

## Introduction

- Misconceptions associated with learning differences can create unique barriers to success for students in higher education. [3]
- Students with L/AD graduate at lower rates when compared to students without L/AD. [1]
- Factors that contribute to challenges include stigma, low self-esteem, and lack of knowledge among teachers, family, and peers. [2]
- Without adequate support and sufficient understanding of L/AD challenges, students with L/AD can struggle emotionally, academically, and socially. [3]
- Purpose: Obtain an in-depth understanding of stigmatizing experiences from the perspective of postsecondary students with L/AD.**

## Methods

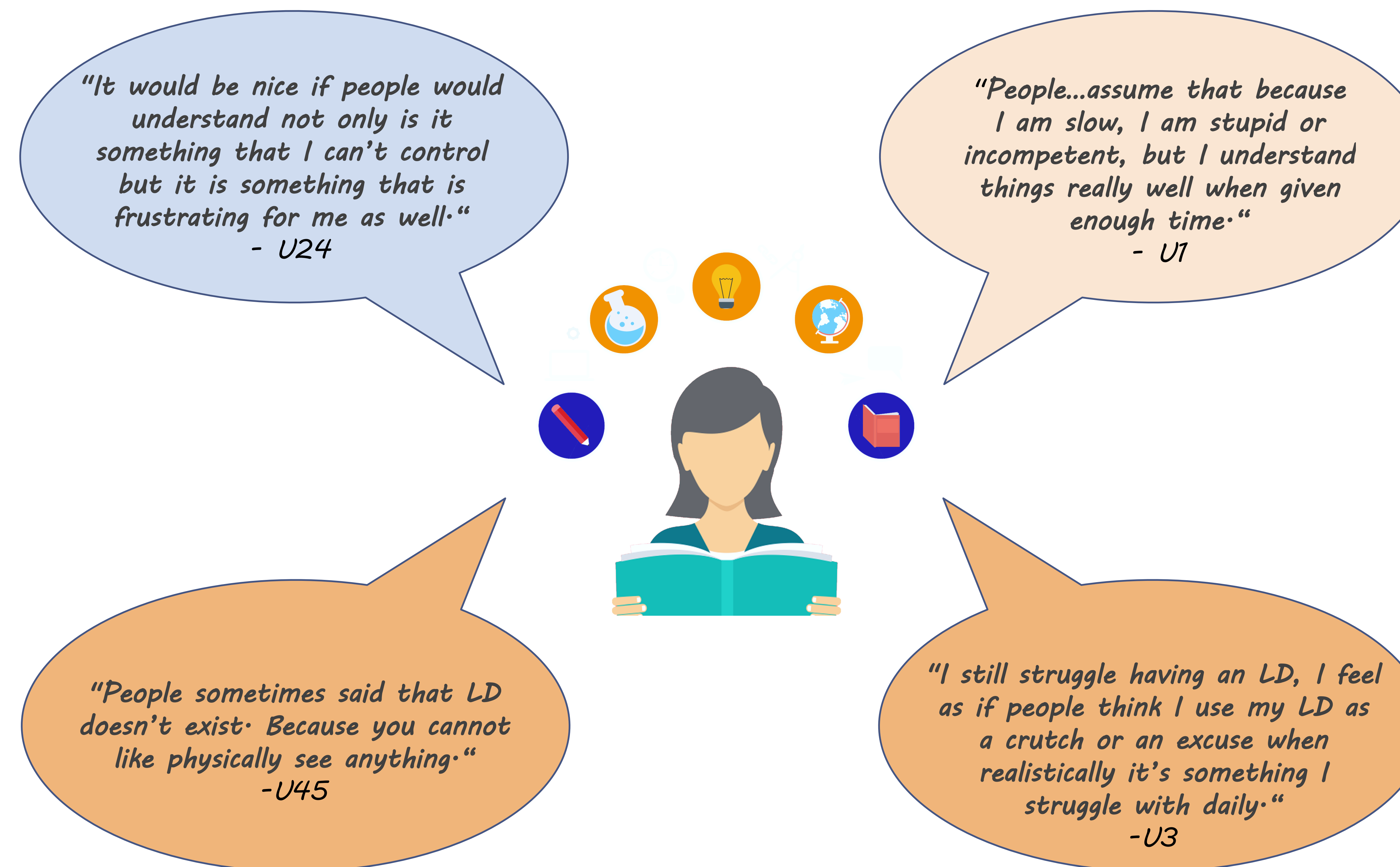
- Data were from a larger prospective cohort study that analyzed the role of mentorship for undergraduate students (CS<sup>3</sup>LD Project).
- Participants were 52 undergraduate students with L/AD in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) majors.
- Secondary analysis of 30 transcripts from student focused group discussions and responses to focused questions was conducted.
- Conceptual thematic analysis was used whereby data were analyzed, coded, conceptualized, and organized into categorical and thematic findings to enhance understanding.
- Thematic classification was used to label and reframe the phenomena related to stigma. [6]

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## Results

Misunderstanding	Definition	Impact
L/AD "Can be Stopped" (Extent of L/AD)	Others' beliefs that L/AD can be controlled or cured.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Misunderstanding involuntary behavior can make students feel guilty and frustrated.</li> <li>Feeling misunderstood can lead to issues with discipline in the classroom and negative feelings about self.</li> </ul>
L/AD "Reflects Intelligence" (Impact of L/AD)	Misunderstanding that L/AD affects a person's intelligence: making them less intelligent than those without LD.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undermining the student results in feelings of inferiority and self-doubt.</li> <li>Students may question their intelligence or seek to prove themselves to others.</li> </ul>
L/AD is "Not Real" (Existence of L/AD)	Misconception that LD is not real because it is not physically manifested.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Societal ignorance can make students feel rejected and may cause them to harbor negative feelings that they need to cope with internally.</li> </ul>



## Discussion

- Misconceptions fell within three primary classifications, those that were related to the extent of L/AD, the impact of L/AD, and the existence of L/AD.
- Stigmatization became internalized as self-doubt, resentment, and negative self-perception, which had to be overcome by the student in order to remain successful in college.
- While misconceptions challenged personal identity, stigma also provided an opportunity for participants to articulate a definition for themselves that centered on positive aspects of having L/AD.
- Participants were able to exhibit self-reflection and self-advocacy in response to stigma as a way to come to terms with their diagnostically-related challenges and gain a better understanding of their diagnosis.
- Findings from this study capture positive interpersonal coping strategies as a result of stigma such as self-advocacy, self-reflection, and self-acceptance.

## Clinical Implications

- Students with L/AD experience a broad range of stigmatizing misconceptions about their L/AD which can negatively impact self-esteem and decrease disclosure of diagnosis.
- Without adequate support to manage stigma, negative perceptions and lower expectations of students with LD can create barriers to achievement in school and in society.
- In order to create individualized strategies and interventions to assist the student to cope with their diagnosis in-depth, further understanding of the lived experience of students with LD is required.

## References

[1] Cortiella, C. and Horowitz, S. H. (2014). *The State of Learning Disabilities: Facts, Trends and Emerging Issues*, 3rd Edn, New York, NY: National Center for Learning Disabilities. [2] Denhart, H. (2008). *Deconstructing barriers: Perceptions of students labeled with learning disabilities in higher education*. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 41(6), 483-497. [3] Horowitz, S. H., Rawe, J., & Whittaker, M. C. (2017). *The State of Learning Disabilities: Understanding the 1 in 5*. New York: National Center for Learning Disabilities. [4] Pacia, J. I. (n.d.). *Vector Students* [Photograph]. Retrieved from <https://pngtree.com/freepng/vector-students.2329405.html>. [5] Pngtree. (n.d.). *Vector Students* [Photograph]. Retrieved from <https://pngtree.com/free-icon/learning.986226>. [6] Sandelowski, M., & Barroso, J. (2003). *Classifying the findings in qualitative studies*. *Qualitative health research*, 13(7), 905-923.

