

Gifted Students and Perfectionism

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Anne Marie Burdick graduated from Southern Methodist University in 2015 with a BA in Mathematics and a Masters of Education with specialization in math. In her first year of teaching, Anne Marie was recognized for having the most students reach Advanced on the Algebra 1 STAAR test.

In my preparation for this review of the literature, I realized that I have experienced first-hand the effects of perfectionism. Not only while writing this piece, but also in many other previous writing endeavors. I have often found myself rewriting the first lines multiple times before being able to dive into the actual paper. From my involvement in secondary schools, I have witnessed students, like myself, who are experiencing the lingering negative effects that perfectionism can have on their learning. The fear of failure or lack of motivation to move forward leaves many students bored or apathetic towards their work. However, when teachers are aware of the specific symptoms related to perfectionism in gifted students, they can transform the often-negative stereotype, presenting perfectionism in a positive light, helping students develop healthy roads toward their own personal development. This review of literature will identify the fundamental definitions of perfectionism and offer suggestions intended to shape perfectionist tendencies into positive learning techniques ready for implementation in the classroom.

It is important that teachers have a good understanding of the underlying causes of perfectionism and the adverse consequences it can have on gifted students. In this way they can mitigate those consequences through a variety of intervention strategies. When teachers deepen their understanding of perfectionism, they are better able

to identify those students who display perfectionist characteristics and begin to focus on ways to encourage positive forms of perfectionism in their classroom. This awareness will allow educators to intervene earlier and provide the right resources for the student.

What the Research Says

Researchers have provided many differing definitions of perfectionism. Fletcher and Speirs Neumeister (2010) identified perfectionism as the tendency to focus on failures rather than accomplishments, generate unachievable goals, and designate obsessive amounts of energy to these standards. Schuler (2000) defined perfectionism as a destructive trait that overtook the way individuals internally perceived themselves. This negative, unhealthy, or neurotic behavior was coined as a maladaptive behavior and is how society had traditionally perceived perfectionism (Shewmaker, 2010).

Rule and Montgomery (2013) were among those researchers who recognized the potential advantages of perfectionism. They saw the benefits that gifted students had if healthy and positive perfectionism was encouraged and developed. This type of perfectionism was coined as adaptive perfectionism, and individuals completed their goals when they strove for excellence and performed at their ultimate best. Rule and Montgomery both advocated shifting the focus from the maladaptive traits of gifted children with perfectionist tendencies to those adaptive traits

that these students could utilize as for their successful academic and social-emotional development.

Shewmaker (2010) explained why perfectionism was heightened when associated with gifted students. They were often labeled as children who were socially awkward, often isolated, and distanced from people who they perceived as different from themselves. These students also experienced depression, stress and anxiety, and had issues in finding their own identities.

Speirs Neumeister, Williams, and Cross (2009) identified family influences, child development, and environmental factors as some of the main causes of perfectionism. They found that many children developed perfectionist traits because they felt they lacked parental approval, resulting in lowered self-esteem. The researchers reported that other children often displayed the perfectionist behaviors modeled by their parents. This lack of an internal safety net within the family caused these youth to question their identity and achievement even more.

Shewmaker (2010) also reported similar results, revealing that the perceived high standards of parents, peers, and the students themselves served as possible roots of perfectionism. This absence of family and peer support systems resulted in a lack of motivation and self-esteem. These students strove to meet unrealistic goals, which set them up for failure and discouragement. They were unable to realize that doing their best

outweighed the outcomes they were trying to achieve, resulting in consequences that hindered them emotionally, psychologically, and physically.

Rule and Montgomery (2013) cited several long-term implications for students with negative perfectionism including a reduction in creativity, risk-taking, amusement, and differentiation, as well as issues related to job seeking and performance as they moved into adulthood. The fear of trying something different and unique blocked their abil-

ed that students matured emotionally when teachers helped them set appropriate achievement goals. When goals were properly implemented, gifted students learned how to manage their perfectionism. Students were able to recognize when to take risks and to focus on completing tasks to the best of their ability, regardless of success or failure. Personalized goals allowed students to feel confident, increasing their personal motivation and growth. For this strategy to be carried out with

team on their side, these gifted students were able to increase their own understanding and awareness of the potential to let the negative aspects associated with perfectionism get the better of them while also embracing those positive traits that allowed them to grow and develop as learners.

It is important for educators to be aware of their students' perfectionist tendencies, what the potential characteristics may be, and how they can help prevent unhealthy expressions of that perfectionism. Gifted students already have enough stressors in their lives, and when perfectionism is added, they may become extremely overwhelmed. Perfectionism does not have to be a negative trait. With the support of educators, family, and peers, students will be able to use their perfectionism to positively drive and push them towards success. Educators should be diligent in making sure to support their students by helping them set realistic goals and provide each student with the appropriate challenges they need to grow as life-long learners. **THP**

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ity to discover or innovate new ideas. They also found that perfectionists had a greater propensity to cheat on tests due to their fear of failure. These students tended to be “workaholics”, feeling as though they were never achieving to their ability. These long-term consequences often led to greater instances of depression, eating disorders, and attempts at personal harm.

Schuler (2000) found that perfectionism resulted in fear, unattainable goals, procrastination, a lack of motivation, unhappiness, and poor time management. These issues carried over into the classroom when they had to work with peers because gifted children felt accountable for their group members' work as well as their own. Additionally, Schuler found these factors related to perfectionism resulted in consequences that blocked their ability to learn and move on to new material.

Suggestions for Intervention

Fletcher and Speirs Neumeister (2012) recommended a variety of interventions. Strategic goal setting, early identification programs, and counseling are suggested to address the negative effects of perfectionism by providing students with support when they were faced with difficulties. They suggest-

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