



# Raising Grateful Children

By SAN Pek Leng, Charity

One of our educational goals is to ensure the well-being of our future generations. As teachers and/or parents, we would contribute dedicatedly without requiring rewards of any kind to enable the children to lead a life free from any sense of guilt for the sacrifices others have made for them.

Yet, somehow, it does not seem right for the children to take no notice at all of the contributions that others have been making in 'working their socks off' for them. As Shakespeare's King Lear put it: 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child'; indeed, it is painful to see the children we raise grow to simply expect kindness and contributions from others without a word of thanks or an acknowledgement of gratitude.

Even so, although many school curricula are already full, should we teach children about gratitude in our curriculum? What good does gratitude do to the students? And, as teachers/parents (or rather, benefactors), what can we do to ensure that our children are given sufficient opportunities to explore gratitude? How possible is it for gratitude to be ensured? This article sets out some frequently discussed aspects of

teaching gratitude, as well as methods of promotion.

## What is gratitude?

In unpacking the concept of gratitude and its role in education, psychologists define gratitude as a cognitively, affectively and behaviourally desirable trait: a positive emotion, a sacred emotion, a pro-social emotion, a moral emotion, a cognitive appraisal process, a moral motivation, a virtue, a character strength, a disposition, a kind of behaviour, and an action. (Harvard Medical School, 2021; Howells, 2014; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Waters and Stokes, 2015).

Socially, as a matter of emphasis, there seem to be different views concerning bearing gratitude more internally than externally, and vice versa. On the one hand, we see that in many cultures, gratitude is not supposed to be borne only or largely silently inwardly or personally. Rather, people are expected to behave gratefully towards the benefactors, or the help-givers, because gratitude is perceived to be better fulfilled when it is accompanied by a return on kindness. This suggests that being grateful has to attend to the interpersonal, people-oriented, and pro-social, external aspects of



gratitude. Because grateful people appear to be nice, more polite, more well-mannered, more respectful, and more educated, indeed more civilised than those who are not, gratitude teaching is often regarded as important in moral education.

On the other hand, some cultures assume that gratitude should come from within rather than be taught, i.e. it should be learned rather than taught. In this regard, people are expected to practise gratitude by thinking thankfully about whatever things come along in their lives that are attached to a positive experience, such as having good health and going for a walk in sunny weather, taking the accompanying positive feelings individually rather than interpersonally. Thus, gratitude is not only about being grateful to a person but also for something, e.g. an event, an activity, or an experience, even if it is provided by a person. Recognising that one is being grateful to people and the other is for things rather than people creates opportunities for spotting the positive aspects of routine as well as unusual events.

### Benefits yielded by gratitude

Studies suggest that the benefits yielded by gratitude are manifold. Robert Emmons (2010) remarks, from his research, with over one thousand people aged between 8 and 80, that people who consistently practise gratitude report having stronger immune systems, are less bothered by aches and pains, and have lower blood pressure and better quality of sleep. Besides, as indicated in some psychotherapeutic research, in functional magnetic resonance

imaging (fMRI) scanning, grateful people show stronger neural sensitivity in the brain and have greater activation in the medial prefrontal cortex, a brain area that controls learning and decision-making (Brown and Wong, 2017).

It is amazing that grateful people can radiate the kindness they have received, as gratitude often motivates kind responses in relationships, and so people are willing to extend kindness. Harvard Medical School (2021) captures that grateful people recognise that the source of goodness lies partially outside them, being grateful helps them to connect and contribute to something larger than themselves as individuals. In other words, gratitude is likely to be kept rolling, and such behaviour can be passed down from generation to generation, as learning takes place through role modelling, and thus, the well-being that gratitude generates is also likely to be multiplied.

### Raising grateful children

Inaugurated first in the closing years of the last millennium, positive psychology has facilitated the growth of peer review and was once classed as the fourth-highest discipline, immediately behind psychiatry, neuroscience and experimental psychology. In terms of academic impact, positive psychology provides robust evidence linking students' gratitude and well-being. Deriving from the scientific study of human strengths and virtues, educational psychologists (e.g. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon and King, 2001) recommend nourishing students' gratitude with

positive psychology interventions, such as educational activities that help to engage positive states, namely resilience, optimism, hope, gratitude, mindfulness and persistence. According to Waters and Stokes's research (2015), supported by positive psychology, psychological interventions, e.g. programs, practices, methods, and activities that aim at cultivating positive feelings, behaviour, and cognitions can develop into positive psychological interventions. In their research, resonating with the discussion earlier, two dimensions of gratitude are distinguished – emotion-gratitude and action-gratitude – of which emotion-gratitude leads to personal well-being and thinking within the individual, while action-gratitude leads to relational well-being.

**Emotion gratitude:** Waters and Stokes (2015) explain, through dealing with emotion-gratitude, students engage in more appreciative problem-solving that enables them to see the value in different aspects of life. Positive psychology interventions that aim at fostering emotion-gratitude, promote grateful emotions by learning to appreciate the surroundings. Being engaged in activities, such as simply keeping a gratitude journal or sharing grateful thoughts with others can help students to hold a balanced view of both positive and negative things that happen in their lives. However, sometimes the students might need to be prompted or pushed to notice the upside of environments, focusing on the good things that surround them, such as the school settings, facilities, infrastructures, nature, etc., because these things are well-fitting and well-provided,

such that they risk being taken for granted.

Waters and Stokes (2015) note that keeping a gratitude journal (or diary) can be a catharsis that helps its owner to understand the emotions that bring gratitude. By writing down valuable life moments, and consistently keeping a gratitude journal, more and stronger gratitude is aroused. Over time, the gratitude journal grows to be a 'database' of beautiful memories ready to be recalled. Depending on the age group of the students, a gratitude journal can be adapted to various forms, such as the 'gratitude vlog', the 'gratitude jar', the 'gratitude box', etc.

**Action-gratitude:** as its name implies, action-gratitude concerns taking actions more than having feelings only. Howells (2014) comments that action-gratitude is a kind of powerful pro-social behaviour that eases communications, e.g. parent-child, student-teacher, teacher-teacher, and teacher-leader or leader-teacher. Aimed at 'giving back' altruistically, action-gratitude serves more than merely admitting the feeling of gratitude and acknowledging helping, it rather synergises social harmony as it encourages reciprocity of kindness. To realise action-gratitude in school, one common method is to let students write letters expressing gratitude. Hence, gratitude is both a receptive matter and a productive, behavioural matter.

For emotion-gratitude, writing gratitude letters enables students to reach out to those they feel grateful for but never had a chance to express their gratitude. Waters and Stokes (2015) and Brown and Wong (2017) note that



writing gratitude letters calls for relational action. This boosts happiness and decreases depression, sometimes immediately, and the beneficial effects of this can last up to three months after writing and delivering the letter. Nevertheless, some people may find it uncomfortable to have the letters delivered, but they are encouraged to write it first and decide if they will send it later because the psychological benefits derived from writing gratitude letters can be reinforced and are as powerful as sending the letters. Like a gratitude journal, the idea of a gratitude letter is adaptable. It can take many forms, such as sending a thank-you card or displaying grateful messages on a bulletin board, etc.

### Conclusion

The ‘nuts and bolts’ of learning to be grateful enables us to enjoy the gratification of the goodness and beneficence of people around us, as well as experiences. That is to say: we can be grateful to someone for something, and we can be thankful for living and experiencing something. And most importantly, we can express these both internally and externally as teaching and learning gratitude can be addressed through the promotion of reflective practice, facilitated by the teacher who provides opportunities for gratitude to be learned and developed. 謝

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