Jus et Civitas	Vol. IX (LXXIII) No. 1/2022	8 - 18	A Journal of Social and Legal Studies

The influence of perfectionism on the school performance of young schoolchildren

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DOI: 10.51865/JETC.2022.1.02

Abstract

Perfectionism amongst young children is a phenomenon that has just recently become a topic for research. In a highly competitive society, orientation towards performance and the attainment of very high standards coincide with the necessity to create a perfect "self" for the child. In this context dominated by the interest to create optimised children, we can talk about the development of a type of behaviour with perfectionist tendencies, whose consequences have started to draw the researchers' attention during the past decades. Although perfectionism can be both positive and negative, research findings have shown that there are numerous factors that contribute to the development of maladaptive perfectionism in children, even from an early school age. The purpose of this research was to focus on the positive side of this personality trait by measuring the connection between the independent variable of perfectionism and the dependent variable of school performance, by also taking into consideration variables such as the parents' influence and the competitive spirit in the educational background. To this effect, the instrument we used to measure positive perfectionism was the Questionnaire on Orderliness [Q3 factor: Perfectionism] on a sample of 101 participants, both parents and children, whereas the instrument we used for competitiveness was the Competitiveness Scale Questionnaire [HICs] on a sample of 51 subjects, consisting only of fourth graders. The obtained data were organized in Excel spreadsheets based on the Pearson correlation coefficient, in order to establish the connection between the variables. The main result of this research is that the subjects focus on quantitative results and on developing strategies to get higher grades, rather than on an efficient learning process. This study has opened up numerous research opportunities on the topic of perfectionism in the young schoolchildren.

Keywords: perfectionism; school performance; competition

Introduction

Perfectionism has been ascribed several meanings – initially a one-dimensional construct, it has been assigned more dimensions starting with the work of Hamachek (1978). As regards its one-dimensional construct, the heralds of this orientation, such as Sigmund Freud (1926/1959), Karen Horney (1950), Aaron Becket (1976) and Albert Ellis (1962), considered perfectionism to be pathological in nature, and that perfectionism as a form of reaching very high performance standards was a consequence of the fear of failure driven by a low self-esteem, an exaggerated self-criticism, and a rigid, all-or-nothing manner of thinking, marked by the "tyranny of the shoulds" (Karen Horney), which characterised an individual with a highly critical attitude towards the behaviour of others, and who

couldn't rejoice or be satisfied when achieving his[1] standards. It has thus been considered that there was a link between perfectionism and psychopathology, as it could lead to anxiety, depression, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, somatic disorders (Shafran, Mansell, 2001, Hewitt, Flett, 2002) or psychological vulnerabilities to stress (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein & Gray, 1998, Hewitt & Flett, 2002).

In 1978, Hamachek established that perfectionism was multidimensional and defined it as a personality trait with both positive and negative consequences, by classifying it into normal and neurotic perfectionism. As a result, setting high standards implies a strong intrinsic motivation to achieve them, which characterizes normal perfectionists who accept and are aware of their limitations which interfere with the achievement of high, imposed goals, whereas neurotic perfectionists set high standards without accepting their limitations, because their strong desire for perfection is driven by the fear of failure and not by the achievement of self-actualization through excellence, thus proving an exaggerated self-criticism towards their own person. Researchers who have studied perfectionism have adopted Hamachek's theory on perceiving perfectionism from a multidimensional perspective.

According to Hewitt & Flett (1991), perfectionism has three profiles/dimensions:

- **Self-Oriented Perfectionism (SOP)** - self-motivated, imposing and complying with high standards;
- **Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism (SPP)** - focused on others, the child believes that others impose the high standards;
- **Other-Oriented Perfectionism (OOP)** - focused on others, setting high standards for others;

In its semantic evolution, the term has had different connotations, which picture a rather downwards trend caused by a "fracture" triggered by the difference between success and failure. The pressure to achieve excellence and the compliance with strict norms related to professionalism, creativity, success, competence come with a price people pay in the form of stress and anxiety. Achieving performance thus becomes an obsession in this social context, turning into a weapon that backfires on the individual by hindering his development. A new *philosophy of existence* is therefore considered necessary, which should state that the desire to succeed be healthy rather than obsessive, i.e. "we should work on our personal improvement without getting caught in the trap of perfectionism. We should accept our weaknesses and limitations. We should turn our backs on the illusions of super-humanity by accepting finitude. In short, this philosophy teaches us to come to terms with reality" (Lacroix, 2009, p. 157). It is therefore important to change the way we *look at* society and not just the way we *act* upon it.

Adler offers a positive approach to this personality trait; in his view, perfectionism meant "the need for excellence". This is reflected in the feelings of inferiority that the child develops by comparing himself to the adult. In Adler's view, this inclination towards excellence is a *driving force* of the person's behaviour which can either have positive consequences, by motivating the individual to develop himself in a healthy way, or develop into pathological forms when the individual tries to assert himself by demeaning other people in his ascent towards achieving personal excellence.

From Adler's perspective, the aspiration to perfection is a *hereditary reality,* specific to each individual, which however depends on the *successful adaptation* to the demands in

[1] *Gender Disclaimer: masculine pronouns have been used in this article for the ease of reading and should be construed as inclusive of both genders.*

the specific social context (Adler, 2020). He emphasised the importance of the social dimension on personality, stating that the way an individual relates to others is moulded by the innate potential of the individual. Neurotic egocentrism should not characterise the human being, as long as one has the freedom to choose one's fundamental goals and the methods one uses to achieve those goals. The way a child relates to the social environment represents his high or low capacity to be autonomous. According to Bandura, a child's perfectionist traits are a combination of his individual characteristics and the demands of his environment (Melero & Morales et al., 2020, *apud* Bandura, 1986). Developing a healthy sense of self and accepting the potential a child is born with, by developing his ability to think and make decisions, are the ways in which a child can shape his identity as a winner, by creating effective tools that he will use at any time to reconsider the difference between failing and learning from one's own mistakes. According to Bandura's social-cognitive theory, the social learning pattern highlights the social environment, the interactions between the individuals and the imitation leading to learning. Achieving success is a result of the child's ability to build confidence in his own strength, to have a high self-esteem, to face challenges and thus to increase his resilience to success and failure. Attaining one's human potential is possible when the child develops an authentic sense of self, by creating his own system of values, without the adult putting pressure on the child to create a perfect "self", perfectly oriented towards excessive competition and performance, thus mirroring the parenting model whereby the success of the child's becoming is actually a limitation in the creation of his own self (Levine, 2006, pp. 77-78, *apud* Berne, 2006, p. 183). The development of the child's perfectionist behaviour lies in the absence of defining the balance between success and failure. Efficiency is a result of the personal efforts an individual with strong intrinsic motivation makes, thus generating greater engagement in the learning activity, whereas achieving standards at any level, based on extrinsic motivation, increases the vulnerability of the sense of personal worth, resulting in a superficial attitude towards learning as a consequence of conditioning the individual. An increasing interest to provide a perfect image of the outstanding student results in the schoolchild's reduced effort to learn and in his developing strategies to get high grades or in his resistance to adult pressure expressed through getting low grades or rebellion, according to studies. An increasing level of efficiency implies acknowledging one's shortcomings and making a greater effort to overcome obstacles, whereas a lack of confidence in one's own abilities shows an increased inefficiency attributed to underdeveloped abilities and skills. An increased self-efficacy implies establishing a relationship directly proportional to the established high standards and the conscious, responsible attitude towards oneself (Pânișoară, 2019, p. 60, *apud* Anderson & Betz, 2001). Should one translate the two attitudes of efficiency and inefficiency into the two dimensions of perfectionism, one can easily associate the existence of a healthy, adaptive perfectionism with an increased self-efficacy and the development of the child's skills and competences through his personal effort, as well as a behaviour prone to maladaptive perfectionism characterized by self-criticism and giving a wrong meaning to one's own efforts.

Perspectives on perfectionism are extensive, but the accepted conclusion on this topic is that perfectionism is correlated with a plurality of values. In this respect, the values that define perfection are those that the individual should promote to the purpose of transcending his biological condition and forming truthful axiological principles. The individual's orientation to perfection is under the aegis of the socially defined ideal, and his failure is in fact *a shortfall of the social feeling*. "The problems of the present stem from the deficiencies of the social education. What impels us to strive for a higher level and to free ourselves from the failures of our public life and of our own personality is the

oppressed social feeling. We are entitled to hope that later on, when mankind indulges into taking the time for it, the force of social feeling shall triumph over all external obstacles" (Adler, 2020, p. 225). In other words, the evolution of social welfare is the result of the balance that the individual achieves from the interplay between the meaning he gives to life in general and the meaning he gives to his own life. The view on success and failure that the child internalizes within the family environment as a result of his parents' feedback regarding these two facets and of the attachment style in relation to his parents can be a cause that leads to today's child and tomorrow's adult developing perfectionist behaviour. The way we educate how one sets his goals and objectives in one's childhood is important because the self-image that the child develops on his path to self-realisation can trigger the development of a real self or of an ideal self.

Research findings on perfectionism have shown that the family environment and the parent's contribution to the development of the child's personality implicitly outline a fundamental framework within which the child can develop these perfectionist tendencies. What is worrying is that these results have reflected the development of maladaptive perfectionism in the child rather than positive, healthy perfectionism.

1.Methodology

1.1. Objectives

The main purpose of this research is to discover whether there is a link between the perfectionist tendencies of young schoolchildren and their school performance. Our intention was also to turn to the positive side of perfectionism, starting from the following hypothesis: *The stronger the perfectionist tendencies of schoolchildren, the higher their school performance.* In agreement with the aim of this research, the objectives were to identify the children with perfectionist and non-perfectionist tendencies within the group of young schoolchildren subject to our research, to recognize the parents' contribution to the surfacing of perfectionist tendencies, and to compare the children with perfectionist tendencies with those with non-perfectionist tendencies in terms of their competitive spirit regarding school performance.

1.2. Sample

This research was carried out in an urban school in Prahova county with a target group comprising young schoolchildren from two fourth grade classes and their parents. The target audience of the research is not specialized. 101 subjects were involved in the research, out of which 51 were young students, 20 from the first class and 31 from the second class, aged between 10 and 12 years, 29 boys and 22 girls, as well as 50 parents, aged between 28 and 47 years, out of which 13 male and 37 female.

1.3. Tools

Two research tools were used:

1. *The Orderliness* Scale

The scale was taken from the website http://www.researchcentral.ro/ and contains 10 items (describing how much the respondent wants to have absolute control and order, to persevere, to be strict and fair) with four possible answers: 'Never', 'Sometimes', 'Often', 'Always'. The first 5 items of the questionnaire are rated increasingly, and the next 5 items are reversed, which means they are rated decreasingly. As a consequence, for the first 5 items, 1 shows the minimum display of perfectionist behaviour in a child or parent,

respectively, and 4 represents the maximum display of perfectionist behaviour. For the reversed items, the rating is reversed.

2. *The Competitiveness* Scale

Taken from the website http://www.researchcentral.ro/, it contains 6 items (expresses preference for competition, autonomy), out of which the first three are rated increasingly, where 1 shows the minimum display of competitive spirit in the school environment, 5 - the maximum display of the competitive spirit. The last three items, which are reversed, are rated decreasingly.

1.4. Procedure

The questionnaires were submitted to the children physically, in the classroom, thus facilitating the understanding of the items by providing additional explanations necessary for the correct perception of the message. Furthermore, the parents were informed in their questionnaire that their answers are confidential and their participation voluntary. The time necessary for filling in the questionnaires was between 5 and 10 minutes.

2. Data analysis

In order to determine to what extent perfectionism is a personality trait of young learners and its connection to their school performance, we examined the connection between several variables, such as: perfectionism and parental influence, perfectionism and school performance, competitiveness and school performance. The data obtained from the subjects involved in the research to the purpose of calculating the variation between the mentioned variables were inserted in 4 Excel worksheets, each on two number columns, using the Pearson function to determine the meaning and the value of their correlation coefficient.

3. Obtained results and their interpretation

3.1. Variation in young schoolchildren's perfectionism in correlation with their parents' perfectionism

As regards the variation in schoolchildren's perfectionism in correlation with their parents' perfectionism, the Pearson correlation coefficient value obtained is $r = 0.21$, thus obtaining a positive, weak correlation, quite insignificant from a statistical point of view, considering the group of subjects in the research. The linear connection that was ascertained between these two variables is weak, but it can be seen that the obtained result has an upward direction, which allows us to postulate that the children's perfectionism has the tendency to increase compared to that of their parents.

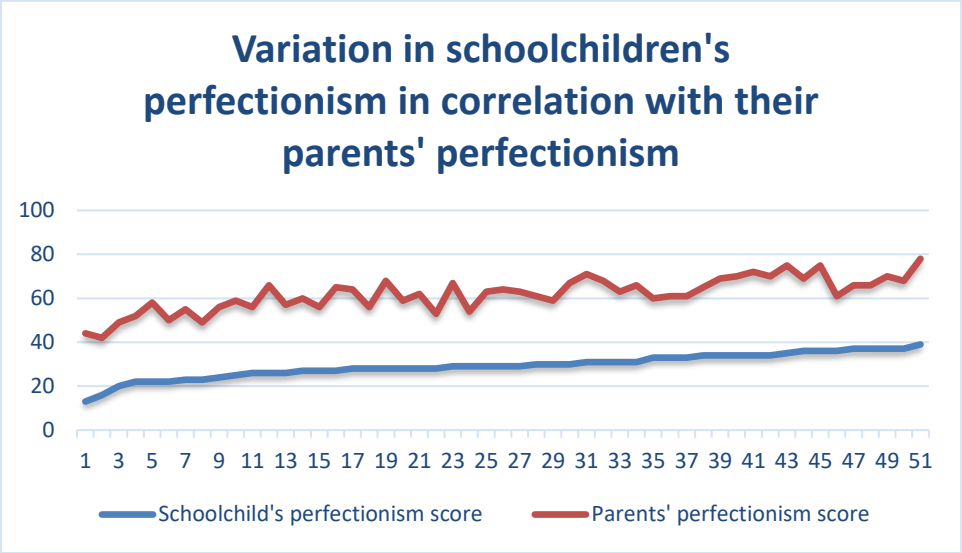


Fig. 1. Variation in schoolchildren's perfectionism in correlation with their parents' perfectionism

Research on perfectionism at the early school age has examined the connection between the parents' and the child's perfectionism, in that it is essential for explaining the child's mental health. It has thus been proven that perfectionist parents can influence the development of a perfectionist behaviour in the child, but also that in some cases there is no connection between the parents' and the child's perfectionism (Adelson & Wilson, 2009, *apud* Dekryger, 2006); a complete or partial lack of parental feedback is a prerequisite for the child developing a perfectionist behaviour, as well as the fact that the child receives his parents' approval only based on his school performance (idem, apud Hamachek, 1978). Other studies have shown that a child develops a perfectionist behaviour as a result of his need to receive the approval and affection of the parent he labels as critical, harsh, and dominated by the desire to control (Oros, et al., 2017, *apud* Affrunti & Woodruff-Borden, 2014, Cook & Kearney, 2009, Flett, Hewitt, et al., 2002). A research conducted by Serppe in 2010 on children in Argentina revealed that excessive parental expectations trigger perfectionism in children. Previous studies have shown that parents of perfectionist children cease to show affection towards their own child if that child does not meet their expectations of high performance (Oros, et al., 2017, 2003, *apud* Flett et al., 2002). Research on the development of negative child perfectionism in relation to the parenting style has shown that an authoritarian parenting style is very likely the cause of this behaviour (Craddock, Church & Sands, 2009). According to McArdle & Duda (2004), parents who focus on achieving high standards educate their children by use of punishment and create an environment that favours the emergence of this personality trait of the child, as opposed to parents who engage in daily activities with their children. As stated by Verner - Fillion & Gaudrean (2010), parents with a high perfectionism (SOP) regard their children's successes as insignificant, and even reject them. Other research on perfectionism has shown that high personal standards and organization contribute to the development of adaptive traits that result in achieving the school objectives (Kornblum & Ainley, 2005, *apud* Flett et al., 1995) or, on the contrary, lead to pathology associated traits ((Kornblum & Ainley, 2005, *apud* Lynd-Stevenson & Hearne, 1999).

In our current research, following the calculation of the score to identify perfectionists among children and parents, we have identified several directions we can focus on when interpreting this variable, among which we can mention: the parents' perfectionism does not influence the development of a perfectionist behaviour in children, as the scores

obtained by children are low compared to those obtained by parents; parents' perfectionism influences the development of perfectionist behaviour in children, and it is necessary to study several variables that play a part in the development of this personality trait; parents with an average level of perfectionism whose children have a high level of perfectionism, which makes it interesting to observe which factors trigger the development of the child's perfectionist behaviour and whether the parents' perfectionism grows simultaneously with the child's perfectionism; parents with a high level of perfectionism and children with an average level of perfectionism.

3.2. Variation in school results in correlation with the children's perfectionism

Another aspect that is well established refers to the connection between a child's perfectionism and his school results, with the purpose to determine to what extent the development of this personality trait is influenced by the school grading system. The Pearson coefficient value is r = 0.59. It can thus be stated that there is a positive connection between the children's perfectionism and their school results. One can note that there is a moderate linear connection between the two variables, with an ascending trend of the results the child obtains, which allows us to say that the perfectionist tendencies of the children increase in conjunction with their school results.

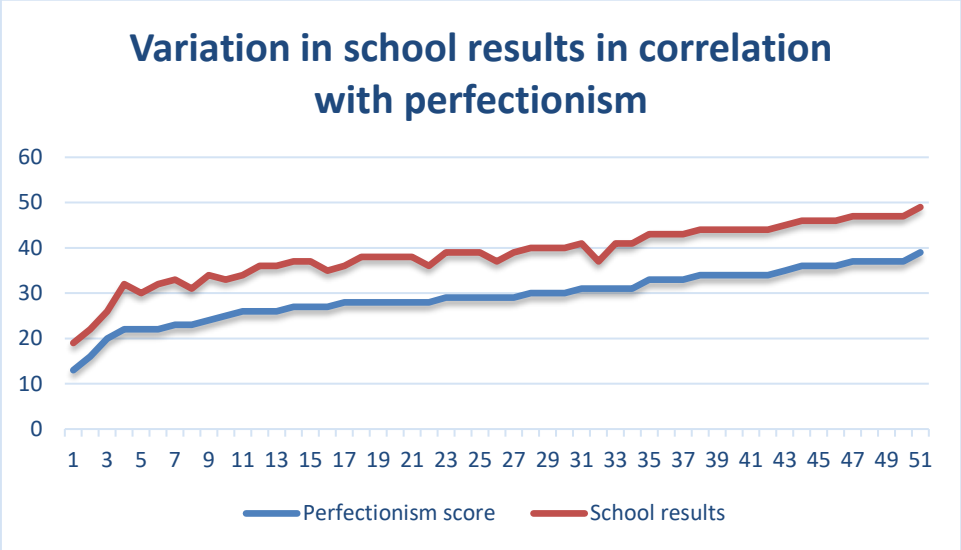


Fig. 2.- Variation in school results in correlation with the children's perfectionism

This research has shown us that parents tend to take a keen interest in their child's school results. Studies related to parents' control have shown that the more they want to control their children, the less they are able to do so, and, without generalising, those *perfect* children raised in an authoritarian style actually live a double life, learning how to be sly (Kohn, 2013, p. 51). Likewise, there are parents who strive to find a balance between what their child can do and their child's school results, reinforcing the idea that good results can only be achieved through effort, and, on the other hand, there are parents who are not involved in their children's school activity and whose children do not perform in school. We believe that these aspects require a more thorough research to find out how the relationship between adult subjects and their children influences the children's school performance.

3.3. Variation in competitiveness in correlation with the school results of young learners

Statistically, the negative value of the correlation coefficient r = -0.0056 means that there is a very weak to zero inverse correlation between the competitiveness variable and that of school results. The linear connection between the two variables is very weak.

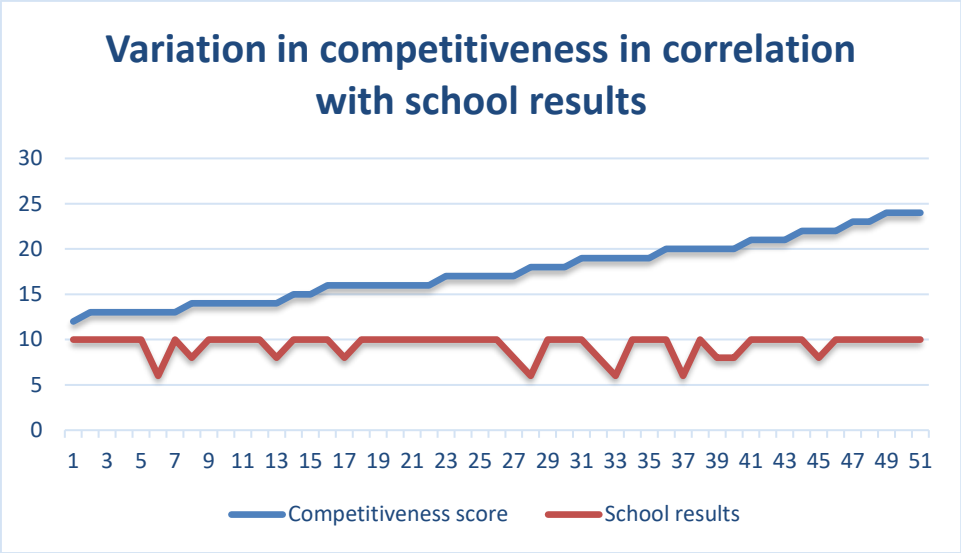


Fig. 3. Variation in competitiveness in correlation with school results

This correlation is not statistically significant and might suggest that research should focus on the hypothesis that there might not necessarily be a connection between competition and school results**.** If the student comes to school to learn, then he already has a strong motivation to perform. Should we take into consideration that the student is learning for grades, we may say that the above result could reflect strategies that the student adopts when learning to get high grades. The current education system based on passin g several tests has encouraged students to adopt strategies that help them get the grades they want, which then explains why the result obtained based on the analysis of the two variables is not quite clear.

3.4. Variation in school perfectionism in correlation with competitiveness

The correlation coefficient obtained by calculating the school perfectionism score and the competitiveness score is r = 0.23, which shows a positive, but weak correlation. The linear connection established between the two variables is weak, but the graphic result has an ascending trend, which allows us to say that, in this case too, the competitiveness variable can increase along with the perfectionism variable.

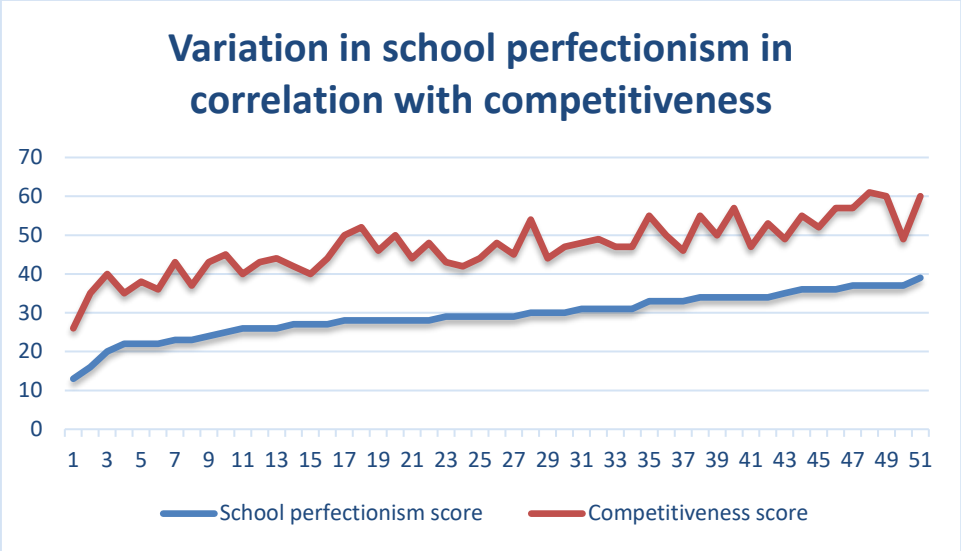


Fig. 4 Graphical representation of the variation in school perfectionism in correlation with competitiveness

Oros and Serppe (2017, *apud* Franchi, 2010) state that child's competitive spirit has been associated with setting high standards. A child's perfectionist tendencies grow when he shows a desire to compete. Under these circumstances, the child manifests a strong desire to excel in his work. However, we should not make it a rule that competitiveness needs to be associated with positive perfectionism, since the study conducted on the children in Argentina by Oros and Serppe (2017), which also took into account their form of operationalization, showed that self-imposed high standards are, in fact, vulnerable factors that predict the development of negative perfectionism.

The result obtained indicates a new research focus within the school environment, in order to observe whether there is a strong connection between perfectionism and competitiveness, as measured in the context of group/individual tasks involving competition, or whether they occur independently and in which contexts. In the present case, it can be noticed that there is an ascending connection between the two variables, but factors such as motivation, self-esteem, stress, fear of failure also intervene between them, which may provide another direction in their interpretation. To exemplify this statement, we take into consideration the calculated scores showing that it is not a prerequisite for perfectionists to be competitive, since their comparative results vary greatly.

Conclusions

Research in the past decades has paid particular attention to perfectionism, as it has been scientifically proven to be a cause of anxious, neurotic behaviour in children, adolescents and tomorrow's adults. It can have a positive side when parents properly manage perfectionist tendencies, helping their children to set achievable, long-term standards, that do not lead to excessive self-criticism, and help them understand that mistakes are characteristic to human nature and that good results are achieved through constant effort.

Taking into account the obtained results, we may underline that the hypothesis of the current research is partially confirmed, while this statement is supported by the necessity to study more variables influencing the development of perfectionism. The result we obtained from the research shows that, without generalising, some students come to

school to get grades and not to learn how to learn, and thus satisfy the need to achieve performance, as imposed by their parents. The conclusion is that grades are the stake of the bet that parents play with their own children, while the picture of modern society actually reflects that the children's school performance is a prize for their parents' accomplishment. We should in fact promote the process – the effort, the intellectual bravery and curiosity - and not the outcome, while children should be helped to discover how they can internalise the desire to learn *for themselves.* Perfectionist tendencies can therefore be seen as a cause for increasing a child's school performance. However, it is important to inspect under which conditions these perfectionist tendencies take shape, while also taking into account other variables such as motivation, self-esteem, fear of failure, for example, or by investigating both qualitative, observable aspects and quantitative, measurable aspects of the schoolchildren's performance.

Limitations and future research directions

A first limitation of the current research could be the insufficient number of instruments used. It is necessary to apply a scale to investigate to what extent the other variables, motivation, self-esteem, fear of failure, parental style, temperament, and conscientiousness, influence the development of perfectionism in children. Another limitation was the lack of advanced knowledge of statistics, meaning that more calculations could have been made to more accurately indicate how dependant one variable is on another. As a result, the interpretations we made are more likely to indicate future research directions rather than conclusions that clearly show the connection between variables. The small sample could also be considered a limitation, although we don't insist upon it, since the same scores could have resulted from a larger sample. Investigating the dimensions of perfectionism in the young schoolchild and his parents is another research direction, which can show what dimension is more prominent and how it interacts with the parents' perfectionism. In a future research we will consider all these aspects, including the improvement of statistical knowledge in order to provide accurate conclusions on the variables we used. Another important limitation was the lack of studies carried out in Romania on this topic, and the scarce bibliographic resources on perfectionism. The theoretical and practical research on perfectionism has shown that it is a real problem, which is considered to have already become widespread among children and especially among adolescents. We therefore believe that it is necessary to take a greater interest in researching it, so that the causes of perfectionism can be discovered early on and not during adolescence, when its effects strongly affect the teenagers' mental health.

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Influența perfecționismului asupra performanțelor școlare ale școlarului mic

Rezumat

Cercetarea perfecționismului în rândul copiilor de vârstă mică a devenit un fenomen recent studiat. Într-o societate extrem de competitivă, orientarea către performanță și atingerea unor standarde foarte înalte coincid cu necesitatea creării unui" sine" perfect al copilului. În acest context al interesului pentru crearea unor copii optimizați, vorbim despre dezvoltarea unui comportament cu tendințe perfecționiste al acestora ale cărui consecințe au început să atragă atenția cercetătorilor în ultimele decenii.Deși perfecționismul poate fi atât pozitiv, cât și negativ, rezultatele obținute în urma cercetărilor au arătat că există numeroase cauze care contribuie la dezvoltarea perfecționismului maladaptiv al copilului încă de la vârsta școlarității mici. Scopul cercetării actuale a fost orientarea spre latura pozitivă a acestei trăsături de personalitate prin măsurarea relației dintre variabila independentă a perfecționismului și cea dependentă a performanțelor școlare, luând în considerare și variabile precum influența părinților și spiritul competitiv în context educațional. În acest sens, pentru măsurarea acestuia, am utilizat drept instrument chestionarul Atitudine Ordonată [Factorul Q3:Perfecționism], având un eșantion de 101 participanți, format din părinți și copii, iar pentru competitivitate am utilizat drept instrument chestionarul – Scala Competitivitate [HICs], pe un eșantion de 51 de subiecți format doar din elevii clasei a IV-a. Datele obținute au fost organizate în tabele în Excel, folosind coeficientul de corelație Pearson pentru a stabili relația dintre variabile. Orientarea spre obținerea rezultatelor cantitative și dezvoltarea strategiilor pentru obținerea notelor și nu pentru învățarea eficientă reprezintă principalele rezultate ale cercetării actuale. Acest studiu a deschis numeroase oportunități de cercetare asupra subiectului perfecționismului la școlarul mic.