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PERFECTIONISM IN TEACHER EDUCATION: AN EMPIRIC APPROACH TO THE CHALLENGES OF DIGITALIZED SOCIETY

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Abstract: *The perfectionism profiles of student teachers were investigated using a questionnaire-based inquiry. The statistical analysis enhanced medium to high levels of perfectionism of the participants, without any differences between the students enrolled in different faculties. The findings showed unequal variances of perfectionism in the groups of traditional and non-traditional students. Considering the challenges of the digitalized society and the characteristics of younger teacher students, aspects of perfectionism and mindset that would address nowadays realities should be introduced in the learning process. Teacher education would offer the appropriate perspective to perfectionism and attending standards.*

Key words: *perfectionism, mindset, learning process, teacher education.*

1. Introduction

Each person sets goals every day. Some of them are realistic and achievable. Some of them are established according to the values, patterns, or habits of the community and society. Perfectionism was defined as "*the tendency to set excessively high standards and to engage in in exaggerated critical self-assessment"* (Kawamura et al., 2001). The goals that are unfeasible to the individual trigger unhealthy perspective of perfectionism (Rice et al., 1996). Two types of perfectionism were described: normal perfectionism, associated to the challenges to tackle excellence, and neurotic perfectionism, characterized by unsatisfaction of under achieving unrealistic goals (Hill et al., 1997). These types of perfectionism were also labelled as enabling and disabling perfectionism according to individual adjustment to perfectionism standards or rigid approach to imposed or self-imposed standards (Piirto, 1994; Rice et al., 1996). At the beginning, perfectionism was considered an aspect of giftedness (Silverman, 1995) and there is evidence that the perfectionist mindset could be achieved in late childhood and early adolescence (Barrow & Moore, 1983), with the risks of disabling results (Adderholt-Elliot & Eller, 1989; Howell, 1996). Later research considered perfectionism from the perspective of excellence as a performance criterion enhanced by contextual factors in

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educational settings that foster perfectionist mindset among students, like developmental era, the quality of the educational community, emphasis of social comparison (Rice & Ray, 2016). As underlined, perfectionism in academic settings was addressed partially because both variables are difficult to operationalize in achievement-oriented contexts (Bong et al., 2014). Some models of perfectionism showed that standards and standard settings are key-elements and key-focus of interventions (Lo & Abbott, 2013; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Few studies suggested that there are associations between standards and academic outcomes, even dough performance is not well represented, as the indicators of well-being (Stoeber & Ranbow, 2007, Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). Other findings stressed the relation between perfectionism and emotional adjustment (Stoeber et al., 2014). Maladaptive perfectionism was registered in relation to social desirability and personal standards in academic settings (Stoeber & Hottam, 2013). Latest research enhanced that socially prescribed perfectionism was found in adolescents' development and self-oriented perfectionism mediated the positive relation between academic achievement and exploration (Negru-Subțirică et al., 2023).

Perfectionism and educational differences were addressed considering the association between the dimensions of perfectionism and the levels of academic achievements and affect in school education (Stornelli et al., 2009). Even dough perfectionism was not related to the levels of reading and mathematic achievement, a positive association between mathematics achievement and perfectionism was enhanced in gifted students (Macsinga & Dobrita, 2010).

2. Methods

To explore the patterns of perfectionism in teacher education, we conducted a survey that included the perfectionism scale provided by International Personality Item Pool (IPIP). The analysis was oriented towards the perfectionism profiles of prospective teachers in the cases of the socially evaluated school subjects in lower secondary education in Romania: Romanian language and literature and Mathematics. Therefore, we choose the participants among the students enrolled in the faculties of Philology and Mathematics and Informatics.

3. Participants, Instruments, and Procedure

The participants were a total of 208 students enrolled in the first year of the teacher training programme as follows: 146 from the Faculty of Philology and 62 from the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics. The questionnaire-based inquiry was carried out at the end of the didactic activities of the academic year, in the month of May 2024. The goal of the study was to highlight the perfectionism patterns of nowadays students, so the research considered two major directions: 1) to identify the profiles of perfectionism of prospective teachers and 2) to explore the differences in the levels of perfectionism from the perspectives of several demographic factors. The participation in the research procedure was voluntary. The questionnaires were anonymous and

collected only factual data regarding gender, age, and studies. The participants were mostly women (163; 78.4 %). Only 21.6 % were men (45). The average age of the participants was 20 years, the minimum age was 18 and the maxim was 53; the most participants were 19 years old (M = 20.4; SD = 4.14; Median = 19; Mode = 19). Only 25 % were younger than 19 years (25^{th} percentile = 19.0) and 25% were older than 20 years (75^{th} percentile = 20.0). In these conditions, more than 90% of the students were traditional students (190; 91.3 %) and only less than 10 % were non-traditional students (18; 8.7 %). The data were recorded and analysed using *Jamovi*.

4. Results

The levels of perfectionism of the participants are in general high (M = 3.44; SD = 0.66). The distribution is almost symmetric, multimodal, and the lowest mode is 2.9. The most participants registered perfectionism scores rated higher than 3.5 (Median = 3.5). Half of the students' scores is between 2.90 and 4.00 (IQR = 1.10). Therefore, the perfectionism scores range from 1.20 to 5 and the highest density is between 3.00 and 4.00. The patterns identified in the perfectionism scale are presented in Table 1.

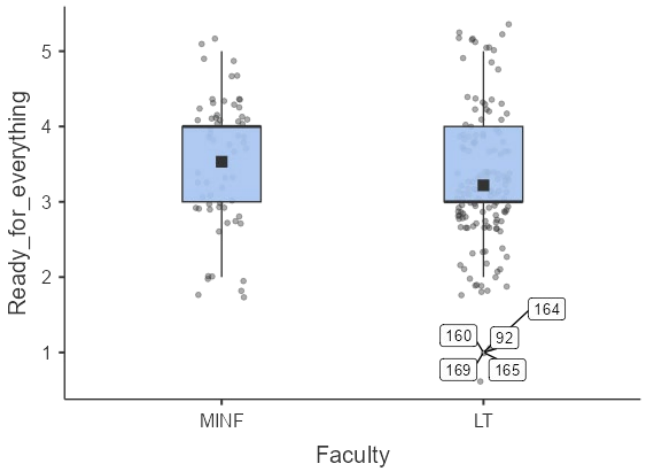
Perfections patterns of prospective teachers Table 1

Item	M	SD	Median	Mode	IQR
Ready for everything	3.31	0.89	3.00	3.00	1.00
Attention to details	3.90	1.01	4.00	4.00	2.00
Householding finalizing	3.24	1.16	3.00	3.00	2.00
Order	4.18	1.10	5.00	5.00	1.00
Following the programme	2.93	1.14	3.00	3.00	2.00
Exigency in work	3.58	1.06	4.00	4.00	1.00
Scattered things Reversed	3.36	1.26	4.00	4.00	2.00
Complicating things Reversed	2.71	1.34	3.00	1.00	2.00
Often forgetting Reversed	3.39	1.31	4.00	4.00	2.25
Neglecting duties Reversed	3.82	1.06	4.00	4.00	2.00

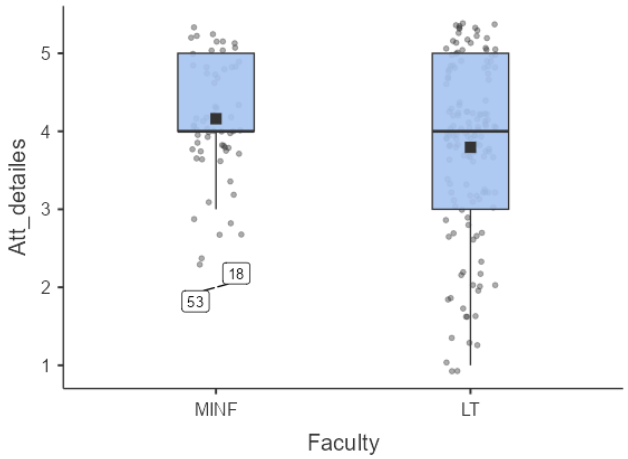
The first item on perfectionism scale, *Ready for everything*, rated compact scores. Even dough the middle half of the scores registered by students from Philology and Mathematics and Informatics are ranged between 3 and 4, the position of median differs from 4 in the case of the students from Mathematics and Informatics to 3 in the case of the students of the Faculty of Philology. The most extreme values are registered by the students from Philology, who declared the lowest levels of readiness as visible in Graph 1.

The second item in the perfectionism scale addresses the attention to details. The levels declared by the participants are differently ranged considering the faculty in which students are enrolled. The students from Mathematics and Informatics registered a half of the scores higher than the median, between 4.00 and 5.00. The students from Philology registered a half of the scores between 3.00 and 5.00, even dough the median is still 4.00. The extreme values were chosen by the students from Mathematics and Informatics, but those are still higher than the lowest scores of the students form

Philology.



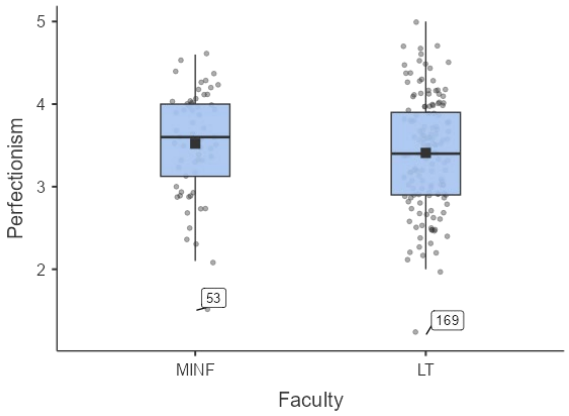
Graph *1. Comparison in Readiness between faculties*



Graph 2. *Comparison in Attention to details between faculties*

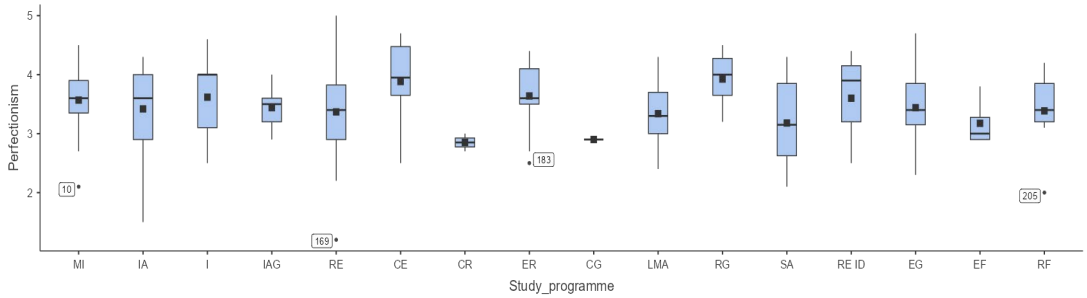
The other items in the perfectionism scale rated similar statistical indicators, except for *Householding finalizing*, in which case the students from Mathematics and Informatics declared the lowest levels and registered the lowest extreme values (M = 3.24; SD = 1.16). Nevertheless, we should consider that the gender balance differs in those faculties: there are 30 females and 32 males at MINF and 133 females and 13 males at Philology.

The levels of perfectionism are similar for both faculties, the middle half of the scores are ranged between 3 and 4 (M = 3.44; SD = 0.66), as shown in Graph 3.



Graph 3. *Comparison in Perfectionism between faculties*

All in all, the perfectionism levels appear similar regardless of the belonging faculty, but multiple box-plot analysis enhance different ranges and interquartile ranges considering the study programmes in which students are enrolled. The factors that should be retained in the analysis are the profiles of the students and the number of the respondents in every study programme.



Graph 4. *Comparison in Perfectionism between study programmes*

The pattern identified in students' perfectionism consisted in very high levels of *order* (M = 4.18), high levels of *attention to details* (M = 3.90), *neglecting things* (M = 3.82), *exigency in work* (M = 3.58), medium levels of *forgetting things* (M = 3.39), *readiness for everything* (M = 3.31), finalizing monotonous chores (*Householding finalizing*) (M = 3.24), and rather low levels of respecting the routines (*Following the programme*) (M = 2.93) and *complicating things* (M = 2.71).

The aim of our study was to explore the differences in the perfectionism profiles of the participants. Starting from some empirical considerations, we investigated the potential differences in perfectionism levels depending on the faculty in which the students were enrolled. Therefore, we performed the Independent Sample t-Test to investigate the

differences between the levels of perfectionism of the students depending on the faculty they belong to. The statistical analysis did not identified significant differences between the 2 groups of results [t(206) = 1.11; p = 0.26]. Thereupon, the perfectionism profiles of prospectives teacher are similar regardless their career choice in Philology or Mathematics and Informatics. According to previous findings, we considered that the status of traditional or non-traditional student could be a grouping variable. We also performed the Independent Sample t-Test to search for the differences between traditional and non-traditional students. The statistical analysis showed that Levene's test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the assumption of equal variances [t(206) = 2.39; $p < 0.01$]. The 2 groups of participants are obviously unbalanced: 190 traditional students and only 18 non-traditional students, but there are indicators that should be further addressed. Nevertheless, the empirical observations regarding the behaviours of young students according to the standards provided on internet and social media and according to their appetite for achieving digitally imposed or promoted patterns of perfectionism should be considered.

4. Conclusions and Discussions

Previous research showed that there are at least two sides of perfectionism: one flexible and adjustable, oriented towards achievements, performance, and excellence, and the other maladaptive, which generates failure, stress, disappointment; the double perspective on perfectionism reveals a wider overview of students' outcomes (Rice *et. al*, 2016). Nonetheless, the educational perspective on perfectionism has not been approached so far. There is some evidence regarding perfectionism in educational settings, but only related to students' performance. The contribution of addressing perfectionism in the teaching and learning process would produce outcomes on three different levels: in students' acquisitions, in students' employment in the workforce, and in students' contribution to innovation that leads to societal growth. The interest to investigate the perfectionism profile of nowadays students has legitimacy in education' mission to endow every beneficiary with the resources and mechanisms to overcome existing or potential challenges. The standards of the contemporary society are set according to those so-called models shared through the internet, many of them lacking values, rules, and integrity. The correct approach to perfectionism may contribute to the assessment of correct and achievable standards, developing self-assessment and self-evaluation mechanisms, intellectual work-techniques, fair-play, resilience, and other high-order thinking skills. The virality of the posts on social media accounts and their contents impose ever newer and less controlled standards. The incorrect positioning towards the shallow and deceptive standards may lead to unhealthy behaviours in academic settings and in everyday life.

The bright side of perfectionism covers many aspects that address performance and excellence, the main target of the learning process in teacher education. There are findings that enhance the contribution of the academic settings to the development of enabling perfectionism. Therefore, the educational perspective on perfectionism may lead to the integration in current teaching practices of the best strategies that

contribute to the development of the appropriate approach to perfectionism. The presented perspective on perfectionism addresses the issues of the novelty of study. Considering the defined patterns of perfectionism identified in the case of traditional and non-traditional students, the need for evidence that support the findings is obvious. The factors that determined are varied and with different sources, but the contribution of education and training must be highlighted since education has an organizing role in the formation and development of the human personality. The analysis of the result registered in the perfectionism scale identified different positions of the middle-half values of the scores (see *Ready for everything* or *Attention to details*) that provides arguments to support the hypothesis of differences between perfectionism profiles. Even dough statistical differences hadn't been underlined, expanding the research group could lead to conclusive results.

Previous finding enhanced similarities in the perfectionism profiles of participants even if the evidence was low (Macsinga & Dobrița, 2010). The analysis of multiple boxplots of perfectionism considering the study programme in which the teacher students are enrolled showed different ranges and interquartile ranges. These conclusions support the differences between the profiles of perfectionism of students that come from different study programmes and that have specific backgrounds regarding previous completed studies, previous and current study interests, learning preferences, information processing and reporting on personal experience, decision making. Nevertheless, such findings would allow the individualization of the educational offer considering the characteristics and profiles of the beneficiaries. Evidence-based educational policies would address factors that were not present in other development niches but are specific to contemporary society.

One limitation of our study is gender imbalance, a case of gender stereotypes in students' career choices, that could influence the results. The most important limitation of our investigation consists in the lack of balance between the groups of traditional and non-traditional students. Expanding the research group may lead to relevant results and would address the issue of generalization of the findings and overcome the necessity of enlarging the number of non-traditional students. Another limitation of our study is that the perfectionism scale was not associated with personality factors specific to the generation of nowadays students. Nevertheless, future research will complete students' profile with relevant dimensions and will deepen the investigation with qualitative approach that would offer insights of aspects behind perfectionism.

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