one group from other groups (Ghorbani & Yazarloo, 2021; Hoseini, 2013; Jahanshahi, Haghighatian, & Bahian, 2024; Mahdian et al., 2022).

Identity is described as "a relatively stable sense of self-unity." According to Erikson's perspective, "despite changes in behaviors, thoughts, and feelings, a person's self-perception remains consistent." Additionally, he notes that this sense of who we are must align with how others perceive us. Identity is formed through our perception of others. Therefore, identity and self-perception are always two sides of the same coin, and one does not make sense without the other (Tanhaye Reshvanloo et al., 2024). Mahmoodi and Asgari (2018) argue that an individual's identity is shaped as part of the whole identity in relation to the society to which they belong or feel they belong (Mahmoudi & Askari, 2018). Today, scholars emphasize the acquired nature of identity. They have moved away from an essentialist view of identity,

which regards it as an abstract, unchanging, static, and eternal concept, and instead focus on its concrete, political, and dynamic aspects. To better understand identity, the position of the national community among various social groups and, consequently, individual and social identity among other identities must be recognized. Nowadays, in addition to professional communities, other types of communities such as family, ethnicity, nation, ummah, and the global community can also be considered. Ethnic identity is a cognitive, belief-based, and psychological set of traits that influences the social actions of different ethnic groups, fostering solidarity and cohesion at the national level (Hester & Housley, 2017).

The social dimension of identity is related to the quality of an individual's relationships with the larger social system. Its historical dimension refers to the shared awareness of a community's historical past and the emotional attachment to it, which binds generations together and prevents a generation from becoming disconnected from its history (Bischof, 2017). The geographical dimension is another aspect of identity that represents the physical, tangible, and visible manifestation of identity, while the cultural dimension is the shared mental and psychological framework that is shaped over time and passed down through socialization processes to subsequent generations. New generations inherit it as the legacy of the past (Litam & Oh, 2022). Another key dimension of identity is its political aspect, which is considered the most important component of identity. This dimension implies that individuals, who are physically and legally members of a political system and live within the borders of a country, also psychologically consider themselves part of that system. Love and loyalty

towards a political system foster ethnic and racial solidarity (Mahmoudi & Askari, 2018).

The learning of attention and respect for ethnic identity is formed first within the family and later within social institutions. The first social institution capable of embedding ethnic identity in students is the school. One of the goals of education and schools is to recognize and nurture ethnic identity. This topic is clearly addressed in higher education documents and the transformation document. However, there are various elements within schools that can highlight and promote ethnic identity among students. Besides the influence of factors such as curriculum planning, management, teachers, and students themselves, it appears that the curriculum has a more significant impact on fostering and maintaining both individual and national identity in students (Kermani & Saei, 2017).

Despite the emphasis placed on identity formation and its values in higher education documents and by the Supreme Leader on strengthening national identity (Akbari, 2020), what is observed in school curricula, particularly in secondary schools, is the lack of a unique approach that dissects identity for students and helps them discover their correct identity. In the secondary education stage, several initiatives have been proposed, such as engaging students with Islamic values, customs, and patriotism, fostering a habit of discipline, developing a cooperative spirit, strengthening curiosity about the social environment, teaching life skills and social norms for creating order and responsibility, respecting others' rights, and promoting cooperation. However, it seems that these efforts are insufficient. This issue has been more emphasized in primary education, while identity formation during secondary education is even more critical because one of the key issues during adolescence and youth is self-awareness. Unfortunately, not all adolescents and young adults successfully form their identities, which often leads to various personal and social problems and negative reactions from others in their current and future lives. One of the barriers to addressing the identity crisis in students could be the lack of necessary mechanisms for teaching. In secondary schools, the focus is more on material that is delivered in large volumes with minimal effectiveness, and what truly aids students in their identity formation is not the school and its teachings but rather their circle of friends and virtual spaces. Unfortunately, these often not only fail to resolve the identity crisis but also exacerbate the challenges and problems within this realm, leading to confusion among students by the end of secondary education, making recovery

difficult. Considering these issues, the present research aims to investigate the topic of identity, the situation in which adolescents find themselves, and to comprehensively examine the dimensions of this identity. It also seeks to identify various factors associated with it to enhance students' sense of identity formation and answer the fundamental question of how the state of identity and its dimensions appear in middle school students, and what strategies can be provided to improve it. In other words, what is the model for enhancing students' identity?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research is applied in terms of its objective, sequential mixed methods in terms of data type, pragmatic or combined (interpretive and positivist) paradigm in terms of its paradigm, exploratory in the initial phase and descriptive-analytical in the later phase regarding its nature (approach and design). Based on reasoning type (execution logic), the research is mixed (inductive-deductive) since it involves both inductive reasoning (in the qualitative and Delphi sections) and deductive reasoning (in the quantitative survey and correlation sections).

The statistical population for the first phase of the qualitative section (meta-synthesis) includes all articles and scientific works in domestic and international databases, as well as existing documents and regulations in this field. In this phase, 20 articles were selected according to the article selection process based on the PRISMA guidelines using a non-random purposive sampling method. It is important to note that the criteria for selecting articles in the meta-synthesis method include the currency and relevance to the research topic, high scientific quality and credibility, originating from reputable domestic and international databases, appropriate methodology, and diversity in perspectives. Additionally, in the second phase (Delphi technique), the population includes all experienced officials in education. Since the minimum number of experts in a Delphi panel is generally between 10 to 18 people (Linstein & Torof, 2011), 19 experts were selected using purposive non-random sampling. The selection criteria for the experts include holding at least a doctoral degree, being officials in the education sector in Tehran with expertise in identity and identity formation, and having over five years of experience in areas such as education, training, management, policy-making, etc. Additionally, expertise and experience in the

field of identity and identity formation, such as writing articles, books, or research proposals, were required.

The statistical population in this section includes all middle school students in Tehran. Given that prominent theorists, including Klein (2015), suggest a sample size of at least 200 people as a general rule for structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analysis, 282 respondents were considered for the sample size, chosen using a multi-stage cluster sampling method. The questionnaire was distributed both online and in person among these respondents, and 10 incomplete questionnaires were excluded, leaving 272 respondents for statistical analysis.

2.2. Data Collection

In the first phase of the qualitative section (meta-synthesis), the tool for data collection was the systematic review of literature and reputable scientific sources. This process involved a thorough and targeted search of scientific databases, articles, books, and theses related to the research topic. In the content validity examination of the meta-synthesis phase, it was found that the content and concepts being investigated were comprehensively covered in the existing literature. Articles were selected with high accuracy, and an initial screening process was performed. A flow diagram (search and article selection process) was used to identify appropriate articles in the field under study. In this stage, the limitations were outlined in terms of temporal scope (domestic and international), spatial scope (domestic and international databases), research nature (synthesis, review, qualitative and quantitative), and thematic scope (keywords for searching). Screening was then carried out at both macro and micro levels. Additionally, internal validity results showed that the findings from the meta-synthesis were not influenced by external factors and were properly explained. A checklist of 27 items based on the PRISMA model, independent analysis by the researcher and a statistics expert, the Cohen's Kappa agreement coefficient, the use of standard criteria, repeatability (transparency in the execution process), and the use of MAXQDA software for precise tracking of the analysis and data coding stages were applied. Finally, feedback and revision of codes by an expert in the subject matter were done to identify contradictions. In terms of reliability in the meta-synthesis method, methods for precise documentation of the research process, intrarater agreement, and interrater reliability were employed. The findings indicated that the results of the meta-synthesis were both reliable and valid. Furthermore, in the second phase of

the qualitative section (Delphi technique), the Delphi worksheet was utilized. Experts were asked to provide not only ratings but also any opinions or suggestions regarding the indicators, and to add new indicators they deemed important to the end of the table. To ensure the validity of the Delphi worksheet, the questions were appropriately designed to be simple, clear, and relevant. Plain and conceptual language that was easily understandable by the experts was used for the closed-ended questionnaire items. Before the implementation of the Delphi worksheet, content validity was assessed using the content validity ratio formula, and the results indicated that the content validity was acceptable, meaning the content of the worksheet comprehensively covered the required concepts. For reliability, internal and temporal reliability were used, with the findings from the Delphi phase indicating the worksheet's validity and reliability.

To collect data in the quantitative section, the researcher-developed questionnaire was used to measure both internal (derived from the identified qualitative section indicators) and external validity (based on the final model). The process for developing the questionnaire for internal validity involved systematically reviewing literature in domestic and international databases based on the PRISMA protocol, a standard approach. Identified articles were screened using specific criteria, and ultimately, 20 articles were retained. These articles were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the identified dimensions were used to develop questions for the Delphi worksheet. The resulting indicators, components, and dimensions were finalized with expert consensus through three rounds. The final questionnaire included 65 items using a Likert scale ranging from "very high" to "very low." To assess the validity of the questionnaire, content validity was measured using content validity ratio formulas with the help of 10 experts, who reviewed the questionnaire for any redundant questions or needed revisions. Necessary revisions were made before distributing the questionnaire. Additionally, for construct validity, both convergent and divergent validity were measured using Smart PLS 3 software, with the findings displayed in the table below. Reliability was also assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, composite reliability, and McDonald's omega, with values above 0.7 for all variables, indicating that the measurement instrument was reliable.

The reliability of the dimensions is confirmed as the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability coefficients are above 0.7, and AVE > 0.5. Convergent validity is confirmed

as $CR > 0.7$; $CR > AVE$; $AVE > 0.5$, and divergent validity is confirmed as $MSV < AVE$ and $ASV < AVE$.

2.3. Data Analysis

In the qualitative phase, to provide an analytical model of identity in middle school students, the thematic analysis method was used with MAXQDA Analytics Pro software (2018 version). Common themes and patterns from the selected articles and the open-ended questions from the Delphi worksheet were identified and analyzed. In the Delphi phase, for closed-ended questions, the mean and standard deviation were used to evaluate results and determine the level of agreement among the experts. Additionally, the Kendall's concordance coefficient was used to assess expert opinions and agreement on priorities concerning the closed-ended questionnaire, using IBM SPSS Statistics 16.

In the quantitative phase, descriptive statistics (for describing demographic features such as age, gender, education, and work experience using frequency percentage, tables, and charts) and inferential statistics (using confirmatory factor analysis for internal validity and one-sample t-test for external validity) were employed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23 (2015 version) and SmartPLS-V3 (2016 version) software.

3. Findings and Results

In order to analyze the data in the qualitative section, thematic analysis was employed. The analysis followed a coding process that included three stages: open, axial, and selective coding. This process was used for the indices examined in the meta-synthesis as well as those derived from interviews. The final coding from this process is presented in Table 1, where the code corresponding to the interviews and the source of the codes are also provided.

Table 1

Codes Derived from the Systematic Literature Review and Interviews with Experts for Providing the Analytical Model of Identity in First Cycle Secondary School Students

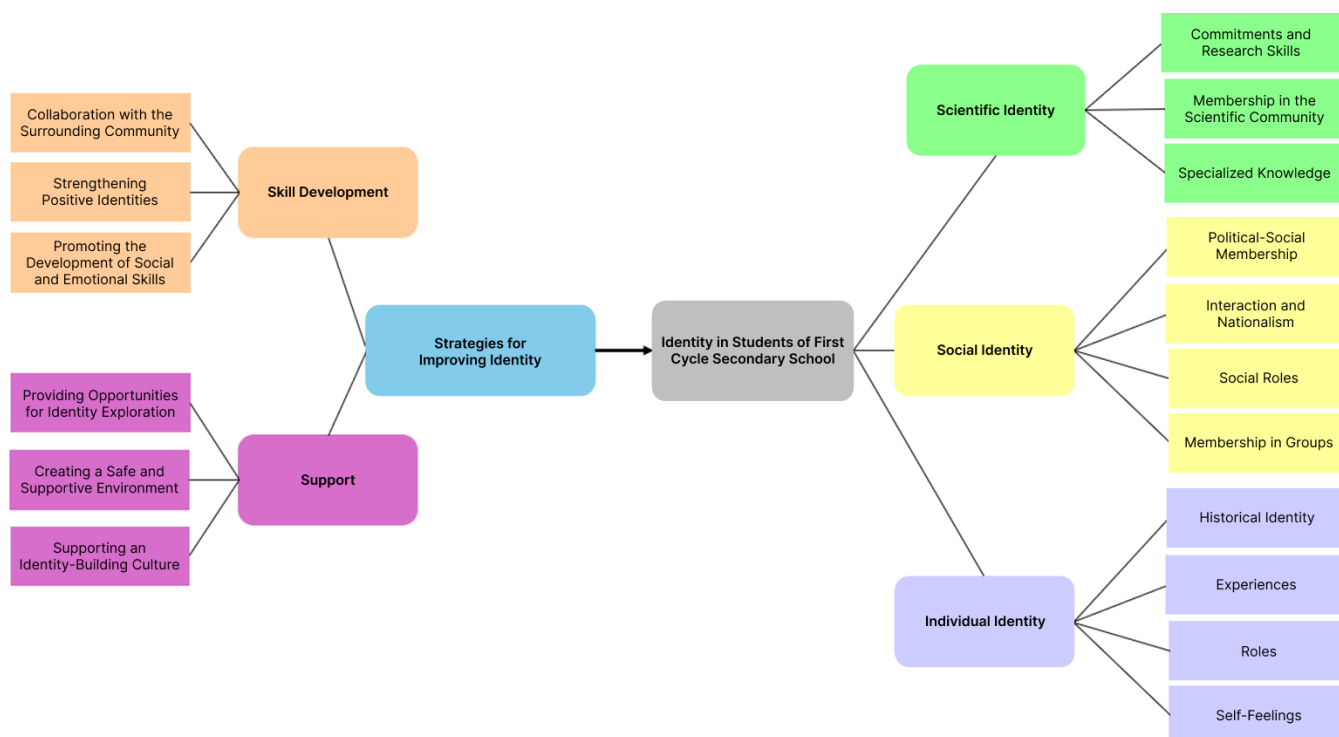
Construct	Dimensions	Components	Indicators
Analysis of the status of identity and its dimensions in first cycle secondary school students and suggestions for improvement	Personal Identity	Self-feelings	A common feeling exists among students.
		Roles	Sometimes, students help stimulate collective conscience. The collective awareness of secondary school students regarding the past is significant. They have emotional differentiation. The physical, tangible, and visible manifestation of patriotism in students conveys this feeling. Students tend to have individual differentiation. Civic participation is fundamental to secondary school students' activities. They prioritize creating a strong group identity. They value traditional values and perform roles accordingly. They honor their role in their ethnic homeland.
		Experiences	Relationships with parents, teachers, peers, and other adults are considered influential in shaping self-feelings and one's place in the world. Positive experiences in school contribute to self-esteem and confidence in secondary school students. Major life events such as the death of a loved one, moving to a new location, or experiencing a serious illness can impact a student's identity.
	Historical Identity	Belonging to society is one of the factors of personal/historical identity for students.	Attention to cultural, historical, and ideological foundations is observed. There is an assessment of cultural differences among students. Wise judgments are made about different social mechanisms and products.

Strategies for Improving Identity in First Cycle Secondary School Students	Social Identity	Group membership	Collective identity content Group membership-based content Education in social relationships Content related to various Iranian ethnicities Formation of new social units
		Social Map	Creating a framework for understanding oneself in relation to others Students learn what is expected of them in different situations and how to interact with others. They create opportunities to explore different aspects of their identity. Providing opportunities for acquiring social skills Social maps can offer behavioral patterns for students.
		Interaction and Nationalism	National identity is one of the factors fostering interaction among students. Attention to civilizational domains fosters a participatory identity in students. Creating content promoting a sense of responsibility among students helps foster nationalism.
	Political-Social Identity	Public participation in national decisions is significant for students.	Attention to the political position of society among students is emphasized. The emotional attachment of students to their homeland is emphasized. Public participation in national decisions is considered important for students. Valuing political thinkers is taught to students.
		Scientific Identity	Attention to technological advancements in the country Public involvement of students in the country's scientific processes Students have social responsibility in learning science.
		Specialized knowledge	There is cohesion among knowledgeable individuals in secondary schools. National pride is considered. Wise judgments are made about different social mechanisms and products.
		Membership in the scientific community	Attention to research skills, including the ability to design and conduct experiments, collect and analyze data, and write research results Students' adherence to values like honesty, objectivity, and responsibility is emphasized. Students' identity as members of a particular group can influence their experiences in science and their understanding of their role as a scientist.
		Research skills and commitments	Creating a space where students feel safe and comfortable to express themselves and explore their identity. Respecting the diversity and individual experiences of each student. Encouraging open and honest dialogue about identity-related issues.
	Support	Creating a safe and supportive environment:	Encouraging students to engage in various activities, both inside and outside of school, that allow them to discover their interests and talents. Providing resources on identity, such as books, websites, and guest speakers. Supporting students in forming connections with adults and peers who can serve as role models or share similar experiences. Offering opportunities for identity exploration within the community.
		Providing opportunities for identity exploration	Including topics related to the history, culture, and arts of the local, national, and international community in the curriculum.
		Supporting a culture of identity-building	

Skill Development	Promoting the development of social and emotional skills	Using diverse educational resources, such as books, films, music, and guest speakers to teach culture. Encouraging students to share their culture through food, music, dance, and other forms of artistic expression. Organizing programs that foster interaction among students from different backgrounds, such as cultural clubs, discussion groups, and service-learning projects.
	Strengthening Positive Identities	Teaching skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, effective communication, and conflict resolution. Providing opportunities for students to practice their skills in action, such as through group work and collaborative problem-solving. Creating a space where students can learn from each other and feel supported.
	Collaboration with the Surrounding Community	Focusing on students' strengths and achievements. Providing positive feedback and encouragement for students. Promoting diversity and inclusion in secondary schools and among students. Talking to families about the importance of identity and how to support their children's identity development. Engaging the community in programs and initiatives that promote the healthy identity development of students. Respecting various identities, including cultural, religious, sexual, and gender identities, within the community. Involving students in identity-building events.

Figure 1

The Qualitative Model of The Study

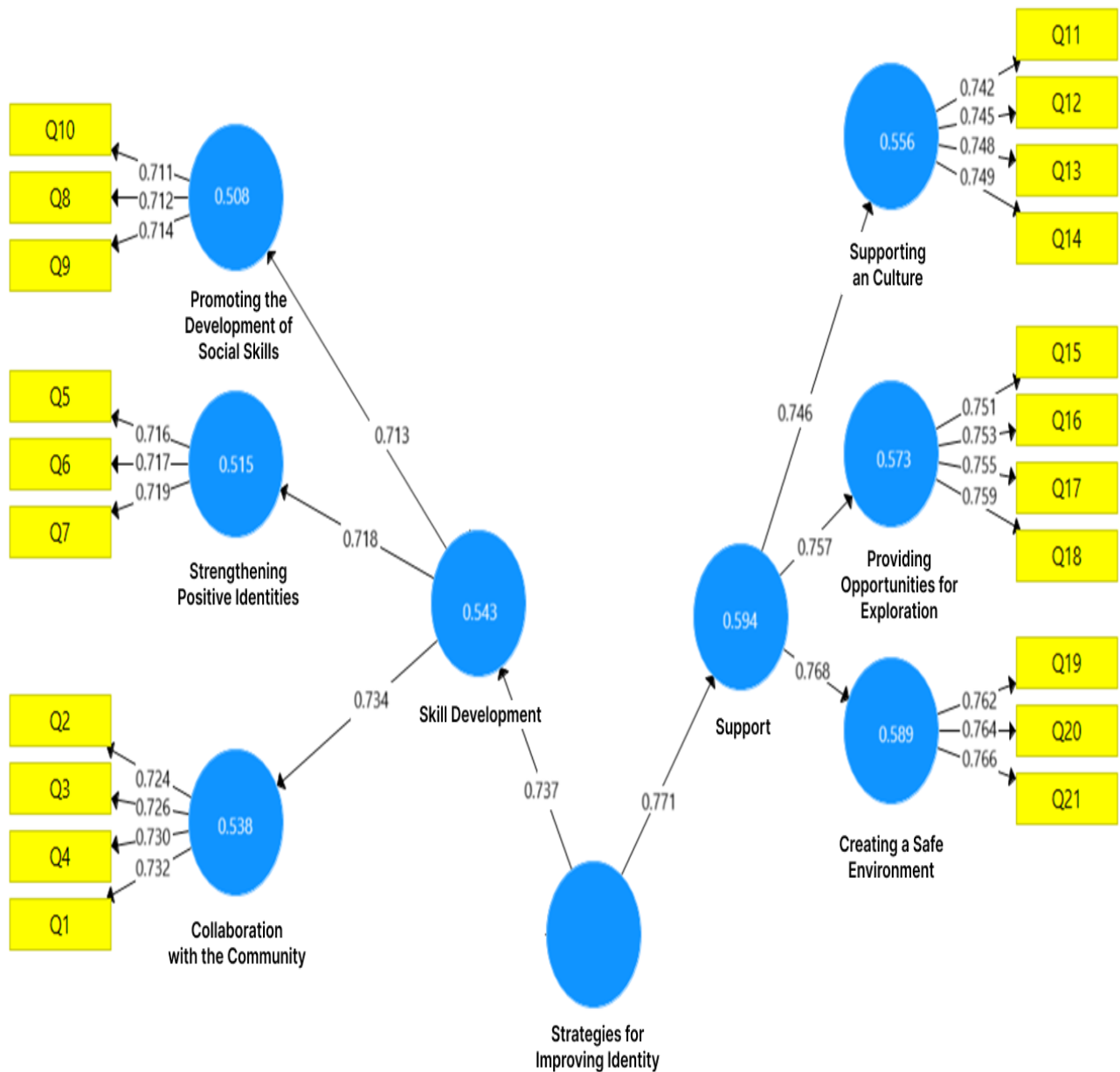


To confirm the model fit and examine the relationships between the components of the model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on Partial Least Squares (PLS) was

utilized. This analysis was conducted to answer the following questions. The results of this analysis are presented below.

Figure 2

Quantitative Validity of the Model for Strategies to Improve Identity in First Cycle Secondary School Students in the Factor Loading State

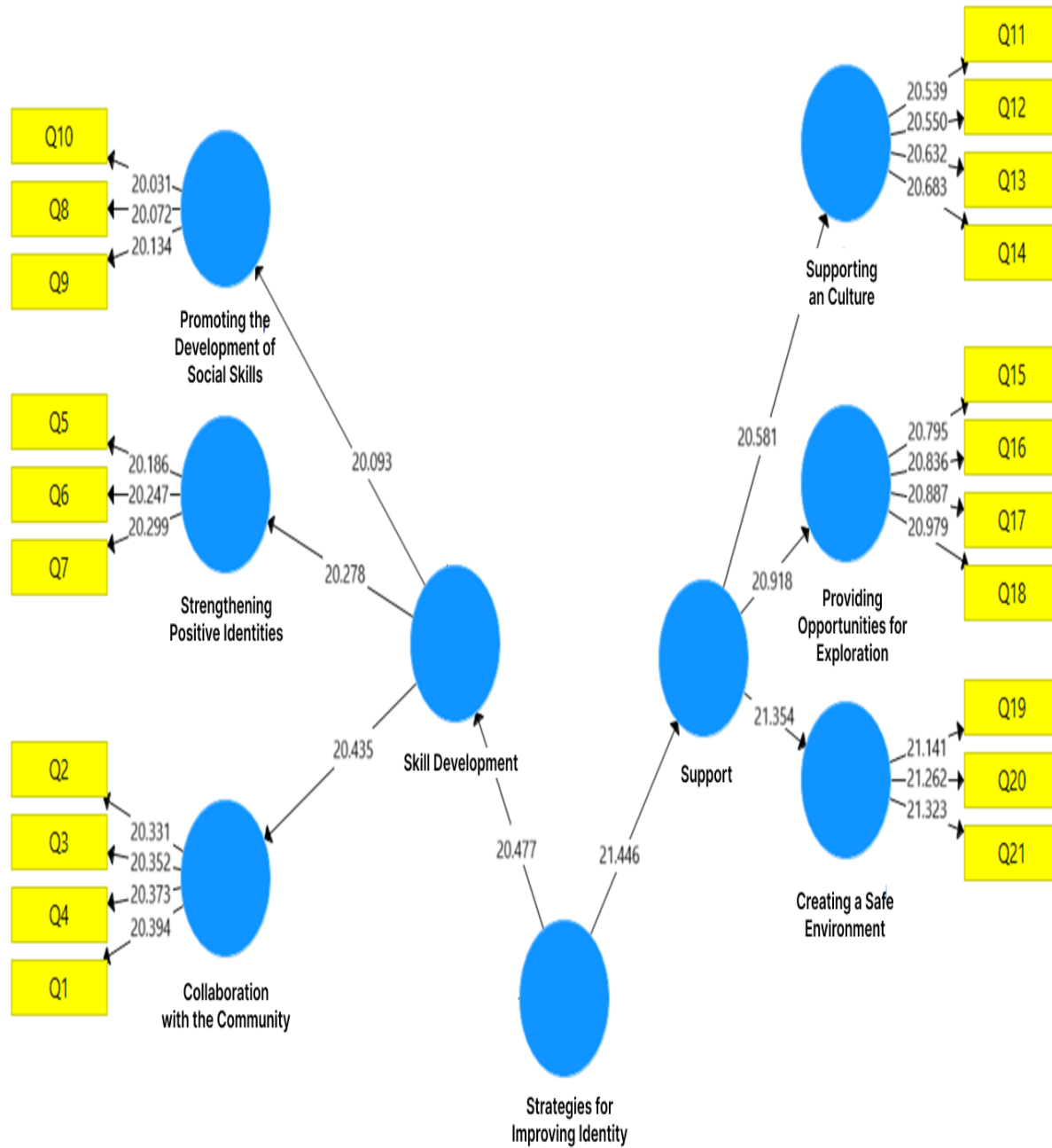


As shown in Figure 2, the factor loading for all components and indicators is higher than 0.4, which indicates that the explanation of indicators for each

component, and of components for each dimension, is acceptable.

Figure 3

Quantitative Validity of the Model for Strategies to Improve Identity in First Cycle Secondary School Students in the Significance of Coefficients State



As seen in Figure 3, the t-value for the significance of each of the indicators and components is higher than 2.58, meaning that with 99% confidence, all indicators for each component, and components for each dimension, are confirmed. Therefore, no indicator or component needs to be removed.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The model presented in the current study serves as a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing identity in first-cycle secondary school students. It categorizes various dimensions of identity into three main categories: scientific, social, and individual identity. The purpose of this

model is to provide an analytical framework for understanding identity in students and emphasizes that identity is not only influenced by individual and internal aspects but also shaped by social and scientific interactions. For instance, one's understanding of scientific identity can contribute to the formation of meaningful and effective social relationships in the school environment, thereby influencing student behavior and social interactions.

In this regard, teachers and researchers can use this precise categorization to better understand the identity-related needs and challenges of students, and to design and implement educational and support programs tailored to each identity dimension. One of the strengths of this model is its innovation in highlighting the alignment and interaction between the various dimensions of identity. Many existing models in this field have addressed scientific, social, and individual identities separately, while the present model places greater emphasis on the interconnections and mutual influence of these dimensions on one another. For example, a student's scientific identity, shaped through research efforts and participation in scientific projects, can have a positive impact on their social identity. This is because students, by strengthening their scientific identity, may view themselves as effective and respected individuals within the scientific community, thereby enhancing their social responsibility and fostering positive interactions with classmates and teachers.

Similarly, positive social interactions, such as supportive friendships formed in the classroom, can strengthen and solidify students' individual identities, helping them build self-confidence and self-awareness. Compared to other identity models, the current model not only acknowledges commonalities but also clearly identifies significant differences. Many models, especially identity models, emphasize the importance of social and individual identity dimensions and explore the role of social interactions and individual experiences in identity formation (Appachu & Singh, 2024). These models also highlight the role of supportive and cultural environments in strengthening identity. However, the present model stands out by specifically focusing on the scientific dimension of identity, particularly within the context of students, and presents unique strengths compared to other models. Many of these models focus primarily on social and individual identity, while this model specifically addresses the importance of specialized knowledge, membership in the academic community, and research skills (O'Reilly et al., 2024). The special attention to scientific identity in this model,

particularly within the context of changing educational systems and the need to develop scientific and research skills in students, represents a key innovation.

Considering the new challenges in education and the necessity of fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills in students, this model could serve as a foundation for shaping new educational programs specifically aimed at strengthening scientific identity and related skills (Malmir, 2023). Moreover, the model specifically addresses practical strategies for improving students' identities, which include support and skill development across various identity dimensions. This practical and applied approach, in comparison with many other theoretical models that focus mainly on describing and analyzing identity dimensions, offers a clear advantage and can lead to improvements in the quality of education and the strengthening of student identities.

Overall, the model presented in this research, with its emphasis on the various dimensions of identity and their interactions, offers significant innovation and applicability. It can serve as an effective conceptual framework for research and educational planning in the field of student identity. Additionally, this research aligns with previous studies (Adib Manesh, 2023; Baradaran Haqir et al., 2023; Gouvea, 2020; Hong & Perez, 2024; Jahanshahi, Haghighatian, & Behian, 2024; Siteine, 2021; Terrasse, 2021), which have examined the social influences on identity in youth, as well as with the work of Abramson and Schachter (2024) that emphasizes the role of scientific identity in shaping adolescents' cognitions (Abramson & Schachter, 2024). This alignment with previous research contributes to the validity and further applicability of the discussed model.

The limitations of the current study primarily stem from the influence of social and cultural conditions, as student identity is shaped by the prevailing societal context. Sudden changes in these conditions, such as social or economic crises, can significantly impact the research results, which are beyond the researcher's control. Additionally, the diversity in student experiences and cultural backgrounds further complicates the analysis of identity. Each student's unique experiences influence their identity formation, leading to potential variability in the findings, which the researcher cannot fully account for or control.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that policymakers design and implement programs that create safe and supportive educational environments for students, allowing them to explore and express various

aspects of their identity without fear of judgment. Furthermore, curricula should be designed to address the analysis and exploration of different dimensions of identity (scientific, social, and individual) and assist students in exploring their own identities.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

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

Transparency Statement

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

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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