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Working with Perfectionist Students. ERIC Digest.

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Perfectionist students are not satisfied with merely doing well or even with doing better than their peers. They are satisfied only if they have done a job perfectly, so that the result reveals no blemishes or weaknesses. To the extent that perfectionism involves striving for difficult but reachable goals, it involves the success-seeking aspects of

healthy achievement motivation and functions as an asset to the student and as an ally to the teacher. Even a success-seeking version of perfectionism, however, can become a problem to the extent that the student begins to focus not so much on meeting personal goals as on winning competitions against classmates (Furtwengler & Konnert, 1982).

Problems associated with forms of perfectionism that focus on seeking success are relatively minor, however, compared to the problems associated with forms of perfectionism that focus on avoiding failure (Burns, 1980). Fear of failure (or of blame, rejection, or other anticipated social consequences of failure) can be destructive to achievement motivation, especially if it is powerful and persistent. Victims of such fear typically try to avoid or escape as quickly as possible from achievement situations in which their performance will be judged according to standards of excellence. When escape is not possible, they try to protect their self-esteem either by expressing very low aspirations that will be easy to fulfill or by expressing impossibly high aspirations that they have no serious intention of striving to fulfill. In the school setting, many such students become alienated underachievers.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PERFECTIONIST STUDENTS

Pacht (1984) listed the following as symptoms of student perfectionism:

* performance standards that are impossibly high and unnecessarily rigid;

* motivation more from fear of failure than from pursuit of success;

* measurement of one's own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment;

* all-or-nothing evaluations that label anything other than perfection as failure;

* difficulty in taking credit or pleasure, even when success is achieved, because such achievement is merely what is expected;

* procrastination in getting started on work that will be judged; and

* long delays in completing assignments, or repeatedly starting over on assignments, because the work must be perfect from the beginning and continue to be perfect as one goes along.

Other symptoms commonly observed in perfectionist students include unwillingness to volunteer to respond to questions unless certain of the correct answer, overly emotional and "catastrophic" reactions to minor failures, and low productivity due to procrastination or excessive "start overs."

COPING WITH PERFECTIONIST STUDENTS

Perfectionist students need to relearn performance norms and work expectations. They need to learn that (1) schools are places to learn knowledge and skills, not merely to demonstrate them; (2) errors are normal, expected, and often necessary aspects of the learning process; (3) everyone makes mistakes, including the teacher; (4) there is no reason to devalue oneself or fear rejection or punishment just because one has made a mistake; and (5) it is usually more helpful to measure progress by comparing where one is now with where one was, rather than by comparing oneself with peers or with ideals of perfection.
Swift and Spivack (1975) emphasized that helping perfectionists develop more realistic expectations is a process that needs to be couched within a context of acceptance of their motivation to achieve and their need to feel satisfied with their accomplishments. Thus, instead of dismissing their concerns as unfounded (and expecting them to accept this view), teachers can use active listening methods to encourage these students to express their concerns, make it clear that they take those concerns seriously, and engage in collaborative planning with the students concerning steps that might alleviate the problem. The goal is to help perfectionist students achieve a 20- or 30-degree change rather than a 180-degree turnaround (Pacht, 1984).

Teachers want students to retain their desire to aim high and put forth their best efforts, but to learn to do so in ways that are realistic and productive rather than rigid and compulsive. Intervention efforts are likely to feature some form of cognitive restructuring. McIntyre (1989) suggested the following teacher strategies for working with perfectionists: "give permission" to make mistakes, or divide assignments into outline, rough draft, and final draft stages, with perfection promoted only for the final draft; discuss appropriate reactions to making mistakes; and frequently use ungraded assignments or assignments that call for creative, individual responses rather than correct answers. If necessary, place limits on perfectionist procrastination by limiting the

time that can be spent on an assignment or by limiting the amount of correcting allowed.

Teachers must be careful to be sure that the assistance they provide does not make these students too dependent on them, to the point that they seek teacher clarification and approval of every step of their work. The goal is to gradually guide the student toward an independent work posture.

STRATEGIES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

Brophy and Rohrkemper (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).

CONCLUSION

Perfectionists often show unsatisfactory achievement progress because they are more concerned about avoiding mistakes than with learning. They are inhibited about classroom participation and counterproductively compulsive in their work habits. Identifying perfectionist students is possible by observing their behaviors and talking with them about habits and practices that interfere with class participation and performance on assignments. Effective teachers take perfectionist students seriously, communicating understanding and approval of their desire to do well and sympathizing with the students' feelings of embarrassment and frustration. Teachers can learn to support and reinforce the success-seeking aspects of achievement motivation while working to reduce unrealistic goal setting.

This digest was adapted from: Brophy, Jere (1996). Teaching Problem Students. New York: Guilford. Adapted with permission of the author.

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