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Evaluation Report: Perfectionism Literacy Lesson

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Background

When students are perfectionistic they place unrealistic expectations on themselves and others, or report experiencing pressure from others to be perfect (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The expectations can pertain to a range of things – academic achievement, appearance, and sporting achievements – any area of life they consider important.

Being perfectionistic is common among students and research suggests it is increasing with, young people more perfectionistic than ever before (Curran & Hill, 2019).

A considerable amount of research has been dedicated to understanding the consequences of perfectionism in education and other achievement settings with a number of reviews now available that summarise this work (e.g. Grugan et al., 2021).

The consequences of perfectionism for performance have been found to be complex. On one hand, there is some evidence that students who are perfectionistic can outperform their peers academically. However, on the other hand, there is also evidence that students who are perfectionistic may find setbacks particularly difficult to deal with so their motivation and performances suffer in the longer-term.

The consequences of perfectionism for mental health and wellbeing are much clearer. Students who are perfectionistic are generally likely to be more worried and anxious, and more vulnerable to a range of mental health and wellbeing difficulties. The more extreme and clinical consequences of perfectionism can include eating disorders, depression and suicidality (Limburg et al., 2017).

Being perfectionistic does not necessarily mean students will experience these problems and many students can be supported before any problems develop.

One way to support students is to increase their perfectionism literacy – the ability to recognise features of perfectionism, knowledge of the help available, and a willingness to seek help if needed.

Aim and scope of evaluation

With this in mind, the current project evaluated the effectiveness of a single classroom-based lesson focused on improving knowledge of perfectionism and willingness to seek support if needed.

Research questions / hypotheses

Our research question was: can a single classroom-based lesson improve student-reported knowledge about perfectionism and willingness to seek support if needed?

The content of the lesson was designed to increase familiarity with different aspects of perfectionism (features and origins), highlight differences between perfectionism and trying one's best, and the importance of seeking support.





Characteristics of activity

Detailed description	<p>“Perfectionism literacy” lesson</p> <p>Resources used for the lesson were developed by York St John University and are available online here.</p> <p>The lesson plan was developed in collaboration with the education charity National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE).</p> <p>The lesson includes three resources/activities: (1) a short video focused on perfectionism, (2) a card-sort activity focused on “perfectionism vs. doing things well”, and (3) a card-sort activity focused on different kinds or “flavours of perfectionism”.</p> <p>It also includes a reflective and application element, whereby students think about themselves and others, and a “handy hints” plenary.</p>
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Characteristics of outreach

Activity type	Skills and attainment (workshop/lesson)
Timing, duration and frequency of activity	<p>A standalone lesson</p> <p>Lasting approximately 60 minutes</p> <p>Delivered once</p>
Mode of delivery	<p>Delivered on-site at school</p> <p>Face-to-face in a classroom setting</p> <p>Delivered by a teacher at the school</p> <p>Communicate the content and timing of the lesson with the school’s Wellbeing Team so that any additional support can be provided following the lesson.</p>
Target group or groups	Year 9 upwards (aged 13+ years old)

Outcomes

Anticipated outcomes	<p>Increased knowledge of perfectionism characteristics</p> <p>Increased confidence in talking about perfectionism</p> <p>Increased willingness to seek help for self and others if needed</p>
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Methods used to evaluate impact of intervention

Type of evaluation	Empirical enquiry
Type of research approach	Quantitative (pre-test/post-test design)
Rationale	The approach was adopted for pragmatic reasons and the difficulty associated with creating a control or comparison group in the setting.
Data collection methods	Survey (pre/post intervention) Questions and response formats are reported in Table 1
Sampling and response rate	<p>The current sample represents a subsample of the students who received the workshop (those who agreed to take part in the study).</p> <p>The survey was completed by 68 Year 10 students (age 14 and 15) from four lessons (50.0% male, 44.1% female, remaining students did not report gender, identified as "other" or "preferred not to say").</p> <p>Of these, 67 completed all questions on both pre-test and post-test surveys (one student missed one response for one question).</p> <p>The sampling strategy was one of convenience (based on availability of students/classes) and purposeful (students who had completed the workshop).</p> <p>Students were from one secondary school in the UK.</p>
Timeframe for evaluation	<p>The survey was completed two weeks before and immediately after the lesson.</p> <p>Lessons were delivered in June and July, 2021.</p>
Approach to data analysis	<p>Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations)</p> <p>Change scores (percentage change)</p> <p>Paired samples t-test to establish statistical significance of the change</p> <p>Effect size to quantify the size of change in units of standard deviation (Cohen's d_s ; Lakens, 2013)</p>

Table 1. Response format of the questions and scoring

Question	Response format				
I can recognise the features of perfectionism	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I would know where to get support for myself or others for perfectionism, if I needed to					
I know where perfectionism comes from					
There are things you can do if you need help with perfectionism					
It is important to get support for perfectionism if you need it					
I found the lesson useful					
I found the lesson interesting					
I found the lesson informative					

Table 2. Scores for respondents who completed both pre-event and post-event questions

Question	Respondents	Time 1 mean	Time 1 SD	Time 2 mean	Time 2 SD	% change	t	Effect size change
I can recognise the features of perfectionism	68	3.07	0.97	4.44	0.66	45%	12.59*	1.53
I would know where to get support for myself or others for perfectionism, if I needed to	67	2.63	1.27	3.78	0.93	44%	8.12*	0.99
I know where perfectionism comes from	68	2.46	1.04	3.82	0.93	55%	9.97*	1.21
There are things you can do if you need help with perfectionism	68	3.06	1.09	3.93	0.83	28%	5.54*	0.67
It is important to get support for perfectionism if you need it	68	3.31	1.03	4.10	0.78	24%	6.54*	0.79

Note. *denotes a statistically significant difference between time 1 and time 2 scores ($p < .001$, two tailed). Effect size denotes the magnitude of change in units of standard deviation (Cohen's d_z ; Lakens, 2013).



Results and conclusions

Results	<p>Descriptive statistics for respondents for time 1 and time 2 questions are reported in Table 2. Table 2 also includes change scores (percentage change), results of pair-samples t-test, and effect size</p> <p>Key findings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There was a significant increase from pre-lesson to post-lesson in all questions. 2. Percentage change ranged from a 24% increase to 55% increase. 3. All changes were statistically significant. 4. Changes were equivalent to between half and one and a half standard deviations. 5. For two questions, the change corresponded with the typical response moving from “Neither agree or disagree” to “Agree” – recognising features of perfectionism and importance of getting support if needed. 6. The majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that the lesson was useful (75.4%), interesting (72.3%) and informative (80.0%). A minority of students disagreed or strongly disagreed that the lesson was interesting (6.1%) and informative (6.1%). <p>Data is available here.</p>
Impact achieved	<p>Our evaluation indicates a positive impact of the lesson on the knowledge of perfectionism and willingness to seek support if needed.</p>
Contribution or attribution	<p>We consider the evaluation to provide evidence of a contribution (not attribution of causality) to the observed changes due to the type of design (pre-test/post-test design).</p>

Closing remarks

Our evaluation of the “Perfectionism literacy” lesson indicates that it **had a positive impact** on students.

Following the lesson, students reported they had more knowledge of perfectionism and better recognised the importance of seeking support if needed.

The lesson therefore offers an easily implemented preventive intervention for schools to use with their students to help reduce the negative effects of perfectionism among students.



Recommendations

1. The lesson evaluated here is a valuable addition to the activities aimed at safeguarding mental health and wellbeing in schools. We encourage teachers to consider integrating it in to the personal, social and health curriculum for their students.
2. We encourage teachers to consider the degree to which current practice in the classroom might inadvertently encourage (rather than discourage) perfectionistic thinking in their students. Unrealistic expectations, frequent or excessive criticism, anxiousness over mistakes, and public use of rewards and sanctions can all reinforce perfectionism in students.
3. We recommend that schools ensure teachers are able to recognise the development of difficulties associated with perfectionism. In this regard, increasing perfectionism literacy among teachers is a useful way of supporting student wellbeing. The resources used in the current lesson, and the learning that arises from preparing for and developing the lesson, are one way to do so.

References

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Further information

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