

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**PERFECTIONISM:  
A GROUP INTERVENTION WITH GIFTED  
FEMALES**

A thesis  
presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in Education

Massey University

Deborah Ramsey  
2002

## *Acknowledgements*

It was my privilege to get to know and work with several dazzling young women who volunteered to belong to my research group. They generously gave their time, willingly disclosed their stories, concerns and fears, and enthusiastically accepted all my research invitations. I hope their experience as participants in the 'Life-Long Learning Programme' has rewarded them with self-awareness and an understanding of how to make their learning sustainable. This case study is the result of their hard work and is dedicated to them.

My husband and colleague, Phil Ramsey, said he would be satisfied with the acknowledgement "words fail me", however, I feel I can summon up a few. This section of the thesis will be the only one Phil has not proofread and edited for me; all other chapters have benefited from his brilliant understanding of the interconnectedness of ideas. He also helped me debrief workshop sessions by meeting every Friday at Clarke's Café and scrawling our reflections over café napkins which I would then type up that afternoon at work. Even when my observations from the research seemed incoherent and meaningless, he helped me work toward an understanding of what was happening by trusting the process. Being constantly 'on tap' for my thesis has meant, at times that his attention was diverted from his own PhD which is in final stages of completion, and for this I thank him mightily.

Thanks go also to my supervisor, Dr Tracy Riley, who brought a wonderfully fresh editorial perspective to my research drafts. Tracy is internationally recognised for her work in the area of the Gifted and Talented and I wish her all the best in her efforts to ensure optimal learning environments for all our kids. I thank her for her supervision.

For the original idea that catalysed this research and for her continued interest and support, I wish to thank Kay Ellison.

I wish to acknowledge the Human Resource Management Department of Massey University which has graciously supported my study, and Allana Coulon in particular, with whom I shared an office amicably while we each laboured to complete our own Master's thesis!

Finally, I want to acknowledge my children Alex and Nick who, every day, help me see what really matters.



## *Table of Contents*

Acknowledgements.....	i
Table of Contents .....	iii
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures.....	viii
Abstract .....	ix
<b>CHAPTER 1: <i>Introduction</i></b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 Research purpose and objectives.....	1
1.2 Organisation of thesis .....	2
<b>CHAPTER 2: <i>Literature Review</i></b> .....	<b>4</b>
2.1 Perfectionism.....	4
2.1.1 <i>Defining perfectionism</i> .....	4
2.1.2 <i>Core processes in perfectionism</i> .....	12
2.1.3 <i>Measuring perfectionism</i> .....	14
2.2 Defining giftedness.....	16
2.3 The link between giftedness and perfectionism.....	20
2.4 The need to help gifted female perfectionists.....	22
2.4.1 <i>Perfectionism and underachievement</i> .....	25
2.4.2 <i>Perfectionism and eating disorders</i> .....	26
2.4.3 <i>Perfectionism and teenage suicide</i> .....	28
2.4.4 <i>Perfectionism and the 'model student'</i> .....	31
<b>CHAPTER 3: <i>Methodology</i></b> .....	<b>32</b>
3.1 The need for an intervention study.....	32
3.2 Use of case study .....	36
3.3 Collection of data.....	39
3.4 Selection of participants.....	43
3.5 Use of the Burns Perfectionism Scale.....	45
3.6 Analysis of data.....	46
<b>CHAPTER 4: <i>Models influencing the study</i></b> .....	<b>49</b>
4.1 Development and maintenance of perfectionism .....	49
4.2 Conditions necessary to change the worldview of perfectionists ..	55
<b>CHAPTER 5: <i>Development of the programme</i></b> .....	<b>58</b>
5.1 Use of improvisational drama .....	58

5.1.1	<i>Learning to fail</i> .....	59
5.1.2	<i>Learning to be flexible</i> .....	59
5.1.3	<i>'Coming into the moment'</i> .....	60
5.1.4	<i>Learning to laugh</i> .....	61
5.1.5	<i>Experiencing creativity in play</i> .....	62
5.1.6	<i>Confronting fear</i> .....	62
5.1.7	<i>Experiencing change and integration</i> .....	63
5.1.8	<i>Experiencing decisiveness</i> .....	63
5.2	<i>'Pleasure-predicting' sheet</i> .....	64
5.3	<i>'Sustainable Work' model</i> .....	66
5.4	<i>Group intervention</i> .....	66
<b>CHAPTER 6: Workshop One</b> .....		<b>68</b>
6.1	<i>Introduction</i> .....	68
6.1.1	<i>What happened with attendance?</i> .....	69
6.2	<i>Workshop One: Purpose</i> .....	71
6.3	<i>A description of workshop one</i> .....	72
6.4	<i>Plan for workshop one</i> .....	75
6.5	<i>Written questionnaire and focus group results</i> .....	76
6.5.1	<i>Dominant themes in girls' understanding of perfectionism</i> .....	76
6.5.2	<i>Dominant themes in girls understanding of giftedness</i> .....	83
6.5.3	<i>Identification of perfectionistic themes from group conversation</i> ...	86
6.6	<i>To what extent did the workshop fulfil its purpose?</i> .....	93
6.6.1	<i>Getting to know one another</i> .....	93
6.6.2	<i>Creating a safe and trusting environment</i> .....	93
6.6.3	<i>Assessing girls' understanding of perfectionism and giftedness</i> ....	94
6.6.4	<i>Preliminary identification of girls with perfectionistic tendencies</i> .	95
6.7	<i>After the workshop</i> .....	97
<b>CHAPTER 7: Workshop Two</b> .....		<b>98</b>
7.1	<i>Workshop Two: Purpose</i> .....	98
7.2	<i>A description of workshop two</i> .....	100
7.3	<i>Plan for workshop two</i> .....	105
7.4	<i>To what extent did the workshop fulfil its purpose?</i> .....	106
7.4.1	<i>Raise girls' awareness of the costs of perfectionism</i> .....	106
7.4.2	<i>Familiarise girls with the PLE model</i> .....	107
7.4.3	<i>Creating a safe psychological environment</i> .....	109
7.4.4	<i>Identification of girls with perfectionistic tendencies</i> .....	110
<b>CHAPTER 8: Workshop Three</b> .....		<b>115</b>
8.1	<i>Workshop Three: Purpose</i> .....	115
8.2	<i>A description of workshop three</i> .....	116
8.3	<i>Plan for workshop three</i> .....	121
8.4	<i>To what extent did the workshop fulfil its purpose?</i> .....	122
8.4.1	<i>Explore improvisational drama</i> .....	122

8.4.2	<i>Challenge perfectionistic belief</i> .....	123
8.4.3	<i>Reinforce the PLE model</i> .....	124
8.4.4	<i>Identification of girls with perfectionistic tendencies</i> .....	125
<b>CHAPTER 9: Workshop Four</b> .....		<b>129</b>
9.1	Workshop Four: Purpose.....	129
9.2	A description of workshop four .....	130
9.3	Plan for workshop four .....	134
9.4	To what extent did the workshop fulfil its purpose? .....	134
9.4.1	<i>Explore healthy responses to criticism</i> .....	134
9.4.2	<i>Explore the effects of 'trying too hard'</i> .....	135
9.4.3	<i>Challenge perfectionistic belief</i> .....	136
9.4.4	<i>Identification of girls with perfectionistic tendencies</i> .....	137
<b>CHAPTER 10: Workshop Five</b> .....		<b>140</b>
10.1	Workshop Five: Purpose .....	140
10.2	A description of workshop five .....	141
10.3	Plan for workshop five.....	147
10.4	To what extent did the workshop fulfil its purpose? .....	147
10.4.1	<i>Explore concept of 'shared control'</i> .....	148
10.4.2	<i>Challenge perfectionistic belief</i> .....	149
10.4.3	<i>Identification of girls with perfectionistic tendencies</i> .....	151
<b>CHAPTER 11: Workshop Six</b> .....		<b>154</b>
11.1	Workshop Six: Purpose.....	154
11.2	A description of workshop six.....	155
11.3	Plan for workshop six .....	161
11.4	To what extent did the workshop fulfil its purpose? .....	161
11.4.1	<i>Retake Burns Perfectionism Scale and discuss</i> .....	161
11.4.2	<i>Provide an integrated summary of the programme</i> .....	164
11.5	Follow-up interview with Storm and Amber.....	167
11.5.1	<i>Transcript of interview with Storm and Amber</i> .....	168
<b>CHAPTER 12: Key issues arising from the case study ...</b>		<b>172</b>
12.1	Issues related to the nature of perfectionism.....	172
12.1.1	<i>Defining perfectionism</i> .....	172
12.1.2	<i>The role of Kirk's Change Model in the programme</i> .....	175
12.1.3	<i>Suitability of level of intervention</i> .....	176
12.2	Issues related to specific techniques used in the programme.....	179
12.2.1	<i>Use of the Burns Perfectionism Scale</i> .....	180
12.2.2	<i>Use of the Sustainable Work (PLE) Model</i> .....	183
12.2.3	<i>Use of Improvisational Drama</i> .....	184
12.2.4	<i>Use of a group intervention including non-perfectionists</i> .....	186
12.3	Ideas for future interventions and research.....	187

---

REFERENCES .....	191
APPENDIX A ETHICS APPLICATION.....	199
APPENDIX B THE BURNS PERFECTIONISM SCALE.....	210
APPENDIX C WRITTEN QUESTIONNAIRE FOR WORKSHOP ONE.....	212
APPENDIX D RAW DATA FROM WRITTEN QUESTIONNAIRE .....	214
APPENDIX E INSTRUCTIONS FOR IMPROVISATIONAL GAMES.....	219
APPENDIX F 'QUICK QUIZ' .....	223
APPENDIX G PLEASURE-PREDICTING SHEET .....	226
APPENDIX H GALLWEY'S 'SUSTAINABLE WORK' MODEL.....	228
APPENDIX I 'LOWERING STANDARDS' EXPERIMENT .....	231
APPENDIX J TRANSCRIPT OF WORKSHOP ONE CONVERSATION ...	234
APPENDIX K TRANSCRIPT OF WORKSHOP FIVE CONVERSATION ...	247
APPENDIX L TRANSCRIPT OF WORKSHOP SIX CONVERSATION.....	256
APPENDIX M PROGRAMME EVALUATION QUESTIONS.....	268
APPENDIX N ARTICLE : 'RETHINKING GRADES FOR SUSTAINABLE LEARNING .....	272
APPENDIX O ARTICLE: 'REFRAMING THE PERFECTIONIST'S CATCH-22 DILEMMA: A SYSTEMS THINKING APPROACH' .....	281

## *List of Tables*

6.0	Attendance at programme workshops.....	70
6.1	Workshop One Plan .....	75
6.2	Themes from responses to the question “What does success mean to me?” .....	77
6.3	Themes from responses to the question “How will I know if I am successful?” .....	78
6.4	Themes from responses to the question “What would change for me if I stopped getting good grades?” .....	79
6.5	Themes from responses to the question “What does it mean to be a perfectionist?” .....	80
6.6	Themes from responses to the question “What do I mean by ‘perfect’?” .....	81
6.7	Themes from responses to the question “Does perfectionism help or hinder my progress?” .....	82
6.8	Scores for each participant on the Burns Perfectionism Scale.....	97
7.1	Girls’ cost-benefit analysis of perfectionism.....	102
7.2	Workshop Two Plan.....	105
7.3	Scores for each participant on the Quick Quiz (Adderholdt and Goldberg, 1999) .....	114
8.1	Workshop Three Plan .....	121
9.1	Workshop Four Plan .....	134
10.1	Workshop Five Plan .....	147
11.1	Workshop Six Plan .....	161
11.2	Two sets of scores for each participant on the Burns Perfectionism Scale .....	163
12.1	Characteristics of ‘fledgling perfectionists’ .....	179

## *List of Figures*

2.1	Gagne's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent .....	19
4.1	The dynamics of perfectionism: A systems view .....	50
4.2	'Shifting the burden' archetype applied to perfectionism.....	53
4.3	The Cycle of Dissipative Structures (Kirk, 2000).....	56

## ***Abstract***

This thesis reports on an intervention with a group of 14-year-old gifted girls, designed to address issues of perfectionism that may be affecting them now and which might negatively impact on their future learning. The intervention was designed on the basis of a systems model of perfectionism. This model frames perfectionism as a consequence of a world view that over-emphasises performance at the expense of learning and experience. The intervention exposed participants to the need to balance performance, learning and experience in order to achieve sustainable life-long learning. The intervention involved a mix of Improvisational Drama, group conversation, identification of perfectionistic thinking, personal diaries, cost-benefit analysis and challenging of assumptions, conducted during the course of six one-hour workshops. The thesis presents the intervention predominantly in the form of case study descriptions of the six workshops.

A major finding of the case study was the value of intervention designed to meet the needs of participants who have not reached a clinically significant level of perfectionism. The term 'fledgling perfectionists' was coined to describe this 'at risk' group, and characteristics of fledgling perfectionists are described. Effective intervention with fledgling perfectionists requires a safe learning environment where they can explore perturbing concepts pertinent to their world view. Improvisational Drama conducted with a group that includes a mix of perfectionistic and non-perfectionistic participants contributes to such an environment. Effective intervention with fledgling perfectionists also requires the facilitator to take a developmental approach and to incorporate individual follow-up processes with fledgling perfectionists.