Exploring Teachers’ Perceptions of the Effects of Perfectionism on Mental Health and Academic Performance of Ontario Secondary School Students

By

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Abstract

Perfectionism is one of the issues that may influence students’ mental health and academic performance. Although many psychologists conceptualize perfectionism as neurotic, some argue that perfectionism can also be normal. Multidimensional frameworks of perfectionism view it from intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives. This research aims to explore teachers’ perspectives of the impacts of perfectionism on mental well-being and academic performance of Ontario secondary school students. Three Ontario secondary school teachers participated in this study. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine participants’ perceptions about perfectionism among adolescent students. Seven major themes emerged from the data analysis including Teachers’ Definitions, Behaviours Associated with Perfectionism, Perfectionism and Academic Achievement, “Healthy” Versus “Unhealthy” Perfectionism, Factors Influencing the Development of Perfectionism, Perfectionism and Gender, and Classroom Strategies for Perfectionism Reduction. These findings indicated that teachers were cognizant of how perfectionism may negatively affect students’ mental well-being by causing anxiety, self-criticism and persistent feelings of dissatisfaction. Participants also noted how fear of failure caused by perfectionism could compromise students’ learning by inhibiting their risk-taking and critical thinking skills.

Key Words: Perfectionism, mental health, anxiety, education
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Chapter 1: Introduction

My bias is that perfection is not only an undesirable goal but a debilitating one as well. In my judgment, perfection per se does not exist in reality, but it is the striving for that nonexistent perfection that keeps people in turmoil and is associated with a significant number of psychological problems (Pacht, 1984, p. 386).

Introduction to the Research Study

Perfectionism is a personality trait that may be seen as a potential advantage for individuals and a trait that people may even be proud of. However, the concept and the definition of perfectionism is more complex than many realize.

In psychology, perfectionism is commonly conceived as a personality trait with the tendency to set excessively high standards accompanied by overly critical evaluations of one’s actions (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). However, consensus on the definition of perfectionism is still argued as it refers to different concepts and includes various meanings (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

Some researchers argue that perfectionism might be a positive motivation for achievement unless the individual is unable to adjust standards based on the situation (Hamachek, 1978; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). The supporters of this notion call for the need to differentiate "healthy" striving from an "unhealthy" extreme, which is linked to physiological and psychological difficulties. In contrast to the positive aspects of perfectionism, some researches link perfectionism to a number of difficulties including low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and other personality disorders or even suicide in extreme cases (Delegard, 2004; Flett, Greene, & Hewitt, 2004; Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Frost & DiBartolo, 2002; Rice & Pence, 2006).

There might be many factors contributing to the development of perfectionism. However, most of the researchers agree on the strong impact of environmental factors such as culture, family and especially parents during childhood. (Hamachek, 1978; McCranie & Bass, 1984; Sorotzkin, 1998). The other major external factors are teachers, peers and
Although typology of perfectionism and its theoretical understanding is well developed, there is still a paucity of empirical research on translating this theoretical understanding of perfectionism into practical interventions for perfectionist individuals who struggle with negative outcomes of perfectionism (Mofield, 2008). Also, the few studies that have examined perfectionism in an educational context have mainly focused on the relationships between perfectionism and giftedness (e.g., Neumeister 2004a, Ng, 2010; Nugent, 2000; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Schuler, 2000).

Teachers, on the other hand, have day-to-day contact with students and are among the first people to notice students’ academic and social-emotional needs. This reflects the important role of teachers in students’ academic, social and emotional growth. However, educators might not necessarily receive professional training in psychology and thus their clinical knowledge to fully understand the issue of perfectionism and the challenges that perfectionist students might face, may be limited.

This research study attempts to provide teachers with a deeper understanding of the nature of perfectionism and its association with potential difficulties for secondary school students’ academic achievement that can subsequently hinder their learning process and finally lead to more serious problems such as depression and anxiety. By increasing educators’ awareness of perfectionism, this study aims to help teachers identify students who might struggle with negative outcomes of perfectionism and use effective strategies to help these students reduce their anxiety levels associated with perfectionism.

**Researcher’s Background**

As an elementary student in Iran, I was always expected to be excellent. From the very first day of school, my parents, my teachers, and my society encouraged me to be perfect all the time. I still remember my third grade teacher saying, “Always try
to be better than yourself’. That sentence was too difficult for me to understand and because my teacher said it, I thought I would have to be more than what I actually am. I was under a lot of pressure to meet expectations and the fear of failing to do so became a source of concern. I found myself studying hard not for the sake of learning, but to get my parents’ and my teachers’ appreciation. I began to build a negative attitude toward imperfection. After a while, I felt obliged to set excessive goals for myself and the ‘all-or-nothing’ rule dominated my mind.

As a high school student, I tried to set my standards according to others’ unrealistic expectations from me. I became overly self-critical and anxious when I could not achieve these high standards. Soon, all of the joys of learning were replaced by the fear of bad judgment by others. Although I was among high performing students, I was more vulnerable to anxiety and depression compared to students who did not have negative attitudes towards imperfection. I could not sleep well the night before exams. I tended to postpone important tasks such as my assignments and I was usually the last one to submit them because I feared there would be flaws. I never felt good enough.

As a person who suffered from the negative outcomes of perfectionism and as a teacher, I try to be aware of this issue in my class and be mindful of the potential challenges which perfectionist students might face. I have tried different strategies to alleviate the stress caused by perfectionism. During my teaching experience, I have encountered many talented and high-achieving students who struggled with negative impacts of perfectionism such as adjustment difficulties, anxiety, low self-esteem and sometimes isolation and depression. However, I realized that it is not always easy to identify such students because of their tendency to hide their anxiety. Not all of them demonstrate observable behavioural signs such as performance difficulties or severe anxiety. I realized that the most noticeable characteristic of perfectionistic students is that they do not seem happy even after succeeding, because they
are never able to satisfy their need of being perfect.

**Purpose of the Study**

Other than those people who have suffered greatly because of their perfectionism or the perfectionism of a loved one, the average person has very little understanding or awareness of how destructive perfectionism can be (Flett and Hewitt, 2014). Although perfectionism is usually viewed as a factor related to anxiety, depression, procrastination and other mental problems, it is not always discussed as a serious detrimental issue per se. In some cases, it is even fostered and rewarded as a positive characteristic in student populations (Hayward, Arthur, 1998). However, recent studies have tried to focus on perfectionism itself as a mental health issue. Flett and Hewitt (2014), have identified perfectionism’s potential destructiveness as an extremely alarming risk factor in suicide.

As a teacher, I believe mental health is a very important aspect of a safe and comfortable learning environment. Students will not be likely to reach their full potential to learn and enjoy their learning if they do not receive enough mental support. They might not be able to demonstrate their abilities if they are scared of being misjudged or underestimated. They may lose self-esteem and motivation if they are expected to be perfect and flawless all the time. Thus, this study aims to increase the awareness about mental issues associated with perfectionism through exploring teachers’ perceptions of perfectionist students. As earlier mentioned, most of the studies on perfectionism have examined this personality trait in a theoretical context and the empirical research on translating these theories into practical interventions for perfectionist individuals is sparse. Moreover, the studies that have explored perfectionism in an educational context and in a school setting have mainly focused on the occurrence of perfectionism in gifted populations (e.g., Neumeister 2004a, Ng, 2010; Nugent, 2000; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Schuler, 2000). While many studies consider perfectionism a common characteristic of gifted students (e.g., Adderholdt-Elliott, 1991; Silverman, 1997), empirical investigations support the notion that perfectionism is not more prevalent among
gifted students when compared to non-gifted students (Parker & Mills, 1996). However, this study aims to examine perfectionism among general student populations in Ontario secondary schools.

Perfectionist students need support to develop skills that help them cope with negative outcomes of perfectionism such as anxiety. To provide this support, teachers need to become aware of the nature of perfectionism and its potential impacts on students’ mental health and academic performance. I believe it is a role of educators to teach students to love and appreciate themselves because “the only thing perfectionist students are not good at, is self-compassion” (Neff, 2003b).

**Research Questions**

The major question that is addressed in this research is: What are teachers’ perceptions about perfectionist learners and how do they think this personality trait could affect students’ mental health and academic performance?

The following sub-questions were also considered:

1. According to teachers, what are some possible sources of perfectionism?
2. According to teachers, what are some potential impacts of cultural background, socioeconomic status and gender on the occurrence of perfectionism in students?
3. What strategies can be applied to modify students’ attitudes toward perfectionism in order to alleviate the negative outcomes of it?

**Overview**

This paper contains five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Research Methodology, Findings and Discussion. The introduction briefly defines perfectionism and its association with mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. It also outlines the background of the researcher as well as the research question and purpose of the study. Chapter 2, the literature review, provides a detailed conceptualization of perfectionism and its
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origins, in addition to introducing different aspects and dimension of perfectionism. It also discusses the association of perfectionism with problems such as loss of self-esteem, contingent self-worth and consistent lack of satisfaction which can lead to anxiety and depression in long term. Some strategies that have been reported to be effective in helping perfectionist individuals cope with negative outcome of perfectionisms are also presented in chapter two. Chapter 3, the research methodology, describes data collection and organization, and also introduces participants. Ethical consideration and limitation of the study is also included in methodology chapter. Chapter 4 compiles the main results of the interviews with the participants, discusses the significance of the findings and compares them with the literature review. Lastly, chapter 5, provides an overview of the key findings and their significance, recommends some effective strategies that might help students cope with negative impacts of perfectionism and reduce their anxiety and includes implications for educators and school counselors. Limitations are restated in this chapter and suggests are made for future studies.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

For the purpose of this study, the literature review will address definitions, different dimensions, theories and potential causes of perfectionism along with some of the impacts of this personality trait on secondary school students’ mental health and academic performance. It will also provide an overview of strategies that might be effective in helping perfectionist students cope with the negative outcome of their perfectionism.

Definition of Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a complex and multifaceted construct which includes various meanings and refers to different concepts depending on the context in which it is being conceptualized. Thus there is no consensus on the definition of perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). However, in psychology perfectionism is mainly defined as a personality disposition represented by setting excessively high standards for performance and striving for flawlessness accompanied by tendencies for unduly critical evaluation of one’s actions (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Dimensions of Perfectionism

Although earlier approaches of perfectionism viewed it as a unidimensional construct centering on self-related standards (Hayward & Arthur, 1998), studies and theory on perfectionism over the past two decades have focused on a multidimensional perspective of perfectionism with intrapersonal and interpersonal components (Hewitt, Caelian, Chen, & Flett, 2014)

Frost et al. 1990 maintained that a unidimensional definition of perfectionism, as the tendency to impose overly high standards, could not differentiate “adaptive” or normal perfectionists from “maladaptive” or neurotic perfectionists. They identified six correlated dimensions of perfectionism: setting excessively high personal standards, concern over mistakes, constant doubtfulness about quality of actions, over-valuing parents’ expectations,
concern over parents’ criticism, and an urge for organization, neatness, and order. In their study (Frost et al., 1990) all six dimensions, except for the organization dimension, correlated positively with fear of failure.

Hewitt and Flett (1991) described perfectionism as a multidimensional construct that has both interpersonal and intrapersonal facets. According to the Hewitt Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HMPS), the measure of perfectionism, developed by Hewitt and Flett (1991), there are three different perfectionism dimensions: self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP), and other-oriented perfectionism (OOP).

According to Hewitt and Flett (1991) self-oriented perfectionists enforce excessively high standards for themselves, assess their own performance against these standards, and are highly self-critical if they fail to meet these expectations. In comparison, socially prescribed perfectionists believe that significant others, such as parents, peers, teachers and society as a whole expect them to be perfect, and that others will be highly critical of them if they fail to meet these expectations. Socially prescribed perfectionists are very vulnerable to feeling helpless when they receive negative feedback from others (Hewitt and Flett, 2002). Having a perfect physical appearance is an example of the expectations that are imposed by society on people. Both self-oriented and socially prescribed dimensions of perfectionism have an element of criticism directed at oneself. Although, self-oriented perfectionism is internally motivated, socially prescribed perfectionism is predominantly externally motivated (Stoeber, Feast, & Hayward, 2009).

In contrast, other-oriented perfectionists however, believe that it is important for others to strive for perfection and to be perfect at all time. Other-oriented perfectionists impose high standards upon others, judge others’ performance against those standards and are highly critical of others who fail to meet these expectations (Hewitt and Flett, 1991). While self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionists are highly self-critical, other-oriented
perfectionists are critical of others (Hewitt and Flett 1991). Hewitt and Flett (1991) regarded self-oriented perfectionism as the intrapersonal component, and other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism as the interpersonal components of perfectionism construct.

**Types of Perfectionism**

Although there are still debates on whether or not perfectionism always leads to difficulties and personality problems in individuals (Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003), detrimental consequences of it have been the focus of many studies since the careful examination of perfectionism (Delegard, 2004; Flett, Greene, & Hewitt, 2004; Frost & DiBartolo, 2002; Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Rice & Pence, 2006).

However, some researches claim that perfectionism may contain both adaptive (positive) and maladaptive (negative) characteristics (Enns & Cox, 2002; Hamachek 1978, Slade & Owens, 1998; Slaney, Rice, & Ashby, 2001). In fact, several theorists centered their studies on the difference between positive and negative perfectionism (Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003; Hamachek 1978) and many researchers have distinguished two types of perfectionism: positive (adaptive or normal) and negative (maladaptive or neurotic) perfectionism (Blankstein & Dunkley, 2002; Hamachek, 1978; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Slade & Owens, 1998; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Two of the theorists who had important contributions to presenting a dual process model of perfectionism were Slade and Owens’s (1998) who stated that “positive perfectionism is associated with approach motivation (approach success) and negative perfectionism with avoidance motivation (avoid failure).” Positive perfectionism is described as a normal or healthy characteristic that has positive influence on the individual (Slade & Owens, 1998). Based on Frost’s multidimensional perfectionism scale (FMPS) normal perfectionists are individuals who demonstrate high levels of perfectionistic strivings, while not being overly engaged with worries such as concerns over mistakes, constant uncertainty.
about actions, unusual worries of discrepancy between performance and high expectations, self-criticism, and the fear of failure to meet one's own standards and to the high expectations of others.

In contrast, negative perfectionism is defined as a pathological or unhealthy personality trait that leads to severe negative effects on the individual (Slade & Owens, 1998). Neurotic perfectionists show high levels of perfectionistic strivings but are also excessively concerned and are overly self-critical (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Thus, perfectionistic concerns may be the determining factor for differentiating negative forms of perfectionism from a healthy pursuit of excellence (Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002). In fact, perfectionistic strivings per se are not only normal, but might be even positive, if only perfectionists could focus on doing their best rather than worrying about mistakes. If they could enjoy striving for excellence rather than being afraid of failure, and could appreciate what they achieve rather than distressing because of the difference between what has been achieved and what might have been achieved if everything had gone flawlessly (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Studies on perfectionism show that self-oriented, other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism (as described above) are differently associated with indices of personality disorders and other psychological maladjustments (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Researches who have used the Hewitt multidimensional perfectionism scale (HMPS) in their studies, argue that self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism are more often associated with depressive symptoms (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Flett, Hewitt & Cheng, 2008). Although results with self-oriented perfectionism are not always equivocal (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Despite all studies that prove the existence of two different types of perfectionism (normal and neurotic perfectionism) there are theorists who reject the idea of normal
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perfectionism and suggest that the term perfectionist should only be used to describe individuals who adhere inflexibly to their standards and who keep placing an irrational importance on the achievement of unrealistic standards in not just one but in several aspects of their life (Flett and Hewitt, 2006; Greenspon, 2000; Pacht, 1984). Pacht (1984) viewed perfectionism as a kind of psychopathology and unlike Hamachek (1978) did not accept the label “normal perfectionism”. Pacht (1984) stated:

“Unlike Hamachek, however, I prefer not to use the label “normal perfectionism. Other labels appear more appropriate”. He wrote “The insidious nature of perfectionism leads me to use the label only when describing a kind of psychopathology” (Pacht, 1984, p. 387).

Similarly, Flett and Hewitt (2006) believe that once the individuals with so called healthy or positive perfectionism experience failure, they no longer show any positive outcomes of perfectionism and are indeed at risk of depression and general dissatisfaction that can never be described as positive.

Greenspon is another opponent of the notion of “healthy perfectionism”. He rejects the existence of healthy perfectionism and calls it an “oxymoron” (Greenspon, 2000). He believes the “harshly negative self-talk” which is experienced by perfectionists is a huge burden and to no extent would this be considered as a positive characteristic. He maintains that there is no factual or theoretical basis that supports the notion of healthy perfectionism and the belief in a dichotomy between healthy and dysfunctional perfectionism is the result of a misunderstanding of the nature of perfectionism and confusing the concept with “striving for excellence”. He states that this dichotomy, might have arisen from “uncritical acceptance of early work on the subject” (Greenspon, 2000).

Factors Influencing the Development of Perfectionism

In order to have a better understanding of the construct of perfectionism, an examination of the factors that contribute to its development is important. The origins of
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perfectionism are mainly categorized to internal factors (within the self) and external factors (outside the self, such as family and cultural environment). In fact, these two factors are the ground on which the Hewitt multidimensional perfectionism scale (HMPS) is based (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). While the causes of self and others oriented perfectionism are within the individuals, socially prescribed perfectionism is imposed by an external factor.

Although there might be many external factors involved in the formation of perfections, there has been an agreement that different childhood environments and experiences especially the parent–child relationship is mostly associated with development of different types of perfectionism (Hamachek, 1978). Hewitt and Flett (2002) identified three main categories of factors that influence the development of perfectionism: Parental factors, environmental pressures and child factors

**Parental factors.**

When parental factors are discussed as a predictive of perfectionism, four main elements should be considered: Parents’ goals and standards, specific parenting practices (i.e., their reactions and behaviours in specific situations), general parenting style (i.e., parenting attitudes, reactions and the way they communicate their emotions and behaviours) and parents’ personality (i.e., parents as role models) (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

Hamachek (1978) maintained that maladaptive perfectionism appears in children with parents who impose high expectations and are never satisfied with their child’s achievements. He believed, adaptive perfectionism, however, usually arises in children whose parents are more flexible in maintaining high standards. Remarkably, Hamachek (1978) suggested that the lack of parental expectations could also be problematic. According to him, children whose parents do not provide them with any outputs or guidelines could develop perfectionism as well since they start setting their own high standards to compensate for the
lack of feedback from their parents.

Sorotzkin (1998) argues that the parents of maladaptive perfectionists are more often non-approving and inconsiderate to feelings of their child. In contrast, the parents of adaptive perfectionists tend to be more positive, supportive and encouraging. In a study done on a sample of 261 college students, Enns and Cox (2002) demonstrated a connection between two different types of parenting styles (harsh and perfectionistic parenting) and different types of perfectionism. Their results showed that while perfectionistic parenting was linked to adaptive perfectionism, harsh parenting was associated with maladaptive perfectionism which could increase the risk of depression in long term (Enns & Cox, 2002).

Kamins and Dweck (1999) on the other hand, showed that feedback that is focused on the achievement rather than the process of achieving it, causes a sense of contingent self-worth in the child. Interestingly, their results revealed that even positive feedback on personal properties (e.g., high intelligence) could still promote the same conditional self-worth in children and that is because once the positive feedback is not present and is replaced by negative one the person will start to feel helpless. Similarly, Besharat and Shahidi (2011) examined the association of different parenting styles with children's perfectionism in a sample of Iranian families. Their findings showed that paternal authoritarian parenting style (high on demanding and low on responsiveness) could remarkably predict perfectionism in children. The important impact of fathers’ rather than mothers’ parenting styles on children's perfectionistic traits presented in their study is due to the fact that men in Iranian culture are more authoritarian than women. Their findings were consistent with the earlier literature on the links between parenting styles and perfectionism in children (Craddock, Church, & Sands, 2009; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Rice et al., 1996).

It is worthwhile to mention that parents can contribute to the development of their children’ perfectionism in multiple ways. In other words, imposing high expectations on
children is not the only way parents promote perfectionism in their kids. In fact, even if they do not impose high expectations on their children, they might still promote perfectionism if they are perfectionists themselves and serve as role models for their children. According to Flett and Hewitt (2002), children whose parents are perfectionists have a high tendency toward perfectionism, as “they tend to imitate and embrace the standards modeled by others.” They stated that perfectionism probably “runs in the family” and more specifically daughters’ perfectionism and the subsequent distress is directly associated with mothers’ perfectionism and distress (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

**Environmental pressures.**

Environmental factors (other than parental factors) are mainly composed of: culture, peers, teachers and occupation (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Different cultures have different perspectives of perfectionism, however, not many cross-cultural studies have been done in this regard. Flett and Hewitt (2002) believe that more personal pressure might be imposed on people in individualistic cultures that focus on individuals’ goals and achievements. For example, Bulimia is one of the results of putting extra pressure on women to have a perfect body.

Despite the importance of pressures forced by school and work environments, there are few empirical studies on the impacts of competitive school and work environments on promoting perfectionism. Flett and Hewitt (2002) suggested that interactions among peers could have a considerable effect on the formation and progress of perfectionism in students. In general, external factors (i.e., parents and society) play an important role in the development of perfectionism and in particular, on the formation of socially prescribed perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

**Child factors.**

Factors such as parents and society in general are not the only elements that influence
the development of perfectionism in individuals. Child factors (Internal factors) also play a role in occurrence of perfectionism in a person. In fact, the child factors, involve personal characteristics and temperaments such as the individual’s openness to external influence or child’s inherited potential to become a perfectionist.

According to Flett and Hewitt (2002) children very often internalize the demands into pressure on themselves and this might result in the development of self-oriented perfectionism. They believe, some children, on the other hand, might externalize the demands imposed on them in the form of pressure on others, which might contribute to the formation of other-oriented perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

**Behavioural Consequences of Perfectionism**

Several studies postulated the association of perfectionism with life stress, depression, anxiety, and other personality disorders or even suicide in extreme cases (Delegard, 2004; Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Flett, Greene, & Hewitt, 2004; Frost & DiBartolo, 2002; Rice & Pence, 2006). In fact, many negative side effects of perfectionism are initiated with the persistent sense of dissatisfaction in these individuals as a result of failing to achieve extreme goals. (e.g. Enns, Cox, Sareen, & Freeman, 2001; Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Hewitt, Caelian, Chen and Flett (2014) found a strong positive correlation between excessive perfectionism and suicide potential in a sample of adolescent psychiatric patients diagnosed with depression. In addition to intrapersonal problems, perfectionism can cause interpersonal and family issues, which is not the concern of this study.

Although the effects of perfectionism are more often examined in clinical context, (Burns, 1980; Delegard, 2004; Flett, Greene, & Hewitt, 2004; Frost & DiBartolo, 2002; Hamachek, 1978; Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Rice & Pence, 2006), few studies have directly examined the impacts of perfectionism on behaviour and feelings in real life situations such as work or school contexts. In other words, despite the evident connections between
perfectionism and achievement striving, only a small number of studies to date have tested how perfectionism operates in academic settings (e.g. Fletcher & Speirs Neumeister, 2012; Mofield, 2008; Ng, 2010). However, these studies have only examined perfectionism in gifted student populations.

Since depression and anxiety are among the most common problems of post-secondary students (Bertocci, Hirsch, Sommer, & Williams, 1992), many psychologists have worked on identifying factors that can lead to these problems. The results of some studies, have approved the negative impacts of perfectionism on students' academic performance and mental health (Hayward & Arthur, 1998). Earlier studies with college students reported a positive correlation between perfectionistic tendencies and a range of adjustment difficulties such as unproductive study, test anxiety (Burns, 1980), writing block (Baxter, 1987), procrastination (Flett, Blankstein, Hewitt & Koledin, 1992), and underachievement (Adderholt-Elliott, 1989). Some psychologists believe that perfectionists’ reluctance to do average work might make them psychologically and emotionally vulnerable in a way that they may start to procrastinate, become defensive to criticism, develop conditional self-worth, and might finally withdraw and dropout of school (Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984).

In a study done on 178 post-secondary students, Hayward and Arthur (1998) identified perfectionism as a crucial cause of depression and anxiety. Their results showed a link between both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism with symptoms of depression and anxiety. However, they indicated stronger links between perfectionism, depression, dissatisfaction and anxiety in socially prescribed cases of perfectionism compared to self-oriented ones.

An investigation by Enns, Cox, Sareen, and Freeman (2001) demonstrated that in comparison with arts students, the perfectionism of medical students reflected higher personal standards (higher adaptive perfectionism) but lower doubts about actions (lower
maladaptive perfectionism). Adaptive perfectionism (achievement striving) in medical
students was notably associated with higher academic expectations and lower academic
satisfaction rates and maladaptive perfectionism (excessive evaluative concerns) was
positively correlated with distress symptoms such as depression and hopelessness.

Study done by Bieling, Israeli, Smith, and Antony (2003) on a total of 198 university
students showed a positive correlation between perfectionism and tendency to set high
expectations for the exam but no association was found between overall perfectionism and
actual performance results (although adaptive perfectionism was linked to better performance
results). Therefore, it was concluded that perfectionistic students were more likely to
experience a discrepancy between their goals and their performance, and consequently
experience more negative effects such as depression, stress, and test taking anxiety
(regardless of meeting their goals or not.) Additionally, they realized that despite the link
between perfectionism and failing to meet one’s standards, perfectionistic individuals still
tend to set higher standards for the next exam whether they had met their initial goal or not.
Their powerlessness to lower unrealistic standards could lead to their vulnerability to low
self-esteem, dissatisfaction and self-criticism, which over time could cause symptoms such as
clinical depression and severe anxiety.

Another study done by Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze and Rice (2004) on a sample of
273 undergraduate students showed that although the grade point averages (GPA) did not
noticeably differ between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionist students, adaptive
perfectionists’ scores were associated with higher self-esteem and more satisfaction with
grade point average (GPA).

Bieling et al. (2004) conducted a study on 527 undergraduate students from university
of Toronto. Their findings indicated that intense self-criticism is the mediating factor between
perfectionism, depression, anxiety, and eating disorder symptoms in these students.
Stoeber and Rambow (2007) studied the impacts of perfectionism on a sample of 121 grade 9 students. They examined perfectionism in two specific aspects of it as “striving for perfection” and “negative attitudes toward imperfection”. Their findings demonstrated that striving for excellence resulted in increased success and motivation rate. In fact, striving for perfection was related to higher achievement, which was evident in their higher grades in curricular core subjects. Expectedly, striving for perfection showed a negative correlation with depressive symptoms only when the effect of negative reactions to imperfection was eliminated. However, negative reactions to imperfection were associated with fear of failure, low well-being accompanied by somatic complaints and depressive symptoms.

Ng (2010) conducted a study on exploring teachers’ perceptions of perfectionism and its relationships with giftedness. He interviewed six elementary school teachers and the results of his study showed that teachers had different ideologies about the potential relationship between giftedness and perfectionism. His findings also suggested that teachers’ understandings of the issue of giftedness and perfectionism could greatly influence their interactions with perfectionist students and their willing to provide support for gifted students who might struggle with negative consequences of perfectionism.

Effective Strategies

Because of the association of perfectionism with personality disorders, most of the studies have focused on strategies in a clinical context. However, since environmental factors such as parents and teachers play an important role in the development of perfectionism, increasing teachers’ and school staffs’ awareness about this phenomenon and familiarizing them with the potential negative impacts of perfectionism on students, might be instructive and helpful. There are still people who believe perfectionism is not only a disadvantage but also a positive characteristic, which can lead to higher motivation and achievement in individuals. It is important to warn people, especially educators and school
counselors about the negative effects of this personality trait on students’ academic performance and mental well-being. There might be teachers who promote perfectionism both by their words and their actions. An important step in helping students is to increase educators’ awareness about perfectionism and change their attitude towards perfectionism.

Mofield (2008) investigated the effects of an affective curriculum on perfectionism and coping among sixth, seventh, and eighth grade gifted students. The results of her study indicated that implementing an affective curriculum, created from a developmental primary intervention model, could have a significant effect on reducing perfectionist students’ concern over mistakes, doubt about action, Personal Standards, and Unhealthy Perfectionism in general.

One of the challenges in supporting perfectionist students is the difficulty to recognize them or link their problems to perfectionism. Information about cognitive styles of perfectionism might help the recognition of the students who struggle with negative impacts of perfectionism. Increased awareness, can also contribute to the development of more effective interventions and support for perfectionist students (Hayward and Arthur, 1998).

Next steps would include providing teachers with effective strategies to avoid the promotion and development of perfectionism at school. Obviously, teachers’ expectations and feedback are two main components of these strategies. I believe, the level of teachers’ expectations and adjusting these expectations according to each individual’s ability is one of the most important factors in this regard. I think it is important to draw a line between “absolute perfect” which does not exist and each individual’s “best attempt” according to their abilities. According to the work of Rogers (1951), parental approval when contingent on meeting parental expectations, could result in children’s more vulnerability to low self-esteem. Thus, it is important to avoid exposing students to situations that promote a sense of conditional self worth in them. This can be done by constructive feedbacks from teachers.
Feedbacks that focus on the achievement or students’ grades rather than process of attaining it are an example of feedback that can develop a sense of conditional self-worth. On the other hand, lack of enough feedback or response from teachers can also lead to perfectionism in students, since students might set their own unrealistic standards, which might not be consistent with their abilities and consequently failing these standards may lead to dissatisfaction and in long-term depression and other difficulties.

Finally, focusing on the process of learning rather than highlighting the outcomes, might help students develop a sense of satisfaction and facilitate the creation of positive and healthy learning environments where students feel safe and respected.

Summary

I would like to acknowledge the book “Perfectionism” by Flett and Hewitt (2002) as one of the richest and helpful sources that increased my understanding of perfectionism. Although the studies done by other theorists in the field of perfectionism contributed to a deeper comprehension of its construct, I base my conceptual/theoretical framework on the theories and conceptualizations provided by Flett and Hewitt (2002). This preference is shaped by three following reasons:

1) Exhaustiveness of their studies: I realized that one of the most exhaustive studies on perfectionism is evident in the works of these two psychologists, and their work has been cited by almost all the studies on perfectionism.

2) My own bias and subjectiveness: As previously discussed, Flett and Hewitt (2002) have mainly focused on negative aspects of perfectionism and they reject the notion of so-called “positive perfectionism”. The emphasis on negative aspects of perfectionism and considering it as a life threatening personality disposition was consistent in all their studies throughout several years. My personal experience with perfectionism and the continuous struggle I have faced due to this personality trait, have shaped my negative perspective on perfectionism. The
theorists who support the idea of positive perfectionism, believe that perfectionistic striving can be a positive motivation and lead to higher achievement if perfectionistic concerns are properly controlled (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). My question is how can a person be identified as a perfectionist if he/she does not get concerned, stressed or anxious after failing his/her high standards? According to many studies perfectionism is highly tied with a sense of dissatisfaction regardless of the results of performance (Flett and Hewitt, 2006). How can this constant sense of dissatisfaction be positive?

3) Applicability and validity of the Hewitt multidimensional scale (HMPS) developed by Hewitt and Flett (1991): I found the multidimensional scale developed by Hewitt and Flett (1991) as the most dominant and applicable measure of perfectionism.

In addition to HMPS, the multidimensional perfectionism scale suggested by Frost et al. (FMPS) in 1990 seems to be from high importance and applicability. Although these two scales are different in the way they have conceptualized perfectionism, I noticed most of the researches in this field have used HMPS, FMPS or both and have contributed to compelling results. Thus, I will also apply this scale in my conceptual/theoretical framework.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology of this study. It explains the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments, introduces participants and reviews participant sampling and recruitment in more detail. In addition, data analysis procedures are explained and the ethical considerations relevant to the study are reviewed. Later in this chapter, a range of methodological limitations as well as the research strengths are identified. Lastly, the chapter ends with a summary of key methodological decisions and the rationale behind them.

Research Approach and Procedures

Creswell’s (2013) working definition of qualitative research is as follows:

…qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and its contribution to the literature or call for change (Cresswell, 2013, p. 44).

This research study is conducted using a qualitative research approach by first reviewing the literature and then carrying out semi-structured interviews with teachers.

The importance of a qualitative inquiry in my research is because to date there are only very few studies on teachers’ understanding of perfectionism and thus this topic needs to be more explored. Since teachers are considered as one of the significant others who play an important role in students’ academic and socio-emotional development, the exploration of teachers’ perceptions of perfectionism can increase educators’ awareness about what needs to be clarified and offers useful strategies for providing positive support for students with perfectionistic traits. Applying a qualitative research approach will provide me with the opportunity to bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to my research (Creswell, 2013)
Instruments of Data Collection

This exploratory study focuses on understanding teachers’ perceptions of perfectionism and this personality traits’ impact on secondary school students’ academic life and mental well-being. It is of high importance to elicit participants’ understandings, assumptions and interpretations and also to value the uniqueness of the information provided by each participant so that insights could be developed based on participants’ perspectives and their interpretation of their world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Hence, semi-structured interviews were chosen to capture participants’ understandings and perspectives on the subject matter.

This type of interview helps explore the topic “more openly and allows interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). Flexibility of the semi-structured format allows respondents to discuss and raise issues that the interviewer may not have previously considered.

Participants

This section, reviews the sampling criteria established for participant recruitment. It introduces each of the participants and explains their recruitment procedure.

Sampling criteria.

This study includes three interview participants who are certified by the Ontario College of Teachers. Since there is always a debate about whether perfectionism is more common among gifted students, teachers’ opinions about this, were gathered from participants’ who have a background in teaching gifted students. However, this does not mean that the current research focuses on perfectionism in gifted students but rather it explores perfectionism among general student populations in Ontario secondary schools. Since this study examines perfectionism from teachers’ perspectives in secondary schools, teacher participants with experience teaching grades seven to twelve were selected for the
interviews. This sampling criterion allowed me to explore perfectionism in a particular age of students.

**Sampling procedures.**

Participants were recruited through word of mouth – by asking colleagues for suggestions about teachers who meet my predefined criteria, focusing the idea that I was interested in interviewing teachers who might be more familiar with perfectionist students and their characteristics. The teachers who met the criteria were contacted and were provided with an overview of the research study and were asked if they were willing to participate. They were informed that the participation in this study was entirely voluntary and there were no known risks to participation.

**Participants’ biographies.**

Christine is a secondary school science teacher in the Ontario public school system. She has been teaching for 10 years and has a master degree in Chemistry, she has taught all secondary science courses in the Ontario curriculum. At the time of the interview she was teaching AP chemistry and biology courses.

Tom is a secondary school History and Philosophy teacher in the Ontario public school system. He has 28 years of experience and has a master degree in Education, he has taught all secondary History courses in the Ontario curriculum. At the time of the interview he was teaching grades 7 and 10 History and grade 12 Philosophy courses.

Edward is a secondary math and science teacher. He has a master degree in teaching and is recently graduated. In his limited teaching experience, he has worked with many high achieving students and at the time of the interview he was teaching grade 10 Math. All three participants have experience working with gifted students.

**Data Analysis**

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed shortly after their completion.
Transcripts were read several times. In order to create the codes, patterns such as repeated words or phrases, patterns of behaviours and prominent ways of thinking which address the research question, were identified. Next, all the codes were reviewed and were clustered into categories. Applying a systematic approach, all categories were reviewed and the concepts that emerged informed the generation of themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In the analysis, teachers understanding and perceptions about perfectionistic students are explored and strategies to support these learners are discussed.

As I wrote my findings chapter, I continued to refine the themes, and chose quotes that supported and illustrated these themes. In some cases, I paraphrased the interviewees, and in other cases I provided quotes. I present my findings through a thematic presentation.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

There were no known risks in participating in the interview. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary and participants had the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were given all the necessary information and had the opportunity to ask questions about their participation in this study at any time. Pseudonyms are given and used so research participants will remain anonymous in any reports of the completed study and any publications that results. Any information resulting from this research study will be kept strictly confidential. Data used for analyses will be stored under password protection in a computer file to maintain confidentiality. All data will be stored for five years. Computer data will be erased after the storage period and transcripts will be shredded.

**Methodological Limitations and Strengths**

The first limitation of this research study is the size of the study and the number of participants. Because of the small scale of the study and limited sample size, the findings are not generalizable to a larger context. Another limitation is that the study does not interview
students directly and their motivations and emotions are merely being speculated by teachers and guidance counselors. However, given the goal of the research—exploring teachers’ perceptions of perfectionism, this methodology is suitable.

I also understand that my literature review was selective. In this broad field there are competing theories, however, in a project of this scope I could not read all perspectives. I chose to focus on key writers and select perspectives on my topic. In order to meet the goals of this study, the literature review attempted to focus on the everyday context rather than the clinical context of the topic. There is a multitude of literature on this topic and I wish that I could have reviewed additional texts, however, if I conduct further research on this topic, I will broaden my literature review.

Despite these limitations, this study is one of the few studies done on teachers’ perceptions of perfectionist secondary school students which aims to explore perfectionism in an educational context and in a school setting. I believe viewing this personality trait from an educators’ lens will shed a new light on teachers’ understandings about the nature of perfectionism and their interactions with students with perfectionistic traits.

Also, applying semi-structured interviews to elucidate teachers’ perceptions of perfectionism is one of the strengths of this research as the participants were able to openly express and articulate their thoughts and experiences for a detailed exploration to take place.

Lastly, this study helped me acquire many research skills that will help me in my practice as a teacher and a researcher. These include: the aptitude for developing effective research questions, the ability to effectively interview participants, the ability to analyze data and reflect on the connections and relationship between theory and practice.

Conclusion

A qualitative approach is adopted for this study, which investigates two main types of information: research studies through the literature review section, as well as two face-to-face
interviews and one Skype interview with practicing teachers. Qualitative approach seemed suitable for this exploratory study as it helped to gain an understanding of teachers’ perceptions and opinions of perfectionism, which is the main goal of this research. Flexibility and open-ended nature of the semi-structured interviews, provided participants with the opportunity to freely reveal their perspectives and helped the researcher understand participants’ beliefs about the topic. Transcribing interviews, looking for regularities and patterns to create the codes, and clustering the codes into categories helped analyzing the data and organizing the findings. These findings are reported in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents findings collected from two face-to-face interviews and one Skype interview with secondary school teachers. The findings are presented pertinent to teachers’ understanding of perfectionism and the impact of unhealthy perfectionism on secondary school students’ mental health and academic achievement, followed by effective strategies suggested by participants to alleviate negative behavioural consequences of this personality trait. These findings aim to increase knowledge of potential detriments of perfectionism in educational context and pave the way to informing needed support for students who struggle with negative outcomes of perfectionism. The results obtained from the data, are organized by themes and outline participants’ comments relating to each theme.

Perfectionism refers to different concepts depending on the context in which it is being conceptualized. In psychology, perfectionism is defined as a personality disorder associated with setting unattainable goals followed by high self-criticism and feelings of dissatisfaction (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Unlike counselors, educational psychologists or related professionals who receive professional training in psychology, teachers might not have the clinical knowledge to fully understand the negative impacts of this personality trait on students’ mental wellbeing. This research tries to address this gap by unpacking teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about perfectionism in an educational context.

Key Themes

Seven major themes emerged from the data analysis, reflecting teachers’ understanding and experiences of perfectionist students. The findings produced overarching themes and sub-themes. The key themes of this research are the following:

- Teachers’ Definitions
- Behaviours Associated with Perfectionism
- Perfectionism and Academic Achievement
• “Healthy” Versus “Unhealthy” Perfectionism
• Factors Influencing the Development of Perfectionism
• Perfectionism and Gender
• Classroom Strategies for Perfectionism Reduction

Teachers’ Definitions

Doubtlessly, teachers’ understanding of perfectionism affects their interaction with and support to students with perfectionistic tendencies. In order to capture the participants’ understandings of perfectionism, I directly asked how they defined this personality trait. Since the term ‘perfectionism’ contains a variety of meanings and is used to refer to different concepts, it is notable to learn how each participant defines this term and to examine if there is a consensus on among participants.

Each participant had a slightly different way of defining perfectionism and focused on a different dimension of it. Christine focused on the ‘perfectionistic striving dimension’ (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004) and described perfectionism as a tendency to do really well in everything. She explained “everything they do has to be to their utmost”. She believed perfectionists have the perception that they have to do better than everyone else and thus usually experience negative effects from their perceived competition with others. Tom, on the other hand stressed the “self-critical aspect of perfectionism” (Flett and Hewitt, 2002) and defined perfectionist as a person who “will never be happy and satisfied with the end product” regardless of its quality. He thought there is always a feeling on the part of the perfectionist that their work is not the best they could do. Edward, explained that perfectionists are people who want to be right all the time and are extremely uncomfortable with having things wrong. Unlike most psychologists such as Hewitt and Flett (2007) none of the participants described perfectionism as a neurotic personality disposition.
As mentioned earlier, Hewitt and Flett (2007) regarded perfectionism as a “neurotic personality style” associated with psychopathology and differentiated consciousness and achievement striving from perfectionism. Although participants did not directly refer to perfectionism as a personality disposition, their definitions reflected a negative perception of perfectionism.

**Behaviours Associated with Perfectionism**

All the participants expressed difficulty in identifying students who might experience perfectionism and agreed that due to the complexity and multidimensional structure of this personality trait, classifying a student as a perfectionist requires a deep understanding of the perfectionism construct and its potential behavioural consequences. However, they discussed behaviours that tend to relate to perfectionistic tendencies. These behaviours are listed individually but they are tightly interconnected and usually overlap.

**Fear of failure.**

Fear of failure was the most frequently used term when the teachers were describing perfectionist students. According to the participants, fear of failure was the dominant factor of perfectionism. They believed this fear is the reason behind perfectionist students’ anxiety. Christine said that, “I think their anxiety comes from their fear…fear of not getting the best mark, fear of failing … obviously in their own perception and with their own standards…” Tom stated, “fear of making mistakes is one thing that is very obvious in perfectionist students, such students just hate failure and can’t deal with it…” Tom’s response reminds of Hamachek’s (1978) quote in which he described the perfectionist as “motivated not so much by desire for improvement as they are by fear of failure” (Hamachek, 1978, p.28). Hamachek (1978) believed perfectionists are driven to perform out of the fear of failure rather than the need to achieve, which could potentially cause distress and anxiety for these individuals.

Participants also believed fear of failure have a negative impact on students’
resilience, creativity and risk-taking. Many studies such as Davis & Rimm (2004) confirm the association of perfectionism with fear of failure and relate it to lack of resilience, avoiding risk-taking and underachievement (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Enns & Cox, 2002; Schuler, 2000). These findings are similar to Ng’s (2010) research findings. In his study, fear, afraid and anxious were the most common adjectives that teachers used when describing students with perfectionistic tendencies. Similarly, fear of failure was identified as the dominant factor of perfectionism which could negatively influence students’ capabilities and risk-taking skills. However, the focus of Ng’s (2010) study, was on examining perfectionism in elementary students who attended gifted programs.

Teachers’ perceptions about the association of fear of failure with anxiety, lack of resilience and risk avoidance is explained below.

**Anxiety.**

Participants defined anxiety as one of the most common characteristics among perfectionist students. Christine explained,

students who I regard as perfectionists are usually very hardworking and academically successful but what is problematic in my view is that the anxiety to produce the perfect product is sometimes so intense that prevents the kid from enjoying the learning, just for the learning itself.

She also noted that perfectionist individuals tend to show more emotional responses to their failures compared to others:

They (perfectionist students) are highly stressed. They stretch themselves really thin in everything that they do and are extremely hard on themselves and this is because they are really scared of failure… I remember one of my students, she was very academically successful and very hard working. I would say that she was also at times a little bit aggressive, or I would say as soon as she didn’t get anything correct she got frustrated and overly emotional.

Tom also defined high stress levels as one of the factors that could negatively influence perfectionist students’ performance:
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…So I can see that they are highly stressed out about doing well before they even start the test and in the end they do really well, but it’s that high stress and fear of not doing absolutely perfect that sometimes takes away from their performance.

He then added: “They have so much pressure to do so well and get such a good mark that they gradually lose that whole joy of learning, yes, I think the joy is totally lost on them.”

Edward also emphasized the perfectionist students’ anxiety and highly emotional responses to minor failures. He noted:

I have experienced students who get real upset and start crying so hard when they don’t get the perfect mark. Even though they are in the top ten and they have done much better than the others but they just want the perfect mark.

The association of perfectionism with anxiety and emotional responses is confirmed by many studies (e.g. Delegard, 2004; Frost & DiBartolo, 2002; Hewitt, Caelian, Flett, Sherry, Collins, & Flynn, 2002). In an experiment done on perfectionist students, Bieling, Israeli, Smith and Antony (2003) showed that over time, the behaviours and cognitive-emotional responses related to perfectionism could lead to significant distress. Their research suggested an important potential pathway from perfectionism to psychopathology.

Concern over mistakes and lack of resilience.

One of the challenges of perfectionist students mentioned several times by teachers during interviews was difficulty dealing with mistakes due to extreme fear of failure.

Christine pointed out that there is a great difference between perfectionist students and others in terms of their reactions to mistakes they make. She said,

…they want to be perfect all the time and when they don’t get the perfect mark they take it much more to heart and get so upset. They don’t want to go through their tests and see what their mistakes are and try to learn from their mistakes.

Similarly, Edward defined lack of resilience as one of perfectionist students’ difficulties,
I think one of the main problems with students who want to be perfect all the time is that they take failure very strong compared to others. I mean, not getting an A is like a huge thing in their life…

He then added: “…It is just not easy for them (perfectionist students) to put the failure behind and move on… and I think this is one of the reasons they feel stressed and anxious all the time…” This finding is in agreement with the study done by Klibert et al. (2014), which associates perfectionism with lack of resilience and distress in perfectionist college students.

Tom on the other hand believed that the problem with perfectionist students is that they cannot accept failure as a part of learning process. He stated,

I don’t think they see it as a learning opportunity, I think they are scared of failure. I don’t know if perfectionists learn from their mistakes. They look at it and they say, wow I did that wrong, but they don’t look to see what is it that I did wrong there, because they don’t want to deal with that. Because they want to be perfect all the time and it is a kind of counterintuitive though because in order to be perfect they have to be able to learn from their mistakes.

Tom thought one of the reasons why perfectionist students merely feel happy is that they are not dealing with what is wrong. He added:

…In order to feel better one needs to look and see what is wrong and then deal with that wrong and try to fix it. Perfectionist students don’t face that wrong in their life, because again they are scared of it, that is why they can never find true happiness.

Teacher’s perceptions about the relation between perfectionism and too much concern over mistakes is in agreement with Frost’s (1990) multidimensional perfectionism scale. According to Frost (1990) excessive concern over mistakes is generally regarded as the central facet of perfectionism (Frost, 1990). In multidimensional perfectionism scale developed by Frost (FMPS) in 1990, concern over mistakes is identified as one of the major dimensions of perfectionism structure.

**Difficulty completing tasks.**

Tom noted that one of the behaviours he noticed among students with perfectionist tendencies is difficulty finishing tasks and handing them in:
I can tell when we are doing work in class how long it takes them (perfectionist students) to complete something. Like in other words if I give students an entire period to do a test, and I know it's only going to take 45 minutes of the 70 minutes, they will take all of the 70 minutes to do it. Even though it's been done within 35 minutes, they will hang on to it until the end, keep looking at the answers, keep adding to it, erasing it over and over again…

He thought perfectionist students were often doubtful about their work and this is regardless of the quality of the final product they submit. He said,

No matter how hard they work on their assignments and no matter how good their final product is they always make comments before handing in things, such as I don’t think this is my best work, or I think I could do better than this so please go gently

Christine and Edward shared similar stories about students’ procrastination and late submission of assignments due to their perfectionistic tendencies. Essentially, delayed engagement in assignments to be evaluated, repeatedly starting over on assignment or refusal to turn in completed assignments have been consistently pointed out by many psychologists who have studied manifestation of perfectionism in the classroom (e.g., Cohen, 1996; Pacht 1984).

Risk avoidance.

All the participants agreed that fear of failure is the major inhibiting factor of critical thinking, risk-taking and creativity which are essential elements of meaningful learning.

Christine believed perfectionist students are considerably less willing to participate in activities which require critical thinking and are not the best risk takers. She explained,

Often their (perfectionist students’) marks are high compared to others but in terms of critical thinking they have some more problems. They just follow the recipe. You see, creativity is a big part of really doing extremely well in the long term, in terms of any innovation you have to be creative and this person I am thinking, she is very linear. The way she looks at things, it is just one way, she is not hitting it from all angles. They can do it if you force them but it does not come naturally to them because again their goal is not learning and enjoying, it is only achieving perfect marks.

She further added,
...So those type of people (perfectionists) to me may end up having good careers if they can get through their over stress, but not necessarily the real research breakers or noble prize winners of the world and that goes back to their unwillingness to think critically and their lack of interest in taking risks.

Similarly, Tom explained that students who are afraid of making mistakes tend to avoid tasks that might involve a higher degree of creativity and risk-taking. According to Tom, working out of their comfort zone and adapting to new situations are some of the challenges of perfectionist students:

I see perfectionists as not being very risky... they are less likely to take chances I would say, which affects their creativity, because once they are out of their comfort zone, then they don’t feel right. That’s my perception at least... So they’ll take very little risks in doing things. For example, I do a lot of things like role playing in my classes. So if they are not comfortable performing I see some perfectionists really not doing well... because they are out of their comfort zone when they are doing a role play. Or if they are doing something creative, I do concept maps and mind maps, I teach these things to organize, and I see sometimes they do it, but they are not very creative in creating the concept maps, because again they are outside of the way they normally think and they are trying to be perfectionist in doing it. If I give them something different to do, I often find that they don’t do as good a job because they are out of their comfort zone.

Edward, on the other hand, thought that although perfectionist students are less inclined to take risks, they do whatever it takes them to get the perfect mark. In his opinion, such students rarely volunteer to take risks or respond, unless they are sure they have the correct answer. However, as soon as they are informed it might impact their marks they take all necessary steps:

...Although some students might take the risk and try new things only because they enjoy it and they have this desire to furthers their understanding, perfectionist kids only do it if it impacts their marks.

Participants perceptions about the inhibiting effect of fear of failure on risk-taking is congruent with Davis (1999)’s study. Davis (1999) contended that creatively talented individuals may be paralyzed by the fear of failing which is a huge barrier to their risk-taking,
new learning experiences and creative thinking. Risk-taking involves not being afraid of exploring new things, and having the courage to accept failure (Davis & Rimm, 2004). According to Davis and Rimm (2004), students’ potential for strong leadership and high academic achievement is compromised when they are not willing enough to take academic risks. Overall, all participants agreed that fear of failure could immobilize students’ risk-taking and creativity and thus could lower the quality of their learning.

**Fear of not meeting expectations and conditional self-acceptance.**

All the participants agreed that perfectionist students are overly concerned about meeting high expectations and this puts a lot of pressure on them. These expectations either imposed by self or others, are usually too high or unrealistic. Christine focused on the constant fear of meeting expectations as a source of anxiety in such students. She mentioned that even though pleasing others such as teachers and parents could be a positive characteristic, students should not be motivated by the fear of meeting expectations. According to Christine the main driving force for perfectionist students is not learning but meeting expectations. She explained,

> Sometimes I feel the only factor that motivates such students is pleasing others. They ask for your exact expectations and they work so hard but not necessarily for the nature of learning. In fact, they only do it for receiving complements. They are kind of people pleasers, I would say.

Christine emphasized that such students put too much stress on meeting expectations and this prevents them from enjoying the process of learning. She stated,

> …They try hard to read your mind and see what you look for, they have this checklist to please you and get the perfect mark and they very often miss the chance of enjoying the process of learning. They are just too stressed about getting those complements, to the point that they forget the main goal is to learn and not to please people…

Edward also believed that perfectionist students are often more vulnerable than other students because their self-esteem and self-acceptance are contingent upon the
approval from others. He also mentioned that perfectionist students tend to over value grades and achievement and regard their performance as a reflection of their self-worth. Edward’s opinion is reminiscent of Pacht’s (1984) and Burn’s (1980) definition of perfectionists as individuals who equate their self-worth with performance and accomplishment. Greenspon (2000) highlights conditional self-worth as one of the dominant characteristics of perfectionists: “A psychodynamic understanding of perfectionism reveals that a feeling of conditional self-acceptance underlies the desire for perfection.”

Evidently, there was a consensus among all participants that equating of self-worth with performance and accomplishment, and the compulsive drive to meet others’ expectation are among the most deleterious effects of perfectionism on students’ self-esteem and self-efficacy.

**Dissatisfaction and self-criticism.**

Consistent lack of satisfaction irrespective of performance was repeatedly mentioned by all participants as a sign of perfectionism. Tom focused on consistent lack of fulfillment as the most detrimental aspect of perfectionism. He stated that such students always feel like they haven’t done as well as they could and thus they are never happy and content with their performance. He said,

Perfectionism doesn't necessarily mean you are a great student or you always do the best. Perfectionism means to me that they (perfectionist students) do a lot of work and try to do perfect and they re-do it and do it and they are never happy with it because it is never perfect in their mind.

Through further discussion Tom described that students with perfectionistic traits often have difficulty taking credits or pleasure even when success is achieved:

I don’t think students who are perfectionists are ever really happy with whatever they do. Let's take for example, a perfectionist who always gets a 90% on assignments which might be much better than their peers but they are never happy anyways, because it is not perfect. No matter how many times they have
been told that they are doing really well, they don’t feel completely happy with what they've done. They don’t celebrate their success because well, I think in their perception they never achieve that level of success they expect.

Christine shared a similar thought and explained:

I think there's something ingrained in them that they’re never fulfilled, like no matter how many times I told this girl (one of the perfectionist students) she was fantastic, she would tell herself yes, but there was always this yes, but. There was always something missing in her own view, so she was never fulfilled. It is like they never reach true happiness.

She noted that perfectionist students are overly self-critical sometimes to the point that they cannot handle failures anymore and they just give up:

…so the perfectionist will have angry reactions to things, on themselves if it's not on somebody else, it's just you can see that they are really like, “oh why did I do this, how could I do this,” and sometimes consume in it. Some perfectionists get beyond the point where they are not at that perfectionist level anymore, it's just too hard for them. And then they end up going the other extreme, and getting lost. We sometimes see these cases among extremely perfectionist students.

Edward believed that it is often hard for perfectionist students to have a good self-image, because they are merely satisfied with their results. He thought that such students have lower self-esteem even compared to people who are doing worse than them.

Essentially, all participants agreed that persistent feelings of dissatisfaction and harsh self-criticism are among the most distinguishable characteristics of students who experience perfectionism. These findings are consistent with many other studies that define dissatisfaction and self-criticism as the main dimensions of unhealthy perfectionism (e.g., Cattell, 2008).

**Perfectionism and Academic Achievement**

Christine and Edward both regarded perfectionism to be more common among high achieving students. They mentioned that despite all their potential mental difficulties, perfectionist students are usually academically successful and demonstrate some positive
characteristics. Edward mentioned, “Perfectionist students are usually very organized, they
want to be in tight control of their stuff, they hand in clean work and they follow the
guidelines… They are usually among top ten students…”

Edward’s notion of organization as one of the positive characteristics of perfectionist
students is consistent with previous studies that define “preference for order and
organization” as one of the dimensions of healthy perfectionism (Frost et al. 1990). Edward’s
comment about perfectionist students’ high need for control is also in agreement with
Neumeister’s (2004a) study in which “strong desire for control” is considered as one of the
most distinguishable characteristics among perfectionist students. Similarly, Christine
believed that perfectionist students usually produce excellent work: “They follow the rules,
they talk to me and make sure what they hand in meets all what I want from them and their
work is usually greatly done…”

Research has examined the influence of perfectionism on achievement with
inconsistent results. While perfectionism is associated with high performance, it is also
related to underachievement in some cases (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1989). Davis and Rimm
(2004) define underachievement in gifted students as “the discrepancy between the child’s
school performance and some index of his or her actual ability” (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p.
206). Studies show that negative characteristics of gifted students with perfectionistic traits
such as procrastination, fear of failure and risk avoidance can contribute to their
underachievement (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1989). In contrast, some psychologists argue that
although unhealthy perfectionism may negatively impact academic achievement, healthy
perfectionism can have a positive impact on students’ performance (Ram, 2005). Healthy and
unhealthy perfectionism will be further discussed below.

Healthy Versus Unhealthy Perfectionism

Many studies support a multidimensional view of perfectionism that includes positive
(healthy) as well as negative (unhealthy) attributes (Hamachek, 1978). However, several experts such as Greenspon (2000) reject the existence of healthy perfectionism and call it an “oxymoron”. According to Greenspon (2000) perfectionist individuals often experience a “harshly negative self-talk” which can be a huge burden for them and to no extent would this be considered as a healthy or positive characteristic. He believes there is no factual or theoretical basis that supports the notion of healthy perfectionism and maintains the idea that the dichotomy between healthy and dysfunctional perfectionism arises from a misunderstanding of the nature of perfectionism and an uncritical acceptance of early work on this personality trait (Greenspon, 2000).

In order to explore teachers’ perceptions in this regard, they were asked to explain if they perceived perfectionism as a healthy or unhealthy characteristic. Two out of three participants believed that perfectionism could be healthy if balanced. Only one participant, Tom, thought perfectionism could by no means be considered healthy.

Christine thought perfectionism could actually be a positive deriving force for students if balanced. She stated,

I think there is a balance like with anything. I think all of us have a little bit of perfectionism, that motivates us to do perfect in something that is important to us but the extreme perfectionist tries to be perfect in everything to the point that he does not take the time to enjoy what he does. To the point that nothing can make him happy and that is when perfectionism is not healthy anymore.

Christine tried to draw the line between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism by differentiating striving for perfection with constant feelings of dissatisfaction. This notion was consistent with other studies that distinguish healthy perfectionistic strivings from unhealthy perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Edward also regarded perfectionism as a positive motivation. He stated, “In some aspects perfectionism can be healthy. It can be a motivation for students to set goals and try hard to achieve those goals.” He further explained: “I can see that it can
also be damaging because perfectionist students tend to blame themselves all the time and that is obviously not good for their mental wellbeing.”

Tom however, had a different perspective. He thought constant feelings of dissatisfaction in perfectionist individuals is detrimental for their mental health and could by no means be considered healthy:

I think it's unhealthy. You never get that higher, that euphoria that some people get. You never say wow, I did that really well, I feel really good about myself. Yeah, that's some intrinsic reward that I think is really important to your mental health. So unfortunately I don’t think perfectionists experience that to the level that they should. So in terms of mental health I think it's not a good thing.

Overall, the question that whether or not perfectionism can be regarded as a positive characteristic revealed different perspectives. Although two of participants pointed out some positive components of this personality trait and believed it could be a positive motivation if balanced, one of the participants thought due to its negative behavioural outcomes such as a persistent sense of dissatisfaction or harsh self-criticism to no extent could perfectionism be considered healthy.

Factors Influencing the Development of Perfectionism

Participants pointed out many factors which might influence the development of perfectionism in students, such as family, cultural background, community and the school culture. However, they all agreed that internal factors such as students’ temperament and personality could also affect the development of perfectionism in individuals. This finding relates to self-oriented and socially prescribed dimensions of the Hewitt Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HMPS) (Hewitt and Flett, 1991). However, in their Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, Hewitt and Flett (1991) identified one more aspect of perfectionism called other-oriented perfectionism which refers to perfectionists, imposing high standards upon others, such as their partners, kids or friends and requiring others to meet those standards perfectly. According to Hewitt and Flett (1991) other-oriented perfectionism
usually has an undesirable and damaging impact on perfectionist individuals’ interpersonal relationships. This aspect was not mentioned by any of the participants.

**Family and cultural background influences.**

All participants defined students’ family and cultural background as factors that could contribute to development of perfectionism in individuals. Christine highlighted the role of family as the most influential factor in formation of this personality trait:

It’s probably family more than anything, it’s coming from long before I ever meet them (students)… It’s just something engrained in them because maybe their parents have wanted them to be perfect all the time…

She shared her own experience and explained how parents could put a lot of pressure on their kids by setting high expectations for them since their early childhood:

I have been told since I was little, you are going to grow up to be a doctor, or you are going to grow up to be an engineer and I was always scared that what if I can’t meet their expectations and this put a lot of pressure on me.

In addition, all participants mentioned that perfectionism was most commonly seen among immigrant families. Edward expressed that immigrant families tend to put more emphasis on achievement and getting good grades and thus students from immigrant families might have a stronger tendency toward perfectionism:

When I was going to school there were a lot of east Asian students and it was really important to them to get the highest grades possible, so they were really hard on themselves and put a lot of stress on getting the perfect marks all the time.

Christine shared a similar response:

It does seem to appear in the immigrant families more. I don’t know the reasons completely, like I think immigrant families try harder…, you know education is much more important to them. Perhaps it’s just in their culture. Yeah, so I guess that’s comparing Anglo-Saxon compared to everyone else. Some of the examples I am thinking about are Chinese background, but I’ve seen it also in Indian background, in Persian background, in Arab background…
Tom explained that he has noticed perfectionism in recent immigrants more than people who have been here for one or two generations:

I don’t know if it’s just peculiar to this school, I don’t know if it’s a pressure coming from home, I don’t know if it’s a pressure coming from, “oh my parents are paying all these money,” I don’t know what it is. But I mean I have seen it more in students whose parents are immigrants, like in other words they weren’t born in this country.

Both Christine and Edward on the other hand, noticed a pattern between perfectionism and students’ socioeconomic background. They believed students who come from middle to high socioeconomic status tend to manifest more perfectionistic traits.

Christine stated that she does not see perfectionism to be the priority in a lower socioeconomic status. By the same token Edward explained:

Students who come from lower socioeconomic status probably have more problems to worry about than getting perfect on everything and so I really wouldn’t notice that in them.

Essentially, all participants thought high parental expectations and specific cultural values are among the factors that could contribute to the development of perfectionism in students. However, two of the participants pointed out the role of socioeconomic status on occurrence of perfectionism and perceived perfectionism to be more prevalent among students from middle to high socioeconomic status.

**School influences.**

Both Tom and Edward believed school environment including teachers, peers and the school culture in general has a potential role in encouraging perfectionism in students. They noted that school cultures that put a lot of emphasis on students’ results and achievements could reinforce perfectionism and contribute to feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction. Tom emphasized the critical role of schools in helping students build resilience:

Some teachers and school cultures do not help students learn how to celebrate their mistakes and learn from their failures. Comments from teachers such as
you could do better if you worked harder or you could get the perfect mark if you did not do this mistake can feed into the negativity that perfectionist students feel.

Edward also expressed that most of schools focus on students’ academic performance and this could encourage students to base their overall worth on academic performance and could lower their self-esteem:

I think sometimes teachers would try to push students by saying hey you could have done better on this and they are trying to motivate that achievement, but you never really know how the student is going to take it. Because perfectionist student will take this as a personal flaw and will lose their confidence.

He added:

…If you are getting perfect marks all the time there is no way the school or the principle be concerned with you or want to meet your parents or anything, so that is the part of the culture that rubs off.

Edward and Tom both outlined the role of peer pressure in high achieving schools and described its impact on displaying negative perfectionistic traits such as low self-esteem or false self-image. Tom explained:

There is usually a lot of pressure on students in high achieving schools. The student might think everyone in my school does perfect and so I have to do the same, otherwise I can’t keep up with everybody and I am going to look like a dummy.

It was clearly indicated that all participants believed school cultures with a lot of focus on performance has an important role in the development of perfectionism in students.

Internal influences.

The participants agreed that it is not always parents, community, school or external factors that encourage perfectionism in individuals. For some reason some students tend to self-impose high expectations and feel pressured to meet these expectations. Tom thought, setting unrealistic standards is a part of some people’s personality and is totally ingrained in them. He further explained:
...It could be something that is present in them, a gene that tends to have this person lean towards being a perfectionist, that no matter how many times you tell them they are doing great they are not completely happy with anything they do.

Tom's explanation is reminiscent of Hewitt and Flett’s (1991) definition of self-oriented perfectionism (SOP). In their multidimensional perfectionism scale (MPS), self-oriented perfectionism is defined as a strong internal motivation to be perfect and to set unrealistic standards for oneself. Edward thought siblings that are raised under same circumstances might have different tendencies toward perfectionism and this shows that there are also internal factors that influence the development of perfectionism. He talked about his meeting with parents who claimed to put no pressure on their kids but the kids themselves tend to set extremely high standards for themselves.

**Perfectionism and Gender**

All participants perceived that perfectionism is more common among female students.

Christine mentioned:

Most of the examples I have in my mind are girls, and I guess girls just have this kind of personality wanting to please people in them more than boys do, and this is certainly by how girls are raised. You know the way they’re complimented from a small age, they’re complimented on looking pretty, on looking good and that just seems to be perpetuated in the females more than males, and I think that probably impacts the formation of perfectionism in them.

Tom shared the same opinion and thought females are more likely to be perfectionists and are usually under a lot of pressure to be perfect in all aspects of their life:

I don't have any data to prove this and it might be just my mental image, but that's my perception in my classes, the girls seem to be more perfectionists than guys. I'm not sure about the reasons, I mean is it because girls are trying harder, the expectation is more these days of girls. Because now in education everything is out there accessible to them. In the past girls maybe weren't expected to go in some occupations. There's even more pressure on them because there are other expectations maybe in home life, maybe in the media…
Edward agreed that perfectionism is more obvious in female students: “females are more meticulous about little things and getting them right, I guess it would be related to this stereotype that the girls really care about details in their appearance”.

The literature shows that gifted girls are often reinforced for perfection in regards to “being good, perfect, pretty, and well adjusted” (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p. 369) and that perfectionistic traits are more evident among gifted girls than gifted boys (Baker, 1996; Kramer, 1988). People usually reinforce the pressure for girls to achieve perfection by making comments such as how perfect a young girl is. Extreme comments make girls to become dependent on others’ praise and thus develop a conditional self-worth which is contingent on receiving approval from others (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p. 369).

The results of Baker’s (1996) study suggested that adolescent gifted females might need more support compared to their male peers for dealing with unhealthy aspects of perfectionism such as fear of failure, high concern over mistakes, conditional self-acceptance and low self-esteem (Baker, 1996).

Overall, all participants perceived perfectionism to be more common among female students. However, the influence of gender differences on the development of perfectionism is a broad topic which needs in-depth examination and is beyond the scope of this study.

**Classroom Strategies for Perfectionism Reduction**

As previously mentioned teachers stressed the complexity of perfectionism construct and found it extremely hard to identify students who might be struggling with this personality trait, as there are not any known formal methods to identify these individuals. They also found it very difficult to help such students modify their negative attitudes toward imperfection, since they believed that perfectionism is usually a part of some students’ personality trait which is formed in their early childhood. Edward stated,

…It is absolutely challenging to erase all the messages they got when they were
younger and modify all the negative attitudes they have built toward imperfection, but it is always worthwhile to try strategies that might change the negative consequences of perfectionism.

In addition, participants agreed that they have never used interventions specifically developed to eradicate perfectionism, but rather they have applied strategies that help students alleviate negative outcomes of this personality trait.

Literature review revealed that empirical research on translating the theoretical understanding of perfectionism into practical classroom-based interventions is sparse and even the existing ones only focus on the gifted populations (e.g., Mofield, 2008; Neumeister 2004a, Ng, 2010; Nugent, 2000; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Schuler, 2000). Some potentially effective strategies mentioned by participants are discussed below.

**Focusing on process rather than outcome.**

Christine believed that perfectionist students are so engaged and stressed about their marks and achievement that they usually overlook the value of learning and its process. She noted that such students need to be encouraged to shift their focus from marks to joyful learning:

…I often talk to students who are extremely hard on themselves and who tend to stress a lot. I tell them listen, you are not looking for the right or wrong answer all the time. It is about the process. It is about learning what is going on. True learning is not solely about marks, it is also about going through the process and enjoying it. Marks will come as long as you enjoy what you do and what you learn.

Edward stated that there is no doubt that marks are the only criteria to judge students in our education system and this encourages students to focus on their marks rather than their meaningful learning:

Students notice pretty early that grades are the number one value, I don’t know how you can change that when everyone knows that grades are what get you in the college so I don’t know how you can change that belief completely.

He explained that it is the role of teachers to emphasis the importance of joyful learning
in improving students’ comprehension of content material and feelings of self-efficacy:

I take my time and have conversations with students… I always tell them that too much focus on marks would cause a lot of anxiety and anxiety doesn’t let you reach your ultimate potential. I tell them if you need your marks you should focus on the process and take the moment to enjoy what you learn, then you would develop a better and deeper understanding and at the end of the day you would be happier with your achievement.

He added that high achieving schools are trying to help students balance their life and try to get students minds off their grades by employing mindfulness activities and implementing strategies that reduce anxiety. Despite all this, he believed students are still under so much pressure from being at elite private schools and are always expected to meet high expectations.

**Focusing on improvement rather than perfect performance.**

Edward thought creating a classroom culture that takes away the emphasis on performance and values growth and effort might be effective in changing perfectionist students’ negative attitudes. He spoke about setting expectations that focus on effort and improvement rather than the perfect performance:

…I think creating a culture that says you can always improve if you are not doing as well as you want to could be very helpful in helping students realize that they should aim for high goals but at the same time, they should not let that keep them from enjoying their learning …

Christine and Tom shared similar responses about the positive effects of focusing on students’ progress rather than solely emphasizing their performance.

Evidently, all participants believed that focusing on improvement and celebrating students’ progress could improve students’ confidence and their feelings of self-efficacy.

**Encouraging risk-taking.**

As previously discussed participants believed fear of failure inhibits
perfectionist students from experimenting and taking risks. Christine mentioned that she always promotes such students to take risks and try new things. She thought engaging students in activities with failure possibilities in a safe and supportive environment could help them overcome their fear of imperfection:

I suppose perfectionist students are so used to success and receiving rewards because they don’t risk mistakes and they simply avoid them. I think they need to be encouraged to take risks, someone needs to push them to do things out of their comfort zone… The point is getting them ready to face their failure and see it is not the end of the world. Nothing is going to happen if they don’t get it perfect because the reality is not perfect after all.

Likewise, Edward believed that engaging students in activities that require healthy risk-taking provides the opportunity for perfectionists to show their competence and helps them build their self-esteem.

**Celebrating mistakes and promoting resilience.**

All participants agreed that perfectionist students have difficulty dealing with their failures and tend to avoid mistakes. They noted that the first step to support such students is to help them develop resilience and encourage them to learn from their mistakes. Edward talked about strategies that he employed to help students identify their mistakes and learn from them. He explained,

…I do something in my classes called test correction, so if you get below 70% you are allowed to take your test home and then write down the mistakes you made and what you should have done and then if you hand that back in, you can get extra marks, like you can’t get all the marks back but you can get a part of it back, which gives credit to learning from the mistakes.

Tom mentioned: “What worries me about perfectionist students is that they are not really prepared for the challenges of the real life, because we all know life is not all about perfect and we need to prepare students for that reality.”

Tom believed the first step in helping perfectionist students is to encourage them to accept their failure, deal with their mistakes and develop resilience:
So one of the things I try to teach in my classes is learning from mistakes that I think it's a big flaw in education not having enough emphasis on that... I celebrate failure, I celebrate people's mistakes because I believe that’s how they learn and grow...

He believed one of the strategies that teachers could apply to help students deal with their mistakes is to talk about their own failures and struggles with their students:

… I talk to my students about the mistakes I have made in my life …and I also talk about how I tried to learn from my mistakes and move on because I think they need to know no one is perfect and we all make mistakes and we need to overcome...

Through further discussion, Tom explained that it is not just about celebrating mistakes, “students also need to learn how to celebrate their success and feel good about themselves. Perfectionist students do not even celebrate their success because they never seem happy with what they achieve.”

Essentially, all participants believed teachers need to provide students with the opportunities to practice healthy risk-taking in a positive and inclusive classroom environment. They all agreed that perfectionist students need to develop resilience in order to deal with their anxiety and teachers play an important role in helping students learn from their mistakes and reduce their fear of failure.

**Conclusion**

The findings in this study addressed teachers’ perceptions about perfectionism in educational context and shed light on negative impacts of perfectionism on secondary school students’ mental wellbeing. Although most of the studies have examined perfectionism among gifted students (e.g., Neumeister 2004a, Ng, 2010; Nugent, 2000; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Schuler, 2000), this research explores this personality trait among general student populations in Ontario secondary schools. Seven themes emerged from the data analysis: Theme 1, Teachers’ Definitions; theme 2, Behaviours Associated with Perfectionism; Theme
3, Perfectionism and Academic Achievement; theme 4, “Healthy” Versus “Unhealthy” Perfectionism; theme 5, Factors Influencing the Development of Perfectionism; theme 6, Perfectionism and Gender; and theme 7, Classroom Strategies for Perfectionism Reduction. The elucidation of the relationship between unhealthy perfectionism, fear of failure, anxiety, life dissatisfaction, conditional self-worth and other mental challenges, can inform the development of support for students with perfectionistic traits. Exceptions to negative perspectives of perfectionism and the notion of healthy or balanced perfectionism was also discussed.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter summarizes the major findings of the study, highlights their significance, discusses implications for the field, and recommends future research directions. This study focused on exploring teachers’ perceptions of perfectionism and attempted to elucidate the negative impacts of this personality trait on secondary school students’ mental health and academic achievement. It aimed to inform the development of support for students with unhealthy perfectionistic traits.

Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

Seven themes emerged from the data analysis: Theme 1, Teachers’ Definitions; theme 2, Behaviours Associated with Perfectionism; Theme 3, Perfectionism and Academic Achievement; theme 4, “Healthy” Versus “Unhealthy” Perfectionism; theme 5, Factors Influencing the Development of Perfectionism; theme 6, Perfectionism and Gender; and theme 7, Classroom Strategies for Perfectionism Reduction.

Participants had slightly different definitions of and perspectives on perfectionist students. However, they all pointed out negative behaviours associated with perfectionism and in general adopted a negative perspective of perfectionism. These findings agree with studies conducted previously (Burns, 1980; Flett and Hewitt, 2002; Pacht, 1984). All participants pointed out the relationship between high expectations and high levels of stress that students with perfectionistic traits experience. This finding relates to self-oriented and socially prescribed dimensions of the Hewitt Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HMPS) (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). However, none of the participants talked about the impact of perfectionism on students’ interpersonal relationships.

The undesirable behavioural outcomes of perfectionistic tendencies including constant lack of satisfaction irrespective of performance, were repeatedly mentioned by all participants. Having difficulty taking pleasure even when success is achieved was mentioned
as one of the most obvious struggles of perfectionist students in this study. The profile of having difficulty taking pleasure from the accomplishments is consistent with Hamachek’s (1978) notion of neurotic perfectionism. In addition, teachers’ descriptions of behavioural and psychological manifestations of perfectionism in students, matched most of the dimensions of Frost et al.’s (1990) multidimensional perfectionism scale (FMPS) such as high personal standards, concern over mistakes, anxiety, dissatisfaction and harsh self-criticism.

The association of perfectionism with risk avoidance and its inhibiting impact on students’ learning experience is supported by many studies (e.g., Davis & Rimm, 2004; Davis, 1999). Other negative outcomes of perfectionism mentioned by participants such as the equating of self-worth with performance and accomplishment, and the compulsive drive to meet high or unrealistic expectations, relates to Burns’ (1980) study on detrimental effects of conditional self-acceptance in perfectionist individuals. This negative view of perfectionism matches Hamachek’s (1978) notion of neurotic perfectionism.

Two participants pointed out the healthy aspects of perfectionism and its occasional positive effect on students’ motivation and self-regulation. The perception of balanced or healthy perfectionism is in agreement with Hamachek’s (1978) view that perfectionism can also be normal. The non-existence of normal or healthy perfectionism which was raised by one of the participants is consistent with Greenspon’s (2000) rejection of the actuality of healthy perfectionism and his idea of calling it an “oxymoron”.

All participants mentioned that occurrence of perfectionism is more evident among girls. This finding is in agreement with Davis and Rimm’s (2004) study which indicates gifted girls are more vulnerable to perfectionism than boys due to social pressure to be perfect and pretty. Davis and Rimm (2004) believe higher prevalence of perfectionism among gifted females could also be a result of the extreme praise they receive from others which
reinforces feelings of conditional self-worth in gifted girls.

Participants expressed difficulty in identifying students who might struggle with perfectionism as there are not any known formal methods for identifying perfectionist individuals. Although participants concurred that they were not aware of specific interventions which aim to eradicate perfectionism, they pointed out some strategies that might be effective in helping students cope with negative outcomes of perfectionism and in some cases could help students use dimensions of perfectionism in a positive way. The lack of empirical studies that translate theoretical concepts of perfectionism into practical classroom-based interventions is also suggested in the literature review (Mofield, 2008).

Implications and Recommendations

The exploration of teachers’ perceptions of perfectionist secondary school students, including their challenges and needs, is the major contribution of this study as a paucity of research exists surrounding the manifestation of perfectionism in classroom and its impact on students’ mental health and academic performance. Moreover, studies that have examined perfectionism in an educational context have mainly focused on perfectionism in gifted individuals rather than general student populations (e.g., Mofield, 2008; Neumeister 2004a, Ng, 2010; Nugent, 2000; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Schuler, 2000). This study however, attempted to explore teachers’ perceptions of perfectionism and its behavioural consequences, among general student populations in Ontario secondary schools.

Since teachers spend most of their time working with students and responding to their unique learning needs, their perspectives and viewpoints are very valuable. Teachers’ personal approaches to perfectionism and perfectionist adolescent students provide an insightful yet comprehensive understanding of this issue, which can narrow the gap between theories of perfectionism and empirical classroom based interventions.
This study indicates that teachers were cognizant of how perfectionism may negatively affect secondary school students’ mental well-being and they noted how this personality trait could compromise students’ learning. The participants’ negative views of perfectionism and their awareness of its deleterious impact on adolescent students is of high importance because if teachers perceive perfectionist students as model students, there is a potential risk that they might unintentionally increase expectations of students regardless of whether students hold healthy or dysfunctional perfectionism. Although perfectionism might include positive as well as negative aspects, over-generalization of perfectionism as a constructive personality trait may pave the way to perfectionism-related distress (Ng, 2010). Hence, it is crucial for educators to unpack their own beliefs and expectations that may impact their interaction with and support for learners with perfectionistic traits.

The findings of this study suggest participants were more willing to provide support and facilitate positive change for perfectionist students when they had a better and deeper understanding of this personality trait. Also, their openness, empathy and supportive attitudes allowed them to identify and acknowledge the differences of students with perfectionistic traits. This support can have enormous influence on the mental well-being of students and can help them develop a better understanding of their needs, strengths and responsibilities. The ultimate goal of education is to help students become more self-aware, critical thinkers who can make positive contributions to their society and this goal cannot be achieved unless educators provide supportive learning environments and incorporate positive coping approaches that address students’ unique learning needs. Students with perfectionistic traits require effective coping strategies which help them recognize their personal dimensions of learning and define their standards and future goals.

Teachers and counselors who work with perfectionist students need to implement strategies that help these students come to an understanding that mistakes and failures are a
part of the learning process and they would not gain ownership of their learning unless they
take healthy risks, make mistakes and learn from them. Perfectionist students need help to
acquire skills to cope with their high stress levels and reduce their fear of failure. They
require techniques that foster psychological resilience, enhance their risk-taking skills and
prepare them for the reality of life which is not always perfect. Shifting the focus from
outcome to process of learning can help perfectionist students relieve their stress caused by
feeling obligated to be perfect all the time.

Many educators might not receive formal training in mental health and their lack of
knowledge in this regard might contribute to their lower comfort level in dealing with mental
health problems. Educators might find it difficult and challenging to handle students who
struggle with emotional and mental issues including perfectionism, as they might be
uncertain about what the main issue is and how they should respond. This study may help
educators broaden their knowledge about perfectionism and recommends effective strategies
to assist students with perfectionistic characteristics tackle negative aspects of perfectionism.
Helping students reduce their fear of failure and develop resilience requires educators to
create opportunities for students to practice healthy risk-taking. Creating this positive
environment in which students feel safe and comfortable to take risks and accept their
mistakes is not always easy, and requires a lot of time and effort; once established and
constantly reinforced, however, it can be a platform for students to take academic risks.

High anxiety levels caused by the discrepancy between perfectionist students’
unattainable goals and their actual achievement as mentioned by participants can exacerbate
the negative outcomes of perfectionism such as persistent sense of dissatisfaction and
conditional self-worth. Hence, it is important for educators to state explicit expectations that
are informed by their knowledge of students’ needs and strengths, and assess students’
understanding of their expectations from themselves and their responsibilities.
This study provides insight for educators who work with perfectionist students, especially with gifted and talented learners who set unrealistic goals for themselves. This study encourages teachers to reflect on their expectations and the pivotal role these expectations play in development of perfectionism. Clearly, educators’ expectations are influenced by their beliefs and attitudes, the school culture they work in and the society in general. The growing emphasis on standards-based reform puts students under a lot of pressure to achieve high performance. This achievement-centered education system encourages the idea that individuals are valued based on what they do and not for who they are (Silverman, 1997). Such a system fosters a culture of unhealthy competition and encourages individualism among learners, which is in contrast with the notion of holistic education and creating collaborative learning environments in which learners develop their collaborative skills and feel responsible for peers’ success and failures.

However, there is always the question of whether educators need to raise the bar and set higher standards for students who have the ability to achieve higher goals such as gifted and talented students. How can teachers recognize if students’ goals are too high, or unattainable? In other words, how can teachers make sure that students reach their full potential without putting unreasonable pressure on their pupils? Also, teachers know that they need to provide support when a student with perfectionistic traits manifests dysfunctional behaviours, but they may not know how to intervene when perfectionist students do not show observable symptoms such as suicidal thoughts. In other words, the main concern is that unless students’ perfectionism does not result in serious observable psychological and behavioural troubles for them, such as major depression or severe anxiety, teachers may not even notice it and thus no intervention or support will be provided until it is too late (Ng, 2010). In addition, perfectionism is usually paid less attention and is not given priority when other exceptionalities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism
Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Learning Disabilities (LD) exist in the classroom. This might put perfectionist students at more risk of emotional and psychological problems and makes it harder to break the vicious cycle of perfectionism (Ng, 2010).

The fact that this study explores perfectionism from teachers’ perspectives does not mean it aims to convey the message that teachers are more responsible than others; rather it intends to raise teachers’ sensitivity to perfectionist students’ special needs and strengths as the frontlines of the education system. All types of learners including perfectionists would benefit from a healthy and positive classroom environment in which supportive strategies such promoting resilience, encouraging risk-taking and emphasizing the process of learning are incorporated.

**Limitations and Areas for Further Study**

Although this study could be helpful for teachers and other professionals who work with students to better understand perfectionist students’ potential challenges and needs, there are still limitations that exist. As mentioned earlier, the number of literature sources as well as the scale of the study were limited due to the time constraints of this research project. A broader scale of study would allow an exploration of perfectionism from a wider range of teacher perspectives. Furthermore, this study explores perfectionism and the associated behaviours only from teachers’ perspectives, rather than directly hearing the issue from the students. Thus, the next step would be to speak directly to students who manifest perfectionistic traits and unpack their personal experiences and beliefs about this personality construct.

One of the questions raised through this research was whether perfectionism is more prevalent among gifted students. While many studies consider perfectionism a common characteristic of gifted students (e.g., Adderholdt-Elliott, 1991; Silverman, 1997), empirical investigations support the notion that perfectionism is not more prevalent among gifted
students when compared to non-gifted students (Parker & Mills, 1996). Therefore, further research might compare the incidence of perfectionism among gifted and non-gifted student populations.

The other question is the influence of cultural values on teachers’ understanding of perfectionism, as well as on students’ perceptions of the academic expectations they face at home and in the classroom. Thus, this study could benefit from being conducted in multiple cultural settings to investigate this influence in more depth.

**Conclusion**

Studies on perfectionism have mostly focused on theoretical concepts of this personality trait, and this study aims to expand the scope to practical classroom based observations and interventions. The findings reveal that teachers’ perceptions of perfectionist students are consistent with previous research literature, however there was still a debate among participants on whether perfectionism can be regarded as a positive personality trait or not. These findings showed that teachers were cognizant of how perfectionism may negatively affect students’ mental well-being by causing anxiety, self-criticism and persistent feelings of dissatisfaction. Participants also noted how fear of failure caused by perfectionism could compromise students’ learning by inhibiting their risk-taking and critical thinking skills. Teachers’ recommendations for coping strategies were not informed by any empirical study about perfectionism and they mainly used their working experience and educational background to support their arguments.

Educators and other professionals who work with students, particularly school counselors, can use the findings of this study to further their understanding of the perfectionism issue and its inhibiting impact on students’ learning and their social and emotional growth.
PERFECTIONISM IN ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

References:


Appendixes

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

My name is Mariam Pirmohammadi and I am a Master of Teaching student at OISE, University of Toronto. A component of this program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. I am investigating teachers’ perceptions of perfectionist students and the impact of perfectionism on students’ mental health and academic performance. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer. The interview would last between 30-45 minutes and will be tape-recorded.

The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my course instructor and research supervisor Dr. Arlo Kempf. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Mariam Pirmohammadi

mariam.pirmohammadi@mail.utoronto.ca

647-539-5349

Research Supervisor: Arlo Kempf

Contact Info: arlo.kempf@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Mariam Pirmohammadi and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Section 1: Background Information
1. Just so I know your cultural background,
   a) Where did you grow up?
   b) What did you study at university?
   c) When did you graduate?
2. How long have you been a teacher?
3. What grades and subjects have you previously taught?
4. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated (in terms of diversity, socioeconomic status, demographics, size, climate)?

Section 2: Teacher beliefs and Practice
5. How do you define perfectionism?
6. During your teaching experience, have you ever noticed or identified a student (students) who has (have) perfectionistic traits? (Probe: How can you tell? How do (does) the student(s) behave?)
7. What are the characteristics that make you think a student is perfectionist?
8. In your experience as a teacher, have you noticed a relationship between perfectionism and academic achievement or not? (Probe: Do perfectionist students usually do better than the non-perfectionist students in their tests, quizzes?)
9. In your experience, how do perfectionist and non-perfectionist students differ in terms of their:
   a) Reactions to minor failures
   b) Academic satisfaction
   c) Risk-taking
10. Do you think perfectionism is healthy or unhealthy? Why?
11. Have you noticed any gender difference in terms of perfectionism? Why / Why not?
12. Have you noticed any patterns between perfectionistic tendencies and:
   a) students’ socioeconomic status (why, why not?)
   b) students’ cultural background (Why, why not?)
13. In your opinion what is the main motivation for perfectionist students?
14. What do you think causes the development of perfectionism in students? (Probe: What factors have the most impact on the development of this personality trait? self,
school, family, community, etc.?)

15. Can you further explain the role of school and teachers in particular, in development of perfectionism in students?

16. Do you think there is a relationship between giftedness and perfectionism? Why /Why not? (Probe: In your experience did you notice that perfectionism is more common amongst gifted and talented? Why/why not?)

17. What are the challenges that perfectionist students face?

18. What do you think teachers can do to support students who struggle with perfectionism?