



Overcoming perfectionism:

practical ways to maintain high standards
while also allowing yourself to be human

Introduction

What drives you to be a good school leader?

Is 'good enough' ever good enough or do you find yourself striving for 'perfect'?

A common driver for many working in education is perfectionism. Perhaps it is what leads them into teaching in the first place, or perhaps it is part of the culture in schools. Just as students are often encouraged to focus on the top grades and not just on getting a pass, education staff are often looking to 'do better'. Does this sound familiar to you?

Everyone has probably met a school leader who is seemingly perfect. Their work is exemplary: accurate, well-prepared with great attention to detail while the projects they manage are well-organised. They have contingency plans in place, monitor progress against objectives and rarely miss a deadline. Perhaps you're that leader? Or perhaps they are your close colleague?



But, if we unveil the layers of what it is to be a superhuman leader, what do we think we'll find? High standards and great work, of course! But what's the other side? Is it effortless to be that perfect? Does perfection provide the space to be authentic and a whole human being?

Now think of yourself. Do you feel the pressure to be perfect? What do you worry will happen if you're not perfect? It's an important thing to consider because the simple fact is that, none of us are perfect. No lesson plan, pupil, day or teacher can ever be perfect. So why do we strive for perfection? Should we start allowing ourselves to make mistakes (we are only human after all?!).

What do we mean by perfectionism?

According to Psychology Today, perfectionism can be placed into two categories, One which motivates us to succeed and one that holds us back and puts us in a 'failure mindset' which can be damaging to our wellbeing if left unchecked:

“ Perfectionism is a trait that makes life an endless report card on accomplishments or looks. When healthy, it can be self-motivating and drive you to overcome adversity and achieve success. When unhealthy, it can be a fast and enduring track to unhappiness

When perfectionism inspires action and motivates people to be better (without impacting their self-esteem), it can be understood in a positive light. However, when it starts causing anxiety, stress, and negative self-belief because people feel terrified to make mistakes or under-perform, it takes a destructive turn.



Striving for perfection is a good thing—isn't it?

There really is no simple answer to this question! While research shows us there are differing ways to be a perfectionist, the truth is that 'perfect' is an impossible state to reach as a human being.

In some cases, perfectionism has been linked with:

-  Hopefulness
-  Greater levels of satisfaction in life
-  More positive family relationships
-  Less stress and burnout

In other cases, the pursuit of perfectionism has been linked to:

-  The use of unhealthy coping processes
-  Increased procrastination
-  Increased levels of depression
-  Diminished satisfaction in life
-  Heightened levels of perceived stress
-  Increased vulnerability to burnout

So, if you're wondering if your perfection is helping, or holding you back, the first thing to consider is how your perfectionism is showing up. It's worth noting that everyone is different. There is a spectrum of experiences but becoming aware of whether you have perfectionist tendencies, and consciously considering how they affect your life is a good first step towards giving yourself a break.

Letting go: black and white thinking

As a perfectionist, black and white thinking can be a common occurrence as we strive to achieve the impossible state of perfect. A machine may be able to perform tasks without error, but as a human being you were never intended to be perfect!

It can be liberating to find life's shades of grey and accept that things are often complicated. Letting go of rigid, all or nothing thinking is one strategy you can use to stop yourself trying to fit into unattainable categories.

Try challenging some of your own black and white thinking on our table below:



Black and white

As a school leader I am expected to deliver excellence in leadership and school management at all times

There is so much to do. I need to fit as much into my school day as possible.

My colleagues are either good or bad. If they say something wrong they are toxic.

If I don't handle everything perfectly and on time (HR procedures, appraisals, budgeting) I am a failure.

I am responsible for the happiness of my staff. If they are unhappy at work it is my fault.



Shades of grey

It is not realistic for any one person to deliver excellence at all times. I do not need to be super-human every day!

There is lots to do, but I also need to allow myself time for breaks and rest throughout the day. It will stop me burning out and I will be better at my job in the long run.

As human beings we are complex and sometimes we make mistakes.

I am not expected to know and do everything. I am part of a team and it is okay to ask for help.

I can promote a good work climate and good teamwork, but I am not solely responsible for my staff's happiness.

Why is perfection so prevalent in education?

We know that school leaders are under increasing amounts of pressure. But there are many reasons why striving for perfection might be so prevalent in schools. For one thing, school leaders care deeply about their pupils, staff and the purpose of their work. This is one of the things that makes working in education such a rewarding career, but it can also make it tricky to accept human errors, and promote a culture of constantly striving, no matter the cost.

Some other reasons perfectionism that might show-up in schools include:

- Feeling of deep responsibility towards pupils' futures
- The pressure and sense of collective responsibility of Ofsted or inspection results.
- Feeling like having too many people to please i.e. pupils, parents, colleagues, SLT, governors
- Exam results, and seeing them as a reflection of your professional skills
- Lack of focus on prioritising your own mental health during teacher training
- Working within a school culture that doesn't allow for mistakes
- Not having a psychological safe environment where challenges and issues can be aired
- Experiencing persistent barriers to promotion, due to discrimination
- Difficult emotions arising from social media comparisons

If you struggle with perfectionism, do you know what drives it? Do any of these pressures above resonate with you? Take a moment to list any other pressures you face on a day-to-day basis that might contribute to your perfectionism.

We'd also love to hear your thoughts on perfectionism on Twitter and Instagram @EdSupportUK



What do we mean by inner critic?

Most of us experience inner commentary or an inner 'voice' about who we are and how we behave. Or inner critic is mostly developed during childhood and influenced by those around us. And while it is normal to have some critical thoughts about ourselves, a highly critical inner voice can lead to low self-esteem and negatively affect our mental wellbeing.

How to reach out before you burnout

Struggling with anxiety and the immense pressure to perform can feel daunting. Sometimes it can feel hard to know where to look for support. In these moments, return to this list, to remind yourself of possible sources of support:

1 Education Support

Your school has invested in our EAP package to help you if you need support. You can speak to a qualified counsellor at any time, 24/7. Call us on 08000 856 148 day or night and we'll listen.

2 Colleagues, friends and family

In a school environment it's common for discussions with senior staff to focus on student outcomes rather than factoring in the experience of those in front of the classroom. Remind yourself that it is completely reasonable to ask colleagues to prioritise time to talk about you too!

Ultimately, it will be hard for you to look out for your pupils and their learning if you are stressed out and unwell. Research has shown that talking about your experiences with someone you trust such as a friend or family member can help. It can allow you to turn abstract feelings into tangible insights into what you're going through. Talking to someone can help you to label your emotions, which may allow you to understand them and take action or move forward.

Talking more openly to others about how you're feeling may feel uncomfortable at first, especially if you're not used to showing vulnerability. Start with small steps until your confidence grows and try different approaches until you find what works best for you. At first it might be useful to write down your thoughts and feelings.

Resource sources:

1. <https://www.harleytherapy.co.uk/perfectionism-help-guide.htm>
2. <https://nopanic.org.uk/perfectionism/>
3. <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/4dwschools/>
4. <https://www.teachertoolkit.co.uk/2022/02/20/teacher-stress/>
5. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/10/09/overcoming-the-leadership-perfection-problem/>
6. <https://kappanonline.org/teacher-stress-balancing-demands-resources-mccarthy/>
7. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5820411_Perfectionism_in_school_teachers_Relations_with_stress_appraisals_coping_styles_and_burnout
8. <https://psychcentral.com/blog/imperfect/2019/07/reflective-questions-to-help-you-quiet-your-inner-perfectionist#Your-perfectionism-has-a-purpose>
9. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/shift-mind/200811/the-problem-perfection>

We also have [this article](#) for school leaders, which sets out some of the different types of talking therapies if that is an option that is available to you.

3 Availability of peer support

Peer groups aim to improve your wellbeing, and give you the space to process high-pressure situations with other school leaders. You'll make new connections and develop new insights and perspectives. They can help you feel better and be the most effective leader possible, sharing new strategies and ideas. [Watch our video](#) to find out what happens in our fully-funded peer support sessions.

Reflective writing task

Next time you're feeling the tug of your inner perfectionist, consider answering these questions by writing them down or recording them in a journal. Remember, they don't all have to be answered in one go. Take your time to work through the questions, even focusing on one each day.

Think of someone you love. Are they perfect? Do you love them anyway?

Is it possible to be perfect?

What is one thing you can let go of and leave imperfect today?

What does your inner perfectionist say to you?

How do your loved one's imperfections contribute to their overall personality?

What would happen if you allowed yourself to be an imperfect human?

Can you think of a time someone you respect left something as 'good enough', rather than perfect? What happened?

What might your inner perfectionist be trying to protect you from?

Was perfectionism encouraged when you were growing up? What did your parents or guardians teach you?



Now try reflecting on your strengths:

1 What are your three biggest strengths? Do those strengths still exist if you get something wrong?

2 Can you remember your first achievement? What did it feel like?

3 What are you most proud of in your career?

4 What are you proud of outside of work?

5 What is one thing that makes you unique?

6 What do you get complimented on the most?

7 Name a challenge you have overcome in the past year?

Remember...

It is okay to have high standards at work as caring about your work can truly be an asset to your school. But better understanding of perfectionist behaviour and letting go of rigid, all-or-nothing thinking can help you preserve your energy while still being there for your pupils and colleagues.

When our goal post is perfect, and we accept nothing less, it can become impossible to meet our own standards — because we are human beings! As a teacher, you may need to cultivate a sense of wisdom and control in the classroom, but maintaining that consistently with colleagues can lead to mental exhaustion.

Perfectionism will differ from person to person and is certainly not a one-size-fits-all experience. Nonetheless, when we take steps to counter our inner critic and create positive and encouraging environments where open communication is prioritised, teachers, educators, and school leaders can feel safe enough to be themselves. Rather than striving for perfection, do the best you can with what is available to you.



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