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# Understanding Climate Change Through the Eyes of Nepali Urban Children

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## Abstract

Research exploring children's own conceptions and voices regarding climate change in Nepal remains scarce. This study explores how Kathmandu-based children, aged nine to thirteen, understand and emotionally engage with environmental issues through twenty-five in-depth interviews. It further looks into the sources of their information. This paper is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to examine how the children's ecological understanding emerges from interactions within family, peer groups, schools, and media. The findings reveal that children are deeply concerned about environmental degradation, expressing fear, sadness, and anxiety about their future. However, their imaginations are largely shaped by global narratives—rising sea levels, melting ice, and increasing global temperatures—rather than by local ecological challenges. This indicates that Nepali children are active meaning-makers whose environmental awareness is globally mediated yet locally detached. It further suggests that their perceptions are shaped more by media and education than by lived experiences. Understanding how children see these issues is important for creating education programs that connect global climate talks with local environmental problems and help children take an active role in protecting the planet.

Keywords: Children's art, climate change, eco-anxiety, media representation, visual culture, environmental concern, environmental problem.

## Introduction

Climate change is happening globally, experienced through rising temperatures, changes in ecosystems, and alterations in weather conditions. Currently, both developed and developing nations are not far from the crisis, not only for

the current generations but also for the future. Sanson et al. argue that it is a human-induced phenomenon, leading to dreadful catastrophes (1). Immediate action is needed to mitigate possible cataclysm, as it is the most threatening and urgent problem facing the planet (Chomsky). Abatzoglou et al. further conceptualize it as a movie with many blurry images and empty frames that remains unfinished, leaving viewers uncertain about how the story will end (42). This metaphor shows that the effects of climate change are unpredictable and complex, which makes it difficult for societies to understand and manage them properly.

The consequences of climate change are not only felt in particular sectors such as mountain climbing, politics, economics, agriculture, and health but also in the imagination of children. They have their own ways of interpreting and representing ecological crises because they are not passive consumers but active meaning-makers (Sanson et al. 5). Childhood is a pivotal period where children begin to develop an interest in environmental problems (Blanchet-Cohen 257-72). At this stage, they acquire abstract thinking, which enables them to use hypotheses and to think beyond immediate, concrete situations (Evenshaug and Hallen qtd. in Ojala 225). Many studies have been conducted over the past years regarding children's perceptions of climate change, but the majority of them are focused on developed countries such as the United States, Australia, and European nations. These studies have dissected the issues from various dimensions. However, it is imperative to understand the perceptions of children from other parts of the world, such as Nepal, a climate-vulnerable Himalayan nation. Here, studies on how children understand, imagine, and emotionally respond to climate change still remain scarce. Precisely, children's artistic expressions, such as drawings and paintings, are given inadequate consideration in academic research despite being valuable sources of knowledge of children's ecological understanding.

This paper argues that children are actively participating in the meaning-making process of climate change, making their own ecological understanding through social, cultural, and environmental interactions. In doing so, urban Nepali children are found to predominantly prioritize global narratives such as melting ice, endangered species, and rising sea levels, rather than local environmental challenges, despite Nepal’s vulnerability to climate change impacts. This study is crucial to draw attention to Nepali children's voices, which are underrepresented in academic literature. It contributes to ongoing discussions about childhood studies, environmental education, and visual culture while also providing insights for educators and media practitioners concerned with climate change. Additionally, it may also encourage policymakers to design policies addressing children's voices.

This study aims to address the following question: How do sources of information (media, family members, peers, school, daily experiences, etc.) shape children's knowledge, imagination, and concerns about climate change?

## Methodology

In this study, I used a qualitative and interpretive research design to explore how children imagine, perceive, and communicate the problems of climate change. I collected and analyzed five paintings by young artists during my visits to workshops, schools, and art classes in Kathmandu. I interviewed twenty-five children, including the artists themselves, aged between nine and fifteen years and born in the Kathmandu Valley, during the pre-winter of 2025. I have mentioned their age in parentheses following their name. I used a purposive sampling method to select children who had some exposure to environmental issues through schooling, media, and everyday experiences.

For the interviews, I primarily visited schools in Kathmandu. I conducted multiple meetings with the same group of children to build rapport and gain deeper insights into their perspectives. Consent was obtained from parents, guardians, and teachers before involving the children in the study. In addition, informed consent was obtained from parents, teachers, and the children themselves to record the conversations on my mobile phone. The interviews were conducted in Nepali, then transcribed and translated into English, after which they were analyzed and presented in this paper. The interviews followed a specific set of questions, focusing on children's understanding of the environment, their awareness of environmental crises, and their concerns and feelings regarding these problems.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory guided this study. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains how children's perceptions are shaped by multiple, interrelated environmental layers such as family, school, media, cultural narratives, and global discourses. Vygotskian framework highlights that children co-construct environmental meaning through language, art, and social interaction.

## Literature Review

Children's awareness of climate change has received growing attention in recent scholarship. It reflects an understanding that young people are not passive recipients of ecological knowledge but active meaning-makers. Studies show that children express concern about biodiversity loss, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events, often framing climate change as an urgent crisis threatening both human and nonhuman life (Strife 37–54). They experience fear, anxiety, sadness, frustration, and anger about environmental destruction, including pollution,

global warming, species loss, water scarcity, and deforestation (Strife 37). An international survey conducted in 2021 with 10,000 children and young people found that 59% were extremely worried, 75% thought the future was frightening, and 83% believed that people have failed to take care of the planet (Hickman et al. e863). Greta Thunberg, a young climate activist, also expressed this sense of anxiety in her 2019 address to the United Nations, declaring: "You (leaders) have stolen my dreams and my childhood… We are in the beginning of a mass extinction" (Thunberg 00:00:20–00:00:50).

Although children exhibit various emotional responses to climate change, they also adopt coping strategies such as deliberately distracting themselves, regulating emotions through social support, cultivating hope, and engaging in collective actions like school climate strikes to manage eco-anxiety (Sanson et al. 21). Maria Ojala identifies three forms of coping: (1) problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, (2) meaning-focused coping, and (3) de-emphasizing the seriousness of the issue (330). Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman, two of the most influential coping theorists, also distinguish between (1) emotion-focused strategies, such as avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparisons, and finding positive meaning in negative events, and (2) problem-focused strategies, which involve defining the problem, generating alternative solutions, weighing their costs and benefits, choosing among them, and taking action (150).

Simultaneously, children are not only emotionally responding to climate change but are also actively engaging in pro-environmental behaviors such as waste recycling and waste minimization, and emphasizing their personal commitment to sustainability (Chan 302). Such practices are not only expressions of ecological responsibility but also symbolic acts intended to compel those in power to take greater accountability in addressing climate change. Ogunbode et al. report that climate anxiety can positively predict participation in climate protests, although this relationship is strongest in European, democratic, and relatively affluent contexts (11). These findings highlight that children and youth are not merely shaped by climate change discourses but are also important actors whose pro-environmental actions and emotional investments contribute to broader societal responses to the climate crisis.

Children's environmental awareness and concerns are shaped largely by their exposure to television and other screen-based media: news and movies (Strife 50). A study with 428 U.K. students aged 15–16 found that television was "the single most important source of information about the environment" (Morris and Schagen 14). Similarly, Strife, in a study of 50 urban children aged 10–12, found

that 70% reported consuming environmental information through media platforms (46). Earlier, in 1996, Chan's research among 992 secondary students in Hong Kong showed that television and schools were major sources of information about climate change, with mass media proving more influential than personal sources (Chan 302). According to this study, 87% of respondents identified television as their primary source of information, followed by schools (58%), newspapers (54%), and families (14%). In parallel, many young people in the developed world learn about climate change through what they learn at school, within their families, or from the media, including social media (Sanson et al. 3).

Research shows that schools are the primary source of environmental education for children; however, in the absence of a mandated curriculum, what they learn often depends on their teachers' interests and knowledge (Sanson et al. 15). Some children also learn about it through direct experiences. Sanson et al., in Children and Climate Change, mention that many children also acquire knowledge about climate change through direct experiences of extreme weather, such as heat waves, heavy rains, cyclones, and flooding (15). These diverse points of contact demonstrate that children's knowledge and emotional responses to climate change are not isolated but socially, culturally, and environmentally mediated.

Nepali children, although least responsible for contributing to the crisis, are among the most vulnerable to its impacts. Research indicates that Nepal faces extensive risks from climate-induced natural disasters, threats to agriculture and food security, public health challenges, declining freshwater resources, and pressures on terrestrial ecosystems (CDCC Consortium 14). Children make up 33.8% of Nepal's population, and climate-related disasters already threaten their safety and well-being. In 2024, for example, floods and landslides caused by unprecedented rainfall killed at least 14 children and forced schools to close (Save the Children). More broadly, research shows that children in developing countries are already facing severe challenges such as extreme weather events and are predicted to suffer disproportionately from the effects of climate change in the future (Hanna and Oliva 115).

Even though the climate crisis is significantly affecting the lives of Nepali children, how they imagine and represent climate change through their own voices and artistic expressions remains largely unexplored. This gap is particularly significant because Nepal is among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, where environmental degradation, erratic rainfall, and deforestation directly affect daily life. Yet, children's understanding of these local experiences is often filtered through globalized narratives circulated by media, schooling, and interna-

tional discourse. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how Nepali urban children perceive, imagine, and communicate climate change, highlighting the ways in which their meaning-making processes center on global imagery rather than local environmental realities.

## Findings

### Representing Climate Change through Art


Fig. 1. Illustrated by Vidhi Agrawal (10).

Agrawal depicted a large, barren tree with a few withered leaves standing on cracked, parched ground caused by drought. A bird and a butterfly are shown attempting to land on its branches. They are struggling to survive. The bird is injured and bleeding, while the butterfly has lost a small part of its wings. In the background, snow-capped mountains appear to be melting because of the heat. The blend of red and yellow colors in the top corner of the drawing indicates extreme heat. He explains:

The ongoing global warming has greatly affected the Earth. Plants have died, the land has become dry, and birds are struggling to survive. This makes me feel sad and angry. If we all fail to protect the environment, it will bring a crisis to our future. How can people be so selfish, caring only about themselves? Everyone must unite to reduce global warming. I learned about the increase in global warming from videos on social media. We also studied this topic at school and learned that smoke from factories contributes to climate change.


Fig. 2. Illustrated by Ipsa Dangol (12).

Dangol depicted half of the Earth, which is cracked due to drought and is melting like a candle. On the surface of the Earth, large buildings and industries are constructed. The heads of a rhino, a bird, and a giraffe are placed on top of the skyscraper. She explains, "Humans kill animals and use their parts – such as heads, skin, jaws, and fur – for decoration. As a result, animal populations are significantly declining, which has created an imbalance in the ecosystem." Moreover, a barren tree on the right side and stumps at the bottom left symbolize deforestation. In the top left corner, a giant sun is depicted. She has also conveyed her message by writing "Make a change in climate" at the top and "Stop Global Warming" at the bottom.

Fig. 3. Illustrated by Veyd Agrawal (10).

At the center of the painting, Agrawal has depicted the planet, which appears to have burning flames in the upper part and water in the lower half. At the top, a dry, leafless tree is surrounded by fire and smoke, indicating devastation. Polar animals, including bears and penguins, are confined in the flames as they struggle to survive while their habitats are destroyed. Moreover, people appear anxious and are shown crying, which indicates human suffering due to environmental damage. Coins and paper money with wings flying away suggest the cost of environmental degradation. Agrawal notes, "People are exploiting the earth to earn money." Additionally, at the bottom left of the painting, he has illustrated marine life, where three fishes are depicted with clear signs of distress.

Fig. 4. Illustrated by Roshana Pradhan (12).

Roshana Pradhan has depicted a round Earth at the center of the painting, where children, a polar bear, a bird, and plants coexist on it. The earth appears dry. Interestingly, their bodies are connected with each other. This shows, according to her, how all forms of life on the planet are interconnected. She conveys that climate change disrupts the entire ecological system and affects every living being. In the right corner, many industrial buildings are shown, with clouds full of smoke. At the top, a large sun is depicted. Four barren trees appear on the left side. While explaining the painting, she elaborated on how she learned about climate change:

Climate change is affecting everyone equally, so I have placed all living beings together in my artwork. I learned about the effects of climate change on Earth at school. Our science teacher told us about it during lessons. I know that climate change is impacting the world, but I am not sure whether it has affected Nepal yet.

change is a serious threat to life on Earth, pushing many species toward extinction. Its impacts include extreme heat, melting ice, health problems, and natural disasters.

Likewise, when asked about her understanding of climate change, eleven-year-old Ajju Dangol (11) responded:

Climate change refers to the rise in global temperature caused by pollution and the excessive release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. It raises concerns about animals losing their habitats and people being harmed by extreme weather events. The most significant consequences include stronger storms, rising sea levels, and the destruction of natural habitats. Our science teacher at school frequently discusses the issue, and we also engage in discussion about it with friends. We can protect the environment by planting trees, reducing plastic use, and riding bicycles instead of using cars. Additionally, we can recycle and conserve energy.

When Veyd Agrawal (10) explained his illustration (Figure 3), he urged human beings to recognize their mistakes and take a decisive role in addressing them. He stated that climate change has affected all countries, which he symbolically represented in his illustration through the flags of several nations. He further added:

Climate change has affected the entire planet. Rising temperatures have harmed both humans and the environment—trees are drying, and melting ice threatens polar bears and penguins into extinction. This is not just one country's problem; every nation is facing its effects. Watching videos on YouTube and other social media platforms like Instagram, I learned that polar bears may disappear within a few years, which is deeply saddening.

Similarly, Alia Naz (12) explained climate change as a rise in the Earth's temperature, leading to severe consequences. She emphasized: "The most pressing problems include animals losing their habitats, extreme weather events such as storms, and the planet becoming dangerously hot. We can protect our environment by planting trees, reducing plastic use, and conserving energy."

Some children expressed worries about climate change, perceiving it as a significant threat to the natural world caused by human activities. They state:

It leads to problems like melting ice, rising sea levels, and more intense storms. It's causing so much harm to our planet and the creature living on it. I am frustrated that human actions are leading to the destruction of ecosystems and putting species like polar bear and coral reefs at risk of extinctions. We are losing our biodiversity. (Rijan Tamang 12)

Climate change makes me feel sad because I love animals and don't want them to suffer. I especially worry about penguins not having enough ice to live on. Where

will they reside in the future? (Krijal Thapa Magar, 10)
I learned about it from my family. My parents always tell me not to throw plastics because it is harmful for nature. I feel worried about climate change because it affects farmers and animals. It makes me sad to see their homes getting destroyed. The biggest problems is animals losing their homes because of climate change. (Nisha Gautam, 11)
Climate change makes me deeply concerned about the future. I have heard that it has affected penguins, and they may die without snow and ice. We must work to preserve them. (Ashik Kumar Kathai, 11)
The heat is increasing because of global warming. It is going to destroy our Earth and we must save it. (Aditi Chapagain, 12)

While sharing their ideas about climate change, most of them frequently mentioned media, schools, peers, and family, which were their primary sources of information. While describing her illustration, (Figure 2) Ipsa Dangol says:
At our home, we get a newspaper, and I first learned about climate change by reading it. From time to time, my father also tells me about this issue. After he explained it, I became more interested. Once I knew a little, I also searched about it on the internet and found that climate change has impacts everywhere, including in Nepal.

Likewise, Vidhi Agrawal (10) describing her painting, shown in Figure 1, explained how she acquired knowledge about climate change:
When watching the news on television or YouTube, topics related to climate change appear. But most of the discussions on this topic happen at school. Some time ago, our teacher talked to us about global warming, and sometimes she even asks for our opinions on climate change in class. However, outside the classroom, we rarely talk about this subject with friends.

Alongside their fears, children also expressed emotions of care and responsibility. Some children believe that the problem of climate change can be mitigated to some extent by planting trees and avoiding the use of plastic. Ayush Parajuli (11) says that he has been frequently participating in planting trees, knowing that it helps to reduce the effects of climate change. Samriddhi Manadhar (13) says that children can play a significant role in addressing climate change by encouraging others to recycle and use renewable energy and making eco-friendly choices in their daily lives. She says, "I write poems about climate change and draw posters to raise awareness. Being creative helps me express my feelings."

**Discussion**

Children have various perceptions of climate change, which are not formed in

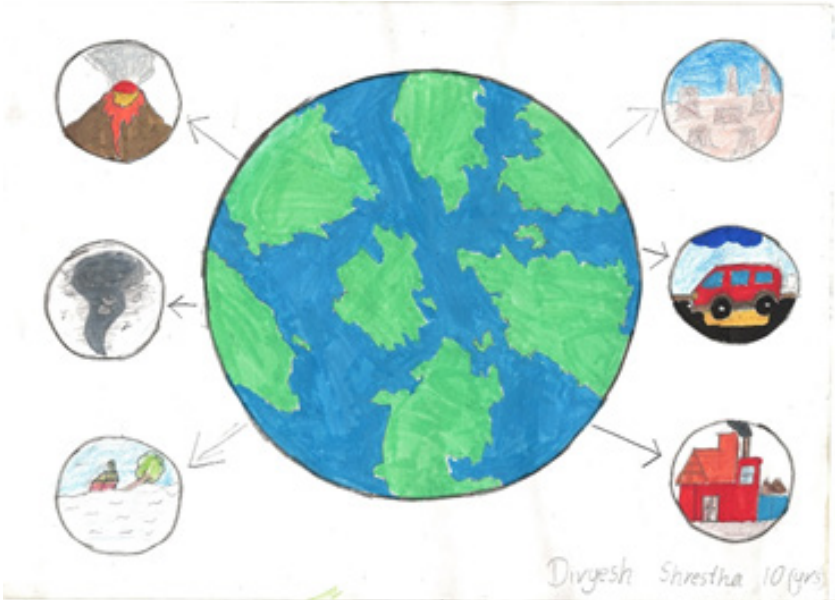


Fig. 5. Illustrated by Divyesh Shrestha (10).

Six different pictures are illustrated on both sides of the Earth. The three pictures on the right side depict tree stumps, a car, and industrial buildings. On the left side, the images follow a similar pattern, showing a volcano, a tornado, and flooding. Shrestha notes that deforestation, vehicles, and heavy industrialization have contributed to climate change, resulting in natural disasters such as volcanoes, tornadoes, and floods. He explains:

My father is also a researcher and often tells me about climate change. I sometimes discuss its effects on the Earth with my friends. I learned from them that planting trees can help reduce it. We studied this topic in science class, where our teacher encouraged us to plant trees and avoid using petroleum vehicles that increase the Earth's temperature.

Expressing Climate Change through Voices

While climate change has been a growing concern across the world in recent years, Nepali children are increasingly aware and engage with the issue. Many of them are informed on what it is and how it is affecting the world. Shravyaa Shree Thapa (13) connected it with the changing weather and temperature of the earth caused by the release of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane. She added:

The effects of climate change are a serious matter and it isn't a pleasant topic to think about. This has changed our planet, and its effects are negative. Climate

isolation but are developed through the social interactions and cultural experiences within a specific context. Context is important in human development because social milieu easily influences the individual. It can be understood through Ecological Systems Theory (EST), introduced by Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s, which posits that human development is a product of ongoing interactions between an individual and the multiple environmental systems in which they are situated. Bronfenbrenner defines:

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (21)

His ideas remain highly relevant today, especially as technology, online interactions, and major social changes create new environmental influences on development (Guy-Evans). Bronfenbrenner's theory conceptualizes the environment as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner 3). The theory has five layers, which include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner, a child's immediate settings such as home, classroom, laboratory, peer groups, and testing rooms—collectively called the microsystem—play a vital role in shaping understanding, attitude, and behavior (3).

In the case of urban Nepali children, the Microsystem is dominant in influencing their understanding of climate change. Several participants in this study attributed their awareness to family, school, and peers. For instance, Divyesh Shrestha learned about it from his father and peers who often talk about it. Similarly, Roshana Pradhan mentioned that she "learned about the effects of climate change on Earth at school," while Nisha Gautam recalled that her family members encouraged her "not to throw plastics because it is harmful for nature." These examples highlight how children’s ecological understanding develops through face-to-face social interactions within their immediate surroundings.

However, Bronfenbrenner also emphasizes that development is not confined to the microsystem alone but is influenced by the interconnections among systems, including the exosystem and macrosystem. The exosystem—particularly mass media and social media—plays a significant mediating role. For instances, Veyd Agrawal’s concepts about climate change came from "watching videos on YouTube and other social media platforms like Instagram," while Ipsa Dangol learned through reading newspapers and conversations with her father. Ajju Dangol

credited her science teacher at school. These examples illustrate how school and digital media function as powerful sociocultural tools, transmitting global environmental narratives that shape children's ecological imagination.

Here, Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning offers an important complement to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Vygotsky argues that learning and cognitive development occur through social interaction and cultural mediation, where knowledge is co-constructed through language, symbols, and tools available in a given society. He explained, "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (Vygotsky 57). In this light, the children's understanding of climate change emerges through their engagement with sociocultural mediators—teachers, family discussions, and especially media texts—that convey dominant global discourses. As a result, children's perceptions reflect collective cultural meanings rather than purely individual experiences.

The findings indicate that Nepali children's ecological awareness is shaped by globalized representations of climate change rather than by their local environmental realities. During interviews, many children expressed emotions such as sadness, fear, and grief toward the plight of polar animals and the melting of Arctic ice. For example, Krijal Thapa Magar felt sadness for penguins "not having enough ice to live on," while Ashik Kumar Kathai expressed concern that "polar bears may die without snow and ice." These expressions resonate with Maria Ojala's observations that "many children worry that penguins and polar bears will become extinct due to the melting ice caps," reflecting what she terms other-oriented empathy that transcends human and other species (333).

Although such empathy shows a strong moral awareness, it also suggests a distance from local ecological issues. Children's imaginations are dominated by global crisis imagery—melting ice caps, endangered polar animals, and rising sea levels—while issues such as air pollution, water scarcity, deforestation, and waste management in their own urban neighborhoods receive less attention. This pattern underscores that Nepali children's ecological consciousness is globally mediated but locally detached, shaped by the overlapping influences of their microsystem (family, school, peers) and exosystem (mass and digital media).

Limitations

This study is limited to a small group of urban children in Kathmandu, which may not adequately represent the ecological experiences and imaginations of children in other parts of Nepal. The country is highly diverse in terms of language,

caste, religion, and culture; therefore, research conducted in different communities could provide deeper and more varied insights. Notably, 33.8 percent of Nepal's total population resides in rural areas, while 66.2 percent lives in urban areas (National Statistics Office 1), indicating that children in these two settings may hold distinct perceptions of climate change. While much more research is undoubtedly needed, the present study serves as an initial step toward understanding children's perceptions and emotional responses to climate change in the Nepali context.

## Conclusion

This research explores the comprehension and emotional engagement of Kathmandu-based Nepali children with the issue of climate change through conversations and artistic expressions. Drawing on Ecological Systems Theory and Sociocultural Theory of Learning, the study highlights that children's understandings of climate change are socially constructed through continuous interaction with their immediate and extended environments. The Microsystem is taken as a major space where ideas about the environment are formed, while the exosystem expands these understandings to a global scale. The findings reveal that children are predominantly shaped by global narratives of climate change rather than local environmental challenges like air pollution, deforestation, or waste management. Their ideas appear to suggest that their ecological knowledge is globally mediated but locally detached, influenced more by mediated representations than by lived, situated experiences. From a sociocultural perspective, the study further reveals that learning about climate change occurs through dialogue, participation, and shared meaning-making across social contexts. In this process, children actively interpret and reconstruct environmental knowledge rather than merely absorbing it.

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