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Perfectionism and Stress During Student Teaching: Managing Uncertainty With Overcompensation

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Abstract

Student teachers who are unclear about their performance expectations may be driven toward perfectionism. This possibility is discussed as an over-compensation strategy to manage uncertainty and a perceived lack of clarity regarding student teachers' roles in the classroom. In this case study, I examined perfectionism and stress among six female student teachers enrolled in senior-year student teaching at a small private New England university. I conducted interviews regarding perfectionism, stress, and the coping strategies student teachers used to manage the stress of teaching. Response themes are identified, and strategies to manage perfectionism and stress-related behaviors for student teachers are provided. Finally, I consider the relevance of these present findings for other professional development programs.

Introduction

As a profession, teaching is a demanding (Kärner & Höning, 2021) and stressful occupation (Ryan et al., 2017; Kongcharoen et al., 2020; Gagnon et al., 2019). Moreover, this is probably even more true now since the COVID pandemic (Pressley & Ha, 2022). Consequently, teachers are at an elevated risk for burnout (e.g., Oliveira et al., 2021; Iancu et al., 2018).

As part of their academic training, education students are typically required to complete student teaching placements under the supervision of cooperating teachers (CTs). Since education students are typically seeking certification or licensure from their respective states, their teaching performance is closely monitored and evaluated. It is not surprising, therefore, considering the challenges of classroom teaching, that education students often report experiencing considerable stress during the clinical phases of their training (Kokkinos et al., 2016).

Research further indicates that some of this stress may be explained in the context of unrealistic "performance expectations" (Alden et al., 2002, p. 385). While holding high expectations for oneself is a positive character

trait and facilitates academic success, this same strength can become a weakness if it is taken to extreme levels in the form of seeking perfection. Perfectionism has been studied extensively and is even a popular subject in the mainstream media (e.g., Brown, 2022). There are probably as many explanations for perfectionism as there are people who experience it. Readers are encouraged to explore the vast works of Flett and Hewitt (2002) for a compendium of research on theory, research, and treatment for perfectionism. Other perfection researchers have explored the role of procrastination (Coutinho et al., 2022), test anxiety (Burcaş & Creţu, 2021), and parental pressures or expectations (Walton et al., 2020).

Moreover, perfectionism has been studied as both an "adaptive" character trait, and as a "maladaptive" trait (e.g., Enns & Cox, 2002, pp. 50–53). As Enns and Cox point out, this polarity has been examined by "clinical" theoreticians prior to the formation of "psychometric measures" (p. 51). Referring to earlier perfection researchers, Enns and Cox indicate that healthy perfectionism would include, for instance, the motivation to encourage people to attain "achievable standards" and "balanced thinking," whereas unhealthy perfectionism would include qualities such as "fear of failure" and "inflexibly high standards" (p. 51). Toward that end, "the psychologically harmful side to perfectionism" has become more apparent at universities (Iarovici, 2014, p. 72).

Hewitt and Flett (1991) identify and describe three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism (SO), other-oriented perfectionism (OO), and socially prescribed perfectionism (SP). According to these researchers, SO perfectionists believe that striving for perfection (and being perfect) are important personal qualities. Therefore, SO individuals expect themselves to be perfect. Other-oriented (OO) perfectionists believe that others should strive for perfection. Socially prescribed (SP) perfectionists are externally motivated, and they believe that striving for perfection is important to others, so SP perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect (pp. 457–458).

Student teachers must achieve a certain level of mastery to be recommended by the university to their state for certification or licensure. Therefore, considering the high levels of performance expected of student teaching candidates, the socially prescribed form of perfectionism (SP) may be especially important for participants in this investigation.

As part of their suggestions for clinicians, Hewitt et al. (2017) discuss perfection as a possible result of experiencing "Unmet Needs: Safety, Connection, Control, Competence, and Autonomy" (pp. 18–20). In brief, these researchers suggest that negative early life experiences can have a detrimental and lasting impact on someone's needs to feel safe and to form meaningful connections with others. Consequently, perhaps out of fear of being perceived as "not good enough," perfectionists may possess a strong desire to have control and to feel competent and autonomous. While these explanations are plausible and useful, there are other potential explanations of perfectionism to consider.

The purpose of the present investigation was to explore what female teacher education candidates report regarding perfectionism and stress during clinical placement.

Methods

Participants

The pool of potential participants included 40 undergraduates from the Department of Education at a small private New England university. Participants were recruited in their student teaching seminar and six participants agreed to be interviewed.

Procedure

Prior to candidates beginning their full-time student teaching placement, I conducted individual interviews to explore perfectionism, stress, and coping strategies as they relate to the demands and expectations of student teaching. As an incentive to participate, interview participants were paid $15. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were subsequently audio-taped and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed to identify emergent themes. To guide this process, I used **Strauss and Corbin's "Grounded Theory" approach to qualitative** research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 12–14). In this method, theory is generated from data through a process **of coding participants' responses.**

Results

The following seven themes emerged during the interviews: (1) generalized stress of student teaching, (2) challenges of student teaching, (3) pressure from self to teach perfectly, (4) pressure from others to teach perfectly, (5) handling instructional setbacks, (6) soliciting support, and (7) managing stress of student teaching. The following discussion of these themes (and related subtopics) includes selected participant responses to illustrate themes. Strategies to help student teachers manage themes will be presented as well.

Theme 1: Generalized Stress of Student Teaching

The consensus of participant responses related to Theme 1 focused on three related subtopics. First, student teaching itself is stressful as participants balance and integrate their roles as both "student" and "teacher." The second subtopic expressed by some student teachers was a lack of clarity about their roles and performance expectations with cooperating teachers. The third subtopic is an extension of the second one, that is, clarifying performance expectations. Specifically, the rubric that is used to evaluate student teach**ers' performance was** unclear to some participants.

With respect to finding a balance of teacher and student roles, some participants found it difficult to balance these two positions. Consequently, if students are confused about their roles (i.e., teacher role vs. student role), they may over-compensate in one direction or the other. This belief may contribute to a perfection-seeking mentality.

Moreover, some participants indicated that the rubric used to evaluate their teaching performance was unclear. Students must achieve mastery to be recommended for certification, but for some students it was unclear what this meant because different interpretations of the evaluation rubric were possible. Therefore, an important concern expressed was that the cooperating teachers and student teachers may have different interpretations of the rubric.

It is possible that students become inclined to seek excellence (even perfectionism) to compensate for feeling **uncertain about what is expected of them. One participant, for example, said that the** "relationship with CT [cooperating teacher] [is] critical for success, so if there is miscommunication, this is stress**ful." If** communication is unclear—perhaps frustration ensues because of a lack of clarity with respect to communication and expectations.

Potential Strategies to Address Theme 1:
Suggestions for lessening stress in student teaching and aligning communication and performance expectations include: Student teachers and cooperating teachers should clarify the respective roles and performance expectations—especially regarding the teaching mastery rubric. Perhaps, lessen a sense of pressure by clarifyi**ng students' understanding of the mastery rubric. Even if roles are clarified,** student

teachers may still strive to perform excellently, but they may not feel as pressured by confusion over performance expectations (which could then result in perfectionism).

Furthermore, if student teachers do not know what constitutes "good enough" teaching they may be inclined to compensate for this uncertainty by doing more than is necessary to alleviate uncertainty. If participants had a clearer understanding of their performance expectations, it is possible that they might have lessened their "minimal goals" for feeling satisfied with their performance. Obviously, this is an empirical question and warrants further consideration.

Theme 2: Challenges of Student Teaching

Participants' responses related to Theme 2 centered around three related subtopics. First, there were communication challenges with cooperating teachers and school administration (e.g., following school procedures and protocols). The second subtopic focused on forming one's identity as a "teacher" and clarifying student-teacher boundaries (and roles) in the classroom. The third subtopic centered on time management to complete responsibilities in student teaching (e.g., lesson planning) and completing other university coursework.

When asked to identify the biggest challenges, one participant summed it up in one word: "communication." Communication issues centered around details such as information about school policies and procedures (e.g., according to one participant: "getting into building if arriving early, dealing with snow days, ID badges, and getting an email address from school"). Another example of student teachers' challenges was coordinating communication between cooperating teachers and school administration. One student teacher reported the following example of communication challenges they experienced: "getting permission forms signed and scheduling lessons around what cooperating teachers want and what school district demands."

With respect to balancing responsibilities, some participants responded that it was challenging to maintain separation between their roles of student and teacher. According to one participant: "In school, I am the teacher, and then I work in [an] after-school program where I am perceived more as a friend." The challenge, therefore, centered on perceived roles and relationships and holding those boundaries consistently.

Turning to time management, participants reported that it was often difficult to achieve a balance between student teaching and student life. For instance, one participant indicated that it was difficult to be a teacher during the day, come back to campus as a student to attend classes, and then complete homework.

Putting their experience into context, student teachers are cultivating a new identity as classroom educators. This is especially challenging as they must deliver instruction in the form of an established (required) curriculum. Therefore, some student teachers appeared to struggle with establishing their own authority or "voice" in the classroom. With respect to potential strategies to manage communication difficulties, there are two dimensions to consider when it comes to helping student teachers: external sources and internal sources.

Externally, it is essential for student teachers to have clear communication with cooperating teachers, and this would include roles and performance expectations. Internally, to relieve some pressure that they may be experiencing about performance expectations, student teachers need to cultivate patience and self-compassion as they develop their teacher "voice."

As one participant said: "Right now, we're not perfect so the perfectionism is like you want to be there. You want to be perfect so you're always evaluating yourself to improve." Naturally, beginning teachers may feel insecure about their ability, about not being good enough. Some student teachers may compensate for their insecurity by seeking perfectionism—according to one participant: "You want to be the best because you feel like you aren't." This thought process may be more likely if someone is unclear about what is expected of

them. Therefore, student teachers may try to compensate for uncertainty by doing more than is necessary, and this could culminate in a perfection-seeking mentality.

Potential Strategies to Address Theme 2:
One strategy to manage challenges around communication could be to hold regular check-ins with cooperating teachers and student teachers to review stated goals and objectives. It would also be useful to review the mastery rubric together to clarify mutual expectations. Student teachers could also regularly journal their responses to questions about what it means to be a teacher and then share their insights with their cooperating teachers. In turn, cooperating teachers could share their own experiences with becoming educators. In this way, student teachers' experiences could be "normalized" and, perhaps, even mitigate their concerns.

As another strategy to lessen their concerns, student teachers could "journal" their positive and negative teaching experiences and then share them with their cooperating teacher, who might be able to "normalize" their concerns and/or reassure them about their performance.

Theme 3: Pressure From Self to Teach Perfectly

Participant responses related to Theme 3 formed two subtopics. The first centered on knowing the difference between the process of trying one's best and doing it perfectly. The second subtopic related to Theme 3 focused on preparation.

First, participants acknowledged the difference between doing one's best and striving for perfection. As one student teacher put it, "I don't feel [the] need to be perfect all the time, but I do feel the need to do my best. And if I don't feel like I've done my best, whether perfect or not, then I'm upset." Apparently, some participants recognized their identity as a developing teacher, and they understood that mistakes are inevitable.

Another student teacher reported:

> I think in the beginning of the Fall semester I definitely had this unrealistic image in my head of what teaching perfectly meant—like all the students are listening, everyone's quiet, looking at you, and you're doing your lesson the way it's planned. Then being in the real world of teachers just blew my mind how false that view of teaching was. Now I put more pressure on myself to teach my best and ask for feedback and incorporate the feedback.

Another participant reported: "I definitely have a lot of pressure on myself. I wouldn't say to teach perfectly, because I understand that I am just a student teacher and … I am just stepping into this, but I actually want to do well."

A second subtopic centered around preparation. According to one student teacher: "Being prepared—I can get up there and I know how to engage the students, so just engaging them and making sure that they're making connections is more of what teaching perfectly is—the small steps are better than the huge ones because then you know that your students actually gain the right knowledge, and they were able to make those connections."

Another participant said, "Even if it doesn't always feel nice it keeps my mind open, keeps me growing. That is perfect." So, perhaps, it's not like perfectionism is what is happening in the classroom. Perfection may, hypothetically, be more appropriately expressed this way: "I am striving to be the best teacher I can, and I am asking questions. That is perfect."

Potential Strategies to Address Theme 3:
It is important for cooperating teachers (and other faculty) to remind student teachers regularly that they are still "student teachers" first and foremost. Therefore, cultivating patience and self-compassion is essential.

Keeping a journal would be especially useful if student teachers read early entries to reflect on their growth and progress.

Theme 4: Pressure From Others to Teach Perfectly

Participant responses related to Theme 4 produced two subtopics. First, most student teachers recognized (and are reminded by cooperating teachers) that they are there to learn and that no one expects perfection. The second subtopic, pressure, is sometimes experienced as competition and comes from comparing oneself to one's peers.

With respect to the first subtopic related to Theme 4, student teachers appeared to understand that mistakes are inevitable. As one participant reported, "I feel like instead of expecting me to be perfect, others expect me to be lower, and they're happily surprised when I'm higher. It makes me wonder what happened in the past to make the bar so low."

Other participants indicated that they were receiving mixed messages from faculty and supervisors. Specifically, while cooperating teachers and other supervisors were more understanding of the developmental process and the inevitability of mistakes, some participants felt pressure from their academic advisers to excel. According to one student teacher:

> Depending on who it is—most people reassure us that we're not supposed to be perfect at this, we are just learning. But then there's also people like our advisors who come in and the pressure is "on" because you want to get those perfect grades, while someone is watching what you do every day. You don't want to get Benchmark you want Mastery for your observation.

Interestingly, pressure to excel was often expressed as externally driven by outside sources. For instance, as one participant reported, "[Pressure] doesn't come from within education, it's from outside, people who don't know about teaching. People outside of education imagine that you just stand up in front of people—How hard can it be?"

Turning to the second subtopic of Theme 4, "pressure" also originated from student teachers' cohorts indirectly in conversations. This form of pressure may simply suggest a competitive quality between peers. For instance, if a classmate talked about how great their lesson was, it could be perceived or experienced as pressure to perform. According to another student teacher:

> I feel like my cohort puts a little more pressure because a lot of times they talk about the lessons that they taught and how well they went and how this is what happened. And I taught a lesson, it wasn't that great. So, the people in my classes put more pressure on me than my cooperating teacher ... but I don't think that they try to—that is something that [just] happens.

Potential Strategies to Address Theme 4:
Cooperating teachers could regularly remind students of the goals of their placements and reassure them of their growth and progress. During student teaching seminars, students could write anonymous notes of their most significant challenge during the week, and then have the instructor read them to the class and discuss them. This might help to "normalize" students' concerns about their performance.

Theme 5: Handling Instructional Setbacks

Participant responses related to Theme 5 centered around 3 subtopics. First, students need to reflect on their performance. Second, they need to normalize their mistakes as an essential part of the learning process. The third subtopic related to Theme 5 centered on the need to move forward.

First, reflectivity. Student teachers generally used their negative experiences as learning opportunities. As one participant said:

> In the moment I tried to just stay present and keep things moving and fix it, fix what's coming, rather than worrying about what's behind me. But after the lesson … I always sit down and write about what things went well. … And then what things I would want to change for the next lesson. Because that reflectiveness helps me stay grounded. … I don't have to be perfect, but I see these little things that could be better. So, I'm going to do them next time.

Another participant reported:

> When lessons don't go as planned, it's important to stop and let's re-evaluate how it's going. Nothing is ever going to go exactly how you planned it. I have a level head on that because I did have an experience with my first observation like it wasn't very good. So, after that, I really did learn to see it like this: "if it's not going as planned, re-evaluate, try to switch things up, and make it work."

Normalization of student teachers' experiences formed the second subtopic of Theme 5. As one student teacher said:

> I've seen my cooperating teacher make mistakes, I've seen the principal make mistakes—it's such a common thing. The fact that everyone freaks out about it makes it even worse because everyone does these—they all get corrected [so] what's the point of freaking out about it. You could just redo it.

According to another participant,

> When I have a setback in my lesson I stop and talk with my CT or my supervisor about it, and they are usually able to give me really helpful feedback to kind of help me come to terms with my mistake. So, if I made a mistake, they'll give me a solution—"Well, this is how you can make it better. How can you implement that in your next lesson?" So, I definitely think taking in the advice that I'm getting in the comments definitely helps with my setbacks.

Another participant stated,

> Yeah, it definitely helps when you hear other people on the same playing field as you, because it makes you feel like you're not the only one. But I feel a lot of students don't express their mistakes or what happened, and they don't ask for feedback so then they're just stuck in that place. And I think that causes a lot of stress.

Finally, another student teacher said,

> That is something that people have to work on because in the beginning I did not like making mistakes and I did feel like a bad teacher—it makes you feel like nothing. But then when you look at the whole picture—everyone makes mistakes so what's the point of freaking out about it. And then it's like I can tell a first grader who wrote the wrong letter to just erase it and it will be ok. Why can't I tell myself that if I did something wrong, just to redo it. I don't have a right to make a mistake and they do?

A third subtopic emerged related to Theme 5, moving forward. Participants recognized that when they worked through their initial disappointment, they needed to take their lessons forward. According to one participant,

> In the fall it was a lot harder for me to even think about mistakes, like they weren't really allowed in. But in such a growing process that everyone makes mistakes, and there's nothing you can do to fix the

past, so you might as well just redo it and do it even better, because there's no reason that should be holding you back.

Another student indicated, "You have to be realistic about it like, Ok, well now I'm taking this and I'm making it work next time, but it was also in the moment like I wanted to cry hysterically and go home instantly, but it's like disappointment that comes with life."

According to another participant,

> I tend to freeze for a moment, and I get a little startle and I don't know why. I don't know if I'm just trying to think about how to get things back on track, or if I'm just, ok, I don't know what to do, what can I do, what can I do? So usually I just freeze, sometimes are little longer than others and it can be little awkward, but that's typically the first thing I do when I have a setback and sometimes, I get upset but you know that's human, that's normal.

Finally, according to another student teacher,

> I started before by beating myself up a little bit in the beginning of last semester, especially after my first 3–4 math lessons I was really upset they weren't going well. … And I started giving myself the allowance to make mistakes as I am learning and I've internalized the fact that every time I make a mistake while I am teaching, I'm learning something not to do next time or a better way to do it next time. So, I do feel a lot better about when things go wrong in lessons now, and I just kind of give myself the space to understand that it will be better next time and I'm still learning and there's a learning curve to all this curriculum. I'm trying to give myself space to be ok with that.

Potential Strategies to Address Theme 5:

Managing setbacks is challenging, especially for student teachers who are in the early stages of forming their careers. These individuals have a need to excel to be recommended for state certification. From the three subtopics identified, it seems that three concurrent interventions are warranted. First, it is critical to encourage student teachers to reflect on their experiences. This reflection could be done through journaling and then in discussion with cooperating teachers. Second, it would perhaps be helpful if cooperating teachers shared their own struggles when beginning their teaching careers. Such sharing could have the positive effect of normalizing student teachers' concerns about their own development.

Theme 6: Soliciting Support

Participants' responses related to Theme 6 centered around 3 general subtopics. First, the cooperating teachers were sought after most often. Second, it appears to students that asking questions is appropriate (to a point). The third subtopic related to Theme 6 is that receiving concrete feedback (pertaining to practice) is essential, as opposed to generic feedback statements.

With respect to the first subtopic of Theme 6, participants were more likely to approach their cooperating teacher with questions, and this relationship was critical for student teachers. As one student said, "I think my CT, [is] very supportive, I could ask her for support. Anyone else like staff I don't think I would feel comfortable going to about things. That just might be my own preference, but I don't feel particularly close to anyone on the staff so going to them for support would be kind of odd."

With respect to the second subtopic of Theme 6, participants generally favored asking questions. As one participant reported, "I formally ask for help whenever I teach a lesson. Or if I have an interaction with a student that I don't feel I did well with, even if it's handling an emotional problem." Another student said, "I just did this, I don't know what you would do, but I just wanted to talk it out. Sometimes. I'll have conversations with my CT about those kinds of social situations. … 'What if' questions." Finally, another

student teacher reported, "I think every day. I'm always asking for something like, "Is this ok? Can I do this better? Is there something you want me to add? So always making sure that what I did is enough. So, I think I'm always asking for support because I want to make sure that everything is lined up and everything's going smoothly."

Turning to the third subtopic related to Theme 6, participants indicated that they benefited the most from specific feedback about their teaching practices. According to one participant,

> The other cooperating teacher was nice, and she did give me support and I asked her for it, and it didn't feel that great because she would just be like, "You just need to be more confident, if you were just more confident everything will be ok." And the first time she said that I thought "I feel pretty confident, I don't feel like I am not." But then she kept telling me that and then I started feeling less confident and it was more like, "Do I look like I'm confident, right now, and less of how I am doing, like how are the kids taking this? Am I doing well?"

What seems most salient here is that if students receive concrete and specific feedback related to their practice, they can make necessary changes. Without specific feedback, they may be more inclined to over-compensate for a lack of clarity about what is necessary to make positive changes.

Potential Strategies to Address Theme 6:
With respect to asking questions and cooperating teachers, depending on the relationship between them, cooperating teachers would be wise to balance soliciting questions with encouraging independence. While some student teachers may need extra support and encouragement, it is also important to help student teachers become resources unto themselves.

Turning to the third subtopic of Theme 6, concrete feedback that includes specific recommendations for tools and practices is preferable to generic feedback.

Theme 7: Managing the Stress of Student Teaching

Participant responses related to Theme 7 centered around three interrelated subtopics. First, students differed in their ability to detect when stress was impacting their performance. This suggests that some individuals are more attuned to their stress levels than others. Second, some participants recognized that their interpretations of situations impacted their stress levels. The third subtopic is that participants had a variety of strategies to manage stress. Moreover, some student teachers seemed to appreciate the value (and importance) of stress management strategies more than others.

Participants employed a wide range of strategies for managing stress. Also, for many student teachers, there was an awareness of being reflective and thinking about the next time. As one participant said, "There will be a next time."

Other participants' responses regarding stress management include:

> The only way to fix that is to just get the job done; if I have 5 lesson plans to do over the weekend, I have to do it the second I get home. Otherwise, I'm not gonna be able to sleep. So, it's just kind of a 'work through it sort of thing,' but at the same time, making sure that I'm monitoring how much I'm doing that. Saving time to go talk to people—not just be me and my computer for 48 hours.

> I like to do different things—at the end of the night I try and either read a book, meditate, do a little bit of yoga. But once the stress starts to pile on, it gets lost in it.

A big thing is, I really wasn't a morning person about 2 years ago, but getting into teaching, obviously have to be a morning person so I think a big thing for me is waking up like 15 or 20 minutes earlier and getting myself ready so that way I'm able to sit in front of the tv or sit on my computer on my phone for about 20 minutes before I have to leave—just to have 'ME' time. Number one, I'm not rushing, and number two I'm not bothered by anyone or anything and just have breakfast, and make sure that I'm alive and well.

I think the biggest thing for managing stress is also just your mindset and really telling yourself if you wake up and just don't feel like it's going to be a good day, [saying] 'it's going to be a good day' makes it such a better day. Even those little sayings. Knowing that you feel like crap, you don't want to do this but you're like 'you're going to have a good day' really improves your attitude and I feel like it improves your outlook. And the last thing for managing stress is a sleep schedule—a scheduled routine of when I want to be sleeping was the biggest thing that I saw impacted my attitude and the way that I felt because it was going to be a long day.

I need to step out of my comfort zone and when I am feeling really stressed, I wish last semester, when I was under all the stress, I wish I asked for a little more help, but I think that I was embarrassed that I was so stressed out—I was always emailing my professors, 'I'm so sorry' and they're like, 'please stop apologizing' and I'm like 'I'm really, really sorry.' So, I think that being ok with the fact that I am stressed and asking for help.

Potential Strategies to Address Theme 7:
It seems that participants differed with respect to their stress levels, their awareness of their stress, and their strategies for managing stress. Cooperating teachers could be very helpful in this regard by reminding student teachers how important it is to practice self-care. Another strategy would be to have students write notes anonymously during the student teaching seminar that pertain to stress and how it impacts them. These notes could be read during the seminar to help students "normalize" their experiences by learning that they are not alone in their struggles with stress.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored student teachers' stress and perfectionism as it relates to student teaching. Specifically, the research sought to answer the question of what female teacher education candidates report regarding perfectionism and stress during clinical placement. Results revealed important information that may benefit the student teaching candidates' experience, and this may also have implications for training students in other professional programs such as health services.

Perfectionism is a multi-faceted and complex issue, and it defies simplistic explanations. Many people struggle with controlling perfection-seeking tendencies. Moreover, the same can be said for stress in that we are living in stressful times, and there are a multitude of stressors for people to manage. Certainly, managing stress positively is paramount to an individual's well-being.

With respect to the relationship between stress and perfection, as has been discussed, there are positive aspects to seeking perfection in that great works can be accomplished, and it can motivate someone's drive for performance excellence. However, there are, unfortunately, negative consequences to seeking perfection as well.

Participants' responses indicated two primary issues confronting student teachers. The first issue pertains to teaching performance expectations. Students must achieve a high-performance level (i.e., "Mastery") to be endorsed by the university for teacher certification. Therefore, it is imperative that student teachers and cooperating teachers clarify their performance expectations. For some student teachers, however, it was unclear

what this meant because they had different interpretations of the teaching evaluation rubric. If students don't possess a strong sense of clarity around what is expected of them, they might over-compensate for this uncertainty by striving to be "better than necessary." This situation may become a breeding ground for cultivating perfectionism. In other words, across different tasks, if individuals are uncertain about what is expected from them in terms of their performance, they may be inclined to over-extend themselves in their efforts to be successful. Perfectionism, for some individuals, may, therefore, be an over-compensation strategy for managing uncertainty. Results from this study suggest this very possibility and it warrants further exploration.

Furthermore, for some student teachers, perfectionism did not manifest in the idea that lessons must be taught perfectly. In fact, participants in this study did not admit a need to teach perfectly and, at some level, they may not actually strive for perfection. Students may understand that this is an impossible task. Rather, for some participants in the current study, perfectionism was more about striving to do the best job possible. In effect, the mindset appeared to be that if one did the best job they could, that was perfect. The challenge, then, is to determine what is the "best" or "good enough" teaching.

Moreover, with respect to "needs," finding a balance of roles between teacher and student is essential. Specifically, if students are confused about their roles (i.e., teacher role vs. student role), students may over-compensate in one direction (or the other) in terms of what they believe. This need, too, may contribute to a perfection-seeking mentality.

Turning to support systems, some student teachers found it difficult to ask for support from their cooperating teachers. This may be, in part, because of where students placed themselves on the continuum of their identity as student or teacher. For instance, if student teachers perceive themselves as a "teacher" (vs. "student"), this may inhibit their tendency to seek guidance. Again, it would be helpful for cooperating teachers to clarify communication expectations with student teachers.

With respect to managing stress, results from this study point to the benefits of employing self-compassion strategies to facilitate students' development as educators. There are two messages that student teachers might focus on: (1) "Yes, mistakes happen, and I am here to learn" and (2) "I really need to do well at this." A balancing act between those two mindsets is critical for student teachers' success. Carol Dweck (2000, pp. 15–19) and colleagues have done extensive research on students' goals, specifically a "learning goal" and a "performance goal" (p. 15). While Dweck normalizes the existence of both goals, individuals with a pervasive performance goal mindset are driven by the need to be perceived or seen as competent, i.e., "look smart ... and avoid looking dumb" (p. 15). As Dweck points out, this objective takes precedence over learning, and developing new skills. This performance goal mindset would be consistent with Hewitt and Flett's (1991) aforementioned socially prescribed perfectionism in that the objective is to satisfy what one believes to be others' expectations. In contrast, individuals who possess more of a learning goal mindset are motivated by the desire to "learn new skills, master new tasks, or understand new things—a desire to get smarter" (Dweck, 2000, p. 15). Accordingly, to someone with a learning goal mentality, mistakes would be perceived as an important and necessary part of the learning process, and not something to avoid.

Student teaching is stressful, and students respond to this stress in many ways. Not surprisingly, some strategies to manage stress are more helpful than others. It appears that some students seek clarity around their performance to satisfy perceived expectations placed upon them. Therefore, constructive and concrete feedback for student teachers is particularly useful for their development as educators. But not just any feedback will suffice; students need clear behavior-driven information that they can use and readily apply to their classroom teaching. Generic positive feedback might "feel good" but it appears to be less useful in the sense that it offers recipients nothing tangible to change.

Turning to future directions, it might be useful to add supports for student teachers to bolster their development. For instance, alumni from teacher education programs could meet with current student teachers to address common themes such as the ones raised in this study. Having alumni share their perspectives on student-teacher concerns may "normalize" student teachers' own experiences and perhaps even create a felt sense of comfort or stress relief.

It may also be beneficial to investigate the potential benefits of other positive self-care practices such as mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and self-compassion (Muris et al., 2016), since these qualities have also been shown to reduce the negative impact of stress (Bluth & Blanton, 2014) and may, therefore, have a positive influence on perfectionistic tendencies. Furthermore, while self-compassion and mindfulness are important tools and practices to utilize in daily living, these skills may be especially important for individuals amid stressful situations such as student teaching. It would be interesting and perhaps fruitful to incorporate such practices into education students' training programs. Student teachers could be taught stress-management and mindfulness strategies by campus health services; this could include teaching students about 'stress' (signs and potential impact) and educating them on the importance of using stress-management strategies (such as mindfulness and self-compassion).

Conclusion

This research represents a solid step in the process of discovery and offers potential applications in academic and professional training programs across disciplines, including health-care-related fields such as nursing and physical therapy. While there are certainly overlapping issues in perfectionism and stress across professional disciplines, it is important to note that different programs have their own needs, requirements, and standards. Therefore, a "one size fits all" approach to understanding and managing stress and perfectionism is unlikely to exist.

Additional research is necessary to support more definitive statements and strategies and to generate a more thorough understanding of the prevalence and impact of perfectionism and stress on student teachers' experiences. In addition to existing theories, exploring perfectionism as "compensation for uncertainty" may be a fruitful area for further exploration.

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