

Perfectionism:

Its Manifestations and Classroom-Based Interventions

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Abstract

Perfectionism, the compulsive striving for unrealistic and unattainable goals, is not limited to gifted individuals. However, research shows that gifted children and adults are at least as susceptible to perfectionistic tendencies as the population at large. Due to their heightened sensitivity, awareness, and abilities, gifted children require affective counseling in order to learn coping skills to help them break the cycle of disabling perfectionism. Teachers of the gifted may use various techniques with which to address these affective needs. Bibliotherapy, group therapeutic discussion, and art activities are all methods through which the negative manifestations of perfectionism—eating disorders, depression, underachievement, substance abuse, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, and suicide—may be addressed.

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville, the French historian, visited the United States and observed that Americans had a strong belief in the perfectibility of man (Adderholt-Elliott, 1987). Today, a vast majority of Americans still hold this belief as an ideal reinforced by competition in sports, academia, business, industry, the arts, religion, and media—society in general. Striving for excellence is a normal, innate aspect of human development (Rice, Ashby, & Preusser, 1996). Problems arise when the pursuit of excellence transforms into stalking perfection. When unattainable goals are set and the individual imposes unrealistic standards of superiority on his or her process of achieving such goals, then perfectionism becomes unhealthy (Rice, Ashby, & Preusser, 1996).

Aspects of Perfectionism

According to Burns (1980), people who exhibit an unhealthy form of perfectionism are those whose standards are high beyond reach or reason, people who strain compulsively toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment. Hamachek (1978) delineated two types of perfectionism. *Normal* perfectionists are those who derive pleasure from striving for excellence, yet recognize and accept their individual limitations (Hill, McIntire, & Bacharach, 1997). *Neurotic* perfectionists, however, possess unrealistic expectations and are never satisfied with their performance (Hill, McIntire, & Bacharach, 1997). Piirto (1994) labeled these types *enabling* perfectionism and *disabling* perfectionism. The enabled perfectionist is flexible in his or her application of perfectionistic standards and feels free to be more or less perfectionistic depending upon the situation (Rice, Ashby, & Preusser, 1996). Regardless of the achievement or the precision of the task rendered, disabling perfectionism leaves the individual with feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction, of never being good enough (Rice, Ashby, & Preusser, 1996). Researchers have shown that the psychological need of disabled perfectionists to live up to unrealistic expectations, whether self-imposed or imposed by others, may reveal itself through specific maladaptive behaviors: eating disorders (Axtell & Newton, 1993; Basco, 1999; Lask & Bryant-Waugh, 1992), depression (Hewitt & Dyck, 1986; LaPointe & Crandell, 1980), underachievement (Alvino, 1982; Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1989; Whitmore, 1980), substance abuse (Berglas & Jones, 1978), obsessive-compulsive personality disorders (Rasmussen & Eisen, 1992), psychosomatic disorders (Forman, Tosi, & Rudy,

1987), and suicide (Callahan, 1993; Parker & Mills, 1996).

Perfectionism and the Gifted

Perfectionism knows no intellectual boundaries. According to Webb (1995), 15–20% of gifted students may experience the negative aspects of perfectionistic tendencies in their lifetimes. A study by Orange (1997), however, suggests that the percentage of gifted students exhibiting negative perfectionistic tendencies may be as high as 89%. This higher incidence rate was echoed in Schuler's (1999) study of perfectionistic gifted adolescents, where 87.5% of gifted students in accelerated courses were identified as displaying perfectionistic behaviors. Whitmore (1980) noted perfectionism to be the most overlooked and influential trait associated with intellectual giftedness. Silverman (1995) concurred by identifying perfectionism as the least understood, albeit integral, aspect of giftedness. Gifted children and adults equipped with heightened awareness, sensitivity, and abilities are often better able to approximate perfection by striving for what "should be" (Silverman, 1993; Webb, 1995).

Thus, in a society that promotes the ideal of perfection, such strivings are rewarded (Adderholt-Elliot, 1987). However, the distinction between very high levels of achievable expectations and neurotic strivings can be a difficult one to make with gifted individuals (Parker & Mills, 1996). Educators must be made aware of the psychosocial aspects of perfectionism (see Appendix A), the subsequent manifestations that may occur, and possible classroom-based interventions to aid gifted students in coping with their perfectionism.

Manifestations of Perfectionism in the Classroom

Cohen (1996) and Pacht (1984) both identified possible manifestations that may appear in

perfectionistic students: procrastination or delayed engagement in assignments to be evaluated; delay in assignment completion, repeatedly starting over on assignments, or refusal to turn in completed assignments; unwillingness to volunteer, share work, or participate unless certain of the correct response; dichotomous "all-or-nothing" response to evaluation or inability to tolerate mistakes; unrealistically high performance standards; impatience with others' imperfections; and overly emotional reactions to relatively minor errors. These negativistic tendencies, if left unchecked, may seriously damage student self-concept and result in alienation, underachievement, or a host of other maladaptive behaviors (Barrow & Moore, 1983; Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1989).

Silverman (1993) stated that healthy emotional development is just as important as intellectual achievement; however, it has not been valued enough to earn a place in common curriculum. It is the educator's role in the gifted classroom to address the affective needs of the gifted child. Barrow and Moore (1983) contended that late childhood and early adolescence represent the prime period for acquisition of the perfectionistic mindset. Consequently, it is important to counsel perfectionistic children as early as possible to avert negative or disabling results (Adderholt-Elliot & Eller, 1989; Howell, 1996).

Classroom-Based Interventions

Teachers have a unique opportunity to help perfectionistic students reshape their way of thinking (cognitive restructuring). Brophy and Rohrkemper (1989) found that effective teachers coupled cognitive restructuring techniques with heightened affective awareness in the classroom by creating a supportive, nurturing learning environment; communicating the expectation that mistakes are an essential part of the learning process; promoting a student-centered atmosphere, rather than an authoritative, evaluator-centered classroom; focusing on intellectual and personal growth, improvement, and the processes of learning, rather than perfect performance; and teaching students how to choose, plan, reach, and evaluate realistic goals. These sentiments are echoed by Winebrenner (1996), Smutny (1996), Delisle (1996), and Cohen (1996). The goal of these techniques is for perfectionistic students to

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retain their pursuit of high achievement, but to do so in a manner that is more realistic and productive (Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1989).

Although there have been many studies on educational interventions for the gifted and numerous studies on perfectionism and its links to giftedness, little has been done to translate the theoretical understanding of perfectionism into practical applications for classroom-based interventions for perfectionistic gifted students (Parker & Adkins, 1995). The suggested interventions that follow attempt to synthesize recommended affective instructional strategies with the cognitive restructuring techniques delineated in the literature of perfectionism.

Creating Classroom Culture

Paramount to the success of cognitive restructuring and affective classroom counseling is the creation of an atmosphere where students can successfully fail and wherein mistakes are seen as pathways to learning (Cohen, 1996; Piirto, 1994). In such an atmosphere, students can self-evaluate and reflect on their own perfectionistic tendencies or lack thereof and establish personal awareness in a safe, nonthreatening way.

The Sharing of Self

Gifted students and their teachers often share similar traits (Adderholt-Elliot, 1991). Clark (1992) suggested that teachers share personal struggles with perfectionism and the coping strategies used to manage perfectionistic tendencies. Students are often put at ease when they realize that they are not alone in their personal battles. This technique may also be useful in conveying the importance of realistic goal setting (Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1989). Teachers can share with students personal examples of the goal-setting process, thereby teaching by modeling the appropriate steps necessary to complete the goal-achievement process and lessen the fear-of-failure/procrastination cycle.

Likewise, students may be able to share their unique perceptions of perfectionism with each other. Group therapy through discussion seems to be useful with perfectionistic thinking patterns (Barrow & Moore, 1983). In a group setting, participants may be able to identify elements of their own thought patterns as they are mentioned by others, receive positive reinforcement and support

from other group members, and recognize other possible responses to situations.

Encourage Active Listening

Active listening is the key to effective counseling. Teachers can employ active listening techniques (e.g., body posture, facial expression, eye contact, verbal and nonverbal feedback) to encourage students to verbalize their concerns, to show understanding that their concerns are important, and to plan collaboratively the steps necessary to address the issue (Brophy, 1996).

Self-Evaluation and Metacognition

By involving students in their own evaluations, the students are empowered when the grading process is no longer a mystery to them (Smutny, 1996). To this end, teachers may use various techniques that incorporate the self-evaluation of assignments (e.g., using rubrics with specific criteria and Likert-scale quantitative measures). After writing a draft of a paper, for example, allow students to self-evaluate the paper using the criteria on the rubric (see Appendix B). In this way, teachers can monitor the students' personal opinion of the assignment. The results of this self-evaluation may be used as a springboard for student-teacher conferences about specific assignments. When students have a firm idea of the criteria to be evaluated, some fear of failure may be alleviated. Likewise, if this process is repeated through multiple revisions of an assignment, students become aware of the progressive process of learning. This process is further enhanced by the use of portfolios in which students are asked to comment on what they learned by working on a particular assignment. Thus, they focus on growth and improvement, rather than end-products.

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Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is a tool teachers can employ to help students address their affective needs

through the interaction between the reader and the story. The bibliotherapeutic process of identification or universal experience, catharsis, and insight appeals to many gifted students. Silverman (1993) listed bibliotherapy as one of the most effective counseling strategies available to teachers, counselors, parents, and gifted students. Adderholt-Elliot and Eller (1989) held that gifted students whose strengths lie in their ability to conceptualize and generalize often find success through bibliotherapeutic reading.

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Perfectionism, Expectations of Others, and Suicide

Delisle (1990) named bibliotherapy as one strategy in the exploration and prevention of suicide in youth. One piece of literature available to address this issue is Robinson's poem "Richard Cory" (see Appendix C; Adderholt-Elliot & Eller, 1989). After students have read the poem silently, ask a volunteer to read the poem aloud or play a recording of the poem. Initiate a group discussion around possible reasons for Cory's suicide, making sure to include the townspeople's opinions (thus touching on unrealistically high expectations of others). Have students brainstorm alternatives to Richard Cory's actions. If the discussion

stagnates, present examples of well-known people who appeared to have everything to live for, but committed suicide (e.g., former deputy White House counsel Vincent Foster, former Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain). Then, open the discussion for personal reflection and experience. Follow-up the discussion with a reflective writing or journal assignment to give students who may have been reluctant to share in the group discussion format an opportunity to share their thoughts.

Humor and the Consequences of Perfectionism

Adderholt-Elliot and Eller (1989) suggested using humor in combination with bibliotherapy to introduce the possible consequences of disabling perfectionism. The story "The Crocodile in the Bedroom" from Arnold Lobel's *Fables*

(1990) presents the negative consequences of perfectionism in a humorous, nonthreatening way by describing a crocodile who chooses to stay indoors with his perfect floral wallpaper, rather than working outdoors in his imperfect flower garden. Due to lack of physical activity and exposure to sunlight, the crocodile turns a sickly pale green, but remains content with the perfection of his ideal wallpaper garden. This story could easily promote discussion of the positive and negative effects of perfectionism, as well as the perfectionistic need for order and alternate options available to the crocodile.

Perfectionism and Eating Disorders

The Best Little Girl in the World by S. Levenkron (1978) addresses the serious maladaptive behavior of anorexia nervosa from the viewpoint of an adolescent girl who strives for both her ideal of physical perfection and the ultimate form of order and control. This novel is particularly poignant for adolescent females who are often deeply affected by the skewed images of reality presented by the media (Axtell & Newton, 1993). Discussion of this novel may lead to the identification of how beauty is defined in our society.

Art Activities

Art activities are another modality that may aid in the affective counseling and cognitive restructuring of perfectionistic students. For students whose self-worth is tied to their academic success or failure, the thought of putting pencil to paper in a written expression exercise may be paralyzing (Winebrenner, 1996). Drawing and being creative in a nontraditional mode such as art may fulfill the students' need for an affective outlet, as well as help to move them from self-deprecation and self-criticism to the joy of exploration, expression, and creativity for its own sake (Smutny, 1996).

Excellence vs. Perfection

Discuss with students the difference between excellence and perfection. Brainstorm with students places from which our ideas of perfectionism come. Using poster board or large sheet of paper divided in half, have students locate, cut out, and glue images from magazine advertisements that they perceive as representing perfection on one half. Then, have students find, cut out, and glue images that represent excellence or

attainable goals on the other half. Hang these collages around the room and use them as a discussion prompt for realistic goal setting.

Goal Setting

Allow students to create a collage of pictures, either drawn or cut from magazines, that represent goals they wish to achieve, either now or in the future. Have each student present his or her collage to the class and explain what each image on the collage represents. Then, have the students work through the process of planning the steps necessary to reach one of those goals. In this way, students may come to realize that goals are not outcomes that just happen; they must be planned. Teachers may also use this opportunity to gauge the planning and realistic goal-setting skills of students.

Conclusion

The concept of giftedness is largely misunderstood in America today (Silverman, 1993). Despite the widely held belief that gifted children are virtually immune to problems, academic or emotional, even gifted students who seem well-adjusted may suffer from feelings of inadequacy and perfectionistic tendencies (Yadusky-Holahan & Holahan, 1983). It is important to remember that, whenever classroom discussion touches the affective domain, teachers are not trained counselors. Teachers may not be prepared for all that is disclosed. Although affective needs of gifted students do need to be addressed and teachers have the best intentions in mind, a support system must be in place in case the activity exposes deeply rooted problems or serious expression of maladaptive behavior (Adderholt-Elliott & Eller, 1989). Nevertheless, the mere acknowledgement of affective topics and willingness to address them will undoubtedly touch a child whose self-doubt or inner conflict may have otherwise gone unrecognized or unaddressed.

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Author Note

I have used these interventions in both academically gifted and regular education classes with much success. I have found that, once a comfortable classroom culture of mutual respect and trust has been established, students are much more willing to share their own insights because the atmosphere is one of acceptance, rather than fear of retribution or negativity.

It is essential that teachers who embark upon the affect aspects of classroom counseling be willing to follow up on issues that are revealed. Likewise, teachers must be willing to relinquish the counselor role to a professional guidance counselor or child welfare authority.

Appendix A

Psychosocial Aspects of Perfectionism and Giftedness

- One aspect of intelligence is the ability to reason abstractly. Perfectionism is an abstract concept. The draw to perfectionism is a natural attraction.
- Perfectionism is a concomitant aspect of asynchronous development in gifted children. Gifted children tend to set standards with regard to their mental age, rather than their chronological age.
- Gifted children often have friends older than their age-mates. Thus, they tend to set standards appropriate for those older than themselves.
- Many gifted children experience academic success with little effort and come to expect success and fear failure due to their lack of experience with it.
- When work at school is not challenging to gifted children, often the only challenge they can create for themselves is to produce all their work perfectly.
- Gifted children have insight beyond their years and can grasp the concept of what "ought to be" in relation to "what is." This understanding may heighten gifted students' perfectionistic tendencies.

Adapted from *Perfectionism*, by L. K. Silverman, 1995, paper presented at the 11th World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children, Hong Kong.

Appendix B

Sample Essay Rubric

Name _____

Category	Poor					Excellent					Factor	Total
Responsiveness	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	X 3	
Support Elaboration Organization	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	X 1	
Sentence Formation	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	X 1	
Usage	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	X 1	
Mechanics	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	X 1	
Adhering to Composition Guidelines	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	X 1	

Reflective Comments:

Appendix C

**Richard Cory
by Edwin Arlington Robinson**

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good morning," and he glittered when he walked.
And he was rich – yes, richer than a king –

And admirably schooled in every grace;
In fine we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

About the Authors

Healthy Perfectionism in the Gifted

Wayne D. Parker has received a B.A. (Psych) and a M.A. (Ed. Psych) from Michigan State University and a Ph.D. from the University of Alabama in Ed. Psych Research. He is a licensed psychologist, a certified counselor, and a certified teacher. He has taught for more than 20 years at the college level, as well as international secondary school teaching in Austria, Mexico, and Venezuela. He has twice been awarded the Mensa International Award for excellence in research on the gifted. He has been a senior researcher at the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth for six years until this fall when he was named Director of Institutional Research at Goucher College in Baltimore.

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Patricia A. Schuler received a master's degree in gifted education from the College of New Rochelle, a master's degree in counseling psychology and a doctorate in educational psychology: gifted and talented education from the University of Connecticut. Her experiences in education include being a regular classroom teacher, an examination services specialist for the New York State Department of Education, a coordinator and teacher of elementary through high school schoolwide enrichment programs, and a research associate at The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. She has presented both nationally and internationally on issues related to gifted education, especially underachieving gifted students, perfectionism, and the social and emotional issues of gifted students. Patricia, a national certified counselor, is a partner in *Creative Insights*, a counseling and educational consulting practice, in Rensselaer, NY, which specializes in working with high-ability children and their families.

"Healthy Perfectionism" is an Oxymoron! Reflections on the Psychology of Perfectionism and the Sociology of Science

Tom S. Greespon is a licensed psychologist and licensed marriage and family therapist, in private practice in Minneapolis. He earned a B.A. from Yale and a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Illinois in 1968. After a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Rochester, he joined the faculty of the Medical Center at the University of Alabama in Birmingham, where he was involved in teaching, research, and counseling until moving to the Twin Cities in 1977. Tom lectures and writes on a variety of topics, including psychology and family relations, especially concerning the emotional needs of gifted children and adults. He is a member of several professional organizations, he

**Perfectionism and Giftedness:
Manifestations and Intervention
Strategies**

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