Perfectionist Behavior and Expressions of Perfectionism in Drawings of Kindergarteners

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Abstract

Results based on two consecutive qualitative studies are documented in this paper. The first study focused on perfectionist characteristics in drawings of fifth graders. The second study was designed based on the findings from the earlier study, but it focused on drawings of kindergarteners at this time. Children's drawings were analyzed to see meaningful connections between their behavioral perfectionism scores and their drawing characteristics. Findings were partly consistent with the literature and revealed that perfectionist behavior may have meaningful expressions in the art-making process and in artworks. Working on specific details meticulously, focusing on time-consuming details, not being able to see the whole, spending too much time on certain parts, and starting from details, were described as perfectionism-related characteristics. As an emerging characteristic, self-doubt, a lesser degree of determination, assurance and boldness in drawings are positively correlated with perfectionism. Subjects' age group may be a significant factor to study perfectionism, and lower grade levels may not be suitable to study perfectionism through drawings because of their artistic developmental levels.

Keywords: *perfectionism, kindergarten, artworks, perfectionism and art, art, perfectionist*

Statement of the Problem and the Questions Considered

Perfectionism has been studied within its dimensions in the literature and often defined as adaptive or maladaptive in its nature (Hamachek, 1978; Reis, 2002; LoCicero et al., 2001; Rice et al., 1997; Stornelli et al., 2009). As described in a study (Stornelli et al., 2009), perfectionism can manifest itself as adaptive or maladaptive in a particular domain based on the student's competence and associated capabilities. It was also suggested that parenting styles could have an effect on the creativity and perfectionism of high-ability and high-achieving young adults, in particular authoritarian and permissive styles. A positive relationship was found between socially prescribed perfectionism and authoritarian parenting styles (Miller et al., 2012).

While many studies stressed maladaptive characteristics of perfectionism, some studies claimed otherwise and noted positive characteristics (Tofaha & Ramon, 2010; DiPrima et al., 2011). Tofaha & Ramon (2010) noted that Self-oriented perfectionism was associated with an enhanced general self-worth and increased academic self-concept in mathematics, reading and general school. Adelson (2007) noted various manifestations of perfectionism as a potent force and suggested channeling that perfectionist behavior into creative venues.

Stornelli et al. (2009) studied the happiness and perfectionism relationship in fourth and seventh graders and found a robust association between socially prescribed perfectionism and fear and sadness in art students. Nugent (2000) suggested art activities as another modality that may aid in the affective counseling and cognitive restructuring of perfectionist students as an affective and creative outlet. Lack of research and evidence of association of perfectionism with student artworks inspired this study. The findings from my previous study (Basak, 2009) on fifth graders and the current study carried out in a kindergarten classroom are expected to show connections between aspects of perfectionism, children's artworks and children's behavior in the art classroom. As concluded in my previous study, study of students' artworks has potential to identify perfectionism as another source of information about artistically talented students (Basak, 2009). The presented study is a follow-up of the previous study (Basak, 2009) and aimed to explore connections between children's perfectionist behavior and their artworks in a kindergarten classroom. The findings from the previous study helped to develop an instrument— Perfectionism Observation Checklist (POC) — and evaluation criteria to analyze children's drawings in terms of perfectionist features.

The purpose of this study was to understand expressions of the perfectionist trait in children's artworks and if possible to understand whether or not the char-

acteristics of children's artworks can be used to identify perfectionism without using personality inventories. This study aims to address the following research questions:

- What may be perfectionist characteristics in children's artworks in the kindergarten classroom?
- Can perfectionist behavior be identified through children's artworks without using personality inventories?

Research Methodology

After a detailed review of the items on 15 different perfectionism measures, Stairs et al. (2012) identified nine uni-dimensional personality traits represented in those measures that contribute to perfectionist behavior (Order, Satisfaction, Details and Checking, Perfectionism toward Others, High Standards, Black and White Thinking about Tasks and Activities, Perceived Pressure from Others, Dissatisfaction, and Reactivity to Mistakes).

Perfectionist tendencies of students and their artworks were examined in relation to their observed perfectionism scores. Perfectionism Observation Checklist (POC) was developed based on my earlier study (Basak, 2009), which used the Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale—AMPS— (Rice & Preusser, 2002). The study was designed as a qualitative study based on content analysis of student artworks; in addition to use of qualitative methods, a behavioral checklist—POC—was employed, which was developed based on a quantitative instrument (AMPS). Qualitative methods were employed to collect, analyze, and interpret data, which consisted of classroom observations and student artworks.

The current study adapted a phenomenological approach as a form of qualitative inquiry. The focus is the essence or structure of a personality trait, perfectionism, as a phenomenon, as an expression in student artworks (Merriam, 1998). There is an essence or essences to drawing exercises, these essences are the core meanings mutually understood through the phenomenon of perfectionism. The experiences of the participants were bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

The study was conducted in a public elementary school kindergarten classroom in Bursa, Turkey. The selected group included 21 students, 10 girls and 11 boys. The age range in the sample group was between 55–66 months and the median age was 65 months. Purposive, convenience random sampling was used based on the purposes of the study. Mainly qualitative methodologies were employed in this study

since the focus of investigation is human behavior and communication through artistic expression. In this study, previously suggested perfectionist behavioral characteristics (Basak, 2009) were adapted to structure POC and collected data is still qualitative in nature. The POC included the following questions, designed as a five-range Likert instrument:

1. Cares what others think about him/her.
2. Feels jealousy when others do something better.
3. Expresses sensitivity to mistakes.
4. Sees a finished work as incomplete.
5. Does not enjoy group work.
6. Focuses on details but has difficulty seeing the big picture.
7. Experiences problems with time management and organization.
8. Has difficulty expressing feelings, emotions; seems rather rational.
9. Focuses on results, does not enjoy the process.
10. Does not show flexibility in his/her actions or behavior.
11. Has difficulty starting and finishing tasks.
12. Shows distress when working on a task.
13. Tendency to procrastinate.
14. Makes generalizations when talking and thinking about a subject.
15. Shows obsession in specific things.
16. Prefers precise and mechanical objects and forms, rather than organic shapes and forms.
17. Experiences problems with concentration.

Analysis

The children's artworks were collected, categorized, and then analyzed based on themes as instructed by the classroom teacher's regular curriculum. Analysis of artworks within the same themes was convenient, because each theme, topic or unit would have varying characteristics and so would not be appropriate for comparison otherwise.

The previous study (Basak, 2009) suggested 17 characteristics to be observed in student artworks in relation to perfectionism and its sub-dimensions. The AMPS was originally developed for a different age group (fourth and fifth graders) and would not have been appropriate to be administered to kindergarteners. Therefore, instead of using that scale, artwork characteristics and behavior suggested in my earlier study (Basak, 2009) was adapted to develop an observation checklist.

Each item in the POC is related to one or more sub-dimensions of perfectionism as described in the AMPS. 17-item POC cumulative score and sub-dimension scores are calculated separately.

Perfectionism scores of 21 children, based on 17-item POC are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Children's perfectionism scores based on 17-item observation checklist

Student #	Age (month)	Perfectionism Sub-Category scores				Total Score
		1	2	3	4	
1	66	23	18	31	7	40
2	62	19	13	24	6	34
3	65	22	17	27	8	42
4	60	14	11	16	6	24
	70	11	8	12	4	18
6	69	10	9	15	5	24
7	69	16	7	16	3	21
8	72	16	10	20	7	28
9	65	23	15	29	7	38
10	59	19	15	26	5	32
11	64	23	17	32	7	42
12	61	21	13	26	7	36
13	64	18	6	19	4	26
14	55	19	16	27	5	34
15	65	21	17	27	7	38
16	65	19	17	29	8	41
17	58	22	18	31	7	42
18	71	17	11	22	5	30
19	58	27	26	39	11	55
20	65	21	14	27	6	36
21	57	21	15	29	5	38

N: 21

Categories: 1: Sensitivity to mistakes; 2: Contingent Self-Esteem; 3: Compulsiveness; 4: Need for Admiration

Validity

Drawing of correct conclusions based on the qualitative data was crucial for validity. There are a number of available perfectionism instruments in the literature. The reason why the AMPS (Rice & Preusser, 2002) was considered to categorize expected drawing characteristics in this study was the availability of only one previous study (Basak, 2009) that considered student artworks related to perfectionism. Therefore, the phenomenological approach was considered as an appropriate method. 31 drawing characteristics were described and classified in the previous study (Basak, 2009) and in the literature. Each drawing characteristic is related to one or more sub-dimensions of perfectionism. However, only 18 characteristics were appropriate and applicable to kindergarten level artworks. These 18 characteristics were further classified to clarify concrete and observable drawing features. 18 characteristics were classified under 9 categories that are applicable to drawing analysis of the kindergarten level. These 9 observable drawing characteristics for lower grade levels are:

1. Less expressiveness, mechanical rationality, rigid drawings. Lower spontaneity and non-flexible drawings characteristics.
2. Attention and time over little mistakes.
3. Slow task performance, unfinished works as a result.
4. Signs of boredom and lack of concentration, sometimes resulting in unfinished works.
5. Working on specific details meticulously. Focusing on time consuming details, not being able to see the whole. Spending too much time working on certain parts, starting from details.
6. Drawing contour lines and borders. Outlining colors due to fear of blending different colors.
7. Attention to following borderlines; not breaking rules or orders. Painting through edges of paper.
8. Attention to creating smoothly painted areas.
9. Preference of precise forms, objects, lines. Feeling confused when drawing organic, imprecise forms, shapes. Sometimes not completing imprecise forms in a drawing.

Analyzed portfolios involved over 280 drawings with 15 drawings from each child. Each artistic portfolio underwent an analysis of these items. It was found that not all 9 items were distinctive in children's artworks. It may be that the classroom art practices and the curriculum decided by the teacher are mostly coloring practices and did not involve free representations and self-expressions of drawings

and paintings. Yavuzer (1992) described this period as a pre-schematic stage, in which drawing representations are not personalized yet, and they show schematic and familiar shapes and figures. These representations are just schematic and not shaped by culture or logic yet (p.41). As a result, it was observed that these 9 items were not all distinctive in their drawings. Further analysis revealed only 4 items to be distinctive and observable in their drawings. These characteristics are:

- Rigid, non-flexible drawing characteristics.
- Working on specific details meticulously. Focusing on time-consuming details, not being able to see the whole. Spending too much time working on certain parts, starting from details.
- Attention to following borderlines; not breaking rules or orders. Painting through edges of paper.
- Attention to creating smoothly painted areas.

Items 2, 3, 4, 6, 9 were either eliminated or merged as one item since they were not distinctive for the current artworks analyzed. The artworks were analyzed in terms of each characteristic to see whether or not it is observed, and if so, to what degree on a Likert scale. Each score gathered from the analysis of characteristics was then compared with the child's related cumulative perfectionism score and the scores from four sub-dimensions.

Findings

A Likert rating scale was used for each observable characteristic to measure whether or not a certain characteristic is observed, and if so, to what extent it is observed. The data collected through POC revealed differences within this group in terms of perfectionist behavior. Expressiveness is usually seen as effective conveying of thoughts and feelings. What is expressiveness in an artwork may be even more difficult to understand. For example, an expressive artwork is usually expected to convey the artist's own ideas, emotions and thoughts with less conscious/unconscious, external distractions and limitations. External distractions and limitations include psychological, social and/or cultural influences. Perfectionist behavior also involves perception of higher external limitations such as higher parental expectations. In most cases, a perfectionist individual has very high expectations even from themselves. Setting unrealistic goals and expectations most of the time turns into limiting behavior and so the person becomes more self-conscious. Self-consciousness manifests itself as less expressiveness and less impulsiveness in drawings. Therefore, as suggested in my earlier study (Basak,

2009), a lesser degree of expressiveness and less spontaneity are expected from a person with perfectionist tendencies.

One of the most obvious signs seems to be expressive characteristics in a drawing. The higher a child's perfectionism score, the lesser expressiveness in his or her artwork is expected. Spontaneity is also another key term related to perfectionism in artworks. Spontaneity means being performed or occurring as a result of a sudden inner impulse or inclination and without premeditation or an external stimulus. It is also linked to perfectionism (Basak, 2009), as perfectionist inclinations are less spontaneous since perfectionist expectations could be stimuli that interrupt the natural flow of expression in art creation. It is not surprising that in the current study there was a meaningful connection between expressiveness and spontaneity, and perfectionism scores. The drawings in this classroom were mostly coloring activities with fewer free drawings and representations. In this sense, the expressive nature of painting printed areas between lines was the only chance to determine expressiveness and spontaneity. Surprisingly, the children with higher perfectionism scores tended to paint in a carefree manner without giving it much thought or interest. They apparently showed less motivation in their artworks. Their lines were mostly scattered and less determined compared to the children with lower perfectionism scores. This was not expected since perfectionism is usually thought to be more determination and care toward perfection. In Figure 1 and in Figure 2, two children's artworks can be compared in terms of expressive characteristics. The first child has a very high perfectionism score (42) compared to the other (24). In addition, these children's compulsiveness and sensitivity to mistakes category scores were respectively correlated with their overall scores.

In another example, two children with higher and lower perfectionism scores are compared in terms of their painting manner (Figure 3 and 4). The first child has a very high perfectionism score (41) compared to the other (24). In addition, these children's compulsiveness and sensitivity to the mistakes category scores were respectively correlated with their overall scores. It may be that perfectionist behavior causes possible self-doubt, a lesser degree of determination, assurance and boldness. In this case, instead of searching for only expressive features in a drawing, perhaps we should also look for and compare signs of self-assurance and boldness.

In another example, we can see how careless and/or unmotivated a child is (Figure 5). He shows no control over color. There might be various reasons for this uncontrolled drawing. Interestingly, he shows similar careless and out-of-control manner in all his drawings. He scored distinctively high (55) on POC and he was also diagnosed with ADHD. In such cases it is difficult to identify whether his drawings are related to some form of perfectionism or his manner is rooted to

Figure 1. Child #11, score 42, age: 64 months.

Figure 2. Child #6, score: 24, Age: 69 months.

Figure 3. Child #16, Score: 41, 65 months.

Figure 4. Child #6, Score: 24, 69 months.

Figure 5. Child #19, Score: 55, Age: 58 months.

ADHD itself; or it might be both. Further analysis, behavioral observation, and parental reports may be required to identify this kind of children. It should also be noted that a high percentage of children with ADHD has been diagnosed incorrectly. Although ADHD has been a popular condition in the literature for decades, it also has to be reminded that ADHD is a fictitious disease and the name father of ADHD, Leon Eisenberg, admitted in 2009 that there was no such condition (Dean, 2013). It may also be the case that highly talented children develop higher incidence of symptoms that are similar to those of so-called ADHD, if these symptoms are not diagnosed (Silverman, 1994). As described in the literature, a maladaptive form of perfectionism is related to many disorders (Orange, 1997; Hamachek, 1978; Reis, 2002) and ADHD could be just one of them in some cases as well.

In general, spontaneity and expressiveness in children's artworks are two characteristics to observe. However, adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists might show differences in their drawing manners in terms of spontaneity and expressiveness. Perhaps further studies regarding adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism and their drawing characteristics are needed. As an emerging characteristic, we should perhaps look for self-doubt, a lesser degree of determination, assurance and boldness in drawings associated with perfectionism.

It should also be noted that most of the artworks available in this classroom were coloring activities of printed coloring books. Not many self-completed drawings were available. Further analysis of children's other drawings may be helpful. In addition, especially the child with the diagnosed ADHD showed no care following borderlines; painting through all areas. In this case, it is difficult to conclude that these drawing characteristics are specific to children with perfectionist tendencies.

Discussion

Perfectionism is a complex phenomenon and typical personality inventories have been used. It may also be suggested that child drawings and artworks can reveal useful information about the nature of children and childhood. However, the complex nature of child drawings causes limitations and empirical approaches are very difficult to employ in analysis. Drawing a direct conclusion to make a connection with perfectionism is difficult since perfectionism sub-scores showed differences. Especially, adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism might differ greatly when manifested in children's drawings. Furthermore, sub-categories of perfectionism such as sensitivity to mistakes and compulsiveness are two greatly distinctive traits; they may manifest themselves differently and also contribute to

perfectionism. However, self-doubt, lesser degrees of determination, assurance and boldness in drawings may be associated with perfectionism. Larger scale applications of multidimensional perfectionism instruments and then follow-up studies with phenomenological approaches to children's drawings may be helpful to explore perfectionism in drawings. The child's sense of competence in artistic activities may be another factor to consider. Children in this particular age group are at the pre-schematic stage; similar studies on child drawings based on later developmental stages are suggested.

Working on specific details meticulously, focusing on time-consuming details, not being able to see the whole, spending too much time working on certain parts, and starting from detail were described as perfectionism-related characteristics. In the current study, similar tendencies were reported in behavioral observation. However, some children showed opposite manners such as not focusing on detail; not starting from detail; not spending required time working on details. It might also be that self-doubt and less determination caused such a drawing, and also it seems unfinished as expected from perfectionists. Again, it should be noted that adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism might show differing characteristics.

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