A critical review of child perfectionism as it relates to music pedagogy

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Abstract
Perfectionism as a construct has received increasing attention in recent years, in particular with regard to its potentially debilitating effects. In this critical literature review, the prevalence and development of perfectionism in school-age musicians are examined, with an eye to the implicit values of neoliberalism and settler colonialism represented in music curricula. Parent, teacher, and cultural influences are considered, as well as the role of perfectionism in children’s experience of music performance anxiety. Suggestions that perfectionism in this context may be a product of punitive methods in education and inequitable distribution of resources are discussed. Recommendations are made for pedagogical practices and research with children, as well as implications for parents, with specific attention focused on the need to deviate from the idea that perfect performances are the only measurements of success in music.

Keywords
child development, perfectionism, music performance anxiety, supportive education, facilitative perfectionism, debilitative perfectionism

Researchers have noted an increase in the prevalence of perfectionism among children and adolescents in recent years, and with that growth a larger proportion of children who tend more toward debilitative perfectionism than facilitative perfectionism (Curran & Hill, 2019; Flett et al., 2016; Sironic & Reeve, 2015). Perfectionism is commonly understood as a predisposition toward unrealistically high demands and expectations, severe self-criticism, and concern or intolerance for mistakes (Flett et al., 2016; Patston & Osborne, 2016). The alarming growth of debilitative childhood perfectionism in the modern generation suggests issues rooted in the reproduction of learned values and systemic practices in children’s education. Especially in

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music education, where there is an emphasis on high visibility in performing known works, children may be exposed to the pressure of unrealistic expectations during formative years of development (Ryan, 2004).

Although perfectionism is understood as a complex, multidimensional concept influenced by various factors (Flett et al., 2002; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Stoeber & Otto, 2006), the high and increasing rate of perfectionism in children calls attention to systemic factors in modern society and in particular within the field of education (Curran & Hill, 2019; Patston, 2014; Sironic & Reeve, 2015). It has been suggested that 21st-century values of neoliberalism and settler colonialism bind individuals to pursue constructed ideals that may or may not be realistic (Burman, 2016; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2014). Furthermore, as Western societal expectations actively escalate competitiveness, the result is an industrialized environment in which acquiring highly exclusive and discriminating marketable traits becomes necessary for career success (Burman, 2016; Curran & Hill, 2019; Moss, 2014).

Modern school curricula typically support and reproduce a competitive system by limiting the concept of academic success and the pathways to achieving it (Curran & Hill, 2019; Nxumalo et al., 2018). Children are exposed, even in the early stages of childhood, to the stress of mounting requirements from various social influences (Curran & Hill, 2019; Flett et al., 2016; Greblo & Bratko, 2014; Lee & Hong, 2016). The result of this competitive system is that children are driven to develop perfectionistic tendencies, as they increasingly strive to fulfill increasingly demanding and unrealistic expectations (Curran & Hill, 2019; Hong et al., 2017).

Within this context, performative activities such as music and sports may cultivate and perpetuate perfectionism in children. In these fields, regular and repetitive practice is critical to eliminating mistakes, demanding high levels of self-efficacy, control, and regulation (Hennessy et al., 2019; Jaap & Patrick, 2011; Patston, 2014; Ritchie & Williamson, 2011; Winsler et al., 2011). Musicians devote a great deal of time to intensive practice in preparation to perform in contexts where the expectations are high and feedback is both immediate and public (Dobos et al., 2019; Kobori et al., 2011; Patston & Osborne, 2016). Studies have found that children feel the stress and demands of such performances and evaluations, and may have heightened experiences of performance anxiety as a result (Dempsey, 2015; Dobos et al., 2019; Ryan, 2004). Furthermore, as children often engage in music and sports training outside of their regular school commitments, they typically face expectations to perform well in both curricular and extracurricular undertakings (Sorkkila et al., 2020).

In examining the factors related to music education and children’s performance experience, this article aims to address and contextualize the issue of perfectionism in music pedagogy. The purpose of this article is (1) to uncover systemic issues in music pedagogy, as indicated in the research literature, that encourage the development of perfectionism in childhood, and (2) to understand the impact of perfectionism in childhood, with particular focus on the negative impacts that are detrimental to children’s well-being and learning. Themes of performance anxiety, parent influence and parenting style, and children’s holistic well-being will be discussed in relation to childhood perfectionism in music, as well as implications for practice in children’s music education.

Method

A preliminary electronic search for common themes related to childhood perfectionism in music was conducted using Google Scholar and ProQuest databases with the search terms “child*” AND “perfectionism” AND “music.” The search was restricted to publications in the last 10 years, from May 2010 to May 2020 in both databases, and research results were sorted
by relevance. Google Scholar yielded 14,200 results, while the ProQuest databases, restricted further to scholarly and peer-reviewed sources in the disciplines of psychology, education, and music, yielded 381 results. The authors reviewed the first 100 titles and abstracts in each database to analyze significant issues most frequently referred to in relation to the development of perfectionism in childhood, particularly in music education.

The inclusion criteria focused on topics and theories related to systemic and cultural influences in music education on the development of perfectionism in early and middle childhood, systemic inequities, and the effects of perfectionism on children’s well-being and learning in music education. Research focused on gifted children, children with chronic illnesses, and children with disabilities as the focus groups were excluded due to the emergence of variables unique to each group that detracted focus from the main topic. Despite the high number of results and the broad inclusion criteria, there were very few relevant sources that focused on the topic of child perfectionism related to music. Hence, from this preliminary search, only 15 items from the literature were chosen.

Due to the limited research available with a focus on childhood perfectionism in music education and musicians, especially in early and middle childhood, the search was then expanded to include publications in the last 20 years, with subject populations including adolescents and young musicians in college and university. In addition, the authors further expanded the search to early and middle childhood perfectionism without a focus on music to gain a better understanding of the important factors influencing the development of perfectionism during childhood.

Two common and salient themes that were most relevant to the purpose of the review in determining modern systemic influences and their effects on the development of perfectionism in children studying music were analyzed. The first theme was perfectionism in connection to music performance anxiety (MPA), and the second focused on parent and sociocultural influences. Once the themes were chosen from the analysis of the relevant literature search, more specific searches were conducted in context of the themes. For example, the search terms “child* perfectionism” AND “music performance anxiety” were used for a deeper analysis of the connection between childhood perfectionism and MPA. With the narrowed themes, the authors searched for relevant literature using references from the chosen literature and noting commonly referenced sources across the literature.

**MPA and perfectionism**

MPA is a common problem for musicians. It is associated with a range of psychological, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral manifestations (Dobos et al., 2019; Kenny, 2011; Patston, 2014; Patston & Osborne, 2016). Numerous studies have investigated its prevalence in adult musicians, along with a range of strategies for coping with and reducing anxiety and minimizing its effects (see, for example, Biasutti & Concina, 2014; Cohen & Bodner, 2019; Dews & Williams, 1989; Fishbein et al., 1988; Juncos & Markman, 2015; Kendrick et al., 1982; Lin et al., 2008; Lockwood, 1989; Nicholson et al., 2015; Spahn et al., 2016; van Kemenade et al., 1995; Wesner et al., 1990; Zarza-Alzugaray et al., 2018).

While most research prior to 2000 considered only the experiences of professional and pre-professional musicians, the lens has since shifted and an increasing body of literature points to its presence, and potential development, in the school-age years (see, for example, Allen, 2011; Braden et al., 2015; Diaz, 2018; Fehm & Schmidt, 2006; Kalenska-Rodzaj, 2020; Lorenz, 2002; MacAfee & Comeau, 2020; Maroon, 2003; Osborne et al., 2005, 2007; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; I. Papageorgi, 2006; J. Papageorgi, 2020; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Rae &
McCambridge, 2004; Rothlisberger, 1992; Ryan, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2004, 2006; Ryan & Andrews, 2009, 2021; Ryan et al., 2021; Sarbescu & Dorgo, 2014). Indeed, researchers of one study suggested that it presents even earlier in preschool-age children (Boucher & Ryan, 2011) and may have both innate and developed components.

Throughout the anxiety literature, perfectionism is frequently implicated as a contributing or related factor (Botha, 2015; Clark et al., 2014; Dempsey, 2015; Dobos et al., 2019; Haraldsen, Solstad, et al., 2020; Kenny & Osborne, 2006; Kobori et al., 2011; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Sarikaya & Kurtaslan, 2018). A number of researchers have suggested that perfectionism pushes young musicians to set unachievable goals and to develop poor coping mechanisms (Patston, 2014; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007). Consequently, the experience of anxiety may be further increased in young musicians who are highly self-critical, as they anticipate diminished performances that cannot live up to their standards of perfection (Cleary, 2013; Dempsey, 2015; Mor et al., 1995; Patston, 2014; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Sarikaya & Kurtaslan, 2018).

Researchers have also indicated that certain aspects of perfectionism are notably linked with MPA (Clark et al., 2014; Dobos et al., 2019; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). For example, in Patston and Osborne’s (2016) study on the prevalence and developmental trajectory of MPA and perfectionism in 10- to 17-year-olds, they found a positive and highly significant correlation between the two constructs, with a particular emphasis on Concern for Mistakes. Interestingly, the study showed that both MPA and perfectionism increased with experience in music, suggesting possible systemic issues in music education that may encourage the development of MPA and perfectionism. In interviews with 12-year-old pianists, Ryan (2004) found that a fear of making mistakes was cited as the primary reason for anxiety in performance. Similarly, Stoeber and Eismann (2007) discerned that young musicians’ negative reactions to imperfect performances (e.g., frustration, anger, depression, and stress) were predictive of distress and performance anxiety. This worry about making mistakes, both in front of an audience and during practice, is a concern voiced by young musicians throughout literature on performance anxiety (Dempsey, 2015; Dobos et al., 2019; Patston, 2014; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Ryan, 1998, 2004; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007).

Perfectionism and MPA have also been explored in relation to another construct in at least two studies—that of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief and confidence in their capacity to successfully learn or perform specific tasks (Bandura, 1977). In music education and performance, self-efficacy generally refers to musicians’ belief in themselves to learn specific skills and difficult repertoires, and to perform well (MacAfee & Comeau, 2020; McPherson & McCormick, 2006). Greater self-efficacy was linked to better performances and more success in music examinations (McPherson & McCormick, 2006). More recently, Dempsey (2015) examined relationships between perfectionism, MPA, and self-efficacy in 8- to 12-year-old children, while Sarikaya and Kurtaslan (2018) examined the same relationship in music teacher candidates. In both studies, researchers concluded that high levels of perfectionism were related to high levels of MPA, while there was a negative correlation between self-efficacy and MPA.

Various dimensions of perfectionism exist (Cleary, 2013; Flett et al., 2002; Patston & Osborne, 2016), but researchers have most referred to two major dimensions: facilitative (perfectionistic striving or positive perfectionism) and debilitative (perfectionistic concerns or negative perfectionism) perfectionism (Cleary, 2013; Diaz, 2018; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Other subcategories of perfectionism have also been developed to explain the dimensions of perfectionism, changing over the years to encompass a wider understanding of facilitative and debilitative perfectionism (Klibert et al., 2005). For example, three categories of perfectionism that are widely used are (1) self-oriented perfectionism, which refers to
perfectionistic tendencies arising from self-drive; (2) other-oriented perfectionism, which refers to the expectation of perfectionism from others; and (3) socially prescribed perfectionism, which refers to extrinsic motivation derived from the belief that others expect perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1993; Klibert et al., 2005). Although viewed as maladaptive perfectionistic traits when first introduced, these categories have been associated, to different degrees, with both facilitative and debilitative perfectionism (Klibert et al., 2005).

While there have been differing investigative results on whether facilitative perfectionism is associated with anxiety (Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007), debilitative perfectionism has more markedly been related to the development of stressful goals, rumination over mistakes, and increased MPA in young musicians (Clark et al., 2014; Diaz, 2018; Dobos et al., 2019; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007). Debilitative perfectionism is associated with maladaptive coping mechanisms in music, such as avoiding practice, which in turn increases MPA (Diaz, 2018; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Previous studies found perfectionistic concerns to correlate highly with socially prescribed perfectionism in young and collegiate-level musicians (Diaz, 2018; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007). Debilitative perfectionism or perfectionistic concerns signify an intolerance of mistakes, doubts over actions and capabilities, and excessive self-criticism (Diaz, 2018; Kobori et al., 2011; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

In contrast, facilitative perfectionism has been associated with more positive traits and consequences, such as the development of coping mechanisms, mediating anxiety, organized and increased practice time, more awards, decreased MPA, and better performances (Diaz, 2018; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber, 2012; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Facilitative perfectionism refers to perfectionistic-striving behavior and cognitions, such as establishing high personal standards and rigid self-discipline (Diaz, 2018; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber, 2012; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Previous studies perceived perfectionistic striving was correlated with high levels of intrinsic motivation and self-oriented perfectionism (Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007).

Stoeber and Eismann (2007) explored associations between dimensions of perfectionism (facilitative and debilitative), and positive and negative outcomes, including motivation, achievement, effort, and distress. Their results suggested that young musicians’ negative reactions to mistakes increased their performance anxiety, somatic complaints, and emotional fatigue. While young musicians’ frustration, anger, and depression responses to mistakes were significantly correlated to distress, perceived external pressure to be perfect (i.e., from teachers and parents) was not found to have significant effects on the young musicians’ distress in this study. Thus, it is possible that personal reactions to and desires for perfectionism impact young musicians’ distress more than perceived external pressure for perfectionism. However, it is also conceivable and perhaps even likely, that while external pressures were not explicitly perceived by participants, years of training within a perfection-laden art set the groundwork for their own internal pressures as the participants developed.

The impact of perceived pressure from external sources was also explored by Cleary (2013) in a study examining MPA and debilitative perfectionism in young musicians taking practical music examinations. The analysis showed that debilitative perfectionism, exacerbated by perceived pressure and criticism from teachers and families, had a direct positive correlation with MPA (Cleary, 2013). This study sheds light not only on the impact of debilitative perfectionism on children’s anxiety but also on other domains of well-being identity, such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and motivation. It also highlights the pressure that children sometimes face in music instruction, participating in examinations and being subjected to direct criticisms from families, teachers, and even strangers.
Some researchers have proposed that educators could play a significant role in guiding children through MPA (Fehm & Schmidt, 2006; Patston, 2014; Patston & Waters, 2015; Sarikaya & Kurtaslan, 2018). Patston (2014) and Patson and Waters (2015) suggest that, instead of pushing students to practice for extended periods with unrealistic performance expectations, educators should be encouraged to engage with students by creating individualized lessons and practice plans to support effective and equitable learning for their students. In line with this proposal, Haraldsen, Nordin-Bates, et al. (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with elite performers in the arts and sports on their childhood experiences at Norwegian talent development schools. They noted that participants who recalled “controlling” conditions in which they recognized pressure from educators—and consequently were motivated by these controlling factors—also remembered developing anxiety and perfectionistic concerns. Hence, strategies proposed for an equitable music education include clear communication of realistic expectations in practice and performance, appropriate adjustment of levels and time for preparation, and a focus on teaching beyond musical skills to include holistic care of musical experience. The need for appropriate teacher training that includes developing skills and strategies for supporting students suffering from MPA and debilitating perfectionism has been highlighted by several researchers (Fehm & Schmidt, 2006; Patston, 2014; Patston & Waters, 2015; Sarikaya & Kurtaslan, 2018). The underlying premise is that music educators may be uniquely positioned to help children cultivate realistic expectations and goals, while encouraging the development of high self-efficacy to support the improvement of their musical skills (Patston, 2014; Patston & Waters, 2015; Sarikaya & Kurtaslan, 2018).

Similar trends were observed in research with adolescents and young adult musicians under the age of 30 (Clark et al., 2014; Dobos et al., 2019; Haraldsen, Solstad, et al., 2020; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007). Most studies have used a version of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS), which measures multiple factors of perfectionism (Dobos et al., 2019; Haraldsen et al., 2020; Kobori et al., 2011). Findings indicate a general pattern of increasing and debilitating MPA when participants focused on mistakes and on punitive or critical evaluations (Dobos et al., 2019; Haraldsen, Solstad, et al., 2020; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007). Concern over mistakes, parental criticisms, and doubts about actions were associated with debilitating perfectionism and MPA (Dobos et al., 2019; Kobori et al., 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007), decreasing personal growth and motivation (Haraldsen, Solstad et al., 2020). Haraldsen, Solstad, et al. (2020) found that while perfectionistic strivings (facilitative perfectionism) did not significantly impact elite junior performers’ growth profiles, evaluative concerns cultivated maladaptive growth profiles, increasing frustration, anxiety, lack of control and competence, and decreased performance level.

Perfectionism has been identified as a psychological vulnerability, often associated with MPA (Hewitt et al., 2002; Patston & Osborne, 2016). However, some results suggest that facets of perfectionism may facilitate moderate levels of anxiety that improve performances (Kobori et al., 2011). Moderate levels of physiological and psychological arousal are advised as necessary to reach an optimal level of performance (Dempsey, 2015; Miller, 2004), which may explain the association between mild facilitated anxiety and better performances.

Furthermore, many studies propose the importance of discriminating between the negative and positive facets of perfectionism, as they have different effects on music learning, attitudes, performance, and distress (Dobos et al., 2019; Stoeber, 2012; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). In a study by Dobos et al. (2019), some subscales of perfectionism, such as Parental Expectations and Preference for Organization, were found to be negative predictors of MPA. The researchers suggest that striving for perfectionism through self-regulation and receiving pressure that raises performance standards may have facilitating consequences.
Along the same lines, interviews with both students and professional musicians revealed that high expectations for performances increased confidence and resulted in good performances; however, those with excessively high standards and overly critical mind-sets before and after performances tended to have more negative experiences and anxiety (Clark et al., 2014).

The findings imply a general pattern of positive correlation between MPA and perfectionism among musicians across the age span. Unfortunately, while young musicians were recruited as participants in some studies, there is limited research with child and adolescent musicians. In one study that focused on the experiences of adolescent musicians, the authors found a low significant correlation (r = .213) between the scales of MPA in adolescents and perfectionism, suggesting that perfectionism was a poor predictor of MPA (Kenny & Osborne, 2006). Given the findings on musicians as a whole, it seems unlikely that musicians at this highly sensitive and self-conscious stage would not follow suit. Kenny and Osborne’s (2006) finding, therefore, highlights the need for further studies on this relationship in younger populations.

Parent and sociocultural influence

As noted earlier in this article, the neoliberal system and ongoing settler colonialism instill excessive competitiveness in children (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2014). Children are often viewed as extensions of adults, acquiring value in relation to the emotional value they elicit from their parents (Burman, 2016; Garlen, 2018). Consequently, children face increasing amounts of stress as they are pressured to fit the narrow concept of an ideal to become better and more perfect in their endeavors.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, parents have been implicated in child perfectionism in a number of studies. Researchers have linked the development of perfectionism in childhood and adolescence with parental expectations, criticisms and perfectionism, as well as competitive cultural climate (Azizi & Besharat, 2011; Botha & Panebianco, 2018; Cook & Kearney, 2009; Damian et al., 2013; Flett et al., 2002; Greblo & Bratko, 2014; Hong et al., 2017; Stoeber & Childs, 2011; Vieth & Trull, 1999). General patterns that emerged from these studies indicate that parental perfectionism is highly associated with various subcategories of the perfectionism scale: Parent Criticism, Expectations, and Concern for Mistakes (Botha & Panebianco, 2018; Cook & Kearney, 2009; Damian et al., 2013). Furthermore, intergenerational effects of perfectionism have been noted, suggesting that parenting style and perfectionism are correlated with children’s perfectionism (Azizi & Besharat, 2011; Botha & Panebianco, 2018; Damian et al., 2013; Flett et al., 2002; Greblo & Bratko, 2014; Hong et al., 2017).

This relationship between parents’ perfectionism and their child-rearing practices was examined by Greblo and Bratko (2014), who studied 786 parents of high school students. They found that parents’ facilitative and debilitative perfectionism correlated differently with parenting styles. Facilitative perfectionism had a positive correlation with acceptance and understanding of children, and a negative correlation with permissive parenting style. Debilitative perfectionism correlated negatively with acceptance and positively to parental criticism and permissiveness.

Further to this, two studies have found parents’ psychological control and authoritarian style to positively correlate with children’s development of debilitative perfectionism (Hong et al., 2017; Soenens et al., 2005). Looking specifically at the impact of mothers on their children’s development, Soenens et al. (2005) found that mothers’ debilitative perfectionism was predictive of their daughters’ debilitative perfectionism, with the mothers’ psychological control acting as a mediating variable in the correlation. Moreover, a longitudinal study of Singaporean children (beginning when they were 7) and their parents showed that negative
parental control (punitive and harsh discipline) and intrusiveness were indicative of children’s high and/or increasing critical self-oriented perfectionism (Hong et al., 2017). Similar correlations were observed in studies with adolescents aged 15 to 19, as children’s perception of high parental expectations predicted increases in adolescents’ socially prescribed perfectionism (Damian et al., 2013).

Researchers have also observed that parents’ perfectionism was related to children’s development of perfectionism (Azizi & Besharat, 2011; Cook & Kearney, 2009; Vieth & Trull, 1999). Azizi and Besharat (2011) found that, in Iranian families, parental perfectionism, especially self-oriented perfectionism, was positively correlated with the emergence of perfectionistic characteristics in children. Similar results were found by Vieth and Trull (1999) in their examination of 188 undergraduate students and their parents. Results indicated that self-oriented perfectionism in students was positively related to the same characteristic in same-sex parents. Cook and Kearney (2009) looked at the relationships between parents’ perfectionism and children’s perfectionism and internalizing psychopathology, where internalizing psychopathology was described as negative conditions harmful to children’s well-being, such as anxiety and depression. In line with previous studies, they found that maternal critical self-oriented perfectionism was positively correlated to the adolescent sons’ self-oriented perfectionism and internalizing psychopathology, although no significant data were found in regard to fathers or daughters.

Finally, Botha and Panebianco (2018) proposed that socio-cultural factors may be at play in university music students’ development of perfectionism. The study examined parental role in relation to perfectionism and performance anxiety in undergraduate music students from four South African universities. The researchers found that Parental Expectations and Criticism, which are two subdimensions of perfectionism in the MPS, differed across the academic institution, type of music degree, and home language of the students. Differences in perfectionism scores across academic institutions first led the authors to believe that students from universities with stronger Afrikaans traditions and with parents that employ more traditionally Afrikaans autocratic parenting styles scored higher on Parental Expectations and Criticism. With further analysis, the authors discovered that students in BA (Music) programs, compared to BMus programs, and those who spoke African languages at home, compared to English or Afrikaans-speaking groups, scored significantly higher on the Parental Expectations and Criticism dimensions. Hence, Botha and Panebianco (2018) concluded that while parenting styles possibly play a role, the interaction of various complex socio-cultural factors, such as language, geographic location, parents’ education, curriculum content, and ethnic minority status, may also influence students’ perceived parental pressure and consequently, the development of perfectionism. This contention supports the findings of Castro and Rice (2003) who explored the role of ethnic differences in perfectionism among young American college students. They found that ethnic minority groups scored higher in parental expectations, with Asian American students scoring highest on half of the perfectionism subcategories. Minority students were found to harbor more concerns about making mistakes and receiving criticism from their parents, and they displayed more self-doubt.

Disparities in socioeconomic status (SES) were also studied in relation to the development of perfectionism in children and youth (Hong et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2009). The results from Hong et al.’s (2017) study suggest that parents from low SES families exerted more negative control and displayed increased intrusiveness. Children with parents of low SES were more likely to develop debilitating self-oriented perfectionism. Furthermore, in a study measuring perfectionism as a domain of conscientiousness across different age groups, the authors noted that perfectionism increased with age for individuals of low SES, while levels of perfectionism decreased with age for individuals of high SES (Jackson et al., 2009).
Collectively, the findings from these studies indicate that social and cultural factors have the potential to affect children’s development of perfectionism. Parents’ own perfectionism, along with their child-rearing practices, may serve as models for children who adopt similarly perfectionistic behaviors in the development of their self-identity. Debilitative parental perfectionism appears to have particularly strong connections with children’s traits, in particular maladaptive perfectionism. Restrictions, a lack of control and the sense of inferiority that children may feel in competitive education settings, such as in music, were elements present in various studies (Botha & Panebianco, 2018; Dempsey, 2015; Dempsey & Comeau, 2019; Dobos et al., 2019; Haraldsen, Solstad, et al., 2020; Patston, 2014; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Robson & Kenny, 2017; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007). At the micro-level, intrusive parenting and psychological control were presented as predictors of child perfectionism in many studies; at the macro-level, systemic issues of settler colonialism and neoliberalism, such as inequities in resources and discrimination of ethnic minorities and individuals with low SES, were mentioned in relation to child perfectionism (Botha & Panebianco, 2018; Castro & Rice, 2003; Hong et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2009; Soenens et al., 2005).

Research limitations and future directions

While research on perfectionism in childhood, particularly as it pertains to music education, has grown in recent years, our search results yielded very few findings on young children; most studies have focused on young adults and older adolescents. If pedagogical practices and parenting styles do indeed have an impact on the development of perfectionism, it would seem that the more we know about early manifestations, the better equipped we will be to help children navigate its impact.

The bulk of the literature addressing childhood perfectionism has focused on academic achievement, rather than on children’s experiences in performative activities like the arts. This is somewhat surprising, given that a high level of performance achievement is an accepted societal expectation in artistic endeavors. The focus in the literature on academic achievement is, perhaps, indicative of the devaluing of the arts in society and in schools, as compared with other academic areas. Performing arts require high levels of self-regulation and determination, and students begin honing their skills at a young age—90% before the age of 12, and 46% before the age of 7 (Nagel, 1993). Given the growing body of research on performance anxiety in child musicians and the relationship between anxiety and perfectionism, it seems clear that more research on children’s mind-sets, in particular with regard to perfectionism, in their musical lives would make a valuable contribution to the literature.

Finally, most studies on perfectionism used similar methods of data collection and analysis. Even in research with children, the same types of scales or questionnaires were employed (Cleary, 2013; Dobos et al., 2019; Flett et al., 2016; Hong et al., 2017). There was a clear lack of open-ended surveys, interviews, or observational qualitative research, despite the fact that the topic being explored involved extremely personal aspects and experiences in creative arts. Future research should incorporate a wider range and variety of data collection to garner a more complete picture of the context.

Implications for practitioners

The findings on perfectionism highlighted in this article suggest a systemic issue in contemporary society. Significant correlations were consistently noted between MPA and perfectionism. In addition, several factors related to children and young people’s well-being were noted (Clark
et al., 2014; Cleary, 2013; Dobos et al., 2019). The data highlight the impact of debilitative perfectionism, which is associated with MPA, severe self-criticisms, self-doubt, and rumination over mistakes, as hindering to children’s learning and well-being, and emerging with alarmingly high and increasing frequency in children (Curran & Hill, 2019; Sironic & Reeve, 2015), with related negative traits developing even in early childhood (Boucher & Ryan, 2011; Flett et al., 2002).

Educators, policy makers, and parents are encouraged to reflect on the emphasis that the current education system places on punitive methods. Music performances put children in highly vulnerable positions and subject them to public criticism. Research findings indicate a high prevalence of concern children have about making mistakes in performance. Music teachers and parents may need to re-evaluate their end goals with regard to music education and develop methods through which they can enrich children’s lives through learning music as opposed to maintaining a focus on the production of perfect performances.

Patston (2014) noted the vital role of educators in children’s experience of music, with an appeal for supportive pedagogy in which educators may form meaningful relationships with young musicians and investigate ways to deliver equitable music education. One of the biggest concerns regarding perfectionism is that children set unrealistically high expectations and goals without the proper resources to achieve them. This can lead to the development of MPA, self-doubt, and low self-confidence as they receive criticisms from teachers, parents, and themselves (Clark et al., 2014). Children’s fear of parents’ criticism and failure in meeting high expectations were found to be significant factors in the development of debilitative perfectionism (Hong et al., 2017). Parents and educators are encouraged to communicate with children to develop musical goals and plans that are realistic and achievable. Frequent and meaningful conversations about children’s desires, goals, and difficulties in music may help parents to find more effective ways to help children achieve success.

Finally, educators should develop cultural awareness and recognize the inequities in music education to be mindful of the values they are teaching children during their music training and in their performing life. Ongoing settler colonialism exists in music, as Eurocentric values and Western music dominate both popular and traditional music. Skoogh and Frisk (2019) noted the Western-centric values surrounding music performance, particularly in Western classical music. Western classical music is a genre that holds weight and certain prestige in ceremonies, evaluative performance, and academia. Skoogh and Frisk (2019) note that the joint issues of MPA and perfectionism have been studied with limited attention paid to the complex system of performance values. Since Eurocentric values in music performance are heavily centered around perfection and virtuosity, and rooted in traditions and ceremonies, perspectives on tackling anxiety cannot deviate from the boundaries of neoliberalism or settler colonialism (Skoogh & Frisk, 2019). There is an unchallenged attitude in Western classical music to practice repeatedly with the goal of achieving the perfect performance. This perfect performance is determined as strict subservience to the text and the traditional musical interpretation (Werktreue), which reproduces the values of neoliberalism. The authors assess that responsibility for these issues in performance should not be placed on individuals but instead should be seen as structural within the system.

Among the themes explored in this article were the roles that inequity, discrimination of resources, ethnicity, and education play in promoting unhealthy perfectionism. If society continues to promote a limited concept of success, regarding only perfection and specific genres of music performance, such as Western classical music, as acceptable or noteworthy, then the issue of perfectionism cannot be resolved. Teachers are encouraged to work toward disrupting these dominant discourses in curriculum and program planning when possible.
Conclusion

This article explored the prevalence of child perfectionism in musical settings. Consistent patterns were uncovered through a review of literature. The themes of Musical Performance Anxiety and Parent and Cultural Influences in connection to child perfectionism in music were examined. It was analyzed that perfectionism is highly associated with MPA. While most correlations showed severe maladaptive consequences of perfectionism, there were studies that proposed the multidimensionality of perfectionism. While debilitative perfectionism stemming from unrealistically high standards and extreme self-criticism was associated with increased MPA, some positive aspects of self-oriented perfectionism, such as determination and supportive expectations of parents, were associated with facilitative coping methods and optimism.

Furthermore, parents’ perfectionism was shown to be indicative of parents’ child-rearing practices, their relationship with their children, children’s perfectionism, and children’s development of internalizing psychopathology. Parents’ debilitative perfectionism had a significant impact on the development of negative parenting styles, resulting in high instances of parent criticisms and intrusiveness. Although parents’ facilitative perfectionism had some positive impact in helping children form meaningful relationships with their parents and gain insight into setting plans and goals for the future, debilitative perfectionism had a more profound impact on children. Through modeling, children not only developed similar traits of perfectionism as their parents but also cultivated harmful conditions such as anxiety, depression, low self-concept, esteem, and efficacy. These results supported the patterns found in examining MPA, as high self-criticism and low self-confidence, as well as parent expectations and criticism, were significant factors of debilitative perfectionism in young musicians.

Sociocultural factors also affected the development of children’s perfectionism. The perceived social status of students and students’ culture mediated students’ perfectionism in music programs. Sociocultural factors such as home language, ethnic minority status, SES, respect for the elders, and the high demands for achievement were elements that impacted perfectionism.

In conclusion, through an exploration of the issues of perfectionism in children’s musical education, this article highlighted the systemic problems of the current curriculum and societal perspectives toward children. Limited concept of success and inequity of access to resources, status, and knowledge are critical points that suggest future direction of research in perfectionism. With this awareness, educators and parents should develop less punitive and more supportive methods in furthering children’s musical experience. They should communicate with children the different values of musical education and performance that deviate from the dominant discourse of viewing success as synonymous to eliminating mistakes.

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