



WHY DO STUDENTS BELIEVE THEY HAVE TO BE PERFECT?

(A guest blog for Peter Dewitt's, "Finding Common Ground" column on Education Week)

by

Jena Ball

Where does perfection come from?

Why do even the youngest of students believe they are expected to be perfect?

Does it come from within or from the adults around them?

What is perfection? The word itself comes from "*perficere*," a Latin word meaning to complete or finish. Over time, however, perfection has taken on a more pernicious meaning. In today's terms, perfection has come to mean without fault, which in turn assumes that there is one right way to function or be in the world, and that mistakes (faults) are to be avoided at all costs.

We see this definition of perfection played out in our industrialized classrooms, where all students are expected to learn the same things, in the same way, on the same schedule. This mindset is further reinforced by standardized testing, which delivers the

demoralizing message that some are better than others, and encourages competition, conformity and self-blame.

Rather than risk failure, students shut down their curiosity and creativity, becoming passive recipients of information that they then regurgitate on tests. This approach flies in the face of how human beings learn (we are emotion-driven, trial-and-error learners) and fails to prepare students for a world in which creative collaboration, innovative thinking and flexibility are the most sought after qualities in the workplace.

Back in 2010, as I was beginning my journey as a children's book author, I had little or no conscious awareness of perfectionism. Like most of my peers, I was a byproduct of the skill, drill, test and repeat model that today's students are struggling with. While I understood intellectually that no one is perfect, that didn't stop me, or my peers, from judging me harshly for making mistakes. I joked that I was a recovering perfectionist, but jokes did nothing to alleviate my suspicions that I would never be "*good enough*."

Fast forward to 2013. I had been invited to read from my book, *Lead with Your Heart*, to a combined class of first, second and third graders in Bolingbrook, Illinois. Following the reading I planned to teach the kids how to draw the main character in the book, a big, black pit bull named Lance.

After the reading, the kids raced to their cubbies to get pencils, paper and Crayons so we could start drawing. Excited chatter filled the air as they voted on which dog to draw. When I asked if they were ready to get started, a resounding, "Yes!" shook the classroom walls.

Imagine my surprise when just a few minutes into the exercise the kids' expressions went from smiles to frowns, and I began to hear unhappy complaints. "*Mine is ugly*," said one little girl.

"*This is stupid*," said another, ripping a hole in his paper with his eraser.

"*I can't do this*," said a third.

"*Whoa, time out*," I said. "*What's going on? Why don't you like your drawings?*"

"*Mine's not perfect like yours*," lisped the little boy directly in front of me.

That's when I asked the million dollar question that would change my life and theirs. "*What do you think not perfect means?*"

"*Stupid, ugly, messed up, dirty, bad!*" The words poured from their lips like a dam that had burst, filling the air with frustration, anger and self-blame. "*Weird, insane, gross, loser, dumb, broken, unhappy, different, rubbish, stinky, disgusting.*"

I didn't try to stop them. In fact, I encouraged them to keep going, to get it all out while I scribbled the words down in my notebook. "*All done?*" I asked as silence fell. Silently the kids nodded. I glanced up at their teachers in the back of the room. Their faces were flushed and there were tears in their eyes.

"*Okay, good job,*" I said to the kids. "*I'm really glad you told me how you feel. Let's talk about being perfect, okay?*"

Since that eye-opening day, I have seen the same scenario repeated in hundreds of classrooms around the world. While no longer surprised, I continue to be deeply disturbed and saddened, both for our children and for adults laboring under the illusion that they are flawed, broken or somehow undeserving because they are not perfect. What was needed, I decided, were ways to combat the myth and give students and their teachers firsthand experience making and learning from mistakes. The result was my book and related programs known as, "***The Not Perfect Hat Club***" (NPHC).

NPHC uses multimedia, story-driven projects to give students the chance to experience, discuss and express their feelings about perfection. Creative expression is a vital piece of the process, because it allows each child to discover, develop and share what makes him or her unique. In addition, NPHC creative projects are collaborative, making the point that we are better together - that each person has a piece to contribute to our collective puzzle.

Creating The Not Perfect Hat Club started me on the road to recovery from perfection, but there are many other ways to combat the myth. Here are a few that educators have shared with me.

Teach Each Child as an Individual

John Hattie famously said real learning happens when, "*teachers see learning through the eyes of their students, and students see themselves as their own teachers.*" There is so much wisdom in this statement. We must see our students as unique individuals, each with his/her learning needs, and empower them to take an active role in deciding what and how they learn.

Teach the Whole Child - Heart, Mind and Body

Breakthroughs in [neuroscience](#) have definitively proven that heart, mind and body are irrevocably intertwined. How a child feels emotionally has a profound impact on his/her

ability to learn. Children who are anxious, upset, fearful or depressed cannot learn because their bodies produce chemicals that shut down higher cognitive functions.

Refuse to Data Dump

Children are not empty hard drives waiting to be filled with facts and figures, but complex, emotional beings who are motivated by what interests and excites them. My new motto, reinforced by children themselves, is "*know your kids, grow your lessons.*" My job is not to impose preset lesson plans, but to get to know my students and adjust how I teach based on what gets them excited and helps them learn effectively.

Cultivate Mindfulness and Self-reflection

Real learning (meaning the integration of information and experiences), requires: quieting the mind; being fully present in the moment; acknowledging but not judging thoughts, feelings and physical sensations; time to get to know one's heart and mind; and practice expressing thoughts and feelings.

Cultivate Empathy and Kindness Through Story

Human beings are storytellers. Stories allow us to make sense of our world, and take down the walls of prejudice, fear and judgment. Giving children the opportunity to exercise their creativity, and explore who they are through a combination of storytelling and real-world projects, will teach important literacy skills, and help them develop into caring, compassionate and collaborative adults.

Finally, help your children fall in love with the iterative process of learning; to see mistakes and errors as stepping stones to discovery. Thomas Edison, who as a child was told he was, "too stupid to learn anything," said, "I haven't failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Make sure your students know that they are seen and encouraged to explore who they are, and that while perfection is not an option, excellence is!