

## Fostering Gratitude

A few simple practices can promote the feeling and expression of gratitude among students, thereby building their character, prosocial skills, and positive emotions.

By David N. Miller

**J**ustin is an eighth-grade student who seems to have everything going for him: he has many friends, receives good grades in school, effectively participates in many co-curricular activities, and comes from a loving and supportive family. Yet he often complains about his circumstances, frequently experiences depression and an overall lack of satisfaction with his life, infrequently helps others, and rarely experiences or expresses gratitude for his many blessings.

In addition to teaching students a variety of academic skills, a primary goal of public education is to develop character and civic virtue in students. This second goal often gets lost because of the increased pressure to meet testing goals, but it remains a vital aspect of schooling.

One way to enhance character development among students is to foster their experience and expression of gratitude. Possessing a capacity for gratitude not only can strengthen students' positive life outlook and appreciation for others but also can support a positive school experience. Specifically, gratitude can lead to increased well-being, greater progress toward goals, improved relationships, and enhanced prosocial behaviors, all of which can affect the individual student and the overall school climate. Because gratitude is an attribute that is developed, it can be practiced and reinforced in the learning environment.

### What Is Gratitude?

Gratitude can be conceptualized as either a virtue or an emotional state. For example, gratitude has been conceptualized from a moral and ethical perspective. As a moral barometer, gratitude signals the beneficiary that a benefactor has bestowed a gift upon him or

her. As a moral motive, gratitude encourages prosocial behavior in the beneficiary either directly toward the benefactor or toward others. As a moral reinforcer, gratitude increases the probability that the benefactor will act prosocially toward the beneficiary in the future (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001).

As an emotional state, certain conditions must be met for a beneficiary to experience gratitude. First, the beneficiary must perceive that the benefactor intentionally bestowed the benefit. This component is the essential ingredient for experiencing gratitude when it is viewed as an interpersonal emotion. Second, the benefactor should incur some cost in providing the benefit. In general, the greater the perceived cost incurred by the benefactor in providing the benefit, the greater the beneficiary's gratitude. Third, the beneficiary should value the benefit bestowed upon him or her (Froh, Miller, & Snyder, 2007).

### The Power of Positive Thinking

The concept of gratitude as a positive quality that supports other life factors is receiving increasing attention within the scientific community, particularly within the emerging field known as *positive psychology* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology has been defined as the "scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216) and is concerned with positive traits, positive emotions, and positive institutions (Seligman, 2002).

Positive psychology was developed largely as a reaction to the disease model that is so prevalent in contemporary psychology, in which remediating deficits and treating disorders is given greater attention than building

**David N. Miller** is an associate professor of school psychology at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

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and promoting strengths and virtues. It fits well with the positive qualities of the learning environment, which necessarily build on student strengths, create capacity, and work toward potential. Fostering gratitude can help promote students' strengths by making them more aware of those strengths in themselves and others.

### Developing Gratitude

Although the understanding of gratitude in adults has grown substantially in recent decades, there is currently limited research on gratitude in youth. Most children can cognitively experience and express gratitude beginning in the middle level, and the experience and expression of gratitude lead to multiple benefits, not only in individual students but for others as well. Therefore, although teaching students to be grateful is useful at the elementary level, middle level and high school administrators have a particularly powerful learning opportunity in terms of student development.

There are several variables that may promote or inhibit the experience and expression of gratitude. Variables that can promote gratitude include optimism, empathy, humility, the ability to view problems from different perspectives, and spiritual orientation. Potential obstacles and inhibiting factors include a sense of entitlement, lack of self-reflection, preoccupation with materialism, and the perception that one is a passive victim (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Many middle level and high school students exhibit behaviors that inhibit gratitude and could therefore benefit from structured programs that require greater reflection on the people, events, and things for which students can and should be grateful.

### Tips for Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers can begin promoting gratitude in their children at an early age. For example, rather than simply teaching children to say a perfunctory thank you after receiving a gift, parents and caregivers can teach children *why* they should say thank you. Because such virtues as gratitude are acquired behaviors, consistent support and encouragement from adults enable children to develop the skills necessary to experience and express gratitude.

Encourage children to be mindful of people, events, activities, and things for which they can and should be grateful. Gently remind them, without nagging, about the many positive aspects of their lives, particularly in comparison to other children who may not be as fortunate.

Encourage children to write thank-you notes after receiving gifts from relatives and friends and to include *why* they are thankful for the gifts. Also, encourage children to write thank-you notes to teachers and other school staff members who made a particular impression on them or who helped them in some way. Have children reflect on why they are grateful and communicate it in notes.

### Benefiting From Gratitude

Recent research has demonstrated that numerous benefits can be gained by experiencing and expressing gratitude. For example, those who frequently feel and express gratitude appear to enjoy their work more, to be more optimistic and energetic, to make progress toward personal goals, and to be more likely to help or support others than individuals who do not experience gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Children who are grateful have more positive attitudes toward their families and school (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008).

The practice of gratitude may also be useful for decreasing materialism, particularly

## Gratitude as a Quality of Positive Psychology

Gratitude, like hope and optimism, is an important component of positive psychology. Positive psychology is more than positive thinking. It involves:

- Scientific study of human strengths that help people thrive
- Study of positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions
- Such qualities as happiness, creativity, resilience, compassion, courage, justice, curiosity, meaning of life, and gratitude.

The capacity for gratitude is associated with:

- Experiencing more-positive emotions
- Improved goal attainment
- Being less likely to become blasé about positive experiences
- Greater satisfaction with life
- Less depression and anxiety
- Increased helpfulness and empathy.

the desire for things that people do not have and typically do not need. Experiencing such desires often results in subjective distress and dissatisfaction with one's life circumstances. A useful antidote to this problem can be the experience and expression of gratitude (Miller, 2006; Miller & Nickerson, 2007). The active engagement of gratitude appears to be a viable exercise for increasing and sustaining individual happiness as well as enhancing the probability of social behavior (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

### What Can Schools Do?

Fostering gratitude in youth is an appropriate role for schools not only because it is good for students but also because schools are communities where people do things for others. The learning environment also provides a strength-building context. Experiencing and expressing gratitude does not come naturally; it is a learned process and sometimes an ef-

fortful one that requires a certain level of inner reflection and introspection (Miller, 2006). Although much can be done at home to foster gratitude, schools have the capacity to raise awareness of the benefits of gratitude, weave the practice of gratitude into the school day, and build on existing peer-to-peer and student-adult relationships. Fortunately, there are specific exercises that can be used in schools to promote gratitude.

### Keeping Gratitude Journals

One method that may be particularly useful in schools—and that is neither expensive nor time consuming—is having students keep “gratitude journals.” This practice was developed by Robert Emmons and his colleagues, who found in multiple studies that engaging in a task as simple as self-monitoring and recording events for which one is grateful can lead to greater prosocial behavior and subjective well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2004).

Although most of the work with gratitude journals to date has involved adults, Froh, Sefick, and Emmons (2008) recently conducted the first study examining the positive effects of counting blessings in middle level students and found similarly positive results. Specifically, they found that counting blessings was associated with enhanced self-reported gratitude, optimism, and life satisfaction as well as decreased negative emotions among students who kept gratitude journals in comparison to students who did not.

To use gratitude journals, students typically write down four or five particular things (e.g., people, events, or activities) that they are grateful for and why. This intervention is very brief, easy to implement, and has empirical support for its effectiveness, so it is potentially useful for students at the middle and high school levels. For example, gratitude journals could be assigned to students in conjunction with major holidays that are designed to promote gratitude, such as Thanksgiving (Miller, 2006) and

Memorial Day (Miller, 2008).

Gratitude journals also have the potential to improve students' writing skills and promote self-reflection, so this exercise could benefit all students in a particular school or district. Keeping gratitude journals may be particularly useful for students who are experiencing depression or subjective distress. Students who are depressed frequently self-monitor negative aspects of their lives and neglect positive ones. Having such students create gratitude journals can help them focus on more positive aspects of their lives and potentially alleviate, at least to some degree, their level of subjective distress.

### Modeling Gratitude

School administrators, teachers, and other school professionals can promote gratitude in students by modeling it. For example, schools could have periodic "gratitude days" during which staff members announce what they are grateful for and ask students to do the same. In particular, it is beneficial for staff members to focus their thoughts and feelings of gratitude to specific people or students in the school and to directly express their gratitude in person. This is a potentially powerful way to model both the experience and the expression of gratitude to students.

### Teaching Grateful Behaviors

School administrators and teachers can work together to teach behaviors associated with gratitude, such as saying thank you when someone does something for them, writing thank-you notes, and reminding students of the advantages and good fortune in their lives. This should not be done in a lecturing or condescending manner (e.g., "You students are simply not grateful enough!"), but rather in a manner that encourages students to be more mindful of their blessings and the importance of acknowledging them to themselves and to others.

### Conclusion

Experiencing and expressing gratitude has many potential benefits for school outcomes, including students' enhanced character development, positive emotions, and prosocial behavior. Promoting gratitude can begin in the middle level and continue into high school. The use of simple techniques, such as gratitude journals, is an effective and easily managed procedure for accomplishing this goal. By having staff members incorporate a few simple practices, principals can help establish a school culture in which gratitude contributes to student well-being and attitudes and, by extension, a more positive school climate. **PL**

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### What Next?

The following are important questions and steps for principals to consider with their staff members when developing programs to foster and promote gratitude in their students:

- Think about the responsibility of schools to promote character development and citizenship. Does the promotion of gratitude in young people help accomplish this additional goal?
- Do students in your school feel and express gratitude for the "blessings" they have received in their lives? If not, what can be done to correct this situation?
- What steps can schools take to encourage parents and caregivers to foster gratitude in their children?

## Recommended Reading

*Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier.* R. A. Emmons. (2007). New York: Houghton Mifflin.

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