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Exploring Identity Development of Therapeutic Boarding School Alumni

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College of Allied Health

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Travis Philipsen

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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Exploring Identity Development of Therapeutic Boarding School Alumni

by

Travis Philipsen

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

Research on therapeutic boarding schools (TBS) has largely focused on treatment experiences and immediate adolescent outcomes, with limited attention to identity development after program discharge. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine identity development during emerging adulthood in TBS alumni aged 18-24 and to explore how internal strengths and external supports influenced participants' developmental experiences after leaving TBS. Positive youth development was the guiding theoretical framework, emphasizing the bidirectional relationship between a person and the external ecological assets they access. Semistructured interviews were conducted with six alumni, and data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis within a qualitative descriptive framework. Inductive thematic analysis was conducted according to Braun and Clarke's procedure. Findings illustrated identity development as a gradual, effortful process shaped by renegotiated autonomy, recovering a sense of self, and competence-building following prolonged external control and trauma exposure. The study contributes to the literature by shifting attention from in-program experiences to post-institutional identity development, highlighting emerging adulthood as a critical period of reconstruction rather than delayed development for this population. These findings underscore the importance of post-discharge contexts and autonomy-supportive environments in understanding identity development among individuals exiting highly controlled adolescent placements.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Emerging adulthood (ages 18-29) is a pivotal developmental period characterized by identity development, autonomy, and the establishment of meaningful relationships (Arnett, 2000; Nowakowska, 2020). For alumni of therapeutic boarding schools (TBS), this transition often involves unique and compounded challenges stemming from their time in highly structured and sometimes coercive environments (Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2020). In contrast to peers who navigate normative developmental trajectories, TBS alumni frequently grapple with unresolved trauma, disrupted family dynamics, and missed developmental milestones, all of which may compromise their ability to achieve outcomes such as relational stability, self-sufficiency, and vocational competence (Mooney & Leighton, 2019).

While existing literature has examined the in-program experiences of TBS students, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these individuals experience life post-discharge (Golightley, 2023), especially in terms of the individual strengths and ecological assets that contribute to their developmental progress. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of TBS alumni during emerging adulthood, with a specific focus on how they navigate identity development during this critical period. The findings from this research have the potential to inform clinical practice, policy, and aftercare planning by shifting from deficit-based perspectives to strengths-based approaches that prioritize resilience and thriving (Benson et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2005).

This chapter provides an overview of the study, including the background, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and significance. This chapter sets the stage for a comprehensive examination of the lived experiences of TBS alumni during emerging adulthood. Specifically, it highlights the need to examine how this population engages with the developmental tasks of identity development, autonomy, and relationship-building in the aftermath of residential treatment. The chapter also underscores the potential implications of this research for clinical practice, policy, and aftercare planning by moving toward a strengths-based understanding that emphasizes resilience, adaptive functioning, and long-term developmental outcomes (Benson et al., 2007, 2011; Lerner et al., 2005).

Background

Emerging adulthood is characterized by identity exploration, increasing independence, and the formation of intimate relationships (Arnett, 2000). For TBS alumni, navigating this period may be particularly complex due to the restrictive and, at times, coercive nature of their adolescent treatment environments (Chatfield et al., 2021). These structured settings can disrupt normative development and limit opportunities for autonomy and self-expression. Despite growing attention on the troubled teen industry (TTI) and calls for increased oversight (Krebs, 2021), there is a lack of empirical understanding of how alumni make sense of themselves and their lives following discharge. Because identity development can shape other emerging adult tasks, such as autonomy and intimate relationships, understanding alumni perspectives during this

period is important (Nowakowska, 2020). The positive youth development (PYD) framework provides a strengths-based lens to examine how individual assets and environmental supports contribute to identity development during this transition period (Lerner, 2018).

TBS are part of the broader TTI, which serves tens of thousands of adolescents in the United States annually (Chatfield et al., 2021). These institutions claim to address behavioral and mental health issues through residential care but are often characterized by highly controlled environments, lack of oversight, and coercive practices, including involuntary transportation and punishment-based interventions (Golightley, 2020; Magnuson et al., 2022; Mooney & Leighton, 2019). Although TBS programs may provide an alternative to juvenile justice system involvement, evidence of their long-term effectiveness is unresearched, and adverse outcomes such as trauma, social isolation, and difficulty trusting future treatment are commonly reported (Mooney & Leighton, 2019). Researchers have also highlighted the limited regulatory frameworks governing these institutions, which allow significant variability in the quality of care provided and thousands of abuse allegations reported (Krebs, 2021; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024).

Despite these critiques, the post-discharge period remains largely unexamined. Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage in which youth progress through three primary tasks: establishing autonomy, developing identity, and building relational intimacy (Arnett, 2000; Nowakowska, 2020). PYD further suggests that thriving is fostered when individual strengths are supported by opportunities, resources, and

relationships in the individual's context (Lerner et al., 2005). While principles of PYD have been demonstrated to be effective in promoting positive outcomes across diverse emerging adult populations, their application to TBS alumni remains underexplored (Dost-Gozkan et al., 2021; Martin-Barrado & Gomez-Baya, 2024). Existing research tends to focus on in-program experiences rather than on the critical post-discharge period, when alumni face challenges reintegrating into their communities and sustaining treatment gains (Chatfield et al., 2021, 2019; Golightley, 2023; Mooney & Leighton, 2019). Accordingly, the literature provides limited guidance on what supports or assets alumni perceive as helpful as they pursue their primary tasks after discharge.

By examining the PYD framework, the study aims to provide a strengths-based perspective that shifts the focus from managing deficits to fostering thriving. Its findings can inform clinicians, families, and policymakers on how to better support TBS alumni in achieving positive developmental outcomes, ultimately contributing to more effective and responsive approaches to therapeutic residential care. Given these conditions and developmental demands, clarifying how alumni describe post-discharge identity development provides the foundation for the study's problem statement.

Problem Statement

Although TBS are intended to support adolescent development, no research has examined alumni experiences in achieving the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood after leaving TBS programs. Existing research prioritizes in-program experiences rather than post-discharge developmental trajectories (Golightley, 2023). This oversight is significant given the importance of these developmental tasks for

emerging adult outcomes and the challenges TBS alumni face upon reentry into society (Chatfield, 2019; Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2023; Mooney & Leighton, 2019).

Without insight into how this population experiences developmental tasks, such as identity development in particular, interventions and support systems may remain misaligned with alumni needs.

Alumni who have been interviewed in prior studies often report ongoing struggles with mental health, substance use, post-traumatic stress, suicidality, and strained family relationships (Chatfield, 2019, Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2023; Mooney & Leighton, 2019). These factors impede critical developmental milestones, including independent living, stable employment, and the formation of meaningful interpersonal connections (Liu et al., 2021). While no researchers have reported on outcomes for this population, the issues mentioned above mirror difficulties reported among youth transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC; Taylor et al., 2024; Tessier et al., 2018).

The PYD framework (Lerner et al., 2018) has been effective in fostering resilience and thriving among diverse youth populations (Martin-Barrado & Gomez-Baya, 2024). But this model has not yet been applied to TBS alumni. This lack of application underscores a critical gap in a body of literature that has historically focused on poor outcomes rather than resilience among TBS alumni. Addressing this gap is vital for advancing clinical psychology and improving intervention strategies. By examining the lived experiences of TBS alumni through the lens of PYD, this study seeks to inform strengths-based practices that prioritize resilience and positive outcomes. Doing so contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how individual and ecological

assets support identity development in a population at heightened risk for developmental disruption. To address this critical gap, this research explores the lived experiences of identity development among TBS alumni.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative descriptive study with a phenomenological orientation aims to explore how TBS alumni aged 18–24 describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood. Using the PYD framework (Lerner et al., 2018), this study examined how internal strengths and external supports influence identity development following discharge from a TBS. The findings can inform more effective, strengths-based aftercare practices and contribute to a deeper understanding of the developmental needs of this underserved population. This purpose directly informs the research question guiding this study and was intended to provide nuanced insights into alumni experiences.

Research Question

How do TBS alumni aged 18–24 describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This study is guided by the PYD framework, which emphasizes the dynamic interaction between internal strengths and external assets in fostering resilience and thriving among youth (Benson et al., 2007, 2011; Lerner et al., 2005). It focuses on aligning individual strengths, such as self-efficacy, purpose, and emotional competence, with external assets in the environment, including supportive relationships and opportunities for growth. The framework is particularly relevant to understanding

interactions that promote identity development in emerging adulthood, a period marked by transition and self-discovery. PYD provides a strengths-based lens that contrasts with deficit-oriented views often associated with the troubled-teen industry, offering an opportunity to examine how TBS alumni can thrive despite early adversity (Lerner et al., 2005).

Nature of the Study

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological orientation to explore how TBS alumni describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected to provide a clear, low-inference account of participants' lived experiences using their own language and perspectives, while avoiding the imposition of abstract theoretical interpretations or causal explanations. The phenomenological orientation of the study informed the focus on participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes related to identity development following discharge from highly structured residential environments. However, this study does not claim adherence to transcendental or interpretive phenomenology. Rather than seeking to extract an essential or universal structure of the phenomenon, the aim was to describe shared experiential patterns across participants in a manner that remains faithful to how identity development was experienced and articulated.

This design is well suited to an underexplored population such as TBS alumni, for whom limited empirical research exists regarding post-discharge developmental trajectories. By prioritizing participants' first-person accounts and emphasizing

descriptive clarity, this approach allows for a nuanced examination of how alumni navigate identity development during emerging adulthood while maintaining methodological rigor and analytic transparency. Guided by the PYD framework (Lerner et al, 2018), this study investigates the interaction between individual strengths and environmental supports. As in Gupta and Reddy (2023) and Lerner et al. (2005), this study frames resilience as the process of overcoming adversity and thriving in the pursuit of growth and developmental success. This framework provided a theoretical lens for analyzing participants' narratives—namely, how internal assets and external resources supported or failed to support their identity development.

Semistructured interviews collected rich, narrative data from participants aged 18 to 24 who previously attended a U.S.-based TBS. Due to the enormous variety of paths emerging adults take during this phase in life (Arnett & Mitra, 2020), it is essential to limit the age range of participants to ensure that saturation of themes can be achieved. Participants were recruited via TBS alumni networks and social media platforms. The interview questions focus on participants' experiences of how internal strengths and external assets contributed to their identity development. Thematic analysis (as described by Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided data interpretation, identifying common patterns and meanings related to identity development. This approach is appropriate for exploring complex, subjective experiences and aligns with the study's aim to understand how TBS alumni construct their sense of self during a critical developmental period.

The findings were expected to contribute to a greater understanding of how TBS alumni navigate the developmental period of emerging adulthood, offering insights for

clinical practice, policy development, and aftercare programming. By emphasizing the lived realities of TBS alumni through a strengths-based lens, this study sought to inform more responsive and supportive interventions for this vulnerable population.

Definitions

Autonomy (self-governance): Autonomy refers to the perceived and enacted capacity to self-govern, making independent decisions, and directing one’s behavior in accordance with personally meaningful values and goals, and assuming responsibility for one’s life direction as dependence on parents decreases (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2021).

Emerging adulthood: Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage, typically spanning ages 18–29 in the western world, characterized by exploration and transitions in identity, autonomy, and development of deepened intimacy in relationships (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2021).

Identity development: Identity development is forming a stable and coherent sense of self through exploration and commitment to values, beliefs, and life goals (Kroger, 2007).

Resilience: Resilience is the capacity to adapt successfully to adversity, stress, or significant challenges, often facilitated by protective factors such as supportive relationships and internal strengths (Gupta & Reddy, 2023).

Self-cohesion (cohesive self): In Kohut’s self psychology, self-cohesion refers to experiencing the self as a single, well-integrated structure that feels continuous over time and held together as a whole (i.e., “cohesive in space”; Aguilar, 2025; Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

Therapeutic boarding schools (TBS): TBS are residential programs offering structured educational and therapeutic interventions for adolescents with behavioral, psychological, or social challenges (Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2020).

Troubled teen industry (TTI): The troubled teen industry refers to a variety of privately run residential programs, TBS, and wilderness therapy programs designed to rehabilitate adolescents with behavioral, emotional, or mental health challenges (Golightley, 2020; Mooney & Leighton, 2019).

Assumptions

In qualitative research, assumptions are essential for shaping the study's methodology and guiding its interpretation. They are beliefs the researcher accepts as accurate without direct empirical verification, yet they are fundamental for ensuring the study's coherence, relevance, and depth (Peoples, 2021). For this study, which explored the lived experiences of TBS alumni during emerging adulthood, a foundational assumption was that participants could accurately recall and articulate their experiences post-discharge and that they would be honest about these experiences during the interview. These reflections were assumed to provide meaningful insights into how they navigated key developmental tasks such as identity development.

Another critical assumption was that participants are consciously aware of the internal and external factors influencing their developmental trajectories. This includes their recognition of supports, challenges, and coping mechanisms that have shaped their sense of self in emerging adulthood. It was further assumed that participants would be willing to disclose both positive and adverse experiences related to their time at a TBS,

including how those experiences may continue to impact their current well-being, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships. This openness is essential to exploring the dynamic interaction between past environments and present developmental outcomes.

Lastly, the study assumed that participants' experiences, while individually unique, reflect shared themes and patterns that can illuminate broader developmental processes within this population. Although qualitative research did not aim for statistical generalization, the collective narratives are assumed to offer transferable insights into how TBS alumni navigate emerging adulthood. This assumption underpins the study's use of descriptive phenomenology, which distills the essence of lived experiences across individuals and provides a deeper understanding of the social and psychological factors that shape post-TBS life transitions.

Scope and Delimitations

This study addresses a gap in the literature concerning how TBS alumni transition into emerging adulthood. While prior research has focused mainly on in-program experiences within TBS settings (Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2020), little is known about the developmental trajectories of alumni following discharge, particularly as they navigate identity development. This study explored the lived experiences of TBS alumni through the lens of the PYD framework, which emphasizes the alignment of individual strengths with environmental supports to promote resilience and thriving during periods of developmental transition (Benson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2005). This scope allows for an in-depth examination of how internal and external assets influence adaptation and growth post-TBS.

The study is delimited to alumni of U.S.-based therapeutic boarding schools who attended within the past 10 years. This temporal boundary ensures the relevance of findings to contemporary TBS program structures and recent transitions into adulthood. Excluding alumni from non-U.S. programs accounts for differences in national policies, oversight structures, and institutional practices that may significantly alter alumni outcomes. Similarly, individuals who attended other residential settings—such as detention centers, psychiatric hospitals, or group homes—are excluded, as these placements follow different placement protocols, legal structures, and regulatory standards. These delimitations are necessary to isolate the unique features of the TBS experience and its developmental implications for alumni during emerging adulthood.

This study also excludes quantitative methods, favoring a qualitative design and employing semistructured interviews to elicit detailed, first-person accounts of alumni experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). While this limits the ability to generalize findings to larger populations, it enables a nuanced understanding of how participants make sense of their developmental journeys post-TBS. Thematic analysis will identify common patterns across participants' narratives (Moustakas, 1994). Although the findings are not intended for broad generalization, they are expected to offer transferable insights that inform clinical practice and policy regarding aftercare, developmental support, and strengths-based intervention strategies for TBS alumni.

Limitations

Several limitations may influence the study's design, data collection, and interpretation of findings. One notable limitation is the potential recruitment bias in

sourcing participants from survivor networks and advocacy groups. Individuals with particularly negative or traumatic experiences may be more inclined to participate in research that allows them to voice their concerns, potentially overrepresenting adverse outcomes (Golightley, 2020). This may skew the overall narrative toward more critical depictions of the TBS experience, thereby limiting the inclusion of alumni who may have experienced more neutral or beneficial outcomes. Additionally, because participants are reflecting on past events, recall bias may have affected their memories' accuracy and completeness (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Kvale, 1996).

A second limitation involves the interpretive nature of qualitative thematic analysis. While this method is widely used to extract meaningful themes from participant narratives, it remains inherently subjective. The researcher's perspective may influence the emphasis on specific patterns or interpretations (Moustakas, 1994). Although systematic coding procedures and reflexive practices were employed to minimize bias and enhance the credibility of findings, complete objectivity cannot be guaranteed. These measures help ensure that coding decisions are transparent and that the influence of researcher bias is minimized, increasing the trustworthiness of the findings.

Finally, the study's focus on the developmental period of emerging adulthood narrows the scope of analysis, excluding a detailed examination of specific TBS program components and their direct influence on alumni outcomes (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2021). While this developmental focus provides valuable insight into post-TBS adaptation, it does not capture longitudinal outcomes or the lasting impact of programmatic practices (Chatfield et al., 2021). The qualitative design also limits transferability to broader TBS

alumni populations, given the diversity of experiences shaped by factors such as socioeconomic status, parental involvement, or access to post-discharge resources (Krebs, 2021). Future research could expand the participant pool to include a broader range of alumni perspectives and employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to enhance generalizability and depth (Manrique-Millones et al., 2021). Integrating alternative theoretical frameworks, such as ecological systems theory or resilience theory, may also support a more comprehensive understanding of how individual and systemic factors interact over time to shape the developmental trajectories of TBS alumni (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Lerner et al., 2005).

Significance

This study is critical to advancing knowledge of the lived experiences of TBS alumni as they navigate identity development during emerging adulthood. Existing research primarily focuses on in-program experiences, overlooking alumni's experiences after leaving these structured environments (Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2020). This research addresses a substantial gap in the literature by examining the internal assets (e.g., self-efficacy, resilience) and external supports (e.g., family, mentors, community) that shape identity development. Grounded in the PYD framework (Lerner et al., 2018), the study offers a strengths-based lens for understanding how former TBS students develop identity following institutional intervention. This perspective challenges traditional deficit-based narratives and highlights the capacity for growth, adaptation, and thriving.

Beyond academic contribution, the study carries important clinical and social implications. It elevates the voices of a rarely studied population, offering insights into trauma-informed care, aftercare planning, and youth development programming. Findings may inform evidence-based practices for clinicians, educators, and social workers seeking to support TBS alumni through developmentally appropriate, strengths-oriented interventions. For policymakers, the study underscores the importance of post-program oversight and support systems that foster long-term well-being. By promoting developmentally responsive and evidence-informed approaches to treatment outcomes, the research contributes to positive social change—reframing how institutional experiences are understood and supporting more equitable transitions into adulthood.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the central focus of this study: exploring how TBS alumni aged 18–24 describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood. It outlined the background, research gap, purpose, and significance of the study and presented the research questions and theoretical foundation grounded in PYD. This chapter underscored the importance of addressing the lack of research on post-discharge developmental trajectories of TBS alumni. Chapter 2 will provide a detailed review of the literature on therapeutic boarding schools, emerging adulthood, identity development, and applying PYD in similar populations, further establishing the foundation for this inquiry.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 critically reviews the literature relevant to the developmental outcomes of TBS alumni as they transition into emerging adulthood. The central problem addressed in this study is the lack of understanding regarding how TBS alumni navigate the challenges of post-discharge life, how they form their identity, and how these experiences shape emerging adulthood. TBS programs claim to rehabilitate youth and prepare them for reintegration, but existing research has not examined whether these claims are reflected in the long-term developmental outcomes after alumni reenter their communities (Chatfield, 2019, Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2023; Mooney & Leighton, 2019). This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of TBS alumni and examine how internal assets, and external supports contribute to resilience and thriving in emerging adulthood. The literature reviewed in this chapter establishes the relevance of this problem by documenting adverse post-discharge outcomes, including mental health challenges, substance use, and disrupted relationships, and by highlighting the parallels between TBS alumni and youth exiting OOHC who face similarly compromised developmental trajectories.

This chapter is organized into three main sections to support the study's theoretical and empirical foundation. The first section outlines the literature search strategy and provides transparency regarding the sources and scope of research reviewed. The second section introduces the PYD framework, which guides the study's strengths-based focus on internal and external ecological assets (Lerner et al., 2018). This theoretical lens is used to understand how TBS alumni adapt following program

completion. The third section synthesizes empirical literature on TBS programming, including critiques of the TTI, and reviews research on emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental period (Nelson, 2021). Throughout the chapter, I identify key knowledge gaps regarding long-term developmental outcomes for TBS alumni and the lack of research applying positive, asset-based frameworks to this population. These gaps underscore the need for this study and provide the rationale for its phenomenological approach.

Literature Search Strategy

A comprehensive and systematic literature search identified peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and scholarly publications relevant to TBS programs, emerging adulthood, and developmental transitions. The search process utilized multiple academic databases and search engines, including APA PsycInfo, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, SocINDEX, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, and Google Scholar. These platforms were selected to ensure access to interdisciplinary literature across psychology, social work, education, and developmental science. Key search terms included *therapeutic boarding schools, residential treatment, adolescent mental health, post-discharge outcomes, emerging adulthood, positive youth development, youth transitions, resilience, and ecological assets*. Boolean operators and database filters such as peer-reviewed status and publication dates within the last 10 years were used to narrow and refine results.

The search process was iterative. It began with broader terms such as residential care and adolescent mental health to establish a foundational understanding of the field.

As key themes emerged, particularly around post-treatment transitions, identity development, and developmental outcomes, searches were refined using more specific terms like therapeutic boarding schools, emerging adulthood, and ecological assets. For example, APA PsycInfo searches using terms such as *therapeutic boarding schools*, *transitions*, and *developmental outcomes* yielded relevant studies on alumni experiences. SocINDEX searches incorporating terms like *residential treatment*, *positive youth development*, and *youth transitions* produced literature focused on systemic barriers and supports for young adults.

Where limited empirical research was available on post-discharge experiences of TBS alumni, literature on similar populations, such as youth exiting foster care or other residential systems, was reviewed to inform the contextual framework. When empirical findings were limited, supplementary sources such as theoretical models, practice-based publications, and policy reviews were incorporated to address gaps and support the development of the study's conceptual framework.

Theoretical Framework: Positive Youth Development

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the PYD framework, emphasizing the dynamic, bidirectional interactions between individuals and their environments (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2018). PYD was developed in response to traditional deficit-based models that focus on risk behaviors and psychopathology in youth. Instead, PYD emphasizes the potential for all young people to thrive when provided with appropriate support, opportunities for growth, and positive developmental relationships that align with the youth's internal strengths (Benson et al., 2007, 2011;

Lerner et al., 2005). This orientation aligns with contemporary views in developmental psychology that recognize resilience and well-being as attainable outcomes across diverse youth populations, including those with adverse life experiences.

Major Propositions and Assumptions

The PYD framework is built on the proposition that aligning individual strengths, such as emotional regulation, social competence, and purpose with external ecological assets such as supportive relationships, community engagement, and meaningful opportunities—results in thriving, a dynamic process of achieving optimal developmental outcomes (Lerner et al., 2005, 2018; Shek et al., 2019). Thriving is often conceptualized through the Five Cs: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring, with a sixth “C” contribution emerging when these qualities are integrated and expressed through engagement in community and society (Lerner et al., 2018). The core assumptions of PYD include the belief that all youth possess strengths that can be developed, positive development is most likely to occur in supportive environments, and thriving is a dynamic and context-dependent process that continues into emerging adulthood (Lerner et al., 2018; Nelson, 2021).

Applications of PYD in Existing Research

PYD has been widely applied in educational, clinical, and community contexts. For example, youth development programs in educational settings have improved academic outcomes and social-emotional skills, while community-based programs like 4-H have effectively used PYD principles to foster leadership, civic engagement, and self-efficacy (Álamo-Muñoz et al., 2024; Mas-Expósito et al., 2022). Recent literature

extended the application of PYD to emerging adulthood, demonstrating its relevance for supporting identity development, resilience, and life satisfaction in this transitioning group (Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021). These findings validate PYD as an adaptable framework for promoting resilience and thriving beyond adolescence, especially for populations who face developmental disruptions.

Rationale for PYD in the Current Study

The selection of PYD as the theoretical foundation for this study is based on its compatibility with the research objective: to understand how TBS alumni navigate emerging adulthood by drawing upon individual and ecological assets (Arnett, 2000; Lerner et al., 2005; Nelson, 2021). TBS alumni often re-enter society with disrupted developmental trajectories due to restrictive, highly structured, and sometimes coercive environments (Chatfield et al., 2021). Applying PYD to this population offers a strengths-based perspective that contrasts with deficit-oriented narratives often associated with alumni of the TTI. Rather than focusing on pathology or failure, this framework supports exploring how thriving can occur post-discharge through the interplay of internal and external assets.

Integration with Research Questions and Contribution to Theory

This study builds on PYD's central propositions by examining how individual and ecological assets influence the transition to emerging adulthood among TBS alumni. The research questions are designed to allow emergent, participant-driven themes and the findings will be considered through a strengths-based lens informed by PYD. In doing so,

the study contributes to the theoretical advancement of PYD by applying it to a new and underexplored population of young adults exiting private residential treatment.

This study also extends PYD's utility into the context of systemic intervention and aftercare planning. By exploring how identity development is achieved through the bidirectional impact of the emerging adult's internal strength and access to environmental resources, the study not only tests the applicability of PYD but also informs programmatic and policy strategies for fostering long-term developmental success among TBS alumni. Given these theoretical underpinnings, applying PYD to the context of TBS alumni offers an innovative, strengths-based lens for understanding how internal and external assets support or hinder developmental trajectories during emerging adulthood.

Literature Review of Related Key Topics

This literature review synthesizes empirical and conceptual work on TBS programs, the troubled teen industry (TTI), and developmental transitions during emerging adulthood. It identifies gaps in existing knowledge on alumni identity development, reviews how scholars have studied this population, and evaluates the strengths and limitations of these approaches. There are very few studies examining TBS alumni, and none examine their developmental experiences as they transition into adulthood. This study addresses this gap by examining how TBS alumni navigate identity development in emerging adulthood, an area that is currently underexamined in the youth development and institutional care literature.

The Troubled Teen Industry: Scope, Critiques, and Misconceptions

The troubled teen industry (TTI) encompasses a multi-billion-dollar network of private residential programs for adolescents with behavioral, emotional, or mental health challenges (Golightley, 2020; Krebs, 2021). TBS organizations operate as one model within this industry. They are frequently characterized as total institutions, which are highly controlled environments that separate adolescents from normative social systems (Chatfield et al., 2021). Though designed for rehabilitation, many TBS programs have been criticized for using coercive tactics, operating with minimal oversight, and failing to produce long-term benefits (Mooney & Leighton, 2019).

While often perceived as institutions for upper-class youth (Golightley, 2020; Mooney & Leighton, 2019; Pfaffendorf, 2019), TBS programs serve adolescents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Public funds, including Medicaid, special education placements, and court referrals, frequently offset tuition costs, thereby challenging the notion that these institutions serve only the wealthy (Krebs, 2021).

Moreover, students are not always placed due to severe psychopathology. Many are admitted for normative adolescent behaviors that parents find difficult to manage, such as academic disengagement, sexual identity exploration, defiance, or substance use (Mooney & Leighton, 2019). This variability in referral reasons raises practice and placement concerns about overuse and misapplication of intensive treatment settings. Thus, employing the PYD framework in this research offers the potential to shift from deficit-focused narratives shared in the troubled teen literature toward identifying factors that foster resilience and thriving post-discharge.

Known Outcomes and Persistent Post-Program Challenges

Existing literature documents a wide range of adverse outcomes following discharge from TBS programs, including mental health struggles, hospitalizations, suicidality, PTSD symptoms, family estrangement, and difficulties with social reintegration (Chatfield, 2019; Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2023, 2020; Mooney & Leighton, 2019). Many alumni report challenges with identity development and completing developmental milestones associated with emerging adulthood, such as forming meaningful relationships, attaining stable employment or housing, and establishing independence (Mooney & Leighton, 2019).

Self-efficacy, individuals' perceived capability to meet demands through practical action, can be conceptualized as a meaningful developmental outcome in emerging adulthood because it supports persistence and engagement with key tasks (e.g., education and work roles) during a period marked by expanding responsibility. Recent empirical work continues to show that self-efficacy is strongly linked with performance and motivation in developmental contexts, underscoring its practical relevance as young people navigate increasing independence (Basileo et al., 2024). Within Positive Youth Development (PYD), competence and mastery-based strengths are commonly treated as central markers of thriving and positive adjustment, aligning self-efficacy with broader developmental processes of skill-building and confidence (Buenconsejo et al., 2025). Evidence from adjacent populations suggests why self-efficacy may be particularly salient following institutional or system involvement: among young adults with histories of youth residential care, self-efficacy has been examined as an individual factor

associated with resilience-related functioning following adversity exposure (von Wendorff et al., 2025), and intervention development work with transition-age foster youth has explicitly targeted coping self-efficacy and help-seeking as modifiable mechanisms of improved adjustment (Blakeslee et al., 2023). Together, these literatures underscore the importance of examining how TBS alumni describe building or struggling to build self-efficacy and mastery as they navigate the demands of emerging adulthood following highly structured adolescent placements. Notably, research findings are not uniform. One study found participants were nearly evenly divided between those who experienced TBS as helpful, harmful, or neutral (Mooney & Leighton, 2019). Most studies report predominantly adverse outcomes (Chatfield, 2019; Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2023, 2020; Pfaffendorf, 2019). Some proponents argue that residential placement prevents worse outcomes, such as incarceration (Mooney & Leighton, 2019). However, critics maintain that such positive outcomes are likely attributable to external factors, such as family support, socioeconomic privilege, or natural maturation, rather than to the program's therapeutic efficacy (Mooney & Leighton, 2019).

Trauma exposure can disrupt identity development by shaping how individuals understand who they are, what they can expect from themselves, and how they locate meaning in their life story, often resulting in enduring negative identity content and diminished self-concept clarity. Contemporary trauma theory increasingly treats identity-related disruption as central—particularly in complex PTSD models that describe “negative identities” and disturbances in self-organization (including negative self-concept) as core posttraumatic sequelae (Hyland et al., 2023). In parallel, narrative-

focused trauma scholarship emphasizes that recovery frequently involves re-integrating traumatic experiences into a usable personal narrative and re-establishing continuity between past, present, and future self-understanding rather than merely reducing symptoms (Wiesepepe et al., 2025). For individuals exiting highly structured or controlling institutions, identity reconstruction may be further complicated by prolonged external regulation of daily life, role expectations, and imposed social identities, followed by a transition in which the person must “re-author” self-definition in less structured environments (Almeida et al., 2025; Floridi, 2025). Emerging-adulthood research with care leavers similarly suggests that post-placement transitions can leave young adults with narrative vulnerabilities and lingering effects of placement experiences that shape their pathway to adulthood (Boullion et al., 2025; Sulimani-Aidan & Kovach, 2024). However, despite these adjacent literatures, there remains a gap in understanding how individuals, particularly those leaving highly controlled adolescent placements, describe the lived process of reassembling a coherent sense of self (i.e., continuity, integration, and self-authorship) during emerging adulthood, beyond broad outcome indicators or symptom-based accounts.

Transition to Adulthood: Parallels with Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care

Although no studies have directly examined the experiences of TBS alumni during emerging adulthood, parallels can be drawn from the literature on youth transitioning out of out-of-home care (OOHC), such as foster care, kinship care, and residential treatment facilities. Like TBS alumni, these individuals often exit structured environments without adequate preparation or support, leaving them vulnerable to

housing instability, poor mental health, justice involvement, and unemployment (Heerde et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2024). Sariaslan et al. (2022) found that adolescents with residential care histories experienced social and health issues 1.4 to 5 times more than siblings who remained in the home, even when controlling for early life adversity. These outcomes suggest that residential intervention does not inherently promote long-term well-being and should be used judiciously.

Autonomy in emerging adulthood refers to the developing capacity and perceived authority to self-govern, that is, to make independent, personally meaningful decisions and take increasing responsibility for the direction of one's life as dependence on parents and other authority figures decreases. In emerging adulthood, autonomy is often reflected in day-to-day decision-making (e.g., where and with whom to live and work, educational choices, relationship boundaries, and a value-based life direction) and in the internal experience of being the primary agent of one's life. As emerging adults move toward adulthood, autonomy becomes a central feature of identity development because it involves both enacting choices and owning them as self-authored commitments (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2021). Autonomy may be especially complicated for individuals exiting highly controlled adolescent placements because opportunities to practice self-governance can be constrained during placement and post-discharge transitions may involve either abrupt freedom without scaffolding or continued external control through monitoring, family dependence, or institutional requirements (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2021).

While OOHC and TBS populations differ in legal status, systemic oversight, and demographic profiles, the developmental risks associated with abrupt discharge and unsupported transitions are similar. These comparative insights highlight the need to understand how TBS alumni construct adult identities and seek stability after institutionalization.

Gaps in Methodology and Representation

Most existing research on TBS alumni has employed qualitative methods, often through interviews or open-ended surveys administered to self-identified alumni (Golightley, 2020). While such methods are well suited for exploring lived experience, most studies have recruited participants from survivor networks or online support groups, increasing the likelihood of selection bias (Mooney & Leighton, 2019). As a result, findings may disproportionately reflect negative perspectives, which, although valid, limit understanding of varied or complex experiences. Quantitative studies are sparse and often rely on retrospective self-reports, raising concerns about recall bias and validity (Chatfield et al., 2021).

Additionally, the existing literature focuses narrowly on in-program experiences or immediate post-discharge adjustment (Chatfield, 2019; Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2023, 2020; Mooney & Leighton, 2019; Pfaffendorf, 2019). Investigations of this population have not moved beyond descriptive accounts of harm and the immediate post-transition period to explore the longer-term developmental trajectories of TBS alumni. No studies have examined how alumni navigate identity development, independence, and relationship-building, the core developmental tasks of emerging

adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2021). This study addresses that gap by examining the impact of internal strengths and ecological assets on identity development from a first-person, phenomenological perspective.

Rationale for Concept Selection

The existing literature has begun documenting the structural problems within TBS programs, including inadequate oversight, ethical concerns, and the prevalence of trauma among alumni (Chatfield, 2019; Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2023, 2020; Mooney & Leighton, 2019; Pfaffendorf, 2019). How emerging adults who have completed TBS programs construct meaning from these experiences as they navigate emerging adulthood remains unexplored. Specifically, there is a lack of data on how alumni form or reform their identities post-treatment.

This study builds on existing literature by shifting attention from institutional critique to development, using a strengths-based lens to explore how this population forms identity given the context of past adversity. It does not seek to generalize outcomes across all alumni but to illuminate how individual narratives reflect broader patterns in adaptation and growth. This approach is intended to expand the developmental discourse on residential treatment and contribute to more balanced and person-centered understandings of alumni experiences. Addressing these gaps through the PYD framework enables a deeper understanding of identity development among TBS alumni, emphasizing the interplay between individual strengths and ecological supports that is critical to developmental success.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature on TBS experiences offers an extensive critique of institutional practices and well-documented accounts of alumni challenges, including trauma, strained relationships, and difficulties with post-discharge adjustment. These studies have contributed to understanding institutional harm but provide limited insight into how TBS alumni experience key developmental outcomes in early adulthood, such as identity development, autonomy, and relational intimacy. While parallels can be drawn from research on youth transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC), the specific developmental trajectories of TBS alumni remain underexplored.

What is known is that many TBS alumni face lasting effects from their time in residential care, often reporting disrupted transitions into adulthood. How these individuals develop their identity after discharge remains unknown, as does what internal or external factors may contribute to their thriving. Additionally, few studies have employed a strengths-based lens to understand how alumni navigate emerging adulthood, and no known research centers alumni narratives within a developmental framework.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring how TBS alumni aged 18–24 describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood. This research extends youth development by capturing alumni perspectives and focusing on developmental adaptation. The findings may inform more developmentally attuned, and strengths-based approaches to aftercare and support. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative, phenomenological methodology used to investigate these lived experiences and provides the rationale for participant selection, data collection, and analytic strategies.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This qualitative descriptive phenomenology study aimed to explore and understand how TBS alumni aged 18–24 describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood. The study emphasized how individual and ecological assets influence identity development following discharge from a highly structured institutional environment. Grounded in the PYD framework (Lerner et al., 2018), this research sought to illuminate the lived experiences of a historically underexamined population and to identify developmental factors that contribute to positive development. By capturing the voices of alumni, the study aimed to advance understanding of post-residential adaptation and to inform the design of more responsive, strengths-based supports for emerging adults leaving therapeutic care settings.

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to achieve the study's purpose and address the research question. It begins with a rationale for selecting a descriptive qualitative design and explains its relevance to the study of lived experiences of identity development. The chapter then describes the researcher's role and outlines the criteria and procedures for participant recruitment and selection. Details regarding developing and implementing semi-structured interviews, including instrumentation and data collection protocols, are provided. The data analysis section explains the step-by-step process for conducting thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including coding procedures and theme identification. Trustworthiness strategies are addressed, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as well as ethical considerations related to confidentiality, informed consent, and IRB compliance.

Together, these components demonstrate how the research methods support a rigorous and ethically sound inquiry into the developmental journeys of TBS alumni.

Research Design and Rationale

This qualitative descriptive study explored how TBS alumni aged 18–24 describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood. The following research question guided the study: How do TBS alumni aged 18–24 describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood? The central phenomenon under investigation was identity development during emerging adulthood, typically ages 18 to 29 (Arnett, 2000). Personal values, autonomy, and exploration of relational intimacy characterized this stage. For alumni of TBS institutions who have experienced adolescence within highly structured, and in some cases coercive, institutional settings, identity development may have taken on unique forms as they transition into adulthood. This study sought to understand how these individuals interpret, narrate, and construct meaning from their developmental trajectories post-discharge, with particular attention to how internal strengths and external supports shape their self-construction.

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological orientation. Qualitative description emphasizes presenting participants' experiences comprehensively, using language that closely reflects how phenomena are experienced and described, rather than abstracting findings into highly interpretive or theoretical constructs. The phenomenological orientation informed attention to participants' lived experiences of identity development during emerging adulthood, particularly following adolescence spent in highly structured or coercive environments.

While phenomenological philosophy informed the study's focus on lived experience, the analytic approach did not involve transcendental reduction, eidetic analysis, or claims of uncovering a singular essence of the phenomenon. Instead, phenomenology served as an epistemological influence that shaped how participant narratives were elicited, treated, and represented. This positioning ensured alignment between the research purpose, data collection methods, and analytic strategy while preserving methodological coherence.

Role of Researcher

In this study, I assumed the role of an observer-participant, engaging with participants through in-depth, semi-structured interviews while maintaining an appropriate level of professional distance. The observer-participant stance enabled the collection of rich, authentic narratives by facilitating reflective dialogue without directly involving my own lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This role demanded a balance between empathetic engagement and methodological neutrality to preserve the integrity of participants' descriptions.

I had no personal or professional relationships with participants before the study. This absence of supervisory, instructional, or organizational ties minimized the risk of power imbalances and helped ensure that participants felt free to speak openly without fear of reprisal or judgment. This neutrality was essential in reducing potential bias and protecting participants from any perception of coercion, particularly in populations with histories of institutional control or authority-based environments such as TBS programs. I

informed participants that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

I used reflexive practice throughout the study to address potential bias and increase transparency. A reflexive journal documented ongoing assumptions, analytic decisions, and reflections on positionality during data collection and analysis (Dodgson, 2019). This journal supported a critical examination of how my perspectives and background might shape interpretation, aligning with qualitative best practices to enhance trustworthiness and reduce researcher-driven distortion (Saldaña, 2021).

Ethical considerations are central to the study's design (Mirza et al., 2023). Through an IRB-approved informed consent process, participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and rights. Confidentiality was safeguarded through secure data storage, and personally identifiable information was removed from the final database. Given the sensitive nature of some participants' experiences, appropriate protocols were in place to manage distress, including referrals to relevant resources. The study is not conducted within my work environment, and no known conflicts of interest or dual-role concerns existed. No participation incentives were offered, reducing the likelihood of coercion. Institutional research ethics standards guided all ethical procedures, prioritizing participant well-being throughout the research process.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study consisted of emerging adults who attended a TBS during adolescence. Given the limited accessibility and size of this population, a convenience sampling strategy was selected as the primary recruitment approach (Negrin et al., 2022). If initial recruitment yielded insufficient participation, outreach would have been expanded to include professional networks, such as LinkedIn, and organizations that support TBS alumni. Inclusion criteria required that participants were aged 18–24, had completed at least 6 months of a TBS program during adolescence, and had been discharged from the program for at least 6 months before the interview.

These criteria ensured developmental relevance and sufficient time for reflection and discussion of identity development in emerging adulthood. While much of the literature surrounding emerging adulthood has embraced a wider age range (18-29) (Nowakowska, 2020), Nelson (2021) observed that while some milestones associated with emerging adulthood have been pushed later than what was observed initially, such as, marriage and parenthood, from a developmental standpoint, there seemed to be significant differences in development between people aged 18-24 and 25-29. Additionally, Nelson noted evidence that people aged 18-24 participated more in identity-formation activities (like completing college) than in identity-commitment activities (like career selection) whereas this pattern was reversed in populations aged 25-29. With this study's focus on the experience of identity development, it was most relevant to interview

TBS alumni within the 18-24 age range because this is the group that would have been focused on activities that promote identity development most.

Participants were recruited through digital outreach within online communities focused on the troubled-teen industry, including Facebook groups, Reddit threads, and alumni advocacy forums. Recruitment Materials (Appendix A) briefly described the study, inclusion criteria, and instructions for initiating contact. Eligibility was confirmed through initial direct messaging or email screening. Once confirmed, participants received the informed consent form and were asked to indicate their consent by replying via email with “I consent to participate in this study.” After consent was obtained, a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) was sent to gather background information. Participants who completed the demographic questionnaire were scheduled for a virtual semi-structured interview.

Given the reliance on online recruitment through platforms like Facebook groups, Reddit forums, and TBS-specific advocacy networks, there were inherent demographic and geographic biases. Participants with greater digital access, familiarity, and inclination to participate in online communities may have been overrepresented, potentially limiting geographic and socioeconomic diversity. To mitigate these biases, recruitment materials emphasized openness to diverse participants and encouraged broad demographic participation.

The estimated sample size was 6 to 12 participants, which aligns with recommendations for phenomenological studies seeking thematic saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saturation, the point at which no new themes emerged, was the guiding

principle in determining the final sample size (Guest et al., 2006). Recruitment was extended until thematic redundancy was observed across participant narratives.

Instrumentation

This study used two researcher-developed instruments: a semi-structured interview protocol and a demographic questionnaire. The Interview Protocol (Appendix C) was developed based on relevant literature in developmental psychology, identity theory, and PYD (Arnett, 2000; Nowakowska, 2020). The protocol was designed to elicit detailed narratives from participants regarding their experiences of identity development, with attention to their internal strengths and external supports/barriers.

The interview protocol was reviewed for content validity by expert consultation and was refined to ensure alignment with the research question. The interview protocol employed a semi-structure design, which allowed for flexibility in follow-up questions, adhering to the descriptive qualitative tradition of co-constructing meaning through dialogue. Before the main study, a pilot study was conducted with two participants who do not meet the study's inclusion criteria. This pilot aimed to assess the clarity and effectiveness of the semi-structured interview protocol. Feedback from the pilot participants was used to refine the interview questions, test the technical adequacy of virtual platforms, and adjust interview length estimates. Data from the pilot was not included in the final analysis.

To enhance transferability, the Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix B) collected information on participants' age, gender, race/ethnicity, currently living situation, highest level of education achieved, current employment status, name of TBS

attended, length of stay at TBS, time since TBS discharge, reason for placement, and whether they received follow-up care upon discharge. While the study was not intended to support statistical generalization, this data contextualized the lived experiences shared in interviews. The questionnaire was evaluated by expert consultation for content validity and was adjusted to best contextualize the participants' experiences.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Information summarizing the nature of the study, its inclusion requirements, and its purpose were posted in survivor groups and forums on a variety of social media platforms. The posted information gave details of how to contact the researcher if interested in participating in the study. Upon initial contact with a prospective participant, eligibility was determined based on age, time spent in a TBS program, and time since leaving the program, as confirmed through email correspondence. Once eligibility was established, the participant was asked to email the researcher back that they consent to participate in the study, and had the opportunity to ask any questions or raise concerns regarding the research. Following participant consent, a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) was administered electronically via SurveyMonkey.

Data for this study were collected through virtual semi-structured interviews with alumni of TBS institutions residing in the United States. Following the recommendations of Negrin et al. (2022), recruitment occurred primarily through online platforms, including social media groups, forums, and advocacy networks focused on TBS alumni and the troubled-teen industry. Invitations clearly outlining the research objectives, procedures, and eligibility criteria were disseminated through these platforms.

Interviews were scheduled as virtual meetings lasting approximately 60–90 minutes using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Before beginning each interview, participants' rights, confidentiality protections, and the voluntary nature of the research were reviewed to ensure a clear understanding and address any additional questions. Additionally, a document with online mental health and crisis resources was given to the participant after completing the interview (Appendix D).

The audio from the interviews was recorded using Zoom's secure recording feature. Recordings were then securely downloaded and stored on a password-protected, encrypted drive accessible only to the researcher. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by Zoom's automatic transcription software and I manually verified the transcripts to ensure accuracy. Observational notes on non-verbal cues and key moments were documented in analytic memos after each interview (Saldaña, 2021).

The recruitment and interview phase spanned three months or until thematic saturation was achieved, with an anticipated sample size of 6-12 participants. Participants were debriefed after each interview and were reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Additionally, participants were informed that they may be contacted for a brief (30 minute) follow-up interview if clarification was necessary. Information regarding how and when to access the finalized study results was provided upon request. All collected data was managed with strict confidentiality and securely stored according to Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines.

Data Analysis Plan

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the thematic analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data. This method is suitable for identifying patterns across lived experiences and allows for inductive theme generation grounded in participants' narratives while staying rooted in the participants' language. The analytic process emphasized fidelity to participant accounts, ensuring that findings remained grounded in the data while allowing for coherent pattern identification across cases. Themes were developed to represent how participants experienced identity development, not to assert essential structures or universal truths. This approach to data analysis is appropriate for a qualitative descriptive study that seeks to understand complex, subjective experiences related to identity development.

In alignment with the six-phase framework mentioned above, (1) transcripts were read in full to facilitate familiarization with the data and understand each case fully. (2) Initial codes were developed through line-by-line analysis, using in-vivo and descriptive coding strategies to preserve participant language and identify meaning units. (3) After initial coding, related codes were grouped into broader candidate themes. (4) These candidate themes were then reviewed and some were merged, split or discarded to best reflect common ways participants experienced identity development following TBS discharge. (5) The final themes were defined and given a concise final name. (6) These themes are reported in Chapter 4 and interpreted in light of PYD in Chapter 5.

Discrepant or non-conforming cases were analyzed to ensure that the thematic structure did not reflect only the dominant narratives. These cases were integrated into

the final analysis as potential counterpoints or boundary conditions for identified themes, thereby strengthening the credibility and transferability of the findings (Lester et al., 2020). Direct quotations from participants supported the final themes to ensure transparency and grounding in the data.

The data from the demographic survey were reported to enhance contextualization of this study by providing the number of male/female participants, the age range of the participants, their living situation, employment status, and minimal information about their experience at the therapeutic boarding schools they attended. This data was reported in such a way to ensure the protection of the identity of the participants.

Issues of Trustworthiness

This study employed multiple, rigorously applied strategies to establish trustworthiness across the core criteria of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These dimensions ensure the findings are grounded in participants' lived experiences, minimizing bias and increasing the accuracy, applicability, and reliability of interpretations. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement: each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, with opportunities for follow-up a 30 minute interview if further information was needed. This extended engagement fostered rapport and allowed rich, detailed narratives to emerge. In addition, data collection continued until no new patterns or themes emerged across interviews, reflecting thematic saturation—a critical marker of qualitative rigor (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability was achieved through thick description. Detailed demographic data were collected using a pre-interview questionnaire and summarized in aggregate form to provide context while preserving confidentiality. These descriptions included participants' age ranges, time since discharge, and other relevant background factors. Thick description, as initially conceptualized by Geertz (1973), allows readers to assess whether the findings may apply to similar populations or settings.

Dependability was supported through a comprehensive audit trail documenting recruitment and data collection procedures, transcription verification, coding decisions, the rationale for theme development, analytic memos, and methodological adjustments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). NVivo was used to organize data and support consistent coding across transcripts. Triangulation was also used by examining consistencies and divergences in themes across participants to ensure findings reflected cross-participant convergence rather than single-case artifacts (Patton, 2014).

Confirmability was supported through sustained reflexivity, including maintenance of a reflexive journal to document evolving assumptions, analytic decisions, and potential biases (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). Confirmability was further reinforced by retaining clear links between raw data, codes, and themes within the audit trail and by grounding each theme in multiple participants' accounts, supporting the conclusion that findings derived from participants' narratives rather than the researcher's expectations.

Ethical Procedures

Before initiating this study, approval was obtained from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), confirming that all recruitment and data collection

procedures met Walden's ethical guidelines. These agreements clarified the study's objectives and confirmed that participant engagement was transparent, voluntary, and free of undue influence. The final dissertation included IRB approval documentation and any letters of cooperation to demonstrate procedural adherence.

Recruitment for this study occurred through digital platforms frequented by TBS alumni, including Facebook groups, Reddit forums, and TBS-specific advocacy networks. Recruitment Materials (Appendix A) included clear information about the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, confidentiality protections, and the voluntary nature of participation. Interested individuals were screened via direct message or email to verify eligibility. Those who met the inclusion criteria received a formal consent form outlining the research process, risks and benefits, and contact information for me and for Walden University's IRB. Participants indicated their informed consent by replying to the consent email with a written statement of agreement (Peoples, 2021). Before the interview, the informed consent process was revisited verbally to reinforce participant rights and ensure continued willingness to participate (Xu et al., 2020).

All interviews were conducted via Zoom to accommodate participant accessibility and privacy preferences. Participants were encouraged to select a quiet, private space for the interview and were reminded of their right to skip questions or terminate the interview at any time. Each session was audio recorded with participant consent, using Zoom's encrypted recording feature. Audio files and transcripts were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying information was stored separately in a password-protected code key on an encrypted device. This approach safeguards participant confidentiality

while maintaining data integrity (Denzin et al., 2023). All data were de-identified upon completion of data collection, securely stored for five years in accordance with Walden University's data retention policy, and permanently deleted thereafter (Peoples, 2021). Only I had access to the raw data to prevent unauthorized disclosure or misuse.

Because participants may recall emotionally challenging or traumatic experiences related to their time in TBS programs, specific protocols were in place to minimize potential psychological distress. While the focus of this research is on post-TBS identity development rather than in-program trauma, conversations may still trigger uncomfortable emotions. To mitigate this risk, participants received a list of mental health resources in the informed consent packet and were reminded of their right to pause or terminate the interview at any time. By employing these ethical safeguards, the study prioritized participant autonomy, safety, and confidentiality while upholding the standards of rigorous qualitative research.

Summary

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the methodological framework guiding this qualitative descriptive study with phenomenological orientation. It described the rationale for the research design, the criteria for participant selection, and the data collection procedures, including virtual semi-structured interviews and demographic surveys. The chapter also outlined the data analysis plan, emphasizing a rigorous thematic analysis approach to uncover shared patterns across participants' narratives. Specific attention was given to maintaining trustworthiness through

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, including thick description, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling.

Ethical considerations were addressed thoroughly, including procedures for obtaining informed consent (Xu et al., 2020), protecting participant privacy, minimizing potential distress, and avoiding conflicts of interest. The research design prioritized transparency, participant autonomy, and emotional safety while ensuring methodological rigor. Collectively, the strategies described in this chapter align with the study's overarching aim: to explore how TBS alumni experience identity development during emerging adulthood and how internal assets and external supports shape their post-TBS transition.

Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative descriptive study with a phenomenological orientation aimed to explore how TBS alumni aged 18–24 describe their identity development experiences during emerging adulthood. Aligned with the PYD framework (Lerner et al., 2018), this study examined how internal strengths and external supports influence identity development following discharge from a TBS. The findings can inform more effective, strengths-based aftercare practices and contribute to a deeper understanding of the developmental needs of this underserved population.

This chapter presents the results of the study. It opens with a brief overview of the pilot study, setting, participant demographics, and the procedures used for data collection and inductive thematic analysis. Next, the chapter presents the four themes that emerged from participants' accounts, with supporting excerpts to demonstrate how each theme was grounded in the data. The chapter concludes with a summary of the themes and a transition to Chapter 5, where the findings are interpreted in relation to the literature and the PYD framework.

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study, conducting two 60-minute semistructured interviews with two individuals who did not meet the study's inclusion criteria, using the planned interview protocol (Appendix C) and the demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). The purpose of the pilot was to assess the clarity and effectiveness of the interview protocol, estimate timing, and confirm the technical adequacy of the virtual interview platform. One participant struggled to answer questions about identity development. Although no

changes were made to the interview questions or analysis approach, the pilot study helped improve the administration of the protocol, becoming more comfortable using follow-up prompts, and breaking complex questions into more accessible parts while still collecting the same data, thereby improving consistency of administration and readiness for the main study.

Setting

Nothing inherent to the setting or personal conditions impacted the participants' experience of the study. Data collection occurred entirely in a virtual setting: All interviews were conducted via Zoom, and participants joined from a private location of their choosing. The study was not conducted within a therapeutic boarding school or any affiliated organization, and no organizational conditions (e.g., staffing changes, policy shifts, budgetary disruptions) influenced participants' ability to engage in the study or the manner in which data were collected. Because interviews took place remotely, the primary contextual influence of the setting was the virtual format itself (e.g., reduced access to nonverbal cues); however, consistent use of the interview protocol, rapport-building during extended interviews, and the option for follow-up interviews supported the collection of rich, detailed narratives.

Demographics

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years. The sample included three cisgender men and three gender-diverse participants; four identified as White and two as multiracial (see Table 1). Most participants were enrolled in or had completed postsecondary education, and one participant was completing a high school diploma.

Participants reported varied current living arrangements, including living independently or with family members. Participants reported varied TBS exposure, with length of stay evenly distributed across 6–12 months, 1–2 years, and more than 2 years, and time since discharge evenly distributed across 1–2 years, 3–5 years, and more than 5 years. Most participants reported some form of post-discharge support, whereas one reported none. To protect confidentiality and reduce deductive disclosure, demographics are reported in aggregate and limited to variables necessary to contextualize the findings.

Table 1*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>
Age Range (years)	18–24	6
Gender Identity	Cisgender men	3
	Gender-diverse participants	3
Race/Ethnicity	White	4
	Multiracial	2
Current Living Arrangement	Living independently (alone, with roommates, or with partner)	3
	Living with family	2
	Student housing	1
Educational Engagement	Enrolled in postsecondary education	5
	Secondary education completion in progress	1
Employment Status	Employed (part-time and/or full-time)	4
	Not employed (full-time student)	2
Years Attended TBS	2016–2019	2
	2020–2023	4
Length of TBS Stay	6 months–1 year	2
	1–2 years	2
	More than 2 years	2
Time Since Discharge	1–2 years	2
	3–5 years	2
	More than 5 years	2
Post-Discharge Support	Inpatient or residential services	3
	Outpatient or community-based services	2
	No formal post-discharge support	1

Data Collection

Seven participants completed demographic surveys online via Survey Monkey after providing consent through email (replying with “I consent to participate in this study”). After consent and completion of the demographic survey, participants were scheduled for a Zoom interview. One participant dropped out after the demographic survey, and the other six proceeded with the semistructured interviews conducted through Zoom. At the start of each interview, participant rights, confidentiality protections, and the voluntary nature of participation were briefly reviewed. All initial interviews were 90 minutes long, and three participants completed a 30-minute follow-up Zoom interview for clarification. All interviews were recorded using Zoom’s record feature, transcribed using Zoom’s automated transcription, and transcripts were manually reviewed for accuracy to the audio. Following each interview, participants were provided with the online mental health/crisis resources list (Appendix D). Audio files and transcripts were de-identified and stored securely in accordance with the data management procedures described in Chapter 3. Data collection procedures followed the protocol outlined in Chapter 3, with no substantive deviations.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach as a systematic procedure for organizing and summarizing patterns across participants’ descriptions. Consistent with a phenomenological orientation, thematic analysis was applied to develop themes that described the lived experiences of identity development across participants. To illustrate

how analysis remained grounded in participants' language, initial in vivo codes captured experience-near phrasing such as "was never really a serious option" (P2), "They kicked me out..." (P2), "get to know yourself all over again" (P2), "just survivability" (P4), and "focus on the next right thing" (P2).

Consistent with Braun and Clarke's first two phases (familiarization and generating initial codes) each transcript was reviewed for accuracy to the interview audio and transcripts were read multiple times to ensure full case familiarization. Initial coding was conducted line-by-line to identify meaning units using in-vivo codes and descriptive codes to preserve experience-near meanings of identity development. NVivo was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, and retain traceable links between raw data excerpts and coding decisions. For example, excerpts coded as parental control interfering with choices reflected participants' descriptions of limited autonomy (e.g., "was never really a serious option" [P2]), while college helped refine interests and noticing interests captured participants' accounts of exploration (e.g., "pick up things to try... and then discard them when they don't fit you" [P5]; "get to know yourself all over again" [P2]). Codes such as lost self at TBS and TBS trauma focused on surviving not bettering self reflected trauma-related identity disruption (e.g., "reading what person someone wanted me to be" [P4]; "just survivability" [P4]), and codes such as next right thing mindset captured stepwise coping and competence-building (e.g., "focus on the next right thing..." [P2]; "I still know the next best thing I can do" [P6]).

In the third phase, concept maps in NVivo were used to visualize relationships among all codes, and to cluster the codes into six candidate themes (i.e. potential

themes): self-concept building through supported autonomy, self-concept, processing trauma, social facilitation of identity development, interests, and struggles with self-efficacy. In phase four, these candidate themes were reviewed against the full data set and some were merged, split or discarded based internal coherence, distinctiveness from other themes and ability to describe the participants' shared experience of identity development. Divergent accounts were treated as counterpoints or boundary conditions and were incorporated into theme refinement (e.g., clarifying when a theme reflected a common pattern versus a more conditional experience), thereby strengthening the credibility and transferability of the findings. Through this iterative process, the six candidate themes were consolidated into four final themes that best represented shared experiential patterns across participants.

In phase 5 these themes were thoroughly defined and given a concise, final name: Autonomy Developed with Increased Independence from Parents, Defining Identity through Exploration, Putting a Sense of Self Back Together After Trauma, and Gaining Confidence in Handling Adult Life (Self-Efficacy). In phase six, final themes are presented in the results section of Chapter 4 with illustrative quotations to demonstrate grounding in the data.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was established through systematic and transparent procedures addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, consistent with the strategies proposed in Chapter 3 and criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These procedures ensured

that the findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences of identity development during emerging adulthood and were grounded in the data rather than researcher assumptions.

Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with participants, iterative data analysis, and attention to thematic saturation. Each participant completed an in-depth, semi-structured interview that lasted 90 minutes, allowing sufficient time for rapport building and the emergence of rich, detailed narratives. Follow-up clarification was conducted when necessary to ensure an accurate understanding of participants' descriptions. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new patterns or meanings emerged across interviews. This process ensured that the identified themes reflected patterns across participants, rather than isolated or idiosyncratic accounts. To further enhance credibility, divergent cases were examined and incorporated into the analytic process to refine theme boundaries and avoid overgeneralization. Throughout the analysis, the researcher remained closely grounded in participants' language, using *in vivo* and descriptive coding in the initial phases. This approach preserved participants' meanings and minimized premature abstraction, consistent with a phenomenological orientation. Analytic decisions were documented through memos to support transparency and rigor.

Transferability was addressed through thick description and detailed contextual reporting. Participant demographics and background characteristics, including age range, time since TBS discharge, duration of program enrollment, and current living or educational contexts, were summarized in aggregate form to provide sufficient contextual

detail while protecting confidentiality. Rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences were presented in the results section using illustrative quotations. These descriptions allow readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to other contexts involving emerging adults with histories of residential or institutional care. While the study does not aim for statistical generalization, the depth and clarity of contextual detail support analytic transferability to similar populations and settings.

Dependability was established by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail that documented all phases of the research process. This audit trail included records of recruitment procedures, interview protocols, transcription verification, coding decisions, theme development, and analytic revisions. NVivo software was used to organize data systematically and support the consistent application of codes across transcripts. Analytic memos were used to document decisions related to code refinement, candidate theme development, and boundary-setting between themes. These records enable external review of the analytical process and demonstrate that the findings were derived through a logical, traceable sequence of methodological steps rather than through ad hoc interpretation. The consistent application of procedures across participants further supports the study's reliability.

Confirmability was supported through sustained reflexivity and documentation of the researcher's positionality. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to record assumptions, emotional reactions, and evolving interpretations. This process enabled ongoing examination of how the researcher's perspectives might influence analytic decisions and supported the separation of

participants' meanings from the researcher's inferences. Confirmability was further enhanced by grounding all themes in multiple data sources across participants and by retaining clear links between raw data, codes, and themes. The audit trail and reflexive documentation together demonstrate that the findings are grounded in participants' narratives rather than the researchers' expectations, thereby supporting the objectivity and integrity of the analytic process.

Results

Theme 1: Autonomy Developed with Increased Independence from Parents

Across participants' accounts, autonomy was described in relation to reduced parental control and increased decision-making authority. Although participants rarely used the term autonomy, their accounts emphasized making their own decisions and directing their own lives after leaving highly structured environments.

Several participants described parental control as limiting their ability to make independent decisions about their lives. One participant explained that parental expectations limited their ability to envision independent decision-making, stating that having a life separate from their parents "was never really a serious option" until they developed "a network of people outside of my family" and access to school or work (P2).

Several participants described shifts in dependence away from parents following ongoing parental control. These shifts involved relying on partners, peers, or institutional resources. One participant described relying on a romantic partner for transportation and food, noting, "I don't have another choice but to go to her... if I want to have food on the table" (P4).

In some accounts, shifts in dependence occurred abruptly. One participant described being forced into independence after conflict with parents regarding identity-related decisions: “They kicked me out... it was stressful... working a bunch of jobs and keeping my apartment and going to school,” but later described the experience as stabilizing and “the best thing I could have done” (P2).

Other participants described autonomy developing more gradually while maintaining some parental involvement. One participant described valuing parental advice while retaining decision-making authority: “Even if it’s something I’m not going to take, it helps me slow down and make a more informed decision” (P5). This participant later emphasized that parental respect, rather than approval, supported autonomy: “She respects my decision... because she respects me as a person” (P5).

Overall, across participants’ accounts, shifting reliance away from parents—whether toward trusted others, institutional supports, or both—was described as creating more room for independent decision-making and self-direction.

Theme 2: Defining Identity through Exploration

Identity development during emerging adulthood was experienced as an active process of exploring interests and possible life directions. Several participants described entering emerging adulthood with limited clarity about their interests, particularly following prolonged periods of external control during adolescence.

Interests were discovered by participants through increased attention to internal preferences and exposure to new interpersonal and educational experiences. One participant described paying attention to “basic questions about what I like and who I

am” to “get to know [him]self all over again” (P2). Another described the influence of a professor who modeled passion and competence in a field they later became interested in: “She gave me something to aspire towards, and that was really influential” (P5).

Educational settings were framed as contexts that supported exploration. One participant described college as a space that allowed experimentation: “College lets you pick up things to try and then discard them when they don’t fit you” (P5). This experimentation also included reassessing academic direction as participants clarified what fit and what did not. One participant explained shifting majors as part of discovering long-term goals: “Now I feel like I have a plan... goals that are within those boundaries” (P4).

Exploration was also experienced as emotionally complex. While often energizing, it was also described as stressful and uncertain. One participant described beginning with small interests to build momentum: “The way to start caring about things is just to start caring about something... any reason to care will let you start learning how to care” (P5). Through iterative experimentation, participants described gradually expanding their sense of self and identifying pursuits that felt meaningful and sustainable.

Theme 3: Putting a Sense of Self Back Together After Trauma

Identity development was described by participants as involving efforts to reconstruct a coherent sense of self in the context of trauma associated with therapeutic boarding school experiences and controlling family dynamics. Several participants described adapting closely to external demands during adolescence in ways that left them disconnected from their own preferences. As a result, several accounts reflected entering

emerging adulthood with uncertainty about who they were or what they wanted outside externally imposed expectations. One participant described becoming adept at “reading what person someone wanted me to be” and adjusting accordingly, characterizing this pattern as “deeply damaging to any stable sense of identity” (P4).

Several accounts described early emerging adulthood as focused primarily on meeting basic needs rather than engaging in identity exploration. Those who were required to become independent quickly reported prioritizing basic needs, including housing, finances, education, and healthcare. During this period, identity development was often experienced as on hold rather than absent. Participants emphasized that trauma, combined with the demands of independence, constrained their capacity to reflect on who they were becoming. As one participant noted, focusing on “just survivability” left little space for “bettering myself” or engaging in identity work (P4). In these accounts, survival was not framed as avoidance of identity development but as a necessary precursor to it.

As participants described gaining greater stability, they also described rediscovering aspects of themselves that had previously felt inaccessible. This process was often described as frightening due to prior punishment for self-expression. One participant described difficulty accessing their preferences and feared that providing authentic answers would be unsafe (P6). In these accounts, increased authenticity contributed to a more stable sense of self.

Trauma processing as closely intertwined with identity reconstruction. Several accounts emphasized the need to separate trauma-related adaptations from their broader

sense of identity, articulating a desire not to be defined solely by what had happened to them. For some, this process included releasing anger or victim-based self-definitions in favor of greater agency and self-authorship. Identity reconstruction was described as shifting from being defined by past harm to an active choice about how to live in the present.

Friendships, romantic relationships, and therapeutic alliances were also portrayed as providing relational safety and affirmation that enabled participants to revise their sense of self from before TBS to after TBS. One participant emphasized the importance of being seen without having to perform or conform (P4). Participants also described learning to set boundaries with relationships that undermined their sense of self.

Overall, these accounts portrayed identity development during emerging adulthood as a process of trying to put a sense of self back together following trauma and prolonged external control. This process involved periods of survival-focused functioning, rediscovery of authenticity, trauma processing, and identity repair through relationships. Participants described this as gradual, effortful, and requiring stability and supportive relationships. Through this process, participants portrayed moving toward identities that were not solely defined by past trauma but reflected what they valued, how they wanted to live, and their developing self-understanding.

Theme 4: Gaining Confidence in Handling Adult Life (Self-Efficacy)

Identity development was experienced by participants as closely linked to gaining confidence in their ability to manage adult responsibilities. Several account reflected

beginning emerging adulthood feeling unsure of oneself and gradually “growing into confidence” (P1) through lived experience.

Confidence was described as developing through practical life skills related to daily functioning and responsibility. One participant described college as a context that required skill development: “It’s just as much about the raw academic material as it is... learning the hard and soft skills. I’m learning... what I’m able to do” (P5).

Self-efficacy was also described as developing through solving problems; one participant described focusing on manageable steps: “Just focus on the next right thing... if I can divide things up, I can do anything” (P2). Another described applying this strategy to overwhelming tasks: “Even when it feels impossible, I still know the next best thing I can do” (P6). Across accounts, stepwise problem-solving was described as helping participants persist when tasks felt overwhelming.

Confidence was further supported by learning to function despite intense emotions. One participant described persisting through depression as evidence of capability: “If I can get through this, I can probably handle other things too” (P1). Another described shifting from rumination to action as producing confidence even before circumstances changed (P4).

In several accounts, self-efficacy increased when acting in line with one’s own goals rather than parental or institutional demands. One participant described moving from self-pity toward agency: from “sitting in your own sadness” to “standing up for your own success... you become happier” (P1). Another described redefining themselves over time as capable and self-directed (P5).

Navigating adult systems independently was also portrayed as reinforcing self-efficacy. One participant described managing health insurance independently: “Even though it felt impossible, I knew the next step” (P2). Another described navigating multiple insurance denials independently at age 18 as evidence of competence (P4).

Overall, these accounts portrayed self-efficacy as a key component of identity development during emerging adulthood. Confidence in one’s ability to manage adult life emerged through repeated experiences of action, problem-solving, and persistence in the face of structural, parental, and emotional challenges. Successfully navigating practical tasks and exercising agency in line with where participants wanted their life to go contributed to a growing belief in their competence.

Summary

Findings from interviews with six therapeutic boarding school (TBS) alumni (ages 18–24) indicated that identity development during emerging adulthood unfolded through four interconnected experiential patterns: (a) autonomy developing with increased independence from parents, (b) defining identity through exploration, (c) putting a sense of self back together after trauma, and (d) gaining confidence in handling adult life through self-efficacy.

Across accounts, identity development was described as non-linear and effortful, shaped by institutional history, parental dynamics, trauma exposure, and access to relational and institutional supports. Rather than a fixed outcome, identity was experienced as an evolving process that involved increasing self-direction, trying out possible life directions, repairing a disrupted sense of self, and building competence

through lived experience. Chapter 5 will continue by interpreting these results in light of the theoretical framework of positive youth development.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study with a phenomenological orientation was to explore how TBS alumni described their identity development during emerging adulthood. The study was conducted because, although prior scholarship has documented concerns related to TBS programs based on alumni reports (Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2020, 2023), less is known about how alumni experience core developmental tasks after discharge, including autonomy, identity exploration, and adaptation during emerging adulthood. This study addressed that gap by examining alumni accounts of how identity development unfolded in the years following institutional care.

Analysis yielded four themes that summarize participants' descriptions of identity development during emerging adulthood: (a) autonomy developed with increased independence from parents, (b) defining identity through exploration, (c) putting a sense of self back together after trauma, and (d) gaining confidence in handling adult life (self-efficacy). Across themes, identity development was described as gradual and effortful, shaped by institutional and family histories, trauma-related disruption, shifts in relationships to parents and peers, and access to stabilizing supports and resources during emerging adulthood.

Interpretation of the Findings

Prior peer-reviewed literature on TBS alumni has primarily documented institutional harms, trauma exposure, and post discharge distress (e.g., PTSD symptoms, relational rupture, and ongoing adjustment difficulties; Chatfield, 2019; Chatfield et al.,

2021; Golightley, 2020, 2023; Mooney & Leighton, 2019). Current findings confirm these reports, as participants described entering emerging adulthood with trauma-induced identity disruption, survival-oriented priorities, and a need to rebuild a sense of self following coercive or controlling contexts. The findings also extend the literature by describing how identity development was experienced during emerging adulthood—through renegotiating autonomy with parents, engaging in exploration, “putting a sense of self back together,” and building competence/self-efficacy through lived responsibilities. The findings also converge with adjacent developmental research on emerging adulthood and transitions from OOHC in highlighting that autonomy and identity work may be complicated by abrupt transitions, survival demands, and reliance on scaffolding supports (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2021; Heerde et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2024), while also reflecting identity scholarship that frames exploration and revision as normative mechanisms of identity development (Kroger, 2007; Stephen et al., 1992).

Half of participants in this sample identified as having a gender-diverse identity, which is meaningfully higher than recent population estimates (2.7% in this age range) and could be relevant to interpreting the identity development processes from this dataset (Herman et al., 2025). Recent literature suggests that gender diverse emerging adults navigate identity development within contexts shaped by family negotiation, safety needs, and access to affirming supports, such that gender identity exploration and development may involve heightened relational and autonomy-related demands (Doyle, 2022; Malpas et al., 2022). Additionally, gender-minority stress process (e.g., anticipated rejection, concealment pressures, and invalidation) can increase distress and complicate

the developmental work of building a coherent self and secure relationships during emerging adulthood (Hunter et al., 2021). Consequently, from a gender identity development perspective, the need for relational safety, autonomy facilitation, and the rebuilding coherent self reflects not only the post-discharge needs of these TBS alumni but also the additional identity management that gender-diverse participants experience as they navigate controlling and non-affirming social contexts (Doyle, 2022; Malpas et al., 2022).

Interpreted through the PYD framework, the findings can be understood as illustrating person–context processes in which identity development was supported when participants accessed ecological assets that did not replicate coercive dynamics (e.g., supportive relationships, educational contexts, therapeutic alliances, and community resources) and when participants could exercise increasing self-direction and competence (Benson et al., 2007, 2011; Lerner et al., 2005). In participants’ accounts, development appeared to be facilitated not by “TBS effects” but by post-discharge contexts that created room for autonomy-supportive decision making, exploration, relational safety, and mastery experiences—conditions that align with PYD’s emphasis on thriving emerging from the fit between individual strengths and available supports. Importantly, PYD is used here as an interpretive lens to situate the themes within strengths-based developmental theory, not as a causal explanation of outcomes.

Complicating this need for self-directed action, participants’ descriptions of delayed autonomy development and the need for scaffolding supports align with recent research suggesting that autonomy-restricting or psychologically controlling parental

dynamics can shape emerging-adult development by reinforcing dependency and complicating identity work (Shah et al., 2022). In the present findings, identity development was repeatedly portrayed as emerging when participants encountered contexts that enabled self-direction, choice, and competence-building, rather than contexts that replicated external control. This convergence supports interpreting participants' post-discharge development as a reconstruction process in which autonomy-supportive environments may be particularly salient—consistent with PYD's emphasis on person–context fit and access to ecological assets that support thriving (Shah et al., 2022). Additionally, this research provides further explanation and normalization of TBS alumni dependence on caregivers after becoming adults and highlights the need for scaffolding practical support while still respecting self-direction.

These interpretations remain bounded by the study's qualitative descriptive, phenomenologically oriented design and the scope of the data. The findings do not evaluate specific programs, compare TBS models, or establish causal pathways; they reflect retrospective meaning-making from a small, self-selected sample of six alumni recruited primarily through online survivor/advocacy networks. Accordingly, claims are limited to describing shared experiential patterns in this dataset—showing that participants portrayed identity development as gradual, effortful, and context-dependent, often occurring despite institutional harm and requiring stability and supportive relationships—rather than asserting uniform outcomes for all TBS alumni or generalizable program effects.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study, as they define the boundaries of what the results can reasonably claim and how they may be applied to other contexts. These limitations stem from the study's qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological orientation, reliance on retrospective self-report, and recruitment procedures as well as the intentionally small, nonrandom sample typical of qualitative inquiry. Together, they do not negate the value of the findings but clarify that the results should be understood as contextually bounded accounts of TBS alumni's identity development during emerging adulthood rather than as representative or causal conclusions.

First, the findings reflect participants' retrospective meaning-making about identity development rather than contemporaneous accounts of post-discharge experiences. As such, the study captures how identity is understood and narrated in the present, not how it was experienced moment-by-moment at the time.

Second, participants were recruited primarily through online survivor and advocacy networks, which may shape the range of experiences represented. The findings therefore reflect the perspectives of alumni who were motivated to articulate and reflect on their post-discharge experiences. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all TBS alumni or of all therapeutic boarding school programs. Instead, the results are contextually bounded and reflect the lived experiences of participants who elected to share their narratives within this research context.

Third, with a small, non-random sample, the findings are not intended to be generalizable to all TBS alumni. Instead, they offer transferable insights into identity development among emerging adults exiting highly structured residential environments, with applicability dependent on contextual similarity.

Finally, this study did not examine specific program characteristics or compare outcomes across TBS models. The focus remained on participants' post-discharge developmental experiences rather than program efficacy, aligning with the study's phenomenological and descriptive aims. The study focused specifically on emerging adulthood and does not capture longer-term developmental trajectories beyond this period. Identity development later in adulthood may involve different processes and warrants further investigation. Future research using longitudinal or comparative designs may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how identity development evolves across later stages of adulthood and across diverse post-institutional contexts.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future research and practice related to TBS alumni and post-institutional development during emerging adulthood. Given that participants described identity development as gradual, effortful, and context-dependent, longitudinal research is needed to examine how autonomy, identity coherence, and self-efficacy evolve beyond emerging adulthood and whether early post-discharge conditions (e.g., survival-focused functioning, relational safety, and access to supports) shape later trajectories. Because participants' accounts emphasized that identity growth occurred when supports did not replicate coercive control, future

studies should examine how specific post-discharge contexts (e.g., family dynamics, type of aftercare, and access to educational/community resources) are associated with autonomy and identity development in this population.

Additional research should explore variability within the TBS alumni population by examining how contextual factors such as family dynamics, socioeconomic resources, type of post-discharge support, and time since discharge influence identity development. Comparative studies that examine differences across residential treatment models, levels of parental involvement, or aftercare structures may help identify conditions that either support or constrain autonomy and identity development. Mixed-methods approaches may further strengthen this line of inquiry by integrating qualitative narratives with quantitative measures of identity development, self-efficacy, psychological well-being, and social functioning, allowing for both depth and broader pattern identification.

Although the current study included gender-diverse participants, future research should purposively recruit samples that are sufficiently diverse and sufficiently large—to examine how intersecting identities (gender identity, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic context) may shape post-institutional developmental experiences. Such research may illuminate identity-specific stressors and protective factors that cannot be meaningfully examined in small, aggregated samples and can inform more culturally responsive support strategies.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for theory, clinical practice, and systems that support TBS alumni during emerging adulthood. Theoretically, the findings

extend and complicate developmental and strengths-based perspectives by illustrating how identity development may unfold following prolonged external control and institutional disruption. Rather than reflecting linear progression toward independence, participants' accounts indicated that identity development involved prolonged renegotiation of autonomy, competence, and relational boundaries, often contingent on whether post-discharge supports facilitated growth without replicating coercive dynamics. Interpreted through the PYD framework, the findings highlight how autonomy, competence, and agency may emerge through ongoing interactions between individual capacities and environmental supports rather than as fixed outcomes of treatment or maturation. This contribution is conceptual rather than confirmatory: the study does not test PYD propositions, but it illustrates how PYD concepts can be used to interpret post-institutional developmental contexts that are underrepresented in the literature.

For clinical practice, the findings highlight the importance of autonomy-supportive and trauma-informed approaches when working with TBS alumni. Participants' accounts indicated that identity development was closely tied to opportunities for exploration, relational safety, and repeated mastery experiences, and not solely to symptom reduction. Clinically, the findings suggest that therapeutic work with TBS alumni may need to prioritize restoring decision-making authority and collaborative goal setting before more directive change strategies, because interventions experienced as prescriptive risk replicating prior control dynamics. The findings also indicate that identity disruption and coherence were intertwined with trauma-related concerns; identity

reconstruction was described as occurring alongside trauma processing rather than as a secondary task.

Participants' descriptions further suggest that confidence was built through functioning while distressed and navigating adult responsibilities, highlighting self-efficacy as an experience-dependent component of identity development. Given that self-efficacy was described as developing through mastery experiences, interventions that support stepwise collaborative problem-solving, navigating adult systems, and functioning while distressed may be especially relevant for strengthening confidence and identity development. Additionally, the findings indicate that identity disruption and coherence were intertwined with trauma-related concerns; trauma processing occurred alongside identity development and reconstruction rather than as a secondary task. Therefore, trauma-informed approaches may be supportive when working with this population.

The findings also carry implications for family systems and relational contexts. Parental involvement was not described as inherently harmful or helpful; rather, the perceived impact depended on whether involvement functioned as support or control. Given the unanimous experience of parental control by the participants in this study, this finding may help parents to engage with their emerging adult child in such a way that supports, rather than hinders identity growth. Family-focused interventions may therefore be especially beneficial if offered immediately after leaving TBS and especially effective when they emphasize supportive connection without authority over the alumni's identity-related choices.

At the organizational and systems level, the findings highlight considerations for post-discharge supports and aftercare planning. Although the study does not support broad causal or policy claims, the findings are policy-relevant insofar as they highlight the developmental importance of post-discharge environments that provide continuity of care, accessible mental health services, and practical supports (e.g., educational guidance and stable housing/financial resources). In participants' narratives, supports were described as most helpful when they enabled gradual exploration and competence-building rather than reinforcing compliance-based dynamics.

Collectively, the findings indicate that identity development among TBS alumni was experienced as context-dependent rather than as an automatic outcome of time or treatment completion. By centering alumni narratives and emphasizing autonomy, exploration, identity reconstruction, and competence-building, the study contributes a developmentally informed account of post-institutional identity development that complements a literature base that has largely emphasized harm and symptomatology (Chatfield et al., 2021; Golightley, 2020).

Conclusion

This study examined how therapeutic boarding school alumni described their identity development during emerging adulthood. Rather than following a linear developmental trajectory, participants' accounts illustrated identity development as an ongoing process shaped by post-discharge contexts, relational renegotiation, and gradual competence-building following prolonged external control.

The findings indicate that identity development among TBS alumni is a gradual, effortful, and context-dependent process shaped by autonomy development, identity exploration, reconstruction of a coherent sense of self following trauma, and the accumulation of self-efficacy through lived experience. Participants described entering emerging adulthood with disrupted or delayed identity development and navigating this period through active engagement with new roles, relationships, and responsibilities.

Importantly, the findings suggest that identity development often occurred despite, rather than because of, past TBS experiences. Growth was facilitated through alternative developmental contexts, such as educational settings, peer and romantic relationships, therapeutic alliances, and community resources that supported exploration, competence-building, and autonomy without replicating controlling dynamics. These findings complicate deficit-based narratives by demonstrating how emerging adults can reclaim agency and construct meaningful identities following institutional care when supportive conditions are present.

This study contributes to the literature by extending developmental and strengths-based perspectives to an underexamined population and by illuminating the lived processes through which identity development occurs after institutional disruption. The findings contribute to the literature by shifting attention from treatment outcomes to post-institutional identity development, highlighting how autonomy, self-efficacy, and relational boundaries are renegotiated in emerging adulthood rather than resolved during adolescence. In conclusion, by centering alumni voices, this study underscores the importance of understanding identity development as a post-discharge process shaped by

context, agency, and meaning-making, offering a foundation for future research and practice that moves beyond deficit-based models of institutional care.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

Email

Subject line:

Interviewing TBS Alumni about Experiences in Young adulthood (60-90 minute interview)

Email message:

There is a new study about the experiences of young adults after leaving Therapeutic Boarding Schools (TBS). Your experiences can help shed light on the challenges and opportunities TBS alumni experience during their transition from the TBS environment to adulthood. Participating will contribute to meaningful research to improve support for alumni like you.

About the study:

- Complete a short demographic survey
- One 60-90 minute phone or teleconferencing interview that will be audio recorded (no videorecording).
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18-24 years old
- Attended a TBS program in the U.S. in their teen years
- Minimum of six months in the TBS
- Discharged at least six months before participating in this study

- Willing to share experiences about young adulthood after leaving TBS

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Travis Philipsen, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during _____.

Please email Travis.Philipsen@WaldenU.edu to let the researcher know of your interest.

You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.

Social Media Post

Caption: There is a new study about the experiences of people who attended Therapeutic Boarding Schools (TBS) that could help care providers like doctors and therapists better understand and help their clients. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences in young adulthood after leaving the TBS program.

About the study:

- Complete a short demographic survey
- One 60-90 minute phone or teleconferencing interview that will be audio recorded (no videorecording).
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18-24 years old
- Attended a TBS program in the US. in their teen years
- Minimum of six months in the TBS
- Discharged at least six months before participating in this study
- Willing to share experiences about young adulthood after leaving TBS

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Travis Philipsen, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during _____.

Please message Travis Philipsen privately to let them know of your interest.

Appendix B: Demographic Survey

Demographic Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

Section 1: Personal Information

1. **Age:** _____

2. **Gender:**

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary/Other (please specify): _____

3. **Race/Ethnicity:**

Check all that apply:

- Black or African American
- White
- Hispanic or Latino/a
- Asian
- Native American or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Other (please specify): _____

4. **Current Living Situation:**

- Living independently
- Living with family

- Living with roommates/partner
- Other (please specify): _____

Section 2: Educational Background and Employment Status

5. Level of Formal Education Achieved:

- Less than Highschool Degree
- Highschool Diploma or equivalent
- Vocational program achieved
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Postgraduate Degree
- Other (please specify): _____

6. Current Employment Status:

Please check all that apply:

- Unemployed
- Part-time employment
- Full-time employment
- Part-time Student
- Full-time Student
- Other (please specify): _____

Section 3: Therapeutic Boarding School Experience

7. **Name of TBS Attended** (optional): _____

8. **Years Attended:** From _____ to _____

9. **Length of Stay:**

- 6 months to 1 year
- 1–2 years
- 2+ years

10. **Time Since Discharge:**

- 6 months – 1 year
- 1–2 years
- 3–5 years
- 6+ years

11. **Reason for Placement in TBS** (check all that apply):

- Behavioral issues
- Mental health concerns
- Family-related challenges
- Academic struggles
- Other (please specify): _____

12. **Did you receive any follow-up care or support after leaving the TBS?**

- Yes (please describe):

- No

Name: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your participation! Please submit this survey before your scheduled interview.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Researcher's Introduction:

- Introduce yourself and provide a brief overview of the study's purpose.
- Explain the interview structure, emphasizing the semi-structured format, and ensure participants feel comfortable sharing openly.
- Reiterate the confidentiality of the participant's responses and the use of pseudonyms.

Informed Consent:

- Confirm that the participant has read and signed the informed consent form.
- Review their right to withdraw, skip questions, and ask questions about the study.
- Confirm that the interview will be recorded and clarify how the recordings will be stored securely.

Establishing Rapport:

- Start with an informal question, such as, "How are you feeling about participating today?" or "What led you to join this study?"

Core Interview Questions

1. Internal Strengths

Primary Prompt:

Since leaving the therapeutic boarding school, can you describe personal strengths or qualities that have helped shape your identity?

Probes:

- How do you see these strengths influencing your sense of identity today?

- Were there specific moments or experiences that brought these strengths out?
- How have these qualities helped you navigate adulthood?

2. External Supports and Barriers

Primary Prompt:

Tell me about any people, relationships, or environments that have supported or made it difficult for you to figure out who you are since leaving TBS.

Probes:

- What role has your family, friends, or community played in your development?
- Were there any support systems or resources you relied on after discharge?
- Did you feel supported or isolated when trying to build your life post-TBS?

3. How Personal and Outside Influences Work Together

Primary Prompt:

How do you think your own strengths and goals fit in with or go against the rules or expectations around you (for example, at home or at school)?

Probes:

- Can you tell a story of when you had to balance what you wanted and what other people expected?
- Did you learn anything about yourself because of these experiences?
- Did you get a greater understanding of who you are?

4. Meaning-Making of TBS Experience

Primary Prompt:

How do you think your time at the therapeutic boarding school influenced your current sense of identity?

Probes:

- Do you see your experience as something that shaped or disrupted your development?
- How do you feel about your time there now, compared to when you first left?
- Does the structure or environment at TBS impact parts of your identity?

5. Identity Over Time

Primary Prompt:

In what ways has your sense of self changed as you have moved through emerging adulthood?

Probes:

- How would you describe yourself at the time you left TBS versus now?
- What has stayed the same, and what has changed regarding how you see yourself?
- Were there turning points or events that shifted how you viewed your identity?

6. Challenges and Coping

Primary Prompt:

What challenges have you faced in figuring out who you are, and how have you managed or overcome them?

Probes:

- Can you talk about any setbacks or struggles you've experienced during this time?
- What strategies or supports helped you move through these challenges?
- Have these experiences changed your beliefs or values?

Closing Question

Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience of becoming an adult after attending a therapeutic boarding school?

Appendix D: Online Resources

Mental Health and Crisis Support:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**
<https://988lifeline.org> or call/text 988
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)**
<https://www.nami.org>
- **Crisis Text Line**
Text HOME to 741741
<https://www.crisistextline.org>
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**
<https://www.samhsa.gov> or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Support Networks for TBS Alumni:

- **Breaking Code Silence (Support & Advocacy for TTI survivors)**
<https://www.breakingcodesilence.org>
- **Unsilenced (Advocacy and resources for TTI survivors)**
<https://www.unsilenced.org>
- **Survivors of Institutional Abuse (SIA)**
<https://sia-now.org>
- **r/troubledteens**
<https://www.reddit.com/r/troubledteens/>

Positive Youth Development and Resilience:

- **Positive Youth Development (Youth.gov)**

<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development>

- **Search Institute (Developmental Assets)**

<https://searchinstitute.org>

General Mental Health Information:

American Psychological Association Help Center

<https://www.apa.org/topics/crisis-hotlines>