History of Perfectionism

“Perfectionism has been associated with a rigid adherence to impossibly high standards, an irrational importance on the attainment of these standards, and a tendency to overgeneralize failures. Researchers have primarily focused on how perfectionism predicts psychological adjustment; yet, recent research also indicates that perfectionism impacts students’ achievement motivation” (Fletcher & Speirs, 2012). Students are being pushed outside of the comfort zone to which they learn making it more difficult to see motivation in our students, especially with perfection issues. “Children with average to above-average levels of perfectionism may be highly motivated to achieve in all situations, including both timed and untimed testing conditions. Such motivation may drive someone to attempt to match his or her own untimed performance, during timed testing. If this is the case, we would expect a smaller performance discrepancy between timed and untimed testing among highly perfectionistic children relative to children with lower perfectionism” (Tsui, J. M., & Mazzocco, M. M. (2007).

Special Interest:

Remind yourself that it is ok not to be PERFECT.
The greatest mistake that you will ever make in life is continually fearing you’ll make one.

perfectionism (noun)
a personality trait displeased with anything that does not meet high standards.

Perfection ≠ Success
Strategies and Implications in the Classroom

“Adolescents may benefit from the cultivation of adaptive perfectionistic traits without being accompanied by overly critical evaluations of their own performance. Namely, adaptive perfectionists are those who set high standards for themselves yet allow minor flaws in their performance as the situation permits (Hamachek, 1978). To meet this definition, on the one hand, teachers should nurture students’ aspirations by encouraging them to set higher standards and engage in challenging academic tasks. These practices are supposed to provide students with a positive outlook on life that may contribute to adaptive emotions and willingness to persist at pursuing their goals. On the other hand, teachers are advised to alleviate students’ concern about making mistakes through the provision of mastery oriented motivational support in the classroom. Specifically, teachers can explicitly convey to students that making mistakes is a natural part of learning (Turner, Meyer, Midgley, & Patrick, 2003). By creating an environment in which students feel free to take risks, make mistakes, and try again on their way to success without worrying about putting their self-worth in jeopardy, teachers may facilitate students’ adaptive achievement-relevant behaviors while at the same time reducing the potential negative outcomes stemming from evaluative concerns” (Shih 2011).

The Pursuit of Excellence vs. Perfectionism

- **The pursuit of excellence** = doing the research necessary for a term paper, working hard on it, turning it in on time, and feeling good about it.
- **Perfectionism** = doing three drafts, staying up two nights in a row, and handing your paper in late because you had to get it right - and still feeling bad about it.
- **The pursuit of excellence** = studying for a test ahead of time, taking it with confidence, and feeling good about your score of 96.
- **Perfectionism** = studying at the last minute (after three days of chronic procrastination), taking the test with sweaty palms, and feeling depressed about your 96 because a friend got a 98.
- **The pursuit of excellence** = choosing to work on group projects because you enjoy learning from the varied experiences and approaches of different people.
- **Perfectionism** = always working alone because no one can do as good a job as you and you’re not about to let anyone else slide by on your “A”.
- **The pursuit of excellence** = accepting an award with pride even though the engraver misspelled your name. (You know that it can be fixed later at the jewelry store).
- **Perfectionism** = accepting the reward resentfully because that dumb engraver didn’t get your name right.
- **The pursuit of excellence** = reading the story you wrote for the school paper and noticing that the editor made some changes to the copy that really improved it.
- **Perfectionism** = throwing a near tantrum because the editor dared to tamper with your work.
- **The pursuit of excellence** = going out with people who are interesting, likeable, and fun to be with.
- **Perfectionism** = refusing to go out with people who aren’t straight “A” students.
- **The pursuit of excellence** = being willing to try new things, take risks, and learn from your experiences and your mistakes.
- **Perfectionism** = avoiding new experiences because you’re terrified of making mistakes.

What does Perfectionism Look Like?

Table from: [Hately, n.d.]
Strategies in the Classroom (Cont’d)

“Brophy and Rohrkeper (1989) found that effective teachers made an attempt to appeal to, persuade, or change the attitudes of perfectionist students, and to support their efforts to change, by doing the following:

• building a friendly, supportive learning environment;
• establishing the expectation that mistakes are a normal part of the learning process;
• presenting themselves as helpful instructors concerned primarily with promoting student learning, rather than as authority figures concerned primarily with evaluating student performance;
• articulating expectations that stress learning and improvement over perfect performance on assignments;
• explaining how perfectionism is counterproductive;
• reassuring perfectionist students that they will get the help they need to achieve success, following through with help, and communicating teacher approval of students’ progress and accomplishments.

Effective teachers identified the most ineffective strategies for dealing with perfectionist students as criticizing or nagging, threatening punishment for failure to change, controlling or suppressing perfectionist tendencies, and ignoring or denying the problem rather than dealing with it (Brophy, 1995)” (Brophy, 1996).

As educators, it is important to know the different ways to meet the needs of our gifted learners as they occupy our classroom.

Nurturing a relaxed atmosphere where everyone is comfortable is very important.

Ways to help a perfectionist student:

• Let them be average for a day!
• Get involved in activities that are not graded/judged.
• Help them take a risk.
• Help them acknowledge that their expectations of themselves might be too high.
• Give them permission to make mistakes—at least three a day!
• Ban the word “should” from their vocabulary.

“It is when we stop trying to do everything right that we start to do things well. These two things are not the same - but neither are they mutually exclusive” (Hately, n.d.)
The Inside Scoop on Perfectionism in the Gifted

There are many instances where students struggle with the battle of trying to be the best, "most perfect" person at everything that he/she encounters. I personally struggled with this as a child and find the causes and strategies very beneficial to me today. I was the child who, like other perfectionist, was afraid of letting other people down. My parents always held high expectations for me, and being an educator's child, I was doomed as wasn't going to get away with anything. I tried my hardest at everything I did just to get the self-satisfaction that I thought I needed, along with the praises from other adults. I feel that we should always push our students to so that they will have a positive motivation to succeed while fostering a nurturing environment, offering praises, and letting students know that it is ok to fail and lose as long as we work to pass and win.

Sources:


