

Perfectionism in a UK Secondary School: The Relationship with Anxiety and Depression, and how Pupil Views can Inform Intervention.

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BACKGROUND

Perfectionism has been described as the drive to meet excessively high standards and the feeling that anything below these standards would be unacceptable. It has been linked to **negative mental health outcomes** in children and young people and several interventions put in place have failed to be successful (Wilksch, Durbridge & Wade, 2008).

There is a dearth of research with children, particularly in the U.K. Research has predominantly been correlational (García-Fernández et al., 2016) and often investigated trait perfectionism, which is in contrast to **interpersonal perfectionism**, such as the nondisplay or nondisclosure of imperfection.

Interpersonal aspects of perfectionism have been linked to reduced **help-seeking behaviours** (DeRosa, 2000). Thus, further exploration of this specific type of perfectionism would be extremely useful to support effective early intervention for children and young people.

METHOD

A **sequential mixed-methods** design was used. Key stage 3 participants from a mainstream secondary school completed two online questionnaires; a measure of **interpersonal perfectionism** (PSPS-JR) and a measure of **anxiety and depression** (RCADS).

10 pupils who scored highest for both interpersonal perfectionism and anxiety and depression were interviewed individually using two **vignettes** and follow-up questions. The vignettes related to **academic** and **social pressures**.

Phase One

- 366 participants aged 11-14
- 2 **questionnaires**: PSPS-JR, RCADS
- Selected sample for phase two

Phase Two

- 10 participants
- **Interviewed** using vignettes and follow-up questions

RESULTS – PHASE ONE

1. Do pupils with higher **interpersonal perfectionism** experience higher levels of **anxiety** and **depression**?

Correlations were conducted separately by gender as females had higher scores than males for almost all RCADS scales.

For females, all PSPS-JR scales **positively correlated** with all RCADS scales. For males, one type of perfectionism, nondisclosure of imperfection, showed no statistically significant relationship with panic disorder, separation anxiety and major depression. All other scales were positively correlated. For both genders, the relationship between **social phobia** and perfectionism demonstrated the largest effects.

RESULTS – PHASE TWO

2. How do adolescents displaying high perfectionism behaviours and high anxiety and depression **view perfectionism** in others?
3. How do these adolescents **experience perfectionism** themselves?
4. What **support** would these adolescents choose to seek, and what **facilitates** seeking this support?
5. What are the **barriers** to seeking support?



The participants described **six core themes**, which spanned more than one research question. E.g., '**withdrawing**' was a subtheme within the theme '**reaction**'. Participants described '**withdrawing**' in how they viewed and experienced perfectionism, as well as being a barrier to seeking support.

CONCLUSION

The study found a positive correlation between interpersonal perfectionism and anxiety and depression. The only exception was for the **nondisclosure of imperfection** in males. The study also found no difference between males and females for interpersonal perfectionism; however, females experienced higher levels of **internalising behaviours** than males.

Phase two found that participants viewed perfectionism in others similarly to how they experienced perfectionism themselves. The six themes relate to current psychological models and theories, such as the **Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model** (Hewitt, Flett & Mikail, 2017), **self-determination theory** (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and '**fixed**' mindsets (Dweck, 2001). Further research is necessary to fully understand how perfectionism relates to these theories, and what **mediating or moderating factors** may influence whether perfectionism leads to negative outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Intervention should support **social networks** already present and include **environmental** elements.
- Individual **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy** can be adapted to better suit individuals experiencing perfectionism.
- **Educational Psychologists** can work with parents, school staff and other professionals to enhance their understanding of perfectionism, and how individuals can be supported.
- Perfectionism **measures** can easily be used in practice.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Investigate factors that may **mediate or moderate** the relationship between perfectionism and negative outcomes.
- Explore positive or '**adaptive**' perfectionism as well as 'maladaptive' perfectionism.
- Further investigate the role of social networks, specifically relating to actual or perceived **social disconnection**.
- **Larger samples** across multiple schools, school types and geographical locations.

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