



# A “Perfect” Case Study:

## Perfectionism in Academically Talented Fourth Graders

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*“Perfectionism must be seen as a potent force capable of bringing either intense frustration and paralysis or intense satisfaction and creative contribution, depending on how it is channeled.” (Schuler, 2002, p. 71)*

The topic of perfectionism is bound to surface when discussing the social and emotional development of gifted children and adolescents (Davis & Rimm, 1994; Greenspon, 1998; Kerr, 1991; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Silverman, 1990, 1993a; Schuler, 2002). Whereas Greenspon (2000) asserts that “perfectionism is a wound; it is never healthy” (p. 208), others in the field assert that children with perfectionistic qualities are faced with a double-edged sword that can manifest itself either in a healthy or unhealthy manner. For instance, Silverman (1999) asserts that healthy expressions of perfectionism can lead to achievement, self-confirmation, high self-esteem, responsibility, and “unparalleled greatness” (p. 216). On the other hand, perfectionistic qualities that are exhibited in an unhealthy way may result in procrastination, avoidance, anxiety, a self-defeated attitude, and underachievement (Hamachek, 1978; Reis, 2002; Schuler, 1997, 2002; Silverman, 1993a, 1999).

As a teacher in a self-contained gifted and talented fourth-grade classroom for several years, I observed many students who exhibited perfectionism in a myriad of unhealthy ways, and several findings emerged from my observations of these children. First, across differing rates of development, both mental and physical manifestations of perfectionism abounded. Regardless of group size (e.g., individual, small group, or whole class) or type of activity (e.g., art, music try-outs, recess, math, language arts, or social studies), at least one child exhibited unhealthy perfectionistic behaviors. My observations of the students across various contexts enabled me to document a range of manifestations of perfectionism, suggesting ways in which perfectionism can affect gifted children in schools. I found that these manifestations could be categorized, and the following case studies represent the different types of unhealthy manifestations of perfectionism that emerged in my observations.

## The Academic Achiever— “Must Achieve 110%”

Elena<sup>1</sup> was a student academically accelerated in mathematics. When she was first asked to take a diagnostic test, she would become frustrated and would say, “I can’t leave it blank!” She believed she should know how to solve every problem, whether or not she had ever been exposed to the concepts tested. Despite the diagnostic nature of the test, she would struggle with the idea of skipping a problem.

Ivan worked diligently on his math practice. He was not satisfied with anything less than 100% correct. If he missed a single problem, he did not believe he was ready for a test of the material. He would continue to do extra practice, even if he only missed one problem due to a “careless” mistake.

While playing a review game in social studies, Sherman became frustrated. For each question asked, he expected himself to remember every detail about the event, person, or place and would become very frustrated if he could not, even resorting to pounding on his head trying to remember. This attitude also affected Sherman’s participation in math games. He expected to solve every puzzle and to solve it immediately, or he would become discouraged and upset with himself.

Cho came to the United States when she was in kindergarten. She was identified for the self-contained gifted and talented

class and worked very hard to earn top grades. Math and science came easily to her. Although she was reading above grade level in English, her second language, her language arts average was a low A. She was distraught about “not being good” at reading and did extra work each weekend to try to improve. Her parents also were worried about her reading ability and would request extra assignments for Cho.

The Academic Achievers, students exhibiting negative perfectionism in academic pursuits, had unrealistically high expectations for their own performance and were not satisfied with a score of 100, literally pushing for extra credit on everything they did because a score of 100 was not enough for them. If they did not earn the top grade or could not remember the answer word-for-word on every assessment (formal or informal) in every subject, they became upset with themselves. Due to the extremely high standards they imposed on themselves, they put forth more effort than was required to master the material and achieve at the top level. Typically, these students were high achievers and earned very high grades, but they would become disappointed with themselves when they earned anything less and were never satisfied with the achievements and grades they had earned; they wanted to earn all of the extra credit points and obtain the highest possible score for each assessment. Even though they had high grades in all academic subjects, they often completed extra credit projects and assignments and did so with as much energy and effort as they put into their required work. These students focused heavily on their mistakes, and even when they met the expectations of the task at hand, they rarely were satisfied with their performance. Their focus was on the

end product or grade, and they judged themselves on that alone. In some cases, like that of Cho, the students had family pressures, as well as their own pressure for perfection. As Davis and Rimm (1994) noted, gifted students may have pressures that arise from their family, their peers, or themselves for “perfect” work.

As an educator, it is important to become aware of these students. Although it is easy to praise students for high grades, it is much more important to praise them for their efforts. Educators need to put more emphasis on effort and strategies and much less on grades and on “personal traits (like being smart)” (Dweck, 1999, p. 3). Furthermore, these students need guidance in taking pride in the process and in using mistakes as learning experiences. For example, Elena learned to take diagnostic tests with less anxiety because she understood the need to identify areas of strength and weaknesses and learn the material she does not know. I had Ivan correct his mistakes and write “WIMI’s” (“why I missed it”), leading to a focus on learning from the mistakes instead of on looking at the grade. Despite his competitive nature and tendency to strive for perfection, Sherman learned to identify his mistakes and weaknesses in the math game, and when he was eliminated from the classroom tournament, he focused on learning from the mistakes he made instead of berating himself for them. Despite the completion of the tournament, he took a box of cards home to practice and to improve his own performance for next year. Cho continued to work on her language arts skills, but she learned to focus on improvement rather than the grade. She needed encouragement to recognize and celebrate her strengths rather than focusing solely on her “weakness” and comparing it to the abilities of her peers.

### **The Risk Evader— “All or Nothing”**

Despite the art teacher’s compliments of Kathleen’s artistic ability and winning a schoolwide artistic contest, she did not think she could draw. In art class, if the task was to draw, Kathleen did not want to participate and only did so reluctantly.

Brandon wanted a major role in the school musical, and he had the singing ability to earn that role. Unfortunately, shortly before the try-outs, Brandon became ill, leaving him with little voice or energy on audition day. He chose not to try out that day and did not request to audition on a different day.

Risk Evaders are plagued by the impact of asynchronous development or physical limitations on their pursuits, and they will avoid allowing their weaknesses to be exposed. When they encounter a task that requires both their mind and their body, gifted children often are faced with asynchrony—their mind has developed faster than their body—which affects perfectionistic behaviors (Morelock, 1992; Silverman, 1993a, 1993b; Tannenbaum, 1992). Although their mind may see ideals and hold high standards, they cannot always meet those expectations in their performance. Fearing this failure to achieve their standards and ideals, they may decide not to even attempt the task, just as Kathleen did in art. In her mind, she could see the intricate details that a botanist sees in a flower and even noticed the pollen on the stamen, but she feared that her hands, which had the dexterity and precision of a 9-year-old, could not produce the image from her mind.

As an educator, developing a safe classroom environment that encourages risk-taking is essential. Children who exhibit perfectionism must feel supported within their classroom, so the entire class must make a commitment to this safe environment.

Brandon also faced a situation in which he was afraid his body would not be able to perform to his mind’s ideal. Students like Brandon are afraid of failure and cannot stand the idea that they may not meet their own expectations. They do not take delight in the process or in their attempts, and they do not even want to try because they fear they will not succeed at a level that meets their personal standards. This is similar to Adderholdt-Elliott’s (1987) paralyzed perfectionist, who rationalizes that if he never performs, then he doesn’t have to risk being rejected or criticized.

As an educator, developing a safe classroom environment that encourages risk-taking is essential. Children who exhibit perfectionism must feel supported within their classroom, so the entire class must make a commitment to this safe environment. Without it, students may fear not only their own rejection of their work, but also ridicule from their peers. The

focus should continue to be placed on the process and revisions. Students should be encouraged to try new and different experiences that may seem challenging. Challenges should be regarded as adventurous and exciting instead of daunting. Students should be applauded for efforts to tackle something new rather than always being judged for their final products.

### **The Aggravated Accuracy Assessor—“Exactness and Fixation on ‘Redos”**

Carlos worked meticulously during several art classes on his drawing of a Confederate soldier for an art gallery focusing on Virginia. Whenever he was nearly done, he decided to redo the drawing because it was not precise enough. He constantly took the drawing up to the art teacher and to his classroom teacher for reassurance.

When taking notes in class, most students appreciate the opportunity to use shorthand and not have to have everything in final copy form. However, Jodie was not this way. When the class period was over, she still would be copying notes. She painstakingly wrote each letter of each word, taking extra time and effort in making her notes as neat as possible, even rewriting her notes if given the opportunity.

Curtis had been working on a drawing for the art gallery for several weeks. His drawing was almost complete when he decided to throw it away. When questioned about his decision, he replied, “But I colored his

hair black!” Because he had envisioned the drawing differently but only had a black marker instead of a brown one available to him at the time, Curtis literally threw away his hard work.

Asynchronous development of the gifted child in areas such as writing or artistic expression can result in two different types of unhealthy perfectionists. Students may become Risk Evaders, like Kathleen, and choose an all-or-nothing approach, or they may become Aggravated Accuracy Assessors, like Carlos and Jodie, and attempt the task but become frustrated with their inability to meet their mind’s ideal. Likewise, physical limitations, such as the accessibility (or lack thereof) of materials, can result in a final product that does not meet perfectionists’ standards, and they can become very frustrated with their efforts and products. They may choose to redo the same work over and over, may look frantically for ways to “fix” their work or find the necessary materials, or may become disappointed in their own work and give up trying.

The key to helping students like these is to recognize their standards as valuable and acceptable as long-term goals and have faith in their vision and their ability to meet their expectations through effort and revision. These students need help modifying their immediate goals or standards and making their unrealistic ones more realistic by setting them as long-term goals. All students could benefit from reading about and discussing people who revised their works multiple times. For example, Thomas Edison did not invent a successful light bulb until after almost 2 years of failed attempts and more than 6,000 different carbonized plant fibers (Grace Products Corporation, 1998), and two young Detroit scientists did not create their

famous kitchen-cleaning formula until their 409th attempt (hence the name Formula 409). Because many students struggle in art, examples of famous artists’ works, revisions, their biographies, and their autobiographies that illustrate the amount of time devoted to their masterpieces would be beneficial to share.

Students also should have opportunities to critique one another’s work, pointing out aspects that they admire and offering constructive suggestions for improvement. This will help students learn to examine their artwork and writing more critically and identify not only weaknesses, but also strengths.

For students like Jodie whose handwriting slows down their ability to participate in class discussions and activities, some prioritizing may be necessary. Younger students may not recognize when “perfect” handwriting is unnecessary or the difference between “perfect” and “legible,” and they may need help distinguishing between those times. These students benefit from being forced to create “sloppy copies” that have a stipulation of *no* eraser marks allowed—they have to write as they think and cross or scribble out, add above and below lines, and draw arrows instead of erasing. This needs to be followed by opportunities to use their “perfect” handwriting and publish the work.

### The Controlling Image Manager—“I Could Have Won if I Wanted to”

Brandon not only decided not to audition for the school musical (even though he “could have” gotten the part if he had tried out), but he also “wanted to” be “It.” While playing tag on the playground, Brandon ran and yelled,

“You can’t catch me!” However, as soon as the person who was It got near him, he jumped out of bounds and declared, “I wanted to be It!”

Misty competed in a classroom tournament with great intensity and skill, and she easily won against her classmates. After competing against older students and winning the schoolwide tournament, she contemplated intentionally getting penalties to disqualify herself from the district tournament.

Controlling Image Managers like Brandon and Misty not only want to be perfect, but they also want others to regard them as perfect. If they are afraid they cannot reach their expectations or others’ expectations, instead of choosing to not participate, they may intentionally choose to eliminate themselves. This still gives them the opportunity to think—and to say—that they *could have* won and been perfect.

Other children in the class may get frustrated with these students because they either win or give up. The other children never have a chance to fairly win against these students in competitive situations. Role-playing may help these children to better understand others’ feelings in competitive situations. They also benefit from reading and discussing other people’s losses in competitive situations or having guest speakers talk about their personal defeats, particularly in the sports arena and other competitive situations.

Controlling Image Managers fail to understand the pleasure of competition and of trying to do one’s own personal best because they focus too much on winning and being the best. They should be helped to set personal goals before a competitive event so

they can strive for a standard based on their personal performance and not that of others. Using these strategies has a positive impact on students and encourages them to compete. For example, setting personal goals helped Misty to decide to take the tournament game home and practice instead of committing to her plan to disqualify herself.

### **The Procrastinating Perfectionist—“If It Stays in My Mind, Then I Can’t Fail”**

The class was given the task of creating a social studies review board game over a period of several weeks. Jade excitedly shared her intricate vision. However, just days before the project was due, Jade still had not started working and did not have a plan to create it.

When the class found out they would be competing in a national vocabulary contest, Micah was very excited and announced that he would earn a perfect score. The day before the contest, Micah admitted that he had not begun studying. When asked why not, he just shrugged his shoulders. That night, he stayed up late studying. After he finished the contest the next day, he announced, “I didn’t have enough time to study, so I couldn’t get them all right.”

When assigned an extensive project, some gifted children, like Jade, will plan elaborate, creative projects. They become excited about the project and about sharing their ideas but are not as excited to get started on the project itself for fear of it not turning

out the way they imagine it or because they are intimidated by the formidable tasks ahead. Procrastinating Perfectionists have a perfect vision in their mind, but the fear of their inability to achieve that vision causes them to procrastinate, paralyzing them from taking action. They may think, “If I never complete that project, I don’t have to risk getting a bad grade” (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1987, p. 27) or even, “If I never complete that project, I don’t have to be disappointed that the final project didn’t turn out like I wanted it to.”

Some Procrastinating Perfectionists, like Micah, are paralyzed by their fear of failure and not meeting their mind’s ideal, and they also use their procrastination as a way to control their image. Like Jade, Micah had a vision of perfection in his mind. However, his fear that he could not achieve it lead him to procrastinate. His procrastination also allowed him to preserve his ego and gave him an excuse for not being perfect. Addressing the fear of failure and the tendency to procrastinate will help alleviate the ego-saving behavior that some students use along with procrastination.

Procrastinating Perfectionists need help prioritizing and breaking down a large task into smaller subtasks. In working with a Procrastinating Perfectionist who has great vision but not the steps to commence work on the project, educators need to recognize the need for assistance. Together, the student and teacher can create a plan to break the larger task into smaller segments and identify goals. The student still can have high standards and expectations for the final product, but now he or she has a process to focus on and standards to meet along the way. This helps the student’s focus shift from the product to the process and from the outcome to the effort. In designing a schedule, it is impor-

tant to build in buffers so that when something does not go as planned, the student does not have to feel that he or she already has failed and that there is no need to continue.

Furthermore, all children need help prioritizing at some point. They may need to examine their schedule and see when other tests and projects are due and determine what is most important to them. If they have an elaborate project or challenging goal in mind, they may not be able to put as much effort and focus on their math or social studies test as they normally do—something has to give. Teachers of gifted and talented students need to help them realize that they cannot be perfect at everything and that when they have too much to accomplish they must sacrifice a little of one thing to do well at something else. When discussing these issues with students, it is important to examine the entire picture and what currently requires their attention.

### **Take Action in Your Classroom**

Although it manifests itself in different ways, perfectionism is a strong trait in many gifted children. In a classroom that has gifted children, instances of perfectionism are exhibited every day and in every context. Educators must help students use perfectionism in a positive manner and transform it for future work. Some specific strategies to help each type of perfectionist accomplish this are illustrated in Table 1.

### **You Can Make a Difference**

Using these strategies with gifted students like Judy can help them to pursue work in a healthy manner,

resulting in creative contribution and intense satisfaction. Judy, an academically talented fourth grader, grew up in a large family with older and younger siblings who also had

been identified for gifted services. She demonstrated many of the types of unhealthy manifestations of perfectionism. Above all else, she was an Academic Achiever. Prior to fourth

grade, she had not been challenged sufficiently in the classroom and had channeled her perfectionism in a way that led to being a Risk Evader and, at times, a Procrastinating Perfectionist.

**Table 1**  
**Encouraging Healthy Perfectionism in the Classroom**

Type of Perfectionist	Defining Characteristics	Action to Take in the Classroom
Academic Achievers	Hold unrealistically high expectations for their performance in academic pursuits and focus on the final grade and on mistakes made	<p>Praise them for their efforts, emphasizing students' hard work rather than their grades</p> <p>Guide students in taking pride in the process and their efforts and using mistakes as learning experiences</p>
Risk Evaders	Fear failure to achieve their standards and ideals due to asynchronous development or physical limitations, so choose not to attempt the task	<p>Develop a safe environment that encourages risk-taking</p> <p>Emphasize process and revisions rather than end products</p> <p>Encourage students to try experiences that are new, different, and challenging</p> <p>Encourage students to look at challenges as adventurous and exciting rather than daunting</p> <p>Applaud students for their efforts to tackle something new</p>
Aggravated Accuracy Assessors	<p>Attempt the task but become frustrated with their inability to meet their mind's ideal due to asynchronous development or physical limitations</p> <p>May choose to redo the same work over and over to try to make it more like their mind's ideal, may look frantically for ways to fix their work or find the necessary materials, or may become disappointed and give up trying</p>	<p>Recognize their standards as valuable and acceptable</p> <p>Have faith in their vision and ability to meet their expectations through effort and revision</p> <p>Read and discuss stories of people who revised their works multiple times</p> <p>Give students opportunities to critique one another's work</p> <p>Have students create "sloppy copies" and also give them opportunities to revise and produce a finished product</p>
Controlling Image Managers	<p>Want others to regard them as perfect</p> <p>If they fear they are unable to meet expectations in competitive situations, choose to eliminate themselves intentionally and say they could have been perfect</p>	<p>Role-play so children understand others' feelings</p> <p>Read and discuss losses in competitive situations</p> <p>Have students set personal goals based on their own performance before a competition</p>
Procrastinating Perfectionists	Plan an extensive project but fail to start it for fear of their inability to achieve their perfect vision	<p>Help students break larger tasks into smaller segments and goals</p> <p>Have students develop a schedule with buffer time</p> <p>Help students prioritize and recognize that they cannot be perfect at everything at every moment</p>

During her time in my classroom, I helped her gradually shift her focus from grades to effort and provided her with increasingly challenging academic opportunities, which helped her begin to take more risks in and out of the classroom. Judy had an interest in writing, and focusing on the writing process and revisions helped her learn from her mistakes, as did diagnostic testing and analyzing the problems she had missed in mathematics. She began swimming competitively and would set personal time goals rather than goals of placing first.

During the second semester, Judy accepted a personal challenge and decided to complete an independent study project. This project involved her reading, taking notes, organizing, prioritizing, and presenting. We frequently met to plan the stages of the project, set intermediary goals, analyze her progress, and adjust the timeline as necessary. After completing her research and creating a final product, Judy presented to multiple groups, giving her the opportunity to learn from her experiences and revise her presentation. Finally, Judy reflected in writing about what she learned from the experience, both academically and personally, and what she will do differently the next time she attempts a similar project.

Judy moved to middle school and has continued to channel her perfectionism in a healthy way. She appears to be satisfied in her pursuits (academically, athletically, and artistically) and is making creative contributions in and out of her classrooms. Despite not having exceptional athletic talent, Judy continues to swim and now plays softball. She frequently e-mails me to tell how she increased in the number of hits she had in a game or had a new personal best time in a swim meet, demonstrating her focus on personal performance goals. Judy

continues to love to write. She has learned to focus her writing on her ideas and then to revise for grammar and spelling so that she can concentrate on one aspect of the process at a time. Although she still occasionally finds herself procrastinating on studying challenging material for a test or agonizing over an A- rather than an A, Judy has learned to focus on effort, enjoy the process of learning, and accept new challenges.

The story of Judy is one of many stories of gifted students who exhibit unhealthy perfectionistic behaviors in the classroom. By recognizing these behaviors and using strategies like those listed in Table 1, teachers and parents can make a difference and help these students use perfectionism in a positive manner now and in the future. **GCT**

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Student names have been changed.

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