Intellectually Gifted Students' Perceptions of Personal Goals and Work Habits

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PERFECTIONISM IMPACTS ALL FACETS OF STUDENTS' LIVES, BOTH positively and negatively. Hamachek (as cited in Orange, 1997) described perfectionism as a positive characteristic: The student is intrinsically motivated, earns high grades, and performs well on tasks. He or she takes pleasure from the achievement effort and successful completion of a task. On the other hand, Parker (2000) stated that feelings of perfectionism can sometimes impact negatively by overwhelming the student with the need to achieve at all costs, to be better than everyone else, and to set unrealistic and unachievable goals. The neurotic perfectionist views conditions from a negative perspective, feeling that goals are unachievable without perfect performance (Parker).

Perfectionism also impacts attitudes toward school or work in both positive and negative ways. Siegle and Schuler (2000) considered perfectionism to be an influential character trait of gifted students. LoCicero and Ashby (2000) noted that positive aspects of perfectionism in gifted students result in adaptive ways of coping with schoolwork and people. Negative or maladaptive attitudes can result in depression, distress over goals and achievement, or suicide (LoCicero & Ashby). Gifted students sometimes display opposing attitudes wherein they expend enormous amounts of energy and time to solve a problem or may feel they cannot accomplish a task and never even begin to try (Nugent, 2000).

According to LoCicero and Ashby (2000), early measurements by Burns and Pacht defined perfectionism as a unidimensional trait that was problematic and undesirable. Later researchers have described perfectionism as a multidimensional construct focusing on the interpersonal aspects of perfectionism—self-orientation, other-orientation, and socially dictated perfectionism—with the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) as the resulting instrument (Schuler, 2000).

In 1990, Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblare designed an instrument, also called the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS), that examined the intrapersonal facets of perfectionism: concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticism, doubts about actions, and organization (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblare in Schuler, 2000). The resulting acceptance of the multidimensionality of perfectionism has better defined perfectionism as a measurable construct (Orange, 1997).

Characteristics and Influences

Many factors influence students' growth and development. Nugent (2000) stated that the perfectionist attitude is established in childhood and suggested that identification of perfectionistic traits and recognition of problem areas is a first step to finding an alternative to the all-or-nothing attitude of many gifted students. Awareness of maladaptive perfectionism and origins of influence would be helpful to students, parents, and teachers in addressing the problem and discovering alternate methods for coping in a positive way (Schuler, 2000).

Difficulty with perfectionism may increase with age (Emmett & Minor, 1993). Research conducted on perfectionism with middle school students outlined different concerns for different ages. According to Greenspan (1998), perfectionistic middle school gifted students' attitudes begin to shift toward the negative. Greenspan also asserted that low self-confidence, discouragement, and hopelessness reach their highest levels during this age span. Feelings of depression, worry, and loneliness may result in serious negative behaviors (Kline & Short, 1991). Parker (2000), in his study using Frost's Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale with 6th-grade gifted perfectionists, found one cluster of participants to be disagreeable with peers and adults. The subjects were anxious, moody, overly competitive, and socially isolated. Parker described these students as dysfunctional perfectionists. Schuler (2000) replicated Parker's research with 7th- and 8th-grade students. Neurotic perfectionists scored higher in all subtest areas of Frost's Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale except organizational skills.

Very little empirical literature is available on younger gifted students with perfectionistic tendencies. Parental influence plays a major role with young students. Perfectionistic behaviors may become more apparent during late childhood and early adolescence, but usually have beginnings at a much younger age (Nugent, 2000). Negative behaviors and attitudes that may form at this time could be the basis for how students perceive themselves and how they will respond to mistakes, peers, and other dysfunctional or maladaptive behaviors (Nugent; Parker & Adkins, 1995a). Greenspan, Parker, and Schuler (2000) found that perfectionist students in high school recounted memories of the need for order and organization early in their lives.

In summary, although definitions and measurements differ in the literature, researchers agree that perfectionism can be damaging to the individual. Striving to be the best, setting unattainable goals, and being dissatisfied with performance can jeopardize mental stability. Schuler (2000) stated that information gained from the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale developed by Frost et al. (1990) indicates subareas of perfectionism that may be addressed by intervention. Greenspan (1998) stated that such interventions may alleviate problems related to the need of some students to be perfect and the idea that they can never be good enough.

Method

Instrument

Schuler's Goals and Work Habits Survey adapted from the Frost et al. Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale was used to collect data in this study. Schuler

reduced possible negative connotations regarding the survey by removing the word *perfectionism* from the title and renaming the instrument Goals and Work Habits (Siegle & Schuler, 2000). The self-report survey, with 35 items on a 5-point Likert scale, rates individuals' attitudes about their own goals and work habits. Six subareas were addressed: concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticism, doubts about actions, and organization. An overall internal reliability of .90 for the total score with subtest reliability ranging from .67 to .90 was established (Parker, 2000).

Participants

The instrument was administered to 5th-grade intellectually gifted students in a rural school setting. Gifted students were identified through a referral process that included grades; parent, teacher, or self-recommendations; scores from Eby's Leadership and Creative scales; and individual assessment with IQ scores exceeding 120. After identification, these students were served in a gifted education program in which higher order critical thinking skills are applied to students' topics of interest. This program provides investigative processes, experiences, and enrichment beyond what is available in the regular classroom.

Perfectionistic tendencies were apparent in most of the 5th-grade intellectually gifted students. Positive perfectionistic tendencies appeared in the "impeccable dresser," clothing and hair always neat or brushed; the "backpack organizer," pencils and belongings placed in specified locations; and the "persistent worker," possibly frustrated, but coping with and completing the task. In a few cases, perfectionism manifested itself in negative behaviors, such as refusal to attempt a project perceived to be doomed before beginning or, occasionally, in violent outbursts from improper venting of high frustration levels.

Procedure

Knowing where these 10- and 11-year-old students are in the transition from home influences to self or peer influence would provide a basis for appropriate response to negative behaviors and allow the behaviors to be channeled into more positive aspects. In an attempt to understand better where the focus of influence originated, I administered Schuler's Goals and Work Habits Survey to my students. After completing the survey, we discussed the items in detail, and at times the students' dialog did not agree with the selections made on the survey. This change in opinion from the private individual decisions on paper to a shared group discussion decision is an example of increasing peer influence.

Results and Discussion

The data were analyzed by dividing the Likert scores into the identified subareas as outlined by Parker and Adkins (1995b). Each individual's selections were totaled by subarea to establish the group's strength of agreement with each of the statements, with 5 equaling *strongly agree* and 1 showing *strongly disagree*. Mean scores and percents were established to allow comparison of scores.

As seen in the Table 1, the strongest influence of perfectionism for these 5th-grade students was that of parental expectations, with 29.1% selecting *strongly agree* and 23.5% selecting *agree*. In contrast, almost 38% strongly disagreed with statements concerning parental criticism. Class discussion and statistics showed positive support, with appropriate expectations from parents for these students. About one third of the students expressed delight in neatness and organization, remarking on the ability to find things in an organized situation, but did not specify the compulsion to be organized or neat. Students would organize and clean up when directed to do so, but not necessarily willingly or through self-initiation. Although a majority of students (68.8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with statements about concerns over mistakes, their age and the fact that they are entering middle school with the beginnings of stronger peer influences should be considered, as shown when opinions were changed while discussing the items in a group. Student dialog revolved around being part of and fitting in with the group. An emerging influence is the perception that most of their peers would not be concerned over making mistakes and certainly would not admit it if they were. Personal standards and doubts about actions were statistically neutral influences, with students still relying on and being supported by strong parental influences.

Although this study indicates that gifted 5th graders exhibit some signs of perfectionism, collectively the group showed no negative tendencies at this age. Parental concern and expectations are still major contributing factors for these students. Concern over mistakes indicates an increasing awareness of peer influence and how the student perceives his or her own role within the context of the class and among other peers. At this point, behavioral and emotional interventions could be established to offset negative characteristics. A safe, noncritical environment can be developed in small classes of gifted students where deviations from the normal attitudes on perfectionism are acceptable as individual growth. In this environment, students should realize that perfection is not always achievable, necessary, or desirable, and they should have peer

Table 1
Total Scores for Goals and Work Habits (*n* = 46)

Subarea	5	4	3	2	1
Concern Over Mistakes	16	32	66	106	148
Mean	2	4	8.3	13.3	18.5
Percentage	4.3	8.7	17.9	28.8	40
Organization	57	85	71	30	33
Mean	9.5	14.2	11.8	5	5.5
Percentage	20.7	30.7	25.7	10.9	12
Personal Standards	72	79	92	56	23
Mean	10.3	11.3	13.1	8	3.3
Percentage	22.3	24.5	28.6	17.4	7.2
Parental Concern	15	12	30	29	52
Mean	5	4	10	9.7	17.3
Percentage	10.9	8.7	21.7	21	37.7
Parental Expectation	67	54	48	36	24
Mean	13.4	10.8	9.6	7.2	4.8
Percentage	29.1	23.5	20.9	15.7	10.4
Doubts About Actions	42	55	80	41	58
Mean	7	9.2	13.3	6.9	9.7
Percentage	15.2	19.9	29	14.8	21

Note. 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree

support throughout the process.

After surveying these students at the beginning of the school year, repeating the survey at the end of the year or beginning of next year could reveal a pattern of changing influential factors from parent to peer to self. Further study could be conducted on individuals and establish a relationship between perfectionist and nonperfectionist students.

A question to consider: Are the same few students perfectionists in all subareas, or do different students score higher in different areas? Information from this study could be used to help establish baseline data of students' perception of perfectionist influences, although the size of the group and rural location should be taken into account. Following these students over a period of years to track shifts in influence as peers begin to play a more influential role in their lives would be interesting and could be helpful in identifying patterns through the developmental process. GCT

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