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The Journal of Shankari School, a peer-reviewed journal, is published by the Research Management Cell (RMC) of Shankari School. The Shankari School publishes academic journals from diverse disciplines, particularly portraying the learning experiences of school-level students. However, the respective authors are responsible for the opinions, issues, and arguments presented in the journal.

Editorial

It is with great enthusiasm that we present the second volume, first issue of *The Journal of Shankari School*. As an academic platform, our mission remains steadfast—to encourage scholarly discussions, inspire critical thinking, and foster a culture of intellectual inquiry among students, educators, and researchers.

This issue foregrounds diverse student voices and reflective inquiries that illuminate the evolving landscape of education and human existence. It begins with Supriya Phuyal's exploration of personal growth through the lens of self-authorship, a dialogic reflection that underscores how uncertainty can be transformed into purposeful direction. Samraghy Adhikari examines how academic workload can suppress curiosity, while Safu Joshi offers a cosmic meditation on the miracle of human life. Aaseen Sapkota reveals the hidden costs of perfectionism on mental health, and Naman Maharjan captures classrooms as spaces of resilience, collaboration, and growth.

Together, these contributions highlight both systemic challenges and existential wonder. They remind us that education must nurture curiosity, well-being, and imagination—preparing learners not only for academic success but also for meaningful participation in a rapidly changing world.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the authors, reviewers, and the editorial team, whose unwavering dedication has made this publication possible. Your contributions are invaluable in upholding the journal's commitment to quality and innovation. We also invite our readers to engage with the content, share their insights, and continue supporting this journey of knowledge dissemination. Together, let us strive to build a vibrant academic community.

Editorial Board

The Journal of Shankari School



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A conversation between my past self and my future self

Supriya Phuyal

Abstract

This reflective study explores personal growth through a dialogic narrative between past and future selves. Grounded in the theory of self-authorship, it integrates evidence-based frameworks such as Schön's reflective practice, Gibbs' cycle, Dweck's growth mindset, and Neff's self-compassion to examine how identity, resilience, and emotional literacy evolve over time. Drawing on lived experiences—group projects, academic challenges, and moments of self-doubt—the study demonstrates how reflection transforms uncertainty into purposeful growth. The metaphor of “two mirrors” provides a lens for tracing shifts in values, agency, and mindset, highlighting reflection as both a mirror of past struggles and a compass for future direction. Ultimately, the study affirms reflection as a lifelong practice essential for intentional learning and leadership.

Keywords: *Reflection, Self-authorship, Growth mindset, Resilience, Self-compassion*

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Introduction

This reflective study explores personal growth through an imaginative dialogue between my past and future selves. By staging this metaphorical conversation, I examine how deliberate reflection illuminates the evolution of character and mindset over time. Drawing on psychological concepts such as self-authorship—the internalization of one's beliefs, identity, and purpose (Baxter Magolda, 2004)—the study bridges lived experiences with transformative realizations. Through academic work, group collaboration, and personal challenges, I have gradually become more resilient, reflective, and growth-oriented. Yet, this journey was not linear: I often struggled to connect theory with practice, lacked a structured approach to development, and felt pressured by external expectations rather than guided by internal clarity. Without intentional reflection, lessons from both success and failure remained indistinct, and decision-making was clouded by hesitation and fear of error.

This narrative revisits formative experiences through a dialogic lens, framing critical learning moments within evidence-based models. It seeks to transform uncertainty into growth by naming turning points and applying reflective tools to understand how learning unfolds emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally. Ultimately, the study is a personal attempt to reclaim my learning story and use reflection as a strategic pathway toward purposeful development.

The Gap: Reflection vs. Practice

Adolescent learners often struggle to connect theoretical models of reflection with lived experiences, resulting in fragmented personal growth and limited academic development (Vetter, 2018). For Year Nine students, reflective writing frequently remains descriptive rather than analytical, with little integration of frameworks such as Schön's reflective practice (Ramage, 2017), Gibbs' cycle (McLeod, 2025), Dweck's growth mindset (Dweck, 2016), or Neff's self-compassion (Neff, 2023). This gap leads to uncertainty in decision-making, hesitation in collaborative work, and difficulty in transforming setbacks into purposeful learning. Without structured reflection, students risk perceiving failure as a verdict rather than an opportunity, leaving their narratives emotionally expressive but academically underdeveloped.

The rationale for addressing this problem lies in the dual role of reflection: it is both a personal tool for identity formation and a professional skill for lifelong learning. Embedding reflective models into student journals enables learners to move beyond storytelling to critically examine emotions, choices, and growth trajectories. This not only enhances resilience and self-awareness but also raises the academic standard of their work, aligning it with journal-quality writing. The challenge, therefore, is to scaffold reflective practice so that students balance creativity with analysis, transforming uncertainty into intentional growth (Heng & Chu, 2023).

Purpose: The Power of Looking Inward

This study demonstrates how intentional reflection can shape identity, resilience, and mindset by imagining a conversation between past and future selves. It connects theoretical models—Schön's reflective practice (Ramage, 2017), Gibbs' cycle (McLeod, 2025), Dweck's growth mindset (Dweck, 2016), and Neff's self-compassion (Neff, 2023)—with real-life experiences, making learning more meaningful and applicable. Beyond self-exploration, the study invites others to reflect on their own journeys, showing how emotional intelligence, adaptability, and purpose emerge not only from achievement but also from discomfort, doubt, and failure.

By revisiting key turning points, challenging limiting beliefs, and recognizing progress, this reflection fosters greater self-compassion and clarity. It underscores how envisioning a future self can influence present choices, encouraging intentional action. Ultimately, the study assesses how

reflection can convert uncertainty, failure, and doubt into purposeful growth, offering insights into the mechanisms that support long-term learning and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Methodology: *Dialogic Reflection and Self-Authorship*

This study adopts a narrative reflection methodology grounded in the theory of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004), which emphasizes the development of an internal voice and identity independent of external expectations. Central to this approach is an imagined dialogue between my past and future selves—a reflective device that enables introspection, emotional honesty, and critical self-examination. This dialogic structure functions not only as a metaphor but also as a methodological lens for tracing personal transformation across time. It allows for articulating learning moments that emerged not solely from success but from experiences of struggle, uncertainty, and discomfort. Through this internal conversation, the study positions reflection as a dynamic process through which identity, resilience, and professional purpose are continuously negotiated and redefined.

Reflective material was drawn from personal sources, including reflective notes, peer conversations, and emotionally charged group experiences. Rather than relying on conventional data sets, the study curated fragments of lived experience and organized them through the metaphor of “two mirrors”—one reflecting a younger, questioning self and the other an older, wiser version. This framework provided narrative clarity while allowing identity, resilience, and purpose to be traced across time.

By situating personal experiences within established reflective models—Schön’s reflective practice (Ramage, 2017), Gibbs’ cycle (McLeod, 2025), Dweck’s growth mindset (Dweck, 2016), and Neff’s self-compassion (Neff, 2023)—the methodology integrates storytelling with evidence-based analysis. This approach positions reflection not as a static record but as a dynamic process of transformation, enabling a nuanced understanding of personal growth and self-authorship.

Between Two Mirrors

It was late—one of those quiet nights when the world feels paused, and memory sneaks in uninvited. I found myself in a dreamlike space, somewhere between sleep and thought, seated in a dim room with two mirrors facing each other. In one, I saw my younger self: eyes wide, posture uncertain, clutching a notebook filled with half-formed ideas and questions she hadn’t yet learned how to ask. In the other, my older self sat calmly, shoulders relaxed, gaze softened by time and experience. Her eyes were tired, but kind—like someone who had weathered enough storms to stop

fearing the rain.

We didn't speak at first. We just looked at each other, quietly absorbing the weight of everything unsaid. The air between us was thick with curiosity, hesitation, and the ache of becoming. Then, breaking the silence, my younger self leaned forward and asked, *"Do we turn out okay?"*

The older self-smiled—not with certainty, but with understanding. *"We'd be surprised with what we survive," she said gently, "and who we turn out to be because of it."*

The younger one hesitated, then asked, *"Was it tough? Like... really tough? Did we ever get past that awkward presentation—the one where our voice cracked, and we forgot the conclusion slide?"*

The older self-chuckled softly. *"Yes, it was tough. And yes, we got past it. But not because we suddenly became flawless. We learned to laugh at ourselves, to prepare better, and to stop measuring our worth by one shaky moment."*

"But what about the group project?" the younger self pressed. *"The one where no one listened, and we felt invisible?"*

"That one taught us something, too," the older self replied. *"It taught us how to speak up, how to lead without shouting, and how to find our voice even when others weren't ready to hear it."* The younger self looked down, fiddling with the notebook. *"Did we ever stop doubting ourselves?"*

"Not entirely," said the older self. *"But we learned to doubt with kindness. To question without crumbling. And to trust that growth isn't about perfection—it's about persistence."*

They sat in silence again, but this time it was softer. The mirrors didn't just reflect—they held space for everything in between: the failures, the small wins, the nights of uncertainty, and the quiet triumphs that never made it into a résumé.



Figure 1: *A Year Nine student sits thoughtfully, engaged in quiet self-dialogue. The warm tones and painterly brushstrokes evoke introspection, symbolizing growth, emotional literacy, and the*

evolving journey of self-authorship.

Tracing the Threads of Becoming

This is where I gathered my material—not from textbooks or tidy timelines, but from the messy, beautiful archive of lived experience. It came from journal scribbles written in the quiet hours of self-doubt, from late-night thoughts that refused to settle, from awkward presentations that left me red-faced and reflective, and from conversations that lingered long after they ended. These fragments weren't just memories—they were clues. Each one whispered something about who I was, what I feared, and how I was learning to grow.

This reflection isn't a study in the traditional sense. It's a conversation across time—a dialogue between the person I was and the person I'm still becoming. That moment between the mirrors became the heartbeat of this process. I knew early on that I didn't want to hide behind stiff academic language. I wanted something more real—something that felt like me. So, I leaned into storytelling, a practice often encouraged in adolescent reflective writing to deepen authenticity (Vetter, 2018). I imagined my past self: awkward, unsure, occasionally dramatic. And my future self: hopefully wiser, more grounded, and a little less cringe. Together, they helped me sift through the emotional debris of sleepless nights, scribbled margins, and chaotic group projects that tested my patience and perspective.

Rather than constructing a neat timeline or listing polished facts, I chose a narrative style—messy, intuitive, and emotionally honest. Because when you're trying to figure out who you are and how you got here, neatness rarely tells the whole story. This reflection became a mosaic of identity, stitched together from doubt, resilience, and unexpected clarity. Such resilience, as noted in educational psychology, often emerges through reflection on discomfort and challenge (Heng & Chu, 2023). It's about asking whether I truly believe in myself, and whether all this reflection made a difference.

Spoiler: *"It did. Just not always in the ways I expected."*

Reflecting and Analyzing Myself

Early in my academic journey, I often found myself caught between theory and practice. I absorbed information quickly, yet rarely paused to process it with depth. Growth felt sporadic—less like development and more like survival. For example, during Year Nine, group projects often left me frustrated: sometimes my ideas were overlooked, or I hesitated to speak up in front of more confident classmates. Reflection seemed abstract, and decision-making was riddled with hesitation. It wasn't a lack of capability that held me back, but the absence of a structured way to understand and navigate my own learning.

That began to shift when I engaged with Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. It offered a framework that moved me beyond surface-level reactions. I started analyzing situations, identifying emotions, evaluating outcomes, and planning more intentional responses. At first, the process felt awkward and mechanical. But over time, it became transformative. I recall a particularly chaotic Year Nine science presentation where I initially blamed poor coordination. Upon deeper reflection, I recognized my own fear of confrontation and reluctance to speak up. That insight changed how I approached collaborative work—from passive participation to proactive engagement.

Alongside structured reflection, I began doing the inner work that theory alone couldn't reach. Carol Dweck's concept of a growth mindset helped me reframe setbacks as learning opportunities rather than personal failures. Each stumble—whether forgetting lines in a class debate or struggling with math problems—became data, not a verdict. Kristin Neff's framework of self-compassion added another dimension. Like many female students at this stage, I was often harsh with myself, especially when comparing my performance to peers. Learning to meet my shortcomings with kindness reduced burnout and expanded my emotional capacity to grow. These shifts weren't just academic—they were deeply personal, shaping how I learned, led, and lived.

One metaphor stayed with me throughout this journey: sitting between two mirrors. In one, I saw my younger self—wide-eyed, uncertain, full of questions. In the other, a future self—calm, thoughtful, with tired but kind eyes. "Do we turn out okay?" the younger me asked. The older self replied, "You'll be surprised at what you survive—and who you become because of it." That imagined exchange captured the essence of reflection: a conversation across time, grounded in empathy and growth.

This reflection isn't tidy. It's stitched together from scribbled journal entries, chaotic group work, anxious midnight thoughts before exams, and difficult conversations with teachers and peers. But through all of it, a pattern emerged. I moved from being reactive and unsure to becoming more deliberate, curious, and self-directed. I learned not just to think critically, but to feel constructively, to fail forward, and to lead with compassion.

Ultimately, this narrative is more than an academic exercise—it is a record of internal transformation. Growth didn't follow a straight line. It unfolded through layered reflection, guided by theory and shaped by experience. The conversation between my past and future selves became more than symbolic—it became strategic. It helped me move from uncertainty to intention, reminding me that who I was in Year Nine is inseparable from who I am becoming.

Insights from the Study

Engaging in this reflective narrative—framed as a conversation between my past and future selves—has been more than a creative exercise. It has been a journey of vulnerability, insight, and transformation. By revisiting key academic and personal experiences and examining them through evidence-based frameworks, I gained a deeper understanding of who I was, who I am becoming, and who I aspire to be.

At the heart of this reflection lies a quiet but powerful realization: growth is rarely linear and seldom loud. It often unfolds in the margins—through late-night exam worries, difficult feedback from teachers, moments of doubt in group projects, and unexpected breakthroughs in class discussions. What turns these experiences into meaningful learning is reflection, especially when guided by theoretical models that help make sense of the messiness of real life (Ramage, 2017; McLeod, 2025).

Self-Awareness and Resilience: Learning Through Reflection

One of the most profound insights was the importance of cultivating self-awareness. In earlier stages, I often acted reactively—driven by external expectations, fear of failure, or the pressure to appear competent among peers. Schön's Reflective Practice model helped me pause and trace moments when I shifted from habitual reactions to intentional responses (Ramage, 2017). Over time, I began to notice patterns—what triggered my anxiety before presentations, how I responded to setbacks in group work, and how I defined success. This awareness helped me move from being controlled by reactions to choosing values-aligned responses.

Equally transformative was the realization that resilience is not just about enduring hardship—it is about learning through it. Some of my most meaningful growth came from failure, frustration, and confusion. Whether it was a collapsed group project or a presentation that went poorly, Gibbs' Reflective Cycle helped me ask better questions: What happened? What was I thinking and feeling? What could I have done differently? This process turned discomfort into a signal of growth in progress (McLeod, 2025; Heng & Chu, 2023).

Mindset, Compassion, and Lifelong Reflection

Another key insight was the impact of mindset and self-compassion. Carol Dweck's growth mindset helped me reframe effort and failure—not as threats, but as essential parts of learning (Dweck, 2016). This shift encouraged me to take risks, seek feedback, and view mistakes as stepping stones. Kristin Neff's self-compassion added an emotional layer. Like many Year Nine students, I was often harsh with myself, especially when comparing my performance to peers.

Learning to treat myself with kindness created space for more courageous learning (Neff, 2023).

The metaphor of a conversation between past and future selves gave this reflection emotional shape. It allowed me to voice doubts and hopes in a way that felt grounding and honest. My younger self asked, “Am I doing enough?” and my imagined future self responded, “You’ll learn through failure. You’ll grow.” This dialogue became a structure I could return to—tracking transformation not just through achievements, but through emotional maturity, clarity, and compassion.

Perhaps the most lasting insight is that reflection is not a one-time activity—it is a lifelong habit. Structured and compassionate reflection helps me stay aligned with my values, navigate challenges, and remain intentional in my academic and personal journey (Vetter, 2018).

Critical Stance of the Study

This reflective narrative has illuminated how personal growth emerges not from isolated achievements but through sustained engagement with discomfort, introspection, and theory-informed reflection. While the study draws strength from its dialogic structure and integration of frameworks such as Schön’s reflective practice (Ramage, 2017), Gibbs’ cycle (McLeod, 2025), Dweck’s growth mindset (Dweck, 2016), and Neff’s self-compassion (Neff, 2023), it is not without limitations. The deeply personal nature of the reflection, while offering authenticity and emotional resonance, may limit its generalizability across contexts. Additionally, the retrospective lens—though rich in insight—relies heavily on memory and interpretation, which are inherently subjective and shaped by present understanding. The absence of external validation or triangulated data also means that the findings are introspective rather than empirical, offering depth over breadth (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Conclusive Remarks

This reflection challenges the assumption that transformation is achieved through certainty or confidence alone. Instead, it reveals growth as an ongoing process of negotiating ambiguity, embracing vulnerability, and cultivating emotional literacy. The imagined dialogue between my past and future selves functioned not only as a narrative device but also as a strategic framework for self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Through this lens, I was able to trace shifts in identity, values, and agency across time, recognizing reflection as both a mirror—revealing who I have been—and a compass—guiding who I am becoming.

Looking ahead, I view reflection not merely as a retrospective habit but as a forward-facing

practice. It informs how I read, lead, and learn, shaping my responses to challenges and opportunities with greater intentionality. As I prepare for future academic roles, I aim to embed reflective inquiry into self-correction, collaboration, and leadership. Reflection will remain my method for staying aligned with purpose, responsive to change, and open to growth.

Ultimately, this study affirms that growth is not a fixed destination but a continuous practice. Reflection, when guided by compassion and structured inquiry, becomes its most faithful companion—sustaining resilience, fostering clarity, and modeling for others the transformative power of learning through both struggle and success.

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The Curious Cost of Productivity: How Workload Affects Curiosity in Learning

Samraghy Adhikari

Abstract

This study examines the impact of excessive academic workload on student curiosity, highlighting how institutional structures often prioritize performance over exploration. The problem lies in the shift from intrinsic, curiosity-driven learning to instrumental, grade-oriented learning, resulting in cognitive overload, diminished autonomy, and weakened motivation. Employing a qualitative, reflective methodology, the research draws on personal narrative, autoethnographic accounts, theoretical analysis, and structured observation of peer experiences. Insights reveal that heavy workloads suppress curiosity by eroding cognitive “slack,” reducing opportunities for deep engagement, and fostering compliance rather than inquiry. The findings underscore the need for intentional educational design that values depth over breadth, rewards curiosity through open-ended assessments, and creates space for student-driven exploration to sustain lifelong learning.

Keywords: *curiosity, academic workload, intrinsic motivation, cognitive load, over justification effect*

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Introduction

Curiosity is the fundamental engine of intellectual growth and human development. This intrinsic desire to seek new information and understanding transforms passive reception into active engagement, motivating learners to ask probing questions and make meaningful connections. Historically, educational philosophies have championed the cultivation of curiosity as a primary goal. Thinkers such as John Dewey emphasized inquiry as the heart of democratic education, while Maria Montessori designed environments where exploration and self-directed learning could

flourish. These traditions highlight curiosity not merely as a cognitive skill, but as a vital disposition for lifelong learning and civic participation (Oudeyer et al., 2016).

Yet the contemporary academic landscape presents a paradox. While institutions claim to foster lifelong learners, the structural mechanisms of modern schooling—standardized testing, dense curricula, and relentless performance metrics—often create environments hostile to curious exploration. Students now navigate systems where the volume of prescribed work eclipses the joy of discovery, reducing learning to a transactional process of task completion (Lepper et al., 1973).

This tension reflects broader societal pressures. In an era of global competition, education systems are increasingly shaped by economic imperatives, prioritizing measurable outcomes over intangible qualities like wonder, creativity, and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Policymakers emphasize accountability and efficiency, but these priorities often sideline the slower, exploratory processes through which curiosity thrives. Moreover, digital technologies, while offering unprecedented access to information, also contribute to cognitive overload and distraction, further complicating the cultivation of sustained inquiry (Poupard et al., 2025).

The rationale for examining curiosity in this context is clear: curiosity is not a luxury, but a necessity for navigating complex, rapidly changing societies. It underpins innovation, adaptability, and resilience—qualities essential for both personal fulfillment and collective progress. If educational structures inadvertently suppress curiosity, they undermine their own stated mission of preparing students for lifelong learning. Understanding this paradox is therefore critical, not only for rethinking classroom practices but also for reimagining education as a system that values exploration as much as achievement (Chapin, 2024).

Problem Statement: Workload Versus Curiosity in Education

The central problem under investigation is the negative correlation between increasing academic workload and the diminishment of student curiosity. While assignments and examinations are intended to reinforce learning and consolidate knowledge, their overwhelming volume often shifts the learner's focus from understanding to mere completion. In such contexts, education risks becoming a superficial, transactional activity rather than a deep, reflective process. This transition from curiosity-driven deep learning to grade-driven surface learning represents a critical flaw in prevailing educational approaches (Lepper et al., 1973).

The consequences of this shift extend beyond academic performance. Excessive workload contributes to cognitive fatigue, undermines intrinsic motivation, and erodes the joy of discovery

(Deci & Ryan, 2000). Students may begin to perceive learning as a burden rather than an opportunity, which has significant implications for their intellectual development, emotional well-being, and long-term engagement with knowledge. When cognitive demands exceed working memory capacity, curiosity is displaced by survival-oriented task completion (Sweller, 1988). If curiosity, the very foundation of lifelong learning, is suppressed, the broader mission of education to cultivate innovative, resilient, and critically minded individuals is compromised (Chapin, 2024).

Purpose of the Study: Balancing Rigor and Curiosity in Learning

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the mechanisms through which heavy academic workloads impact student curiosity. By weaving together personal reflection and established educational theory, the study seeks to articulate how constant pressure leads to cognitive overload, diminishes autonomy, and distorts motivation. In doing so, it highlights the tension between institutional priorities—efficiency, accountability, and measurable outcomes—and the learner’s intrinsic drive to explore, question, and create (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The significance of this inquiry is multifaceted. For educators, it underscores the need to balance rigor with flexibility, ensuring that pedagogical practices nurture curiosity rather than suppress it (Chapin, 2024). For curriculum designers, it offers insights into how structural choices—such as assessment frequency, task design, and workload distribution—can either foster or hinder deep learning (Sweller, 1988). For policymakers, it raises urgent questions about whether current educational structures align with the broader goal of cultivating lifelong learners (Poupard et al., 2025).

If educational systems continue to prioritize performance metrics at the expense of curiosity, they risk producing proficient test-takers but disengaged thinkers. Re-evaluating these priorities is therefore essential to create environments that encourage exploration, sustain motivation, and prepare students not only for academic success but also for meaningful participation in society as innovative, inquisitive, and engaged learners (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Chapin, 2024).

Literature Review: Theoretical Perspectives on Workload and Curiosity

This reflection is grounded in key educational and psychological theories that illuminate the complex relationship between academic workload and student curiosity.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a foundational lens for understanding motivation in educational contexts. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), intrinsic motivation flourishes when three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied. Excessive workload, however, directly undermines these conditions. When students are deprived of choice, their independence is curtailed; when constant time pressure prevents mastery, their sense of competence is weakened; and when competitive structures replace collaboration, relatedness is compromised. The erosion of these needs shifts motivation from intrinsic curiosity to extrinsic compliance, thereby diminishing the quality of the learning experience (Oudeyer et al., 2016).

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) explains how workload impacts curiosity by emphasizing the limited capacity of working memory. According to Sweller (1988), when students are inundated with deadlines, assignments, and assessments, cognitive resources are consumed by task management rather than inquiry. This overload leaves little space for spontaneous exploration, creative problem-solving, or reflective thought—the very processes that define curiosity-driven learning. CLT underscores the importance of balancing instructional demands with cognitive capacity to ensure that curiosity can thrive alongside academic rigor (Poupard et al., 2025).

The Overjustification Effect adds another dimension by demonstrating how external rewards, such as grades, can diminish intrinsic interest in an activity. Lepper et al. (1973) showed that when every reading assignment is tied to a quiz or every project to a performance metric, the inherent joy of learning is overshadowed by the pressure of assessment. Curiosity, which thrives on open-ended exploration, is reduced to a casualty of grade-driven motivation. This effect highlights the paradox of modern education: systems designed to measure achievement may inadvertently suppress the very qualities—curiosity, creativity, and intrinsic engagement—that underpin meaningful learning (Lepper et al., 1973; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Taken together, these theories reveal a consistent pattern: structural features of contemporary education often conflict with the psychological conditions necessary for curiosity. The literature suggests that curiosity is not merely an individual trait but a systemic outcome shaped by institutional priorities. When workload is excessive, assessments are relentless, and autonomy is restricted, curiosity is displaced by compliance. Conversely, when educational environments respect cognitive limits, nurture autonomy, and value intrinsic engagement, curiosity flourishes as a driver of deep learning and lifelong intellectual growth (Chapin, 2024).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, reflective research design to capture the nuanced interplay between academic workload and student curiosity. Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the approach privileges lived experience, narrative inquiry, and interpretive analysis to illuminate how structural features of education shape learner motivation and engagement (Oudeyer et al., 2016). The methodology is organized around three interconnected pillars:

Drawing on extensive personal experience as a student, the study employs autoethnographic reflection to provide a firsthand account of curiosity's decline within the academic environment. Autoethnography situates the researcher both as participant and observer, allowing for the articulation of subjective experiences that reveal the emotional, cognitive, and motivational dimensions of learning (Ellis et al., 2011).

Critical Analysis of Academic Theory

Personal observations are examined through the lens of established educational and psychological frameworks, including Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988; Poupard et al., 2025), and the Overjustification Effect (Lepper et al., 1973). This theoretical triangulation enables the study to move beyond anecdotal reflection, grounding individual experiences in evidence-based arguments. By integrating theory with lived accounts, the analysis highlights how institutional practices systematically influence curiosity and motivation.

Structured Observation

Complementing personal reflection, structured observations of peer behavior and institutional practices are incorporated to identify recurring patterns of stress, coping strategies, and surface learning. Structured observation is widely used in qualitative research to capture contextual realities and collective experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). These observations provide a broader frame, ensuring that findings are not limited to individual experience but resonate with collective student realities.

These three pillars create a holistic methodology that blends introspection, theory, and observation. This design allows the study to capture both the subjective depth of personal

experience and the objective patterns of institutional practice, offering a comprehensive portrayal of how academic workload impacts curiosity (Chapin, 2024).

Narrative Reflection: *Curiosity Lost in the Race for Grades*

When I think back on my school journey, I can clearly see how the theories about curiosity and workload played out in my own life. The change didn't happen all at once—it was slow, almost invisible at first—but over time it became impossible to ignore.

One of the earliest moments when curiosity truly lit up my mind was during a science lesson on the universe. My teacher was explaining the Big Bang theory, describing how everything—stars, planets, even life itself—began from a single, unimaginable explosion of energy. As he spoke, I drifted beyond the classroom walls. I imagined what it would be like if the Big Bang happened right in front of me. I saw a blinding light filling the room, particles rushing past like sparks, and galaxies swirling into existence. For a moment, the desks and whiteboard disappeared, replaced by an endless sky unfolding in every direction. It wasn't just science; it was wonder that learning could stretch far beyond the textbook, opening doors to imagination and deep thinking about our place in the universe.

But over time, I noticed how this kind of curiosity was slowly pushed aside. The shift was gradual but unmistakable, especially in subjects I once loved. In a history lesson of social studies. I remember being so excited about a big term paper on the Cold War. At the beginning, I was full of questions. I wanted to know why the two sides hated each other so much, how ordinary people lived during that time, and what lessons we could learn today. I borrowed books outside the syllabus, read articles online, and even asked my parents about their memories of the era. It felt like real learning—driven by curiosity, not by grades.

However, the reality of the workload soon intruded. That history lesson was only one of five major assignments due at the same time. My broad exploration narrowed into a frantic search for “usable evidence.” My guiding question changed from “I wonder why...” to “What do I need to write to get an A?” The books I had gathered for enjoyment sat untouched. I submitted a competent, well-graded paper, but the process felt hollow. The curiosity that had sparked my journey was extinguished by the pressure to perform.

This pattern repeated across subjects. In literature, analyzing themes gave way to memorizing quotes for exams. In science, the wonder of experiments was replaced by drilling into past papers. The workload didn't just consume my time—it reshaped how I approached knowledge,

prioritizing utility over understanding and eroding my natural curiosity.

Looking back, I realize that curiosity was never gone; it was buried under deadlines, expectations, and the constant race to keep up. The joy of learning was replaced by the stress of producing. I became efficient, but less imaginative. I learned how to meet requirements but lost the freedom to ask questions without immediate answers.

For me, this reflection shows how school can sometimes silence the very curiosity it is meant to encourage. Teachers often inspire wonder, like in that Big Bang lesson, but the system itself—heavy workloads, endless assessments, and pressure to succeed—can turn learning into a chore. As a student, I want education to be more than grades. I want it to be about discovery, imagination, and keeping alive that spark of curiosity that makes learning meaningful.

Insights from the Study

Reflecting on my experiences through the lens of educational theories reveals several important insights about how workload and pressure shape curiosity and learning.

The Dominance of Instrumental Learning

One of the clearest patterns I noticed was the shift from intrinsic learning—learning because I was genuinely curious—to instrumental learning, where the main goal was simply to get a grade. This connects directly to the Overjustification Effect, which explains how external rewards can weaken internal motivation (Lepper et al., 1973). At first, I wanted to explore history and science because I found them fascinating. But as deadlines piled up, my focus changed to “What do I need to write to get an A?” The grade became the reward, and the curiosity that had driven me at the start faded away. This shows how school systems, even unintentionally, can turn learning into a transaction rather than a discovery (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Cognitive Overload and the Loss of “Cognitive Slack.”

Curiosity needs space—mental room to wander, ask “what if,” and make connections. But with constant assignments and exams, I often felt like my brain was too full to think beyond the task in front of me. This relates to Cognitive Load Theory, which emphasizes the limits of working memory (Sweller, 1988). When it’s overloaded, there’s no energy left for creative or curious

thought. I experienced this when preparing for multiple subjects at once: instead of wondering about the Cold War or imagining the Big Bang, I was just trying to survive the workload. The “cognitive slack” that curiosity depends on was gone, replaced by stress and efficiency (Poupard et al., 2025; Cohen et al., 2018).

The Erosion of Autonomy and Competence

According to Self-Determination Theory, motivation grows when we feel autonomy (having choice), competence (feeling capable), and relatedness (feeling connected) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Heavy workloads often stripped away these needs. Autonomy disappeared when every step of learning was dictated by assignments and exams. Competence was reduced to how fast I could finish tasks, not how deeply I understood them. Even relatedness suffered, because competition for grades sometimes replaced collaboration with classmates. This erosion of autonomy and competence made learning feel mechanical, and curiosity—something that thrives on freedom and confidence—was pushed aside (Oudeyer et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2011).

Critical Discourse

Looking at these insights together, I can see how theories explain what I lived through. The Overjustification Effect shows why grades replaced curiosity (Lepper et al., 1973). Cognitive Load Theory explains why my mind felt too crowded to explore ideas (Sweller, 1988; Poupard et al., 2025; Cohen et al., 2018). Self-Determination Theory reveals why I felt less like a learner and more like a performer (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ellis et al., 2011).

For a Year 9 student like me, these theories make sense because they match my reality. They show that curiosity isn’t just about personality—it’s shaped by the system around us. When schools overload students, curiosity is the first casualty. This reflection makes me think that education should be about balance: enough structure to guide us, but enough freedom to let curiosity breathe. Without that balance, we risk losing the very spark that makes learning meaningful (Chapin, 2024).

Concluding Remarks

Evidence from both personal reflection and educational theory demonstrates that an

excessive focus on academic workload is pedagogically counterproductive. Current systems often measure superficial achievement while undermining the deeper outcomes of curiosity, critical thinking, and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lepper et al., 1973). The result is a generation of students adept at meeting academic requirements but at risk of losing the curiosity essential for innovation and lifelong learning. Anxiety and burnout, therefore, are not individual shortcomings but systemic consequences of imbalance (Sweller, 1988; Poupard et al., 2025).

The way forward is not simply to assign less work, but to pursue more intentional design in education. What is needed is a shift in priorities that values depth over breadth, allowing students to engage in mastery-oriented learning rather than rushing through excessive content. Assessments should be designed to reward curiosity, encouraging open-ended inquiry, personal research, and recognition of the process of exploration rather than only the final product (Oudeyer et al., 2016). Equally important is the creation of curricular “white space”—unstructured time within the learning framework that gives students the freedom to pursue their own questions and interests without the immediate pressure of output. Together, these changes would transform education into a system that nurtures curiosity, fosters meaningful engagement, and sustains the joy of learning (Chapin, 2024).

Ultimately, education should ignite curiosity rather than extinguish it. Success must be measured not by the volume of assigned tasks, but by the spark of inquiry and understanding that endures beyond the classroom.

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Why Our Existence is a Scientific Miracle and a Universal Truth

Safu Joshi

Abstract

This study is a factual collection of various other research papers from certified sites. The main abstraction of this paper would be aligning the dots between the existence of the transforming humans and the scientific miracle behind this unusual existence. The quotes and the research backing up the fact that our existence is not unplanned, yet definitely not normal, have been summarized in the form of theories and qualitative lectures through this paper. These findings have not only contributed to the scientific area regarding questions like the possibility of a mortal being to walk around a planet covered with danger for millennials, but also have created loopholes for scientists themselves in a way of fascination and intrigue. All references and sources of statements are to be addressed in the bibliography below, and all statements or theories talked about have been considered by professionals.

Keywords: *Stardust, Big Bang, Miracle, Multiverse, Existence*

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Introduction

The universe is enraptured in the essence of astronomy. In Nepal, astronomy has never been given the standard equality and priority as astrology, which is an irony. People tend to blame their ruling planets for small mishappenings in their life, but when faced with studying those very planets, they back out, stating that astronomy isn't applicable in the real world. We, humans, have survived despite harsh climate changes, dangerous eras where every step was kill or be killed, and yet we survived, we didn't just survive, we continued living. Mortal beings walking along this very planet that cooled down from a molten state that took thousands of years, breathing O₂, drinking H₂O, and having an environment filled with N₂. That is not normal. That is a miracle - A Scientific

Miracle (BBC, 2011; NASA Astrobiology Institute; Baker, 2025).

The definition of mortal life is bound within limits. It's a fascination that, against all odds and circumstances, our survival was approved. Anything that occurs occurs scientifically, and that is a proven fact, so I had a question. In my sad moments or whenever I felt unworthy of my presence and felt relieved rather than proud of my achievement, I used to ask myself if my existence was not a mistake. Nowadays, students are under peer pressure, academic pressure, and trauma. Many are facing identity crises and are struggling with self-esteem. "Over 80% more likely to report dealing with anxiety or depression compared to older generations, according to recent Gen Z studies," according to a website originally founded for the awareness of mental health among today's generation (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

Scientific Wonder and the Search for Meaning

This question stuck with me for months until I came across an interview on the internet, with the content being about the fact that, scientifically, our existence was never actually theorized. It wasn't even a hypothesis to begin with, so I started digging up research papers and interviews. Two of the most renowned lecturers are Brian Edward Cox, an English physicist and musician who is professor of particle physics in the School of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Manchester and the Royal Society Professor for Public Engagement in Science (Roes, 2014), and Neil deGrasse Tyson, an American astrophysicist, author, and science communicator whose public lectures and interviews have inspired many (BBC, 2011; The Peaceful Bible, 2025).

Neil deGrasse Tyson stated in one of his interviews, "The molecules comprising our body are traceable to the center of stars that manufacture these elements from lighter versions of themselves and that explode, scattering these enriched elements across the galaxy into gas clouds that would later collapse to form next-generation star systems, one being ours" (The Diary Of A CEO Clips, 2022). It was a statement made almost like redirecting the concerns of the generation into a single belief that all souls are ignited with intentional fire. These atoms are in us because the universe is in us (Baker, 2025; NASA Astrobiology Institute). This sparked hope and curiosity, and here we are.

Tracing the Origins of Human Existence

The significance of this study would be to draw a line of origin regarding the universe and

humans, as thus quoted by Brian Cox, “the universe has a medium of you through which it explores itself” (Roes, 2014). This study will highlight recent or past case studies in the order of the formation of a simplified universe, the human existential miracle, and the complementary paths of humans, their bodies, and the universe itself.

This study will also be hinting about the scientific reasoning behind the existence of god, multiverse theories, and the famous simulation theory (Adler, 2020), which will be connected to the main topic, i.e., why your existence is a scientific miracle and a universal truth. All those theories are to be a solid proving point behind the main aim of this study (BBC, 2011; Baker, 2025).

The Birth, Celestial Composition, and Statistical Improbability of the Universe

“The human mind, no matter how highly trained, cannot grasp the universe. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library whose walls are covered to the ceiling with books in many different tongues... The child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books, a mysterious order... but only dimly suspects it.” — Albert Einstein.

The universe is a vast being or an empty drawing book revealing new artworks every flip of the page. The artist is unknown, yet the art is admired. The starting point cannot be grasped by the human mind in practicality, yet if theory is to be stated, there comes the Big Bang theory of space. We all know that the universe we are familiar with now took years to come to such a shape and form, and that transition took around 13.8 billion years. Simply put, the theory states that the universe at the beginning was nothing but a stretched, dense point at an unimaginable speed, but with time, due to the witty formulas and technology, it became more measurable and readable. The universe is still expanding to this very day and will continue until death (NASA Astrobiology Institute).

The mysterious void is not only comprised of carbon, iron, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and helium and thousands of gases—some not copiable by the human brain—it is also made up of thousands of stars, nebulae, black holes, comets, asteroid belts, and at the end our planet Earth is just a revolving piece of rock revolving around a huge fiery mass alongside seven other rocks which are a part of a “solar system.” Solar systems similar to ours—if not larger—have been discovered, and planets capable of becoming Earth 2.0, too, have been figured out (Baker, 2025). Now the question remains of whether human existence is a miracle or not.

The recent interviews with Neil deGrasse Tyson revealed a fact regarding human spawn/existence. According to the research made, there have been over 100 billion humans to walk

on the earth, which is a huge number, and the number of beings that could have lived is even stupendously larger. 1 to the power of 400 trillion ($1^{400,000,000,000,000}$) is the percentage of being born human and the percentage of being born at all, even lower. That shows the incredible luck it is to be born and see what we despise now. Many people who could ever exist will never exist, according to data collected regarding the authentication of genes to see the combination of DNA to make an authentic human being (The Diary Of A CEO Clips, 2022; DEAD Talks Podcast, 2023).

Some citations from profounds suggesting the acceptance of the theory are:

1. It is true that nearly all the elements in the human body were made in a star, and many have come through several supernovas (BBC, 2011).
2. The atoms of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen—and indeed nearly all heavy elements—in human bodies were synthesized in previous generations of stars over 4.5 billion years ago (Baker, 2025).
3. “Every part of you—your bones, your skin, your very thoughts—is made from elements that once belonged to the cosmos. You are not just a being on this planet; you are a continuation of a story billions of years in the making.” – by Prince Ea (2025)

Mapping the Cosmic and Human Narrative

This study adopts a qualitative, narrative-based approach that integrates scientific inquiry with reflective exploration. It is grounded in the belief that understanding human existence through the lens of cosmology requires not only empirical evidence but also philosophical interpretation and emotional resonance (Adler, 2020; Baker, 2025). The methodology is designed to blend multiple dimensions of inquiry, including a comprehensive review of scientific literature, analysis of expert interviews and public lectures, reflective engagement with existential themes, and a cross-disciplinary synthesis spanning physics, astronomy, philosophy, and education.

At the heart of this study are the public engagements and published works of leading science communicators: Professor Brian Edward Cox, a particle physicist and Royal Society Professor for Public Engagement in Science (Roes, 2014), and Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, an astrophysicist, author, and director of the Hayden Planetarium (BBC, 2011; The Peaceful Bible, 2025). Their lectures, interviews, and writings serve as foundational texts, offering both rigorous scientific insight and poetic reflection on the nature of existence. Their studies are the foundational mark, yet other rectified research papers and articles, too, shall be used with proper credits and

clarity in their sources.

To deepen the inquiry, the study also draws upon a wide range of secondary sources. These include peer-reviewed articles on cosmology, quantum theory, and astrobiology (NASA Astrobiology Institute), YouTube videos, books and essays on existential philosophy and the anthropic principle, and theoretical frameworks such as the Multiverse, Simulation Hypothesis, Capture, and Theological Cosmology (Adler, 2020). Reflections on the statistical improbability of life and the genetic uniqueness of human birth further enrich the investigation (Prince Ea, 2025). All sources will be cited in APA format and listed in the bibliography, with hyperlinks to original publications where available.

The collected data and insights are organized into thematic clusters that mirror the sub-themes identified in the literature review. These include Cosmic Origins and Expansion, Celestial Composition and Earth's Context, Human Probability and Genetic Uniqueness, Existential Reflection and Identity Formation, and scientific and cultural narratives of Meaning (Baker, 2025). Each theme will be explored chronologically and conceptually, allowing readers to trace the universe's evolution alongside the unfolding of human self-awareness.

In addition to scientific analysis, the study incorporates personal reflections and student narratives. These reflections serve to illustrate how cosmic inquiry can foster self-understanding, highlight the emotional and psychological dimensions of scientific wonder, and support educational practices that integrate astronomy with identity formation and mental well-being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

Unfolding the chambers of the Void

As a person who is very much interested in astronomy, I have had my fair share of questions regarding the scientific facts proving our existence or merely backing us up. The things we hear, the things we experience, are they truly how life is supposed to be? Is it like a simulation (referring to simulation theory)? What if the life we are living right now isn't truly ours? Maybe we are merely a puppet controlled by who knows who, and each action we take, which we find weird, goes on to become theirs. Interesting paradox, isn't it? Well, that is a theory proposed by Nick Bostrom, a Swedish-born philosopher and professor at Oxford University (e.g., Adler, 2020), who wondered if we are not in human society and instead in a tiny computer screen-like video game.

Countless facts providing theories have established themselves in society regarding human existence, yet none are fully supported. Each theory has its flaws, yet one stood out. To me, a

theory called “eternal inflation” stood out. Not just the name, it is fancy, but the thought behind it. During some digging of information regarding Cox’s interviews, he spoke about something unheard of. He said, and I quote, “ the theory says that we might live in just one universe in an infinite collection of other universes, called a multiverse, in which every possible combination of the laws of nature occurs somewhere in its own separate universe. So everything that can happen, happens. It is then inevitable that our universe exists as well. Why are we here? Because we have to be” (Roes, 2014).

That was something interesting. Cox has always been one to stick to his word and always stood straight in his belief that we exist because the universe wants us to exist. The universe is an improbability, things happen, chaos appears, and alas, all goes into normal. Strange. Humans, too, are somewhat an example of improbability. In life, one isn't sure what they want, but they are never satisfied. Humans do have an instinct, a tendency, to just keep wanting and wanting. There is no boundary. Contrary to that, recent investigations or experiments have been able to sort out the elements found in the human body. Out of all the elements like zinc, iron, and potassium found, there stands carbon too. It's amazing. The reason is that humans naturally evolved from apes in the theory made by evolution-Darwinism; humans were created after the Big Bang. The Big Bang is the “starting package” of the universe, where extremely hot, dense, singular points formed, then expanded rapidly and cooled, leading to the formation of space, time, matter, and the structure of the cosmos as we know it today. It wasn't the start of the universe, but the endless expansion giving space and time. During the Big Bang, helium, hydrogen, and tiny bits of lithium were found, and nothing else. Endless stars are opposed and run on a life cycle with limited fuel. The stars combusted, leaving different new elements into space and leaving particles from which planets technically formed, according to the Tidal hypothesis made by James Jeans and Harold Jeff in 1917. The experiment showed traces of carbon atoms in the human body, which would be scientifically impossible. The carbon atoms themselves were rare and slow-paced and could only be found after the combustion or the explosion of a huge star that had these atoms stored in for millennia. That is a miracle in itself, and finding the very rare atoms in the human body is another one. It is no coincidence, nor is it of probability. Our existence is the result of an extraordinary chain of cosmic and biological events.

Moving on to the next professional who strongly believes human life is connected to stardust is Neil DeGrasse Tyson. His interviews are a collection of speculative theories, mostly regarding the existential meaning of life. Alongside astrophysics, Tyson also holds various beliefs regarding the origin of the human nation and what is keeping it thriving. Analyzing his interviews,

once he said, “We are literally stardust. Yes, you are alive in the universe, or another way to look at it is the universe is alive in you” (BBC, 2011; The Peaceful Bible, 2025). As I have already stated before, modern astrophysics has allowed the atoms of our bodies to be traced. It not only dates back to the origin of the Big Bang but to stars that have lived longer lives than we have. In the time frame of the universe, we humans are merely a dot. That can mean various things, such as the burden of perfectionism, the burden of carrying yourself through struggles can be lifted.

Early in 1950, the physicist Enrico Fermi profoundly questioned, “Where is everybody?” terming everybody as living beings or supernatural entities, which caused a riddle to tangle now known as Fermi’s Paradox. This raised questions about the existence of aliens and their intelligence, yet their lack of presence or simply lack of evidence for the presence of extraterrestrial life. In answer to that, Robin Hanson proposed a theory of his own, marked as an answer to the paradox in the late 1990s remarked as “The Great Filter Theory.” It is the idea of civilizations facing boundaries, whether external, asteroids, meteoroids, or internal; mass murder, genocide, disasters, etc, to their own survival. He argued, “Life expands to fill every niche.” Regarding the former years of human age, starting from the Stone Age till the modern technological world existing before us, the civilization has survived the ice age, snowstorms, mass wipeouts, nuclear wars, and pandemics, yet managed to evolve into intelligent life. Regarding the first scenario, life itself is rare and unpredictable, and humans are the first to ever survive this filter, resulting in the universe seemingly being empty. Yet, the second states the possibility that the filter ahead of us reassures each civilization to encounter such things for survival. In both scenarios, surviving or being close enough to survival is very rare.

I believe almost everyone has a burden in their lives, whether they took it on willingly or not. But knowing that we as a whole are a part of something so vast, so beautiful, and so unknown is wonderful. Having literal stardust in our bodies while we do daily things like breathing and breathing in something from the Big Bang is mind-boggling (Prince Ea, 2025). An even more confusing fact is that we are all one. Humans have genetics in common. There is a single genesis on this entire earth. Our DNA matches bananas. I believe that speaks for itself. These are not even a scratch on the surface of the theories made so far. Hundreds have stated the same facts over and over again connecting us to the universe ..the stars we look at and gaze at feeling at wonder, we look at ourselves ..the pattern in the trees we admire, the same we have in our fingerprints and the thunder that shakes us all yet brings calm, that is the veins of our eyes and the cracks of our palms.

Translating the language of the universe

From the above statements and insights, many things can be pointed out. The translation of the universe can be found in us. In our bodies and in our blood. The statements showcase the fact that even amidst improbability, miracles appear and existence occurs. The elements heavier than hydrogen and helium in our bodies were forged in the cores of stars that exploded long ago (NASA Astrobiology Institute). Our very existence is owed to the life and death of stars. To question and to understand the theory behind our existence is a process that requires conscious effort. Cox has argued that life, in a cosmic sense, is a process of energy transfer, a part of the universal cycle that allows for growth and existence (Roes, 2014).

The journey from the Big Bang to today, the evolution of humans, is no greater than a superficial comic. Different topics pose different theories regarding the start of the “human era, “ yet the 2 lectures have connected the start of us with the start of the universe (BBC, 2011; The Peaceful Bible, 2025). As the barriers expand, so do we. Our consciousness is a profoundly special aspect of the universe. Among 400 billion suns and a universe of 100 billion galaxies, a tiny bit of hope and curiosity is the place of miracles (Prince Ea, 2025). Not only are we special, but we are also miracles. *Literally miracles*. The consciousness we presume has led to so much till now, and the fact that we are just a tiny bit of the whole space and time is interesting. To know life exists on floating and revolving rocks where each has a life, a purpose, and a part of the universe is even more fascinating.

Among the impossibilities, we exist.

A miracle or a logical view of existence?

Hence, from the articles, actual research, and theories, we can officially say that we exist because we had to. Not because of a coincidence from the Big Bang, but because the existing rate of humankind, however rare, was planned (Adler, 2020). To look at this from a scientific view, it is a miracle; yet, to look from the universal view, it was preplanned. Think of it as the universe being an empty book and such a book where the creator already has things preplanned, and miracles are normal, yet the normal are miracles.

From this study, we can emphasize the common ancestral history of humans and the tracing of atoms inside the human body by joining the link to space (Baker, 2025; Prince Ea, 2025). Alongside, we get to know more about the dark void and how the supposedly only intelligent beings have survived against all odds. Any statement made in this study was factual, and the

references to all will be listed in the bibliography. The sector was a fun one to explore and also came with many shocks. Comparing human DNA to a banana and finding literal stardust within us is not just a mere coincidence; it's a statement (BBC, 2011). For anyone interested in this area, I would highly recommend watching Brian Cox, as he specializes in this topic (Roes, 2014). All the interviews are also to be listed in the bibliography.

For all reading this study till the end, I hope you didn't get bored, and I hope you somewhat felt valued. I wish all my readers found the writing interesting and somewhat knowledgeable. As an ending note, I'd like to say,

We are literal stardust, so we are valuable in every way. Stars combusted and died for us to live.

We're special.

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Fairy Tale Life: How the Pursuit of “Perfection” Affects Mental Health

Aaseen Sapkota

Abstract

This study explores the psychological and academic consequences of perfectionism among adolescents, revealing a paradox between the pursuit of flawlessness and authentic growth. Through narrative reflection, visual metaphor, and survey-based analysis, the research identifies three core dynamics: fear of judgment, identity confusion, and the discovery of resilience. Findings indicate that perfection-driven anxiety contributes to emotional distress, including depression and stress, and impairs academic engagement by discouraging curiosity and critical thinking. Students often prioritize performance over learning, leading to burnout and reduced creativity. The study advocates for embracing imperfection as a pathway to mental well-being and meaningful education, challenging conventional ideals of success.

Keywords: *Perfectionism, Mental Health, Academic Anxiety, Identity Development, Resilience*

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Introduction

In today’s hyper-visible world, many individuals, especially students like us, feel an overwhelming pressure to present a flawless image in academics, appearance, behavior, and even on social media. The desire to live an ideal life often comes with a hidden cost: stress, anxiety, and a deep fear of failure. While striving for excellence can foster growth and resilience, the relentless pursuit of perfection can quietly erode self-worth and mental well-being (Curran & Hill, 2019; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

For many young people, even a small mistake can feel catastrophic. A single poor grade or awkward moment may spiral into self-doubt and shame. The dream of being “perfect” becomes a

burden, and expectations that once seemed aspirational begin to feel suffocating. In a world where flaws are treated like curses, the average teenager's inner world can collapse under the weight of unrealistic ideals. Research consistently shows that perfection, especially when driven by external validation, can significantly harm mental health (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Frost et al., 1990). Yet, breaking free from this cycle is difficult when one's sense of value is tied to unattainable standards. This study explores how the desire to be perfect shapes our thoughts, behaviors, and emotional landscapes—and how embracing imperfection might offer a path to greater happiness and authenticity (Neff, 2003).

Have you ever walked down your school hallway feeling like every eye was on you? Or flunked a test and hesitated to tell anyone, fearing they'd think you were unintelligent? If so, I understand. A few years ago, I asked, "Why am I so afraid to make a mistake?" and "Why do I hold back from trying new things?" I didn't have answers then—but I began to recognize the quiet fear that had taken root in me.

While researching for this study, I came across a quote by Albert Einstein: "If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." This simple yet profound idea reminded me that every individual has unique strengths. Life isn't about being good at everything; it's about trying, learning, and growing. Measuring someone by the wrong standard only leads to misplaced judgment and unnecessary suffering. A student who struggles in mathematics might shine in sports, art, or storytelling. Failure in one domain does not define a person's worth (Neff, 2003).

Behind the Mask of Success in Adolescent Mental Health

Today, the idea of living a "fairy tale life," where perfection is found in beauty, success, and happiness, does not truly exist. Young people, especially adolescents, are heavily influenced by unrealistic expectations shaped by movies, social media, and societal norms. Teenagers, whose minds are still developing, often set impossibly high standards for themselves. When these standards are not met, failure is unavoidable. At first, failure can motivate us to work harder and achieve more, but over time, the constant pursuit of perfection begins to harm mental health (Curran & Hill, 2019; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Many adolescents today seek approval and validation from others, showing a lack of confidence in themselves (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Perfectionism is often seen as a driver of success and achievement. However, when it is fueled by unrealistic societal expectations, it can lead to serious damage to psychological

well-being. The pursuit of the “perfect life” often creates heavy emotional burdens, including stress, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Frost et al., 1990; Neff, 2003). These struggles usually come from the inevitable failure to meet impossible standards. Instead of accepting mistakes as part of life, many young people feel worthless when they cannot match the carefully curated image of perfection they hold in their minds. Over time, perfectionism can turn into a fear of failure and constant pressure to perform flawlessly (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

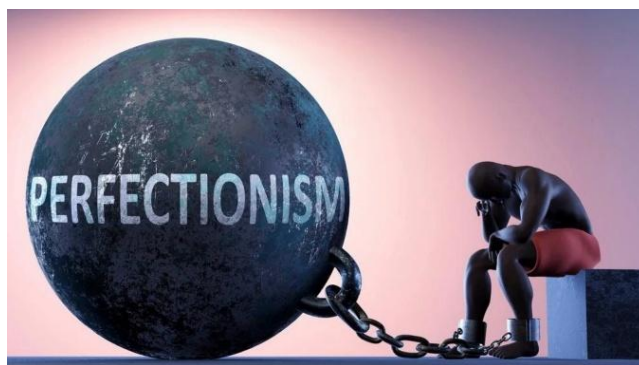


Figure 1: *Chained by Expectations: The Silent Weight of Perfectionism*

This image symbolizes how perfectionism, often confused with ambition, can lead to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and fear of failure. The chained figure reflects the inner struggle of those burdened by unrealistic societal standards, while the soft background highlights the contrast between outward calm and internal distress. [Source link.](#)

My interest in this topic comes from observing people around me, including myself, who have struggled when faced with challenges where failure was unavoidable. I have seen friends and peers silently battle perfectionism while hiding behind outward success—whether in academics, family life, or social appearances. Their lives may look perfect from the outside, but behind the mask lies a darker truth that slowly eats away at them. Eventually, this hidden struggle catches up. In the digital age, these pressures are made worse by social media, where flawless versions of life are constantly displayed. This not only sets impossible standards but also creates a culture of comparison, making adolescents feel even more inadequate (Primack et al., 2017; Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Przybylski et al., 2013).

Significance of the Study: Perfectionism as Toxic Motivation

In the digital age, the idea of living a “fairy tale life” is no longer just an abstract dream. It has become a very real and often toxic pressure that affects adolescents during their crucial developmental years. Social media was the first major influence, promoting unrealistic ideals of beauty, success, and happiness. More recently, artificial intelligence has also shaped adolescent experiences, especially in schools and educational settings. Algorithms now decide what

individuals see, from music to videos, leaving many young people less able to make independent choices. This impact is stronger on adolescents, who are less self-aware than adults and less capable of making responsible decisions (Curran & Hill, 2019).

Social media, however, remains the most powerful trap. With every scroll, adolescents are exposed to curated, unrealistic lifestyles. Research consistently links heavy social media use to higher rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and poor body image. These outcomes are largely driven by comparison and the fear of missing out (FOMO) (Primack et al., 2017; Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Przybylski et al., 2013).

At the same time, academic and career pressures weigh heavily on students. Many strive for perfection in their grades, resumes, and university applications. For some, anything less than an “A” feels like failure, regardless of their actual effort or achievement. External pressures from family and peers further intensify this need for validation. As a result, mental health struggles become unavoidable (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Frost et al., 1990).

This study emphasizes that perfectionism is not only about motivation but also about toxic motivation. While some students thrive under pressure, many silently suffer. Existing research often relies on surveys and scales, which provide useful data but cannot fully capture the personal fears and experiences behind perfectionism. Personal narratives, such as the fear of being seen as incompetent by peers or disappointing parents with less-than-perfect scores, reveal the deeper emotional struggles that numbers alone cannot explain (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Neff, 2003).

Objective and Research Question

The objective of this study is to examine how perfectionism—shaped by social media, artificial intelligence, and academic pressures—affects the mental health of adolescents. It seeks to highlight the emotional consequences of striving toward unrealistic standards and to demonstrate how personal experiences can provide deeper insights than quantitative measures alone.

Based on this objective, the study is guided by the following research question:

Is perfectionism correlated with anxiety and other mental health problems among adolescents in the digital age?

Methodology

This study adopts a combination of both primary and secondary data collection techniques

to explore how the pursuit of perfection affects mental health, particularly among adolescents and students. For the primary method, surveys and questionnaires were used to gather firsthand insights from participants aged 13 to 16. A structured questionnaire was designed to capture both emotional responses and behavioral patterns related to the pressure of portraying a “perfect” image in academic, social, and digital contexts. The questions included quantitative items, such as Likert scale ratings on stress levels, as well as qualitative prompts that invited participants to share personal experiences with perfectionism. To ensure a wide range of perspectives, participants were selected from diverse educational settings. The survey focused on themes such as fear of failure, social comparison, academic pressure, and emotional coping strategies (e.g., Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Frost et al., 1990).

The secondary method involved a review of existing literature on perfectionism, adolescent psychology, and mental health. Key studies and theoretical frameworks, including self-authorship theory, dialogic reflection, and cognitive-behavioral models, were examined to provide context and support for the analysis of the primary data.

For analysis, thematic coding was applied to the survey responses to identify recurring emotional and cognitive patterns. In addition, selected personal reflections were integrated into the study to deepen understanding and humanize the data, offering a richer perspective beyond numerical findings. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process, with participants’ anonymity and consent carefully maintained (e.g., Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020).

Narrative Reflection: Trapped in the Cycle of Perfectionism

I have always chased perfection—or at least tried to. Even while writing this journal, I find myself wanting every sentence to be flawless. I carry in my mind a perfect image of what I want to achieve and what I believe will satisfy others. For a long time, I thought this pursuit was noble, a way to prove my worth. The gratification I felt from every perfect result, flawless presentation, or event that matched my personal image of “perfect” was immense. It gave me a sense of superiority, as if I was above everyone else. Yet, like a drug, this feeling became addictive. Perfectionism began to consume me, and I fell into its trap (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

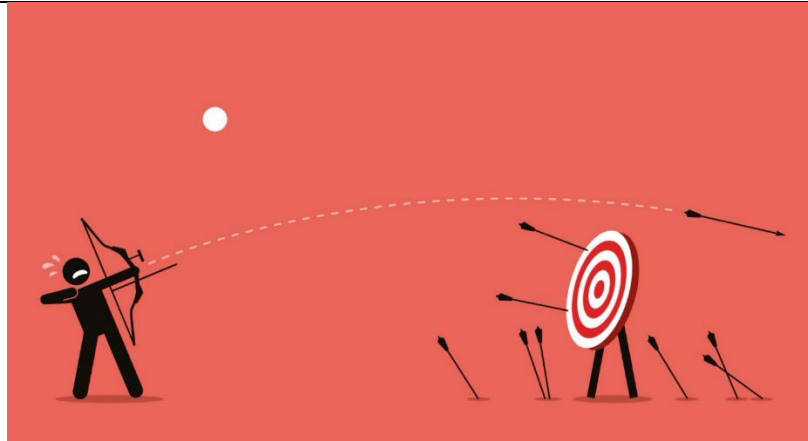


Figure 2: *Missing the Mark: The Pressure to Perform Perfectly*

The stressed figure, shown mid-action with arrows scattered around a missed target, symbolizes the pressure to succeed and the anxiety that comes with falling short. Only one arrow barely touches the outer ring, emphasizing how difficult it feels to meet high expectations. The red background intensifies the sense of urgency and emotional tension. The image reflects how perfectionism can turn effort into stress, and how fear of failure often overshadows the courage to try. [Source link](#)

One memory from my school years always comes back to me whenever perfection is mentioned. I was in the 7th grade and had the opportunity to speak in front of a large audience. Although I had stood on stage a few times before, I was still inexperienced and nervous. I prepared diligently, practicing my presentation over and over the night before. But when the day arrived, I had a panic attack just before stepping on stage. By chance, due to technical errors, I did not have to speak that day. The following week, however, I was scheduled again. The fear of failure overwhelmed me, and instead of facing the stage, I stayed home.

Looking back, I realize that the real reason I could not speak was not a lack of preparation, but the fear of imperfection. I was terrified that I would mess up, that my carefully constructed image would shatter in front of everyone. The thought of being seen as less than perfect paralyzed me. This experience taught me how deeply perfectionism can eat away at confidence and opportunities (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

How's Everyday Adolescent Life?

Through my study on the “fairy tale life” and its impact on mental health, I discovered that many of my peers share similar struggles. To explore this further, I surveyed participants aged 14 to 16, evenly divided between male and female participants. The responses revealed clear differences. Most female participants emphasized hobbies, personal achievements, and academics as areas where they felt pressure to be perfect. Male participants, on the other hand, focused more on social

life, appearance, popularity, and achievements. Both groups admitted to frequently comparing themselves to the seemingly perfect lives portrayed on social media. This constant comparison created feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Primack et al., 2017; Keles et al., 2020).

For example, one participant shared that scrolling through Instagram made them feel as though everyone else had a more exciting life, filled with vacations, parties, and achievements. Another admitted that they avoided posting online unless their photo looked flawless, fearing judgment from peers. These narratives reflect how social media amplifies perfectionism, turning ordinary moments into competitions for validation.

Other participants described experiences that highlight how perfectionism creeps into everyday life. One girl explained how she deleted her TikTok videos if they didn't reach a certain number of likes within the first hour, even though she enjoyed making them. A boy mentioned that he spent nearly an hour editing a single selfie before posting it, adjusting filters and angles until he felt it looked "perfect." Another participant confessed that they avoided joining group chats because they feared saying something "wrong" or not sounding smart enough, which shows how perfectionism can even affect casual conversations.

Academics were another area where perfectionism showed its grip. Several participants admitted that they stayed up late rewriting homework or assignments just to make them look neater, even when the content was already correct. One participant recalled crying after receiving a B grade, not because they didn't understand the subject, but because they felt they had failed to live up to their own image of excellence. Another shared how they avoided participating in class discussions, worried that giving an imperfect answer would make them look foolish in front of peers. To some extent, sports and extracurricular activities also became sources of pressure. A student who played basketball said they felt anxious before every game, not because of the competition itself, but because they feared making a mistake that would ruin their "perfect" performance (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

These examples show that perfectionism is not limited to academics or social media—it seeps into friendships, hobbies, and even leisure activities. For many adolescents, the pursuit of perfection becomes a constant shadow, shaping their choices and limiting their confidence. What should be moments of joy—posting a photo, playing a sport, or sharing ideas in class—turn into stressful tests of worthiness.

The Courage to Embrace Imperfection

My personal experiences, combined with the survey data, have made it clear that perfectionism is not truly a pursuit—it is a fear. It is a cycle that never ends, fueled by the desire to hide vulnerability. I have come to understand that imperfection itself is vulnerability, and vulnerability is something most of us are afraid to show. Yet, to grow beyond perfectionism, we must learn to embrace our flaws, accept mistakes, and build confidence in ourselves. True growth comes not from chasing an impossible ideal, but from enjoying the journey of life with authenticity (Neff, 2003).

Perfectionism convinces us that mistakes define our worth, but mistakes are proof of growth. Every stumble, every imperfect attempt, is a step toward becoming stronger and wiser. When we allow ourselves to be imperfect, we open the door to creativity, resilience, and genuine connection with others. Vulnerability, though uncomfortable, is what makes us human—it allows us to share our struggles, learn from them, and support one another.

The survey responses reminded me that adolescents often feel trapped between the image they want to project and the reality they live. Many admitted that they hide their insecurities behind achievements, grades, or carefully curated social media posts. This shows how perfectionism is not about striving for excellence, but about fearing exposure. It is the fear that others will see us as “less than,” when in truth, imperfection is what makes us relatable and real.

Breaking free from this cycle requires courage. It means redefining success not as flawless performance, but as progress, effort, and authenticity. It means celebrating small victories, learning from setbacks, and realizing that confidence grows when we stop measuring ourselves against impossible standards. The journey beyond perfectionism is not about lowering expectations—it is about creating healthier ones that allow us to thrive without fear.

Insights from the Reflection

The narration on the pursuit of perfection reveals three central insights: the fear of judgment, the confusion of identity, and the ultimate discovery of resilience. Together, these insights challenge conventional beliefs about success and highlight the importance of embracing imperfection as part of authentic growth (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Neff, 2003).

One significant impact of perfection-driven anxiety is its effect on study habits and academic development. Students who constantly strive for flawless performance often spend

excessive time rewriting assignments, over-preparing for exams, or avoiding participation in class discussions out of fear of making mistakes. Such behaviors reflect the dimensions of perfectionism identified by Frost et al. (1990), including concern over mistakes and doubts about actions. While these behaviors may create the appearance of diligence, they actually hinder learning by replacing curiosity with self-doubt. Instead of focusing on understanding concepts, students become preoccupied with how their work will be judged. This cycle leads to procrastination, burnout, and reduced creativity, as the pressure to achieve “perfect” results overshadows the joy of discovery (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Over time, academic progress slows because the student’s energy is consumed by anxiety rather than genuine engagement with learning. In this way, perfectionism not only undermines confidence but also restricts the very growth it claims to pursue, turning education into a performance rather than a process of exploration (Curran & Hill, 2019).

Fear of Judgment

Perfectionism is often rooted in the fear of being judged or seen as inadequate. The drive for perfection is not simply about achieving excellence, but about avoiding the shame of imperfection. This aligns with Hewitt and Flett’s (1991) concept of socially prescribed perfectionism, where individuals feel compelled to meet external expectations. The fear of speaking up, the panic before presenting, and the avoidance of opportunities all stem from anxiety about not meeting others’ standards. Perfectionism thrives on external validation, where individuals focus less on the process of achievement and more on how they will be perceived. When outcomes are predicted in advance, the mind tends to gravitate toward negative possibilities, reinforcing self-doubt (Frost et al., 1990).

Identity Confusion

Another key insight is the blurring of self-worth with perfection. The reflection shows how the desire to appear flawless to others overshadowed personal goals and authentic expression. Identity became entangled with public image, where progress and learning were secondary to maintaining a façade of competence. This confusion creates fragility: when individuals appear strong outwardly but feel weak internally, real challenges expose the cracks in their confidence. Stress and anxiety then dominate, often before any attempt is even made. Perfectionism, therefore, distorts identity by equating worth with image rather than effort, leaving individuals vulnerable to collapse under pressure (Curran & Hill, 2019).

Discovery of Resilience

The final insight is the recognition that resilience is born from imperfection. Embracing vulnerability—accepting mistakes, flaws, and setbacks—provides the foundation for strength. Neff (2003) emphasizes that self-compassion allows individuals to face failure without self-criticism, fostering resilience. Letting go of the need to be flawless allows individuals to step outside their comfort zones, reducing stress and conserving energy otherwise wasted on overthinking. Confidence grows not from avoiding failure, but from facing it and learning through experience. Resilience is the ability to withstand challenges without being broken by them, and this strength emerges only when imperfection is accepted as part of life (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).



Figure 3: *The Journey Within Fear to Resilience*

Challenging Societal Beliefs

These insights collectively challenge the societal narrative that equates success with perfection. True success is not about avoiding failure at all costs, but about integrating failure into the journey of growth. Just as sweetness and saltiness balance each other, success and failure coexist; one cannot be understood without the other. A life of only victories would be empty, while failure provides meaning, humility, and perspective. As one statement wisely noted, “perfection is boring”—a reminder that the pursuit of flawlessness strips life of its richness and humanity.

The Philosophy of Kintsugi

The Japanese art of kintsugi offers a powerful metaphor for this reflection. Broken pottery is repaired with golden lacquer, with the cracks highlighted rather than hidden. The philosophy teaches that imperfections and repairs are part of an object’s history, making it more beautiful and unique. Similarly, human lives are marked by mistakes, struggles, and growth. Pretending to be whole and flawless denies the truth of our experiences. Real growth comes from embracing the cracks, acknowledging vulnerability, and using inner strength—the “glue”—to heal and transform (Neff, 2003).



Figure 4: *Beauty in the Breaks: Strength Through Imperfection.* [Source link.](#)

Perfectionism, when examined closely, is revealed not as a noble pursuit but as a fear-driven cycle. It confuses identity, silences opportunities, and drains confidence. Yet, by embracing imperfection, individuals discover resilience, authenticity, and freedom. Just as the kintsugi bowl becomes more beautiful through its cracks, so too do our lives gain meaning through the acceptance of flaws. Success, therefore, is not the absence of failure but the courage to grow through it (Neff, 2003; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Conclusion

This study reveals a paradox at the heart of perfectionism: the very pursuit of flawlessness, often equated with success and happiness, can undermine both emotional well-being and academic growth. Individuals who feel compelled to live an idealized life—marked by unbroken achievement and constant self-optimization—experience significant psychological distress. The pressure to be perfect is closely linked to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and chronic stress, driven by a persistent fear of judgment and exposure to imperfection (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Frost et al., 1990; Keles et al., 2020).

In academic contexts, perfectionism distorts the learning process. Students who prioritize error-free performance over intellectual exploration often sacrifice curiosity for caution. The fear of making mistakes discourages risk-taking and inquiry, leading to surface-level engagement with material. When grades become the sole measure of worth, critical thinking diminishes, and rote memorization replaces genuine understanding. Over time, this pattern erodes both confidence and creativity, stalling the very growth that education is meant to foster (Curran & Hill, 2019).

Ultimately, this research underscores the need to reframe perfection—not as a destination, but as a distortion. Embracing imperfection, vulnerability, and resilience is not only essential for mental health but also foundational to authentic learning and personal development.

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Echoes of the Classroom: Capturing the Essence of Lived Experiences

Naman Maharjan

Abstract

This reflective study explores the lived experiences of students within Nepal's evolving educational landscape, shaped by the National Curriculum Framework (2076). Moving beyond rote learning, classrooms are examined as dynamic ecosystems where participation, collaboration, resilience, and mentorship foster holistic growth. Narrative accounts reveal how early opportunities to voice ideas build confidence, group projects nurture compromise and collective effort, and academic setbacks cultivate resilience through reflection. Extracurricular activities, friendships, and teacher guidance extend learning beyond textbooks, shaping values, empathy, and identity. Findings highlight that education is not merely instructional but transformational—developing curiosity, compassion, and adaptability. By valuing student narratives, this study underscores the importance of learner-centered practices in cultivating individuals prepared for lifelong learning and societal contribution.

Keywords: *Participation, Collaboration, Resilience, Lived experiences*

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Introduction

Education in Nepal has undergone a significant transformation with the introduction of the National Curriculum Framework (2076), which prioritizes competency-based, student-centered learning (Shrestha & Pant, 2020). This shift moves beyond rote memorization toward active participation, creativity, and reflection, echoing Dewey's (1938) call for experiential learning. Classrooms are now envisioned as dynamic spaces where student voices, experiences, and collaboration are integral to learning.

The rationale for this reform lies in Nepal's changing socio-economic and cultural context.

As the nation strives to prepare its youth for participation in a globalized world, traditional models of instruction—focused narrowly on memorization and examination—are increasingly seen as inadequate (Fullan, 2007). Employers, communities, and policymakers emphasize the need for graduates who can think critically, solve problems, and adapt to diverse challenges (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Moreover, Nepal’s diverse linguistic and cultural landscape calls for an education system that values inclusivity and recognizes the lived realities of students from different backgrounds. By embedding student-centered practices, the framework seeks to democratize learning, ensuring that classrooms reflect not only academic goals but also social equity and cultural relevance (Bruner, 1996).

At the same time, the reform responds to long-standing critiques of the education system, including disengagement, high dropout rates, and limited connections between school learning and everyday life. By encouraging participation, collaboration, and reflection, the framework aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice, cultivating learners who are not only academically competent but also socially responsible and emotionally resilient (Masten, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978).

In this evolving landscape, understanding how learners engage and adapt becomes essential. Capturing these experiences offers insight into how well reforms are being realized in practice and how school life contributes to shaping identity, motivation, and lifelong learning. Documenting student perspectives provides a crucial lens for evaluating whether classrooms are truly becoming spaces of empowerment, creativity, and holistic growth, as envisioned by the reform (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Unheard Voices: The Gap Between Reform and Reality

While recent reforms advocate interactive and experiential pedagogy, students’ personal experiences of these changes remain largely unexplored. Existing research tends to emphasize teacher practices, assessment outcomes, or policy implementation, leaving student perspectives underrepresented (Shrestha & Pant, 2020). Moreover, few studies delve into the emotional, social, and interdisciplinary dimensions of school life. Without these insights, our understanding of educational reform remains incomplete. The classroom is not merely an instructional space; it is a lived environment rich with memories, emotions, and informal learning. Documenting these layers is vital to bridge the gap between policy intentions and everyday realities (Dewey, 1938; Bruner, 1996).

From Policy to Personhood

This study examines how students perceive and interpret the evolving classroom environment shaped by Nepal's revised curriculum. Their reflections provide valuable insights into how learner-centered reforms influence not only academic achievement but also personal growth, creativity, and self-awareness (Shrestha & Pant, 2020). By documenting students' engagement with teaching strategies, classroom interactions, and peer relationships, the study highlights how these experiences shape learning identities, motivation, and a sense of belonging (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996).

These narratives serve multiple purposes. Educators reveal how students respond to pedagogical shifts, informing more empathetic and responsive teaching practices (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). For curriculum designers, they provide a grounded understanding of how reforms resonate in daily school life (Fullan, 2007). For researchers, they offer a foundation for deeper inquiry into the lived realities of learner-centered education (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Guiding questions include: How do students perceive and respond to student-centered practices? In what ways do classroom experiences foster development beyond academics? Through this inquiry, school life is presented as a holistic phenomenon—one that reflects both educational outcomes and the human dimensions of learning (Kolb, 1984).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, reflective approach to capture the nuances of classroom life. Data is drawn from narrative accounts, classroom observations, and reflective journals maintained by students. The emphasis is on interpreting lived experiences rather than measuring outcomes, making narrative inquiry and descriptive analysis central methods (Bruner, 1996).

This study prioritizes the voices of students, presenting their perspectives on teaching methods, peer dynamics, and learning challenges. Themes are identified through iterative reading and coding, with attention to emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions. This methodology allows the study to present a holistic portrayal of school life, revealing both the overt and subtle ways in which classrooms shape students' identities and experiences (Masten, 2001).

Classroom: *I see a microcosm of society*

School life has a rhythm all its own. The rustle of pages, the hum of voices mid-discussion, the quiet anticipation before chalk meets board—these moments, though fleeting, leave lasting echoes. They shape not just what we learn, but how we think, feel, and grow. Looking back, I see the classroom not as a place of instruction, but as a living space where curiosity met discipline, friendships intertwined with responsibility, and learning stretched far beyond the textbook (Bruner, 1996).

One of the earliest echoes I still carry is from grade five, during a science lesson on photosynthesis. My teacher, rather than explaining the diagram herself, invited me to do so. I stood trembling at the board, chalk in hand, unsure of my voice. But in those few minutes, something shifted. I found the courage to speak, to share, to lead. That moment planted the seed of confidence and taught me that participation isn't just encouraged, it's transformative (Dewey, 1938). More than the concept itself, I remember the nods of encouragement from classmates and the quiet reassurance from my teacher. That experience became a foundation for every future moment I stood up to explain, present, or guide.

Group projects in social studies brought another kind of learning. Unlike solitary exams, these tasks demanded negotiation, coordination, and compromise. Initially, I resisted—my ideas felt too precious to dilute. But collaboration revealed a deeper truth: knowledge expands when shared. I recall a project on local governance where we interviewed ward officials. Each of us brought something different—questions, notes, presentations—and together, we created something richer than any one of us could have alone. That experience taught me that learning is a social process, shaped by dialogue and collective effort (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Resilience echoed through moments of failure. I remember the sting of a poor math score despite hours of preparation. What stayed with me wasn't the grade, but the conversation that followed. My teacher didn't scold, guided me to reflect, spot patterns in my mistakes, and try again. That shift—from shame to strategy—changed how I approached challenges. I began to see errors not as endpoints, but as feedback. Growth, I learned, often hides in setbacks. Resilience is built not in success, but on the decision to keep going (Masten, 2001).

Extracurriculars—debates, essays, competitions—extended learning beyond the classroom walls. Preparing for a debate taught me to research critically, structure arguments, and listen before responding. These platforms nurtured empathy, respect, and adaptability. They reminded me that education isn't confined to facts but about values, voice, and perspective (Kolb, 1984).

Friendships, too, were teachers. The classroom was a stage for diverse personalities, sometimes clashing, often growing together. From sharing lunch to swapping homework help, we practiced generosity and support. I remember a classmate who helped me with biology diagrams, knowing art wasn't my strength. In return, I explained math problems to him. These exchanges created a culture of mutual learning, rooted in kindness and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978).

And then there were the mentors—teachers whose influence stretched far beyond the syllabus. One ended each lesson with a moral reflection. During a unit on revolutions, she asked us to consider our own personal revolutions—what changes we needed to grow. That question lingered longer than any historical date. Teachers like her showed me that education isn't just about acquiring knowledge; it's about shaping awareness, values, and purpose (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Today, when I reflect on school, I see a microcosm of society, where discipline, curiosity, collaboration, and resilience were practiced daily (Bruner, 1996). The echoes I carry aren't static memories—they continue to guide my choices, shape my relationships, and fuel my aspirations. The courage from that first presentation reminds me to embrace new opportunities (Dewey, 1938). The lessons of teamwork help me navigate collective spaces (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The resilience from academic setbacks strengthens my resolve (Masten, 2001). And the compassion learned from friendships informs how I connect with others (Fullan, 2007).

In truth, the classroom was never just about walls, desks, or whiteboards; it was a living, breathing space where knowledge met experience, and where each echo—whether of laughter, debate, or silence—contributed to the rhythm of life (Kolb, 1984). These reflections reveal that the most profound learning is not about mastering subjects, but about learning how to live, relate, and grow (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). And these echoes, far from fading, continue to shape who I am becoming, particularly within the evolving context of Nepal's learner-centered curriculum reforms (Shrestha & Pant, 2020).

Insights from the Self-reflection

Learning Beyond the Lesson: Participation, Collaboration, and Resilience

School life offers more than academic instruction—it cultivates the habits of mind and heart that shape how we engage with the world (Bruner, 1996). One of the earliest insights I carry is the transformative power of participation. Standing at the whiteboard to explain photosynthesis was more than a science task—it was a moment of courage. Speaking in class taught me that confidence

grows through practice, and that classrooms are safe spaces to discover one's voice (Dewey, 1938). These early opportunities to express ideas laid the foundation for communication, leadership, and self-assurance.

Equally formative were experiences of collaborative learning. Group projects, though sometimes challenging, taught me patience, compromise, and respect for diverse viewpoints. Whether preparing presentations or conducting interviews, I learned that shared effort produces richer outcomes than solitary work. These lessons extend far beyond school—they mirror the dynamics of family, community, and professional life. In this way, classrooms become microcosms of society, where individuality and collective effort must coexist (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Resilience emerged through academic setbacks. Poor test scores and missed deadlines were discouraging, but they became turning points when teachers encouraged reflection and retrying. I learned that failure is not final—it's feedback. Growth is nonlinear, shaped by persistence and self-awareness. These experiences taught me to approach challenges with patience and strategy, building a resilience that continues to serve me well (Masten, 2001).

The Human Curriculum: Values, Relationships, and Mentorship

Education is not confined to textbooks—it unfolds in the spaces between lessons, in conversations, competitions, and quiet acts of kindness. Extracurricular activities like debates, essays, and cultural programs nurtured critical thinking, creativity, and public speaking. More importantly, they taught me to listen deeply, consider opposing views, and respond with empathy. These experiences fostered curiosity, humility, and adaptability—qualities essential for personal and social growth (Kolb, 1984).

Friendships within the classroom offered lessons no curriculum could teach. Acts of generosity—sharing notes, helping with assignments, offering encouragement—created a culture of mutual support. These interactions taught me empathy, teamwork, and the quiet strength of collaboration. Classrooms, in this sense, are laboratories for moral development, where kindness and cooperation are practiced daily (Vygotsky, 1978).

Mentorship from teachers added another layer of insight. Their influence extended beyond academic content. One teacher, for instance, asked us to reflect on our personal “revolutions”—what inner changes we needed to grow. That question lingered far longer than any historical fact. Teachers like her inspired ethical thinking, curiosity, and introspection. Their guidance shaped not

just my intellect, but my character (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Fullan, 2007).

Concluding Reflection

This study emerged from a shifting educational landscape in Nepal, where the National Curriculum Framework (2076) calls for learner-centered, competency-based reform (Shrestha & Pant, 2020). To explore how these changes resonate in real classrooms, I adopted a narrative methodology—documenting students' lived experiences through reflective accounts of participation, collaboration, challenge, and growth (Dewey, 1938).

The findings reveal that school life is not merely instructional; it is transformational. Participation fosters courage and voice (Bruner, 1996). Collaboration teaches compromise and respect (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Academic setbacks cultivate resilience (Masten, 2001). Extracurriculars expand perspective and adaptability (Kolb, 1984). Friendships nurture empathy and mutual support (Fullan, 2007). Teachers, as mentors, guide not just intellect but character (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). These insights show that learning is not confined to curriculum—it is continuous, relational, and deeply human.

The classroom, then, is a living ecosystem. Every moment, whether a discussion, a failure, a shared laugh, or a quiet reflection, creates echoes that shape identity, values, and lifelong learning (Bruner, 1996). Education, at its core, is not about mastering content but about becoming curious, compassionate, and capable of growth (Kolb, 1984). These echoes do not fade with time. They endure, guiding how we live, relate, and contribute beyond the school walls. And by listening to them, we begin to understand that the true measure of education lies not in grades, but in the kind of person it helps us become.

Future Direction of the Insights

To honor these echoes and extend their impact, educators and curriculum designers must create environments that nurture voice, agency, and reflection. This means embedding opportunities for participation, collaboration, and emotional growth into everyday learning. It calls for valuing student narratives as data and for designing pedagogical spaces where curiosity is cultivated and resilience is supported.

By integrating these insights into practice, we move closer to an education system that not only informs but transforms—one that sees students not just as learners, but as whole individuals in the making.

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