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The Power, Structure, and Practice of Gratitude in Education: A Demonstration of Epistemology and Empirical Research Working Together

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Abstract

A growing body of philosophical, psychological, and educational research shows that gratitude has positive effects on mood, relationships, and learning. This paper explores the power of gratitude, investigates how the ontological (inward), teleological (forward), and metaphysical (upward) structure of gratitude can enhance learning, and then highlights a research study revealing teachers' perspectives on the impact of practicing gratitude in the classroom environment. Four themes emerged from the empirical study that support the gratitude structure: two themes relate to the impact on teachers (enhanced well-being and calm amidst stress), and two themes relate to the impact on students (enhanced classroom environment and strengthened learning). Together, the epistemological framework and the empirical evidence demonstrate that using the structure and the practice of gratitude together in the context of the classroom environment bolsters educational pursuits.

Introduction

Gratitude has positive effects on mood, relationships, and learning. A growing body of neurological, psychological, and educational research supports this general claim (Carr, 2016; Emmons, 2007; Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Howells, 2012; Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr, 2015; Park, Tsukayama, Goodwin, Patrick, & Duckworth, in press). But what is gratitude? How can its power be explained? Does gratitude have a structure that can be used to bolster educational pursuits? Do teachers notice any impact when they practice gratitude in the context of their classrooms? This paper explores the power of gratitude, investigates how the ontological (inward), teleological (forward), and metaphysical (upward) structure of

gratitude may enhance learning, and then highlights a research study revealing teachers' perspectives on the impact of practicing gratitude in the classroom environment. Tying the empirically verified benefits of gratitude in schools with a gratitude epistemology strengthens the argument that gratitude can lay a foundation that promotes productive learners.

Literature Review

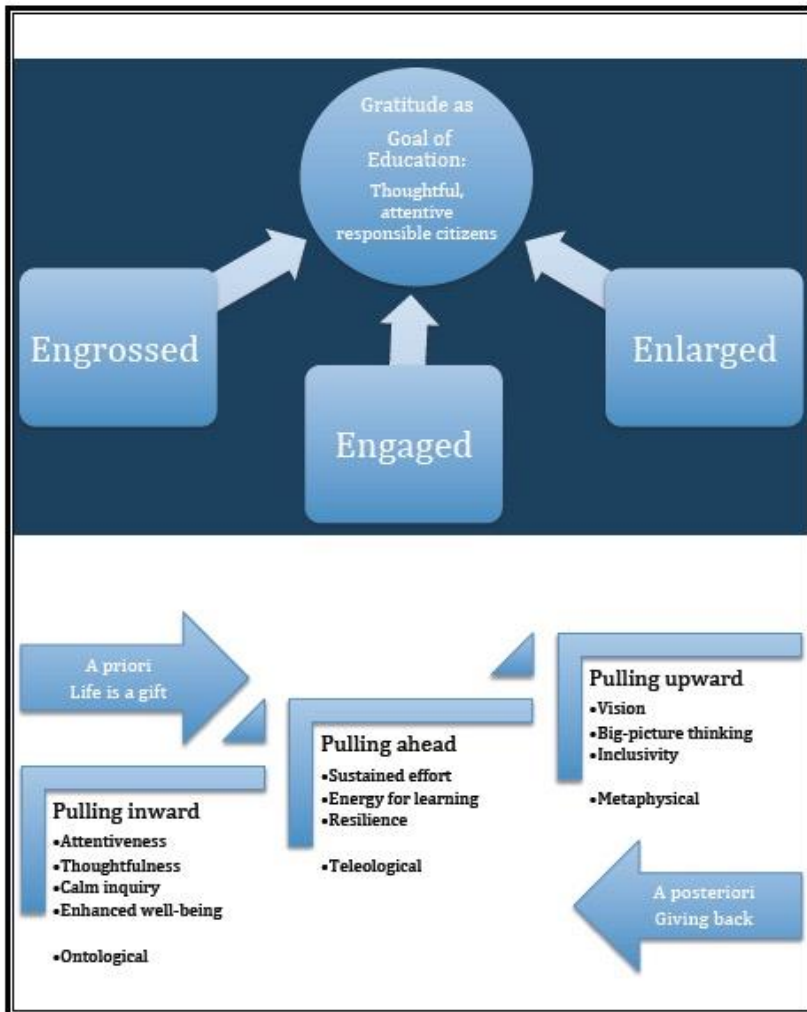
The Power of Gratitude: Gift, Linguistic Analysis, Abundance

The power of gratitude stems from its gift awareness, its linguistic analysis, and its Biblical resonance with abundance learning. Gratitude presumes that learning is a gift or privilege versus a right. Its etymological connotations shed light on its radical meaning. Biblical revelation deepens our grasp of gratitude as a disposition that flows from God's abundant generosity.

Learning as gift. Gratitude becomes powerful in education when learning is recognized as a gift a priori, that is, as the basic or foundational attitude of a student. Knowledge acquired through education builds upon knowledge previously received. The richness of human creativity, curiosity, abilities, thoughts, and capacities for ordering has value that can be cherished at the outset. This recognition of learning as a gift is expressed in Isaiah 11:2: "the Spirit . . . brings wisdom and understanding . . . gives direction and builds strength, the Spirit . . . instills knowledge." This gift of knowledge is to be unpacked, explored and used wisely. Seeing learning as a gift inspires humans to respond with gratitude through engrossed, engaged and enlarged learning endeavors (see Figure A). Education that produces this kind of learner lays the foundation for

a community of thoughtful, attentive, and responsible citizens.

Figure A: *Gratitude as Goal of Education*



Linguistic analysis of gratitude. Gratitude also possesses linguistic power. The French word for gratitude, *reconnaissance*, can be translated “recognition,” denoting a chance to recall or rethink an idea. When learners rethink what and why they are learning, they more fully appreciate its value (Howell, 2012; Stendl-Rast, 2004). This linguistic justification for gratitude shows its active link to appreciation and cognition. Other English linguistic connotations for gratitude include the root “grace,” defined as unmerited divine assistance; “gratefulness” as appreciation for benefits received; “thankfulness,” which denotes the consciousness or cognizance of received benefits; and “graciousness,” an attitude marked by kindness and

courtesy. Collectively, this linguistic analysis strengthens the impact that gratitude might have upon learning.

Further linguistic analysis shows that three prepositions commonly associated with gratitude (i.e., as, for, and to) yield various depths of attitudinal and conceptual power. A learner may experience gratitude as a feeling of gladness or contentment in the process of learning. This common experience of gratitude may be expressed as simply as “I like to learn”; in this instance, the learner recognizes a benefit, though from a vague or unknown source. Gratitude for the benefit received, in contrast, is more precise. The learner sees the benefit clearly and receives it as such. For example, a learner might say, “I’m grateful for the opportunity to get a good education.” Gratitude both as and for constitute a dyadic structure for gratitude.

To be grateful to a benefactor, however, adds a more relational dimension: the benefactor is acknowledged, and this relationship creates a binding effect. The learner is grateful to teachers, to parents, or to God for what has been given. This triadic definition of gratitude means the learner recognizes the benefitted (as), the benefit (for) and the benefactor (to) (Morgan et al., 2015).

The triadic understanding of gratitude is worth pursuing as the goal of education. In secular schools, a more general, dyadic expression of gratitude encourages students to consider gratitude as or for, and when possible, gratitude to the teacher completes the triad. In Christian education, a triadic understanding reaches further by giving gratitude to God—the great Benefactor—who is acknowledged as foundational to learning. Experiencing gratitude at a linguistic level can have far-reaching effects not only on the quality of learning but, ultimately, on more positive social relations in institutional and work environments.

Abundance learning of gratitude. The power of gratitude revealed in the Bible as thankfulness is referenced 150 times. In comparing two parallel verses in Revelation, the only word change in the repeated context is “wealth” to “thanks.” The words of Revelations

5:12—“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and *wealth* and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (emphasis added)—are later echoed in Revelation 7:12—“Praise and glory and wisdom and *thanks* and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever!” (emphasis added). Arguably, wealth and thanks are used interchangeably in these verses. The wealth or abundance of God’s riches, including wisdom and knowledge—liberally shared—causes people of faith not only to shout, “all wealth is yours, God!” but also to declare, “we owe you everything for all you have given: thank you for empowering us so richly to know you and to learn about your creation!” Gratitude is then not for an occasional good gift received but for Christ’s wealth of gifts, freely and continuously poured out. Gratitude, pervasive and unending, can occupy one’s whole being. Beyond a technique or a thank-you letter, gratitude is both a way of being and one’s eternal destiny. Applying this vision to education means enlarging gratitude’s capacity, building from “what I cannot do” (deficit-based learning) or even from “what I can learn” (asset-based learning) to “there is so much I want to learn so I can give back!” (gratitude-based learning).

A Way of Structuring Gratitude: Three Pedagogical Es, Infused with Gratitude

Understanding the power of gratitude lays an ontological (inward), teleological (forward), and spiritual (upward) foundation for pedagogy, thus promoting engrossed, engaged, and enlarged learners (see Figure A). Its ontology includes relating to learning as engrossed learners. Teleologically, gratitude pulls the learner forward in engagement that can overcome obstacles with sustained motivation to give back something of what one has received. The spiritual or metaphysical basis for learning pulls learning upward in the quest towards an enlarged sphere of meaning for learning by valuing inclusion of others, big-picture thinking, and a sense of awe.

First goal of gratitude: to increase engrossment in learning. Engrossment in learning or pulling inward—exercising deep attentiveness to the subject at hand—is the first pedagogical E. The motivation to get inside one’s learning increases with thankfulness, especially as a way of being or as

an ontological stance. Learning can go deeper when the learner dwells in gratitude. Consider this account of gratitude in an art class:

Elmer is a (Navajo) art teacher. Before they start art class, he asks the students to take out all their materials and lay them on their tables, and then, before they begin working, they offer a prayer to God —...—thanking God for the wax of the crayons, the wood and graphite of the pencils, the paper, the trees from which the paper came, the pains, the chalk, and they promise to use them with care and to God’s glory. Then at the end of the class, before they put their materials away, they thank God for the use of their materials. The underlying point is that we are to see the things of this world not only as the works of God for which we are to give God praise but also as the gifts of God for which we are to give God thanks—and then, gifts not only for utility but for delight. (Wolterstorff, Joldersma, & Stronks, 2004, pp. 266, 270)

Learning is experienced as unwrapping a precious gift received from someone who cares for us. When learners experience the triadic nature of gratitude, they feel the gladness of gratitude, are grateful for what they are learning, and may experience gratitude to the Giver of knowledge and learning. Being ontologically (inwardly) grounded in who we are as learners, whom we worship as we learn, and with whom we are in relationship to share learning’s benefits helps learners become engrossed. Experiencing gratitude while learning enhances a sense of well-being and produces a relaxed calm which increases powers of concentration. Attentiveness in this context does not mean a perfectionistic tendency to attend anxiously for fear of getting something wrong. Gratitude leaves room for exploration; for open-ended, inquiry-based learning; for co-constructed lessons; for hypothesis setting and testing; and for flexible timelines. In this kind of grace-filled environment, the learner can go deeper with less stress. C.S. Lewis (1939) lent insight to the idea of engrossment in learning:

By leading the learned life to the glory of God . . . I mean the pursuit of knowledge and beauty, in a sense, for their own sake, but in a sense which does not exclude their being for God's sake.

An appetite for these things exists in the human mind, and God makes no appetite in vain. We can therefore pursue knowledge as such, and beauty, as such, in the sure confidence that by so doing we are either advancing to the vision of God ourselves or indirectly helping others to do so. (p. 7)

The vision of God that Lewis described deepens gratitude out of which the knowledge as such becomes a calm, concentrated, engrossed pursuit without sacrificing that pursuit to a more expedient or self-gratifying end.

Second goal of gratitude: to increase engagement in learning.

The second E guided by gratitude is engagement in learning. Psychological studies show that gratitude increases resilience. For example, in a study with college students, those who practiced gratitude towards learning self-identified that they experienced an increase in focus and resilience while learning (Wilson, 2016). According to Learning Lab Consulting, “Pondering and reflecting upon positive experiences strengthens the neural patterns that create positive experiences in general, which fortifies resilience in individuals” (Lust, 2015, para. 12). Whether this reflection is dyadic or triadic, secular or Christian, the resilience effect remains, though it may be strengthened within a triadic, Christian worldview.

Engagement can be taken as the pedagogical side of resilience as it pulls toward the telos of gratitude. The evidence, summarized by Morgan et al. (2015), supports the connection between gratitude and resilience:

The results appear to demonstrate that engaging in gratitude exercises leads agents to entertain more positive appraisals of their lives in general; to increased optimism when thinking about the week ahead; to fewer physical complaints; to improved pro-social behaviours; to increases in positive affect; and to decreases in negative affect. (p. 99)

Emmons also claimed, “People who experience gratitude . . . seem to cope more effectively with everyday stress and show increased resilience” (as cited in Carr, 2016, p. 145). In other words, an engaged learner gravitates toward a purpose that sustains interest and attention in spite of obstacles.

Cognitive skills are heightened and thus effort can be sustained.

An engaged teleology of gratitude might be expressed as: “I want to learn all I can through the challenges that come with it to be able to give back something of what I have been given.”

Gratefulness fuels engagement by enabling the learner to overcome barriers and frustrations with a greater good in mind. For the learner, engagement opens up a vision of transitioning from being the one who is benefitted to becoming a benefactor. The learner’s transition to becoming a benefactor contributes to fulfilling a vision of educating resilient, attentive, and thoughtful citizens.

From the perspective of a teacher, gratitude-fueled engagement enables one to uphold the mission of education in the midst of political conflict, bureaucratic pressures, and extracurricular interruptions. The Christian teacher’s engagement for learning is forged by a central “thank-you” to God for the privilege of being educated and in turn educating, pushing ahead with learning and as services to students and school communities through good and bad times. The grateful teacher infuses gratitude into the classroom through modeling and through providing time to think in grateful ways.

Third goal of gratitude: to inspire enlargement in learning.

The third E is the enlargement that gratitude inspires. Some research indicates that gratitude opens up the psyche to others, God, the universe, the big picture (Carr, 2016; Emmons, 2007; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). An appreciation for metaphysical knowledge and mystery is embedded in gratitude and leads towards valuing others. Prosociality increases when focus is on something vaster than self:

[T]hose individuals who report feeling part of a greater entity, such as humanity, nature, or a spiritual force tend to report increased gratitude and empathy . . . Together, these findings indicate that placing less significance on the self and self-interest vis-à-vis something vaster than the self can increase prosociality. (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015, p. 885)

Gratitude opens up the metaphysical quest in learning, as it expands learning upward and outward, enlarging the cognitive processes towards contemplation and wonder. Doing so allows learners to make appreciative connections to mystery, beauty, and spirituality. The triadic understanding of gratitude as, for and to, expands institutional expectations for learning. While teachers recognize that they are responsible to follow the curricular and legal expectations of public servants, grateful teachers expand these expectations by pausing to wonder, asking big questions, thinking ethically, and exercising social graces.

Within a grateful perspective, teaching and learning embrace others prosocially. Grateful learners recognize the collaborative nature of the educational task and the value of learning from and with others. This kind of approach inspires gratitude for ultimate truth in the midst of diverse points of view. Attitudinally, being grateful for what teachers believe to be true allows teachers to be gracious toward other's beliefs. Grateful teachers set a tone inspired by the attitude that the truth is not owned, but given. Therefore, grateful teachers point the way rather than dictate the answers. Students are invited into honest inquiry that is free of defensiveness and the need to be right, exploring the bigger story unfolding through discussing things that matter. Gratitude inspires interest in and discussion about the bigger life questions. In the classroom, the spirit of gratitude—especially when inspired by the riches of Christ Jesus—fosters respectful dialogue about opposing beliefs.

Gratitude as an educational end. Gratitude as an educational end is characterized by cognitive awareness of its triadic meaning: it offers an ontology or way of being (pulling inward), a teleological orientation of sustained attentiveness (pulling toward), and a metaphysically enlarged vision of learning (pulling upward and outward). Gratitude, though not easily quantifiable, can have positive effects on learning. Wilson and Harris (2015) described the ripple effect of gratitude when practiced by teachers; teachers experienced enhanced well-being, strengthened relationships, and heightened cognitive skills—and in turn,

noticed that these qualities flowed onto their students, improving the learning environment.

This epistemology of gratitude undergirds the claim that gratitude has a positive effect on learning. The framework of the three Es—engrossed, engaged, and enlarged—suggests that gratitude outshines the various manifestations of culturally defined knowledge and enhances positive attitudes, resilience, contemplation, and prosocial thinking. Gratitude as an educational end cannot be divorced from its ongoing value in the process of education. Teachers can model and create opportunities for gratitude as both attitude and action in order to help students become grateful thinkers, feelers, and doers. This process can occur both relationally and curricularly, aiming to forge educated graduates—i.e., formed into grateful human beings as teachers infuse their teaching with practices of gratefulness. Gratitude will cultivate—more persuasively than knowledge or social skills—members of society who are able to think, act, feel, and communicate a thankful attitude. Such an attitude spawns meaningful connections, making the most of work, giving generously to others, and having the calmness of spirit to be engrossed in lifelong learning. Grateful learners show engagement through cognitive alertness and personal resilience. These learners tend to actively contemplate an enlarged vision that includes strengthened relationships.

Practicing Gratitude in the Classroom

As teachers grasp the power of gratitude by understanding its ability to increase engrossment, engagement, and enlargement in learning, they often wonder how to strengthen gratitude in themselves and in students. While some teachers may find that gratitude comes naturally, most will likely experience a need to cultivate gratitude through intentional practice. Indeed, research shows that people who daily engage in gratitude practices can train their brains with cognitive habits that amplify the good in their lives (Watkins, Uher, & Pichinesvsky, 2015). A variety of gratitude practices emerging from recent research invites people to stop and notice blessings, savor those blessings, speak of those blessings, and respond in some way (see Greater Good Science Center, focus: gratitude). These practices can easily be modified

for individual or collective use in education (Wilson & Harris, 2015). Described below are three specific gratitude practices that lend themselves well to the context of teaching: breathe and focus, gratitude journal, and gratitude language.

Breathe and focus. The breathe and focus gratitude practice, originally termed the state of preparedness (Howells, 2012), invites learners to breathe deeply while honestly examining inner attitude and personal outlook as they reflect forward to a class or to the day ahead in the flow of ontological engrossment. Learners determine if they hold attitudes of gratitude or attitudes of resentment or complaint. They then focus on making conscious choices to be grateful for opportunities to learn and for the people who will be helping them learn.

For the teacher, this practice could be completed while driving to school, while turning off the ignition in the school parking lot, or while standing at the door of the classroom: seizing the opportunity to breathe, focus, and choose to be grateful for students and for opportunities to positively impact them through teaching. For Christian teachers, the breathe and focus exercise can be expressed through prayer, inviting God to grant them the wisdom to choose grateful spirits. For the benefit of students, a teacher can lead a one-minute breathe and focus exercise at the beginning of a day or class period by inviting students to take three deep breaths, examine their attitudes, and then choose to be grateful for opportunities to learn and for the people who will help them learn. In a Christian school setting, teachers can lead opening prayers that invite God to grant the wisdom and strength to choose grateful spirits towards learning.

Gratitude journal. Writing in a gratitude journal (also referred to as “Three Good Things”) is the most researched gratitude practice (Emmons, 2007; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Watkins et al, 2015). To engage in this practice, people identify and record three to five specific, good things either daily or weekly. This practice tends to be more effective when focused on gratitude for people over material objects. Writing in a journal provides time for people to savor blessings as they write.

As teachers drive home, they can contemplate three good things that happened during the day, perhaps focusing on three specific students, colleagues, or parents. Even on particularly challenging days, most teachers can still identify at least three good things. Recording these things in a journal provides extra time to savor their goodness.

In the classroom, a gratitude journal can take different forms. For students in upper grades or secondary classrooms, teachers can provide time at the end of the day (or the week) to write down three good things related to learning or about someone who helped them learn. A variation of this practice is to ask students to write down three good things on a notecard or post-it note as their exit tickets for the day; teachers can create a simple gratitude bulletin board with these notes. Another twist is to provide space at the end of an exam (or after writing an essay), and invite students to write down three things they are grateful for related to the unit or to people who helped them learn. Such journaling strengthens the teleological direction of gratitude with increased resilience and the capacity to savor and pass on what is recognized as good in the learning experience.

Gratitude language. This broader category invites teachers to infuse more gratitude language into their discourse and into classroom discussions. For example, teachers can express gratitude to students for coming to class or helping classmates. In addition, teachers can express gratitude for the opportunity to learn, for various aspects of the curriculum, and for authors who write in clear and convincing ways. At the end of the day, teachers can invite students to express gratitude for specific things they learned that day and for others who helped them learn. Doing so heightens teachers’ and students’ awareness of positive events, experiences, and outcomes that happen each day. Moreover, the Christian teacher can invoke gratitude for God and His bounty.

As an outworking of the enlargement facet in the structure of gratitude, teachers can intentionally name good things about teaching, students, and colleagues. Such naming can occur in the classroom or the teacher’s lounge and extend into community life. In the classroom, the teacher can begin the day or class period by standing at the

threshold of the classroom and greeting each student (ideally by name) with a welcoming tone and expressing gratitude for their presence. As the lesson begins, teachers can model grateful spirits by expressing gratitude for the chance to learn about that particular topic. During a lesson, teachers can express gratitude (either publically or privately) for students who offer insights or are working hard towards learning. Teachers may also want to consider how to infuse gratitude language in written notes to students. This can be accomplished as simply as writing on a post-it note and leaving it on a student's desk or book or by writing on a gratitude postcard and mailing it to the student's home.

Teachers can invite students to use more gratitude language as well. This invitation can be accomplished through a gratitude circle or class discussion in which students are encouraged to express gratitude towards learning or other students who helped them learn. A variation is to ask students to express one thing they were grateful for about the day and to express it to the teacher as they exit the classroom.

Research Study

Purpose

The purpose of this action research study was to explore if teachers who chose to practice gratitude in the context of their classroom environments would notice any impact on themselves or students. In the spring of 2016, one of the authors gave 43 professional development presentations to teachers explaining the social science research on gratitude and how it could be practiced in the classroom. During this presentation, the power and structure of gratitude—its general and cognitive benefits—were highlighted as well as three specific ways to intentionally practice gratitude: breathe and focus, gratitude journal, and gratitude language. The presentation ended with a challenge to make daily conscious choices to engage in one or more of the gratitude practices for the following three weeks and then notice the impact on oneself and one's students.

Participants

Approximately 1300 teachers heard the 30-minute presentation, which was delivered most typically as part of a weekly staff meeting. Audience size

ranged from 12-100 teachers. Of the 43 presentations, 62% were given to public school educators and 38% to private school educators; 57% were given at the elementary level, and 43% at the secondary level.

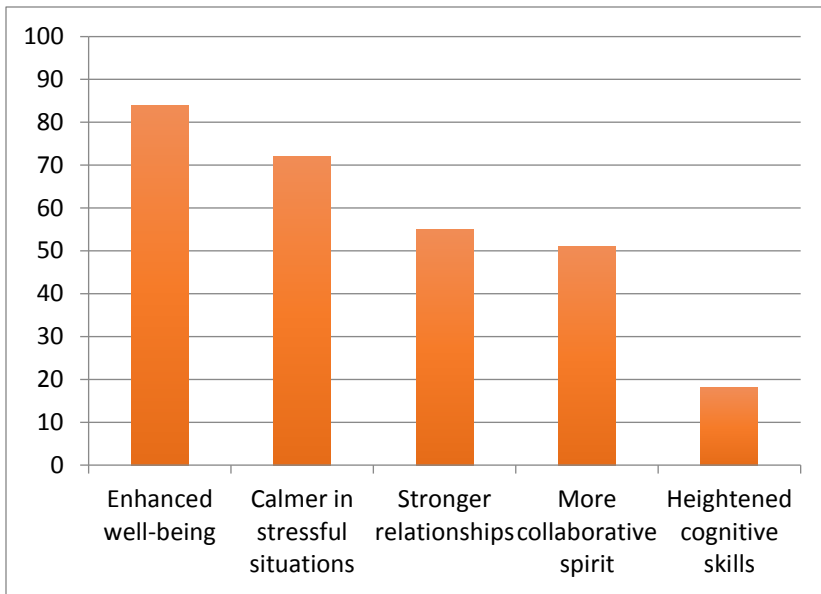
Data Collection and Analysis

Three weeks after each presentation, the researcher sent an email to the school principal who forwarded it to the teachers. The email invited the teachers to respond to a five-question survey asking them to identify if and how they practiced gratitude and what, if any, impact they noticed. One hundred forty-eight responses were received (about 11%); the majority of these respondents were likely those teachers who were impressed by the research on gratitude and compelled to engage in some of the practices. The final question on the survey asked the teachers if there was anything else they wanted to tell the researcher. All qualitative comments were examined and coded using the grounded theory method of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). As themes began to emerge, the comments were re-examined to determine consistent and repeated themes across the qualitative comments.

Results and Discussion

The survey asked teachers to identify the impact on themselves and their students after practicing gratitude for three weeks. Of the three gratitude practices suggested, nearly all teachers expressed using more gratitude language during the day. About two-thirds of the teachers engaged in the breathe and focus exercise and the gratitude journal. When teachers engaged in gratitude practices on a consistent basis, teachers noted many professional benefits that enriched themselves. For example, 84% reported experiencing enhanced well-being, 72% reported feeling calmer in stressful situations, 55% reported noticing stronger relationships (with students and/or colleagues), 50% reported experiencing a more collaborative spirit, and almost 20% reported heightened cognitive skills (see Figure B).

Figure B: *The Impact of Practicing Gratitude on the Teacher (self-identified)*

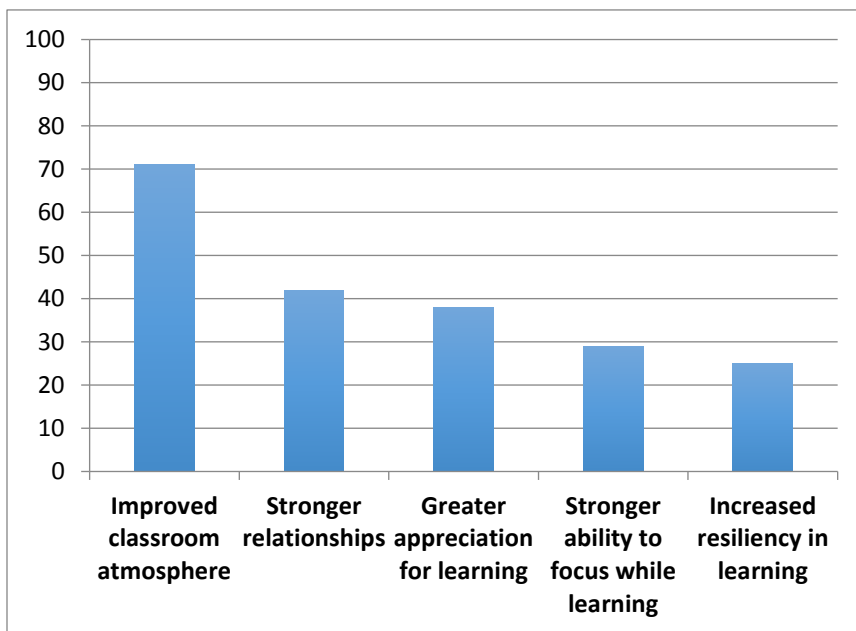


Teachers were also asked if they engaged in a gratitude practice during a particularly stressful situation, and if so, what they experienced. Of those who practiced gratitude with a difficult student or colleague, 75% identified that they felt calmer (a pulling inward) and 50% expressed a greater ability to work collaboratively (a pulling outward) with that person.

The survey then asked teachers what impact, if any, they noticed on their classrooms when they infused gratitude into the classroom environment. Seventy percent of the respondents noticed an improved classroom atmosphere, 41% reported stronger relationships among students, 38% reported more appreciation for learning, 29% reported students were more focused while learning, and 25% reported an increase in

resilience when learning felt challenging, which speaks to the teleological power of engagement (see Figure C).

Figure C: *The Impact of Practicing Gratitude on Students in the Classroom (identified by teacher)*



In addition to the quantitative data of the survey, teachers were invited to write qualitative comments. Collectively, the quantitative and qualitative comments suggest four prominent themes when gratitude was practiced in the context of the classroom. Two themes related to the teachers themselves: enhanced well-being and an ability to remain calm amidst stressful situations. Two themes focused on the students: improved classroom atmosphere and strengthened learning. The qualitative comments offer rich, descriptive detail for the emerging themes.

Enhanced well-being.

Eighty-five percent of the teachers who practiced gratitude consistently expressed experiencing an enhanced well-being as evidenced with comments such as “a more positive attitude,” “an uplifted spirit,” “more patience,” “greater energy,” and a stronger “sense of joy and happiness about teaching.” One teacher noted, “Taking a few moments to be grateful helps me recalibrate my heart and mind each day. This practice has blessed my life.” Another teacher reported, “Thinking of three things to be grateful for in teaching energizes my practice and makes me feel better throughout the day.” “Writing in a gratitude journal right before bed has

done something profound for me” contemplated a teacher, “I did not realize that going to bed with positive thoughts would help me wake up with about the impact of beginning the day with a grateful heart, e.g.: “I noticed that I was more alert and woke up quicker. My mind was clear and I was able to focus better.” Another teacher elaborated on this idea: “[S]etting intentions at the beginning of the day made a huge impact on my attitude and made me a better teacher.”

Calm amidst stress. Many primary and secondary teachers in the United States would agree that teaching is increasingly stressful. Seventy percent of the responding teachers identified that practicing gratitude appeared to help them remain calm when they encountered difficult situations with their students, parents, or colleagues. One teacher noticed, “When I am angry I tend to react, but when I am grateful I can be calmer and respond like I want to.” “I have practiced gratitude by telling students how thankful I am for them. In trying times,” commented a teacher, “this [practice of gratitude language] calms them down and also calms me down. It helps me remember why I love teaching.” A grateful perspective helped another teacher adjust her typical response when a student is late to class, “When a student is late I used to feel angry and say, ‘You’re late again.’ Now I say, ‘I’m glad you made it’ and the student and I both feel better about the day. In fact, I notice she is coming more on time!” Gratitude can also be expressed towards students with challenging behavior. “I left a gratitude post-it note for a disruptive student,” a teacher pointed out, “It impacted his normally disruptive behavior for the day, and he was calmer, more attentive, and contributing in positive ways. All the students noticed.” Another teacher elaborated about sending a gratitude postcard to a difficult student, “The parent emailed me and commented on how impactful this was for the student.” One teacher summed up the ripple effect of gratitude’s calming effect (“When I am calmer, then my class and students are calmer”) while another teacher succinctly stated gratitude’s benefits amid stress, “Demonstrating a grateful heart can go a long way in a difficult situation.”

Stressful situations also emerge among colleagues. The teachers who sought to practice gratitude in

positive thoughts. Even the students notice a difference in me.” A number of teachers wrote

those situations noticed positive benefits. “I have struggled with a particular team member,” confessed a teacher, then elaborated:

I have never experienced something like this before. Writing in my gratitude journal and including her in it, has really helped me and our relationship has improved. I truly believe my attitude shift and my consistency of the gratitude journal has helped.

A high school teacher wrote,

I’m dealing with a serious interpersonal conflict in our department. I have tried to stop for a minute before I get out of my car upon arriving to school and think about this conflict, expressing gratitude for the people involved. Though the tension continues, I can say that I have felt more calm.

Gratitude can also impact meetings; as pointed out by a high school administrator: “When we begin our meetings by expressing gratitude[,] it changes our attitudes from adversarial to more of a team spirit—working towards a common goal.” This grateful, team-driven approach, noticed the administrator, helped the administrators work more collaboratively in solving issues.

The two themes—enhanced well-being and calm amidst stress—enrich the lives of the teachers specifically and give evidence for the ontology and teleology of gratitude. We now examine two additional themes that enriched the lives of students as identified by the teachers. Though these themes make a positive impact on students, teachers also expressed feeling more satisfaction in their work when witnessing an improved classroom atmosphere and strengthened learning.

Improved classroom atmosphere. Seventy-five percent of the teachers noticed an improved classroom atmosphere when they infused gratitude into the classroom. A junior high teacher wrote,

The last class of the day used to be rough, and I would complain about the students. When I made a choice to express gratitude towards them

and I asked them to write down three good things at the end of class, it brought incredible transformation. Now I leave school energized, instead of drained. Such a simple exercise has so much power.

Other teachers described the impact of using gratitude journals on the classroom atmosphere with comments such as: “the whole class atmosphere lifted” and “it produces a positive mood in the classroom.” A lower-grade teacher led a “breathe and focus” exercise a few times during the day and reported an improved atmosphere and better energy: “When I do this, there’s a distinct change in the energy in the room—it’s a calmer, more focused and positive energy.”

The classroom atmosphere was improved in part because teachers noticed improved relationships, e.g.: “As I encourage students to speak good things, I’ve noticed a huge change in the way they treat each other. It’s certainly transforming our classroom relationships.” This enhanced learning space begins with what many teachers wrote about: greeting students at the door with a grateful heart and remarking about the quick “personal connection” it made, “helping each student feel valued and important.” Other teachers wrote about the impact of ending the day with words of gratitude, e.g.: “Expressing good things at the end of the day strengthens our community and sends the students out with joy.”

Strengthened learning. Teachers reported that gratitude appeared to strengthen the learning experience for their students and noticed that students expressed greater appreciation for learning (38%), stronger ability to focus while learning (29%) and increased resilience in learning (25%). One teacher explained, “When I infuse gratitude language into learning, students seem more confident and ready to learn.” Similarly, another teacher clarified: “I noticed that when I express gratitude towards learning, the students see more opportunities to express gratefulness about learning.” Yet another teacher elaborated: “As we practice gratitude towards learning, the students share more personal and deep responses. When we end the day with something positive and meaningful, this usually brings them back the next morning with a positive attitude towards learning.”

Not only did teachers notice a greater appreciation for learning in their students, they specifically pointed out that gratitude appeared to help students focus and remain resilient while learning. One teacher remarked, “Counting blessings helps create resiliency.” Another teacher concurred, “When I acknowledge with gratitude the hard work and effort of the students, the impact is a greater awareness of the value and worth of their effort. This validates them and creates a willingness to carry on and persist.”

Limitations

Though this action research study contributes to the growing body of research on gratitude’s relationship to learning, further research is needed. In this particular study, participants were invited to respond to a survey, and only 11% chose to respond (148 out of 1300 who participated in the training); therefore, generalizability is limited. The study is further limited by the lack of a control group; in addition, respondents do not represent a randomized sample. Another limitation relates to the drawbacks of self-reports, which are subjective in nature and produce limited reliability. While these limitations should be kept in mind, the results of the study are still valuable for educators to consider.

Conclusion

Research shows mounting evidence that gratitude has positive effects on mood, relationships and learning. In this paper, epistemological thinking combined with an empirical study demonstrate that the structure and practice of gratitude in the context of the classroom environment has potential to enhance learning. When teachers understand the ontological (inward), teleological (forward), and spiritual (upward) structure of gratitude, such triadic understanding can serve as both motivation and framework for taking class time to intentionally practice gratitude. This study suggests that practicing gratitude on a daily basis not only enhances teachers’ well-being and helps them remain calm amidst stress, but also practicing gratitude appears to improve the classroom atmosphere and strengthen learning. When teachers build a foundation of gratitude in the classroom, it appears that students may become more engrossed, engaged, and enlarged to absorb the fullness of learning. Education that produces this kind of

learner has potential to create communities of thoughtful, attentive, and responsible citizens.

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