What is a “PERFECTIONIST”?

**BACKGROUND**

Perfectionist is a word used by many to describe themselves and others, though whether they intend this as a compliment or insult depends on their personal construct of perfectionism. International research links perfectionism with high achievement, but also with school refusal, mental health issues and suicide. If schools and families perceive perfectionism positively, they are likely to directly or indirectly reinforce it, potentially putting students at risk of mental ill health. The current Participants Action Research study aimed to find out how a sample of students, staff and parents in UK secondary schools construct perfectionism and how this might shape their behaviour (Phase One), it also aimed to produce and provisionally evaluate guidance for schools and families to support the emotional wellbeing of these students (Phase Two).

**PARTICIPANTS**

- **Phase 1**: 17 Year 9 and 10 students (11 girls, 6 boys), 9 parents, 6 teachers from 4 UK secondary schools, an independent girls’ grammar, an independent boys’ grammar, an ‘Outstanding’ Academy and an ‘Outstanding’ comprehensive.
- **Phase 2**: art psychotherapist, Cbt psychotherapist, Cbt therapist, Integrative Counsellor, 2 Educational Psychologists, 2 Mental Health Nurses (plus Phase 1 participants).

**METHOD**

- **Phase 1**: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with each participant, using *Perfection Construal Psychology* (successful/not successful, ‘happy/not happy’, ‘perfectionism/perfectionist’ Dynamic Assessment (adapted Rey-Osterrieth Complex Figure Test) and Reflective Techniques (i.e. identifying a perfectionist in the Bible classroom) to ascertain participant knowledge, understanding and ‘level’ of perfectionism (researcher assessment based loosely upon an amalgamation of published rating scales). Interviews were transcribed and analysed using 6-stage thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), identifying (amongst other themes) thoughts, feelings and behaviours ascribed to perfectionists, and conflicts and misconceptions in participants’ constructs.
- **Phase 2**: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with external professionals to share Phase 1 findings and identify targets for intervention; these were integrated with considerations from the literature, psychological theory and identified incongruities from Phase 1, to produce guidance for schools and families. This was evaluated by Phase 1 participants through e-mails and face-to-face interviews. Amendments were made and final copies of the guidance distributed to participants.

**CONFLICTS AND MISCONCEPTIONS**

**Perfectionists are:**
- High-achievers, likely to do well and be happy in life, liked by staff and parents and proud of themselves, but
- Stressed and isolated.
- Born that way.

**Perfectionists should:**
- Just ‘Tell it go’, but
- Not change in case they become lazy, unmotivated and start getting things ‘wrong’.
- Get help from someone they respect, but they probably won’t listen.

**The opposite of a perfectionist is:**
- Lazy and unmotivated
- Perceptive and less achieving, but
- Happy, content, relaxed.
- The result of ‘nurture’.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- If students, parents and staff perceive perfectionism as resulting in positive outcomes (such as achievement) and avoiding negative outcomes (such as underachievement), they are likely to reinforce it. If they are unaware of the risks of perfectionism (such as serious mental health difficulties, social isolation and underachievement), they are unlikely to challenge it.

This puts students high in perfectionism at risk of not getting early support to challenge their perfectionist beliefs and related behaviours. These become more engrained and harder to change over time. Educational Psychologists could play a valuable role here in changing unhelpful constructions.

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**REFERENCES**

- **Perfectionism** and ‘...how can we support them in school?**

What to target for intervention:

- **Emotional Needs**
  - Acceptance/belonging, security
- **Environmental Change**
  - Growth mindset approach to teaching and learning
- **Communicative Function**
  - Quality management from unmet need (cognitive, emotional, social)
- **Teaching New Skills**
  - Ongoing skills (including communication, self-esteem, problem solving, planning, emotion regulation)
- **Reinforcement**
  - Individual support plan, including review and recognition of progress
  - Home/school communication

**The research produced and evaluated the following guidance:**

- **STAFF**
  - School guidance pack, including: NLP presentation (to be followed by handout)
  - Guidance booklet (theory, interventions, exercises, thought management, coaching...)
  - Staff ‘Top tips’ crib sheet
  - Core toolkit handout

- **PARENTS**
  - Presentation (to be delivered by school staff or EP)
  - Leaflet (to be distributed by school EPs)
  - Social Media page

- **STUDENTS**
  - Workbook to be delivered by school staff or EP
  - Personal pocket wallet card (to be delivered by school EPs)
  - Personal wallet card (to be distributed by school EPs)

**CONCLUSIONS**

- Participants were pleased with the final guidance and felt they had personally benefitted from both the process and product.
- Constructs around perfectionism were altered; the word OPMUMIST (Ben-Shahar, 2009) was added to participants’ vocabularies to describe a healthy, adaptive and desirable opposite of a PERFECTIONIST.
- There is a role for the Educational Psychologist in supporting schools to better meet the social, emotional and mental health needs of students high in perfectionism through raising awareness of the construct, students’ needs and supporting schools to personalise interventions to the individual, including improving systemic policy, practice and culture.
- Students identifying as High in perfectionism felt their voice had been heard.

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“Exploring and challenging perfectionism in four high-achieving UK secondary schools”

Doctorate in Educational, Child and Community Psychology, 2013-16

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