

**“Neither a Topper nor a Failure — Just Me: A Lived Narrative of the  
‘In-Between’ Self”**

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**Abstract:**

This paper presents a reflective narrative that challenges the rigid binary of “success” and “failure” embedded within contemporary educational and social structures. Through a deeply personal account, it explores the lived experience of being an “average” student one who exists between recognition and neglect. The study examines how social comparison, emotional experiences, and institutional frameworks shape identity, often rendering certain individuals invisible. At the same time, it highlights the transformative role of self-awareness, resilience, and personal agency in redefining success. Ultimately, the paper argues that self-acceptance and authenticity constitute a more meaningful measure of human worth than externally imposed standards.

**Keywords:** Self-identity, average student, social expectations, emotional struggle, self-acceptance, lived experience

**Introduction:**

This is not a motivational speech, nor is it a narrative of exceptional success. It is, instead, a deeply personal account of an ordinary life one that exists quietly between the categories of success and failure. In a world that constantly seeks to classify individuals into clearly defined roles topper or failure, achiever or underperformer there exists a large group of people who belong to neither category. These individuals are not celebrated, nor are they openly criticized. They exist in a space of quiet invisibility. I am one of them.

I have never been a topper, but I have never been a failure either. I have always been that student who remains in the middle the one who scores average marks, typically around fifty to sixty percent, without drawing attention. At first glance, this position may seem stable or even comfortable. However, it carries a subtle yet profound psychological weight. When you are not exceptional, people stop expecting much from you. And when expectations disappear, so does attention. You are no longer seen, not because you are incapable, but because you are not extraordinary enough to be noticed.

My school years were marked by this quiet invisibility. I was not ignored because I was disruptive or inadequate; I was ignored because I was ordinary. I did not stand out in academics, nor did I excel in sports or extracurricular activities. I was simply present, moving through the system without leaving a significant impression. Teachers did not invest much attention in me, and as a result, I never developed the kind of confidence that often comes from recognition. I was not overconfident about anything. In fact, I was uncertain about most things.

Over time, this external perception began to shape my internal identity. When the world consistently treats you as average, you begin to internalize that label. You start to believe that you are not capable of anything extraordinary. This is how identity is often constructed not purely through self-understanding, but through repeated social feedback. The label of being “average” becomes more than a description; it becomes a limitation.

In many ways, this experience aligns with the sociological concept of labeling, where individuals begin to define themselves based on how they are perceived by others. Once labeled as average, I unconsciously started to perform that identity. I did not push myself beyond certain limits because I had already accepted that I belonged within them. My aspirations became smaller, not because I lacked ability, but because I lacked belief.

Comparison played a significant role in reinforcing this mindset. From an early age, I was surrounded by constant comparisons sometimes explicit, sometimes subtle. There was always someone who performed better, someone who achieved

more. Even when I was not actively competing, I felt as though I was constantly falling behind. This environment created a quiet but persistent sense of inadequacy. However, my struggles were not limited to academics. A large part of my experience was emotional. There was a time when I tried very hard to maintain relationships. I adjusted myself, compromised, and made efforts to keep people in my life. I believed that if I gave enough, people would value me in return. But that was not always the case. People left, ignored me, or treated me as convenient rather than important.

These experiences were deeply painful, not because they were dramatic, but because they were subtle and repeated. Emotional neglect does not always announce itself loudly; sometimes, it exists in silence in being overlooked, in being forgotten, in being present but not acknowledged. This kind of struggle is often invisible, yet it leaves a lasting impact.

There were moments when I felt extremely uncomfortable being alone. Loneliness, at that stage, felt like a burden something I wanted to escape. I associated being alone with being unwanted. However, life repeatedly placed me in situations where I had no choice but to confront that loneliness. Gradually, something began to change.

What once felt like isolation began to transform into a space of reflection. In solitude, I started to understand myself in ways I had never done before. I observed my thoughts, questioned my fears, and acknowledged my emotions. I began to realize that loneliness was not necessarily a sign of absence—it could also be a space of presence, a space where I could truly meet myself.

One of the most significant strengths I developed during this time was the ability to move forward. I learned how to let go of painful experiences. I developed a tendency to forget the things that hurt me, not as an act of denial, but as a form of self-protection. This ability allowed me to heal and to continue without being constantly weighed down by the past.

A crucial influence in my life has been my father. From a very young age, he introduced me to the idea of understanding life beyond academics. He never pressured me to become a topper or to achieve in conventional terms. Instead, he

encouraged me to think independently and to make my own decisions. At the time, I did not fully understand the importance of his words. I did not follow his advice in academics, but I carried it into my life.

One of the most defining moments came when I joined coaching for civil services during my graduation. It seemed like the right path, the expected path. However, within a month, I realized that it was not aligned with who I was. Leaving it was not easy. There was fear of judgment, fear of failure, fear of disappointing others. But when I spoke to my father, his response was simple yet powerful: I should do what felt right to me.

That moment marked a shift in my thinking. It made me realize that it is possible to choose authenticity over expectation. It taught me that not all paths are meant for everyone, and that it is okay to step away from something that does not resonate with you.

Academically, I have always struggled with consistency. I do not naturally align with traditional methods of studying. Even now, as a postgraduate student of English Literature, I find it challenging to maintain a structured academic routine. There are moments when I genuinely want to improve, to become better, to be consistent. Yet, I often fall short.

At times, I find myself sitting in a classroom, listening to a lecture, but instead of engaging with the content, I am lost in my own thoughts reflecting, questioning, trying to understand myself. This may appear as a lack of discipline, but for me, it is also a form of engagement with life, just in a different way. I have not achieved anything extraordinary so far. There are no major accomplishments that define me. However, I am still trying. And perhaps that effort, that persistence, holds its own value.

One realization that has gradually emerged is that I may not be exceptional in one particular area, but I possess a certain versatility. I am capable of doing a variety of things whether it is communication, creative expression, or understanding people. Earlier, I viewed this as a weakness. I believed that not mastering one thing meant lacking direction. But now, I see it differently.

Perhaps being “a jack of all trades” is not a limitation. Perhaps it represents adaptability, curiosity, and openness to experience. Perhaps it is simply a different way of existing.

Over time, my understanding of success has evolved. I no longer define it through external achievements such as marks, ranks, or recognition. For me, success is now about self-understanding, about making choices that align with who I am, and about continuing despite uncertainty.

This does not mean that I have found clarity. I am still uncertain about many things.

I am still searching, still learning, still growing. But I am no longer afraid of that uncertainty.

My journey from Varanasi to Lucknow, and now to Jaipur has not been defined by achievements, but by experiences. Each phase has contributed to my understanding of myself, even if it did not lead to conventional success.

Today, I do not see myself as someone who failed to become a topper. Nor do I see myself as someone who failed in life. I see myself as someone who exists beyond these categories.

I am not a topper.

I am not a failure.

I am simply myself.

And for the first time, I have come to realize that this, in itself, is enough.

#### **How to Cite this article?**

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