A Review of Gratitude Researches in Youth: Implications for Moral Education

Chu, Beong-Wan (Chuncheon National University of Education)

Abstract

The aim of this article is to offer a review of gratitude researches in youth. Gratitude is a positive emotion occurred in exchange-based relationships when one person acknowledges receiving a valuable benefit from others. Gratitude is essential to well-being and mental health throughout the life span. Although the adult literature on gratitude has grown substantially in the past few decades, the empirical research on gratitude in children and adolescent is in its infancy. Gratitude interventions in children and adolescents have a short history, but initial findings are very promising. In this article, I review theoretical and empirical work on gratitude as a moral emotion, discuss the unique benefits of gratitude for youth, and analyze interventions for promoting gratitude in children and adolescents. Finally, I conclude by suggesting implications of gratitude interventions that can be applied in moral education.

Key words - gratitude, gratitude interventions, moral education, positive psychology, virtue ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

We experience gratitude when we receive something valuable or beneficial to us. Gratitude is the appreciation we feel when somebody does something kind or helpful for us. Thus, gratitude is triggered by the perception that one is the beneficiary of another’s intentionally provided benefit. Throughout history gratitude has been gained considerable attention in philosophical and theological explanations of the good life. While moral philosophers and religious thinkers have recognized gratitude as being beneficial to experiencing a happy and good life for centuries, psychologists have
recently begun to systematically study gratitude. In psychology, gratitude has been one of the most neglected emotions and one of the most underestimated of the virtues.\textsuperscript{1} However, gratitude has recently attracted considerable interest from both the mass media and the academic community. Current researches on gratitude are mostly concerned with the psychological benefits of gratitude or gratitude interventions. According to Emmons, factors contributing an increased focus on gratitude are positive psychology movement, a renewed interest among social scientists in people’s religious and spiritual lives, and resurgent interest in virtue ethics.\textsuperscript{2}

Gratitude is essential to well-being and mental health throughout the life span. Gratitude is beneficial in both individual and society at large. Research indicates that gratitude is strongly related to healthy psychological and social functioning because it focuses people on self-improvement and helps them maintain and build strong, supportive social ties. In this regard, White claims that gratitude is essential to a flourishing democracy because it helps foster universal amity between citizens.\textsuperscript{3}

However, most researches on gratitude are exclusively focused on adults. There is a dearth of research on gratitude in children and adolescents. Several recent studies indicate that gratitude is also beneficial to children and adolescents. Although gratitude interventions in children and adolescents have a short history, initial findings are very promising.

Given a fact that gratitude interventions are effective to cultivating gratitude in children and adolescents, moral educators should consider gratitude a viable path for students’ moral development. The reason is that gratitude is the overflow of a humble heart as well as a respectful expression toward the benefactors. In addition, gratitude promotes a sense of fairness and equality. Thus, considering that gratitude has a lot of moral merits, searching for practical implications of gratitude interventions in moral education as a separate subject is timely appropriate and pedagogically imperative. The primary aim of this article is to shed light on what is known about gratitude in youth. My discussion begins with the major findings from current researches on the benefits of gratitude in youth and then proceeds to what is known so far about

\begin{thebibliography}{3}
\footnotesize
\item Robert C. Solomon, “Foreword”, In Robert A. Emmons & Michael E. McCullough (Eds.), The psychology of gratitude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), v.
\item Patricia White, “Gratitude, citizenship and education”, Studies in Philosophy and Education 18(1999): 47.
\end{thebibliography}
gratitude interventions that focus on the development of gratitude and its promotion. Finally, I conclude by suggesting three considerations when we try to apply gratitude researches to moral education as a subject.

II. WHAT IS GRATITUDE AND WHAT GOOD IS GRATITUDE?

1. What is gratitude?

The word gratitude is derived from the Latin gratia, meaning favor, and gratus, meaning pleasing. All derivatives from this Latin root have to do with kindness, generosity, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing. Like most words, gratitude appears to have a number of different meanings, depending on the context. For example, gratitude has been conceptualized as a moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality trait, and a coping response. Generally speaking, gratitude means a positive emotional reaction in response to the receipt of a gift or benefit from someone.

Psychologists regard gratitude as a positive emotion. It is an interpersonal emotion that is felt toward other people or entities, and not toward oneself. Emotions can be conceptualized on a state and a trait level. At the state level, emotions involve temporary affects or longer duration moods, which may have associated thought and action tendencies. At the trait level, emotions are characterized by individual differences in the average frequency with which affects and moods are experienced in daily life. The study of gratitude has almost exclusively focused on one or another of these levels.

State gratitude occurs in response to aid that is interpreted to be costly to the benefactor, valuable to the receiver, and intended altruistically rather than ulterior.

---

motive. Watkins argues that experiencing gratitude requires four distinct recognitions such as recognizing the gift, recognizing the goodness of the gift, recognizing the goodness of the giver, and recognizing the gratuitousness of the gift. He calls it ‘recognitions of gratitude’. This implies that there are four cognitive appraisals that lead to gratitude. First, one must recognize that a gift had indeed occurred. Second, the more individuals value a gift, the more gratitude they tend to experience. Third, when one recognizes the goodness of the giver, this enhances the likelihood of grateful experience. Finally, when people recognize the gratuitousness of a gift, they are more likely to experience gratitude. Meanwhile, state gratitude as a moral emotion has three specific moral functions. First, gratitude acts as a moral barometer. It tells the beneficiary that someone has benefited him or her. Second, gratitude acts as a moral motivator. It encourages pro-social or moral behavior, facilitating the repayment of aid. Third, gratitude acts as a moral reinforcer. When someone expresses gratitude, it encourages benefactors to act favorably toward someone in the future.

Trait gratitude refers to one’s disposition for gratitude. Grateful disposition is defined as a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people’s benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains. To put it differently, the disposition of gratitude refers to a virtue of gratitude. Thus, a person who is high in trait gratitude should experience gratitude easily and often. In general, persons who are high in grateful disposition tend to be agreeable, emotionally stable, self-confident but less narcissistic, and non-materialistic. What makes person high in the disposition to gratitude? In this connection, McCullough and his colleagues posited facets of the grateful disposition. Four facets of the grateful disposition are intensity, frequency, span, and density.

A Review of Gratitude Researches in Youth

a similar vein, Watkins argues that grateful people have a sense of abundance, an appreciation for simple pleasure, and an appreciation for others, and these factors serve to foster a more general attitude that views all of life as a gift.\(^\text{12}\) Trait gratitude correlates with a large array of well-being indicators. Thus, grateful people may be prone to positive emotions, positive health, strong relationships, and subjective well-being.

So far, I described the meanings and characteristics of gratitude as an emotion. Although there is a lack of clear agreement about the nature of gratitude, many researchers concur with a fact that gratitude is an emotion which occurs after people receive any benefits that is costly, valuable, and altruistic. Therefore, gratitude as an emotion is always directed towards appreciating the helpful and benevolent actions of benefactors. But, strictly speaking, it is important to recognize that gratitude does not always require an interpersonal context. It can also be experienced toward impersonal(e.g., nature) or nonhuman sources(e.g., God, animals, the cosmos). Whether gratitude is considered a trait or a state, its benefits are closely associated with positive thoughts, positive feelings, and positive behaviors. In turn, these thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can support mental health, well-being, and even self-improvement.

2. What good is gratitude in youth?

Gratitude is an important component of the good life. Emotional, social, and physical well-being must be important to living well, and there are now abundant evidences that gratitude supports and contributes to these facets of human flourishing. Emmons enumerates the benefits of gratitude as follows.\(^\text{13}\) First, gratitude increases spiritual awareness. Second, gratitude promotes physical health. Third, gratitude maximizes pleasure. Fourth, gratitude protects against the negative. Fifth, gratitude strengthens relationships. However, most evidences are related to adults. Because gratitude is good for adults, is it good for children and adolescents as well? Fortunately, several studies now investigated the importance of gratitude for the well-

---

being of children and adolescents. Let me summarize the major findings of the researches.

First, gratitude can be psychologically beneficial for youth. Froh et al. argue that gratitude is related to positive psychological/subjective well-being in middle school students. In a daily gratitude journal-keeping exercise (i.e., counting blessings), students in the gratitude condition reported significantly more gratitude compared with those focused on irritants (i.e., the hassles group) and significantly greater satisfaction with their school experience compared with both the hassles and no-treatment control groups. Moreover, students in the gratitude condition reported significantly greater optimism for their upcoming week in relation to the hassles condition. This study shows that gratitude in the form of counting one’s blessings is strongly associated with enhanced self-reported gratitude, optimism, life satisfaction, and decreased negative affect. In another study, Froh et al. conclude that gratitude is positively correlated with a number of life satisfaction domains in early adolescents aged 11-13. Positive associations were found between gratitude and positive affect, global and domain specific life satisfaction, optimism, social support, and pro-social behavior.

Second, gratitude serves to broaden thought-action repertoires and consequently build enduring social, intellectual, and physical resources. According to Fredrickson, gratitude broadens one’s modes of thinking as he or she creatively considers a wide array of actions that might benefit others. Furthermore, all the goods gratitude builds - close friendships, civil communities, spiritual practices, and skills for loving - are enduring resources in the sense that they function as reserves that can be drawn on in times of need.

Third, gratitude fosters school bonding. Generally, school bonding refers to the connection a student has with their school, the school personnel, and the academic ideals espoused by the school. Theory and research have linked school bonding to

---

A Review of Gratitude Researches in Youth

variety of life outcomes. Specifically, research shows that students with poor school bonding have higher rates of delinquency, substance use, school dropout, and teen pregnancy.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, feeling connected to school is a chief determinant of low-risk behavior and academic growth. Froh et al. found that students exposed to a gratitude intervention reported higher levels of satisfaction with their school experience compared with controls.\textsuperscript{18} Students instructed to count blessings find school interesting, feel good at school, think they are learning a lot, and are eager to go to school.\textsuperscript{19}

Fourth, gratitude buffers against materialism in youth. Materialism is a lifestyle based on accumulating and acquiring consumer goods beyond what is necessary to meet basic needs. It involves the belief that it is important to attain financial success, nice possessions, the right image, and high status.\textsuperscript{20} Froh et al. show that gratitude, controlling for materialism, uniquely predicts all outcomes considered: higher grade point average, life satisfaction, social integration, and absorption, as well as lower envy and depression.\textsuperscript{21} Since gratitude might buffer against materialism (i.e. extrinsic goal pursuit) in children and adolescents, it is plausible that gratitude may foster intrinsic goal pursuit and achievement rather than extrinsic goal pursuit and achievement as promoted by materialism.\textsuperscript{22}

Taken together, gratitude is beneficial to positive youth development. Children and adolescents 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. Children and adolescents who are grateful have more positive attitudes toward their families and school. Gratitude can be an

\textsuperscript{21} Jeffrey J. Froh, Robert A. Emmons, Noel A. Card, Giacomo Bono & Jennifer A. Wilson, “Gratitude and the reduced costs of materialism in adolescents”: 289.
anecdote to materialism and furthermore it increases helpfulness and empathy.

III. INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE GRATITUDE IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Gratitude researchers emphasize that gratitude can be taught and learned, practiced and applied. Fostering gratitude in youth is an appropriate role for schools not only because it is good for students but also because schools should be a moral community where people do pro-social or moral things for others. In this regard, some researchers suggest that gratitude interventions should be applied to schools and classrooms. The best evidence that gratitude can improve youth’s well-being comes from three gratitude interventions. Now I will describe the three gratitude interventions for children and adolescents.

1. Counting blessings

Froh, Sefick, and Emmons randomly assigned 11 classrooms of 6th and 7th graders (ages 11-14) to one of three conditions such as gratitude, hassles, and a no-treatment control. Participants completed the intervention activity daily for two weeks and measures of psychological, physical, and social well-being at pre-test, immediate post-test, and a three-week follow-up. Those in the gratitude condition were instructed to count up to five things they were grateful for, and those in the hassles condition were asked to focus on irritants. Specifically, participants in the gratitude condition were given the following instructions: “There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Think back over the past day and write down on the lines below up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for.” Counting blessings, compared with hassles, was related to more gratitude, optimism, life satisfaction, and less negative affect. In fact, the relation between feeling grateful for help from others and positive affect became stronger during the two-week interventions and was strongest three weeks after the intervention ended.

I think this study shows the potentials of gratitude for children and adolescents in

two ways. First, students in the gratitude condition, compared with those in the hassles or control conditions, reported more satisfaction with their school experience. Consider that school satisfaction is positively related to academic and social success. Therefore, inducing gratitude in students via counting blessings may be viable intervention for mitigating negative academic appraisals while promoting a positive attitude about school. Just as the experience of positive emotions (e.g., joy and contentment) has been shown to increase one’s thought-action repertoires, perhaps felt gratitude would lead to outcomes pertinent to youth’s success within the schools. Second, this intervention might be particularly effective in the treatment of student’s depression. Some students suffering from depression have difficulties in noticing and appreciating positive events in their life. Because this intervention primes one to see the world more positively through more thankful and appreciative lenses, it might be very helpful for preventing depression and increasing mental health.

2. The gratitude visit

Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, and Miller assigned 89 students (ages 8-19) from a parochial school to a gratitude intervention or a control condition. This study partially replicated Seligman et al.’s ‘gratitude visit’ study using a youth population. Participants in the gratitude condition were asked to write a letter to a benefactor whom they had never properly thanked, to read the letter to him/her in person, and to then share their experience with others in the same condition. Meanwhile, participants in the control condition were asked to record and think about daily events. Findings indicated that youth low in positive affect in the gratitude condition reported greater gratitude and positive affect at post-treatment and greater positive affect at the two month follow-up than youth in the control condition.

This study adds to the gratitude literature in several major ways. It is the first

26 Jeffrey J. Froh, Todd B. Kashdan, Kathleen M. Ozimkowski & Norman Miller, “Who benefits the most from a gratitude intervention in children and adolescents? Examining positive affect as a moderator”; 417.
known randomized controlled trial of a gratitude intervention study in children and adolescents and the first paper to reinterpret the gratitude intervention literature arguing to carefully consider controls groups when concluding the efficacy of gratitude interventions. Furthermore, when considering both youth and adult populations, it is also the first known attempt at investigating a moderator, namely positive affect, with this gratitude intervention. Generally, people high in positive affect may have reached an ‘emotional ceiling’ and, thus, are less susceptible to experiencing gains in well-being. However, as this study clearly shows, people lower in positive affect may need more positive events (like expressing gratitude to a benefactor) to ‘catch up’ to the positive experiences of their peers. In addition, this intervention has a distinct strength in that the gratitude visit is a more embodied gratitude expression than any other gratitude expressions.

3. Gratitude curriculum

The most recent development in gratitude interventions for youth comes from a gratitude curriculum that trained the appraisal of benefit exchanges. Froh et al. tested a new intervention for promoting gratitude among elementary school students. Students (ages 8-11) were randomly assigned either to an intervention that educated children about the appraisal of benefit exchanges or to a control condition. School psychology interns taught participants in the gratitude condition about the social-cognitive determinants of gratitude via structured lesson plans. Lessons in the benefit appraisal curriculum consisted of five sessions and followed this outline.28

Session 1 - Introduction
Session 2 - understanding benefactors’ intentions when being a beneficiary
Session 3 - understanding the cost experienced by benefactors when giving a benefit
Session 4 - understanding the benefits of receiving a gift bestowed by a benefactor
Session 5 - reviews/summary, which incorporates components of the previous sessions

Using the methods of classroom discussions, acting out different role plays, and

27 Jeffrey J. Froh, Todd B. Kashdan, Kathleen M. Ozimkowski & Norman Miller, “Who benefits the most from a gratitude intervention in children and adolescents? Examining positive affect as a moderator”: 418.
writing down personal stories in a gratitude journal, the intern emphasized the connection between positive things happening to students and the actions of a benefactor. Across five sessions the intern explained that whatever others are nice to us, they may be doing so on purpose (illustrating intention), using their resources (illustrating cost), and helping us (illustrating benefit). Froh et al hypothesize that strengthening these cognitions will lead to increases in gratitude, as well as theoretically expected changes in behavior (i.e., thinking or reciprocation of prosocial behavior) and emotional well-being (see Figure 1).

Meanwhile, students in the attention-control condition were also provided with structured lesson plans that followed an outline but they focused on neutral topics, such as events of the day. Similar to the gratitude condition, the attention-control condition lessons included classroom discussions, writing assignments, and role-playing activities. Importantly, the general structure of the attention-control sessions closely mirrored that of the gratitude condition lessons in terms of task assignment but not in terms of content.

Across two different studies, the authors found that children can be taught become more aware of the social-cognitive appraisals involved in circumstances of receiving help from others, and that this schematic change makes children more grateful and
benefits their well-being. A weekly intervention obtained such effects in the long term (up to five months later). A daily intervention produced these effects immediately (two days later) and showed further that children behaviorally expressed gratitude more (i.e., wrote 80% more thank you cards to their Parent Teacher Association) and that their teachers even observed them to be happier, compared to those in the control condition.\textsuperscript{29}

This program focused on enhancing trait gratitude (i.e., grateful disposition) in youth. The previous two interventions only assessed state gratitude and so it is difficult to determine if indeed counting blessings and the gratitude visit exercises encouraged trait gratitude. However, this program aims to enhance social-cognitive habits that are foundational to trait gratitude. By teaching students about the importance of intent, cost, and benefit in the recognitions of gratitude, this program enhanced grateful appraisals and well-being.

\section*{IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR MORAL EDUCATION}

As above mentioned, experiencing and expressing gratitude not only can strengthen students’ positive life outlook and appreciation for others but also can support a positive school experience. Because gratitude is an attribute that is developed, it can be practiced and reinforced in the schools. However, our curriculum for moral education doesn’t include gratitude as one of core values/virtues that students should develop and cultivate in the schools. Gratitude is officially regarded as a mere version of etiquettes. I believe that one way to enhance moral character development among students is to foster their experience and expression of gratitude. Since there are abundant evidences that gratitude is essential for a good life or living well, not to deal with gratitude seriously or appropriately in moral education is an obvious pedagogical mistake. Thus, it is time for moral educators to stop and think about the potentials of gratitude in moral education as a separate subject. How do we enhance a capacity for gratitude in moral education as a subject? From now on, I deal with this issue in detail. Here, I will focus on three considerations when we try to apply the findings of gratitude researches to moral education as a subject.

1. Providing secure attachment

Recent developments in neurological science and developmental psychology reveal that secure attachment is important for providing the building blocks for healthy emotion regulation, the ability to cope with stress, and the capacity to foster healthy interpersonal relationships. The same holds true for gratitude. The experience of gratitude during positive interactions with others should go hand in hand with the feelings of being protected, accepted, and valued and the formation of positive working models of others as available, responsive, supportive, and loving. As a result, secure attachment should be closely associated with the disposition to feel gratitude. This means that secure attachment is a strong foundation for the development of relational virtues such as gratitude. Secure attachment leads to more experiences of gratitude which increases the likelihood of developing trait gratitude. If a person is confident in the good will of others and is able to trust others to meet his/her needs, this should enhance several of the ‘recognitions of gratitude’ that I mentioned earlier. Since secure attachment is a strong foundation for enhancing social-cognitive appraisals of benefit exchanges, moral educators should try to provide their students with secure bases. Thus, the establishment of a positive relationship between teacher and student must be seen as a key aspect of enhancing gratitude. The attachment connection generates from the repeated interactions between student and teacher in the schools. To do this, teachers should be consistently sensitive to students’ needs, love and respect their students, set high expectations of their students, give them unconditional emotional support, and be genuinely effective caregivers toward their students.

2. Being role-models of gratitude

Moral educators can promote gratitude in students by modeling it. Teachers who are conscious of their roles as models are successful in gratitude interventions because of the positive conditions they create in their classrooms. For example, teachers could have periodic ‘gratitude days’ or ‘gratitude times’ during which teachers announce

---

what they are grateful for and ask students to do the same. In particular, it is beneficial for teachers to focus their thoughts and feelings of gratitude to specific students in their classrooms and to directly express their gratitude in person. Meanwhile, students often take their caregivers for granted. So, teachers need to encourage students to take time to write parents a note or to list all of the things they are grateful for from their parents. At this time, teachers may tell students their personal stories on gratitude toward their parents just before students do their own activities. These are a potentially powerful way to model both the experience and the expression of gratitude to students. Teachers should enable students to experience what gratitude is and how to express gratitude via showing an example of gratitude by teachers themselves. In this process, it is crucial for teachers to notice that sources of gratitude should not be limited to interpersonal relations. In fact, sources of gratitude can be impersonal. For example, gratitude for nature can be a seedbed for an environmental morality among youths. It also teaches students a virtue of humility, a sense of close interrelationship between human beings and non-human beings, and our moral responsibility toward our nature. Therefore, the bottom line is that experiencing and expressing gratitude by teachers should include both interpersonal and impersonal contexts.

3. Using gratitude interventions in an integrated way

Generally, the term integrated is used to emphasize the importance of three vital characteristics of teaching and learning: thinking – what is to be done or learned, feeling – appreciating what is learned, and action – experiencing through deed and not only discussion what is being learned. The integrated approach to gratitude interventions is especially embraced by Watkins. He argues that integrated gratitude treatment packages have the potential to provide benefits to long-term well-being.

Our goal in applying gratitude researches to moral education should be to encourage an embodied gratitude. Gnostic gratitude that turns gratitude into simple mental manipulations should be avoided in our endeavor. Therefore, acknowledging a benefit in one’s life events, recognizing the benefactor’s intentions and costs, and recognizing the gratuitousness of the benefit are not only totally included in teaching content but also

32 Watkins, Gratitude and the good life: Toward a psychology of appreciation, 238.
exercised continuously by students themselves when we try to enhance students’ grateful dispositions. In addition, we try to encourage students to build a sound moral habit of experiencing and expressing gratitude. Writing a gratitude journal via counting blessings, reflecting on someone that one is grateful for, identifying grateful events in bad or negative events via counterfactual thinking, and facilitating a gratitude visit or a gratitude letter should be applied to cultivate and enhance students’ level of gratitude.

V. CONCLUSION

Well-being and moral education not only can but also should coexist. What is obviously known so far is that gratitude in youth is strongly related to positive psychological/subjective well-being. Although gratitude is a virtue and furthermore it is essential to human well-being, moral education as a subject belittles the importance of gratitude. Gratitude is not included in a list of core values/virtues that teachers should teach students via moral education as a subject. In this article, I offered a review of gratitude researches and then proposed three considerations when we try to apply the findings of gratitude researches to moral education as a subject. I believe that integrating gratitude interventions into the conventional practices of moral education as a subject can secure flourishing lives of our students and enhance the moral quality of our schools and communities.

Gratitude is a moral choice that we should make in the face of a benefit or a gift bestowed us. How readily we express gratitude is based on our personal habits and our attitude toward a good life. By being more attentive and sensitive to opportunities to express gratitude, we increase the opportunity to feel it and so we obtain the benefits of that experience easily and frequently. Thus, moral educators should help children and adolescents keep in mind that gratitude is a moral habit we should build and it is a moral choice we should make. We as moral educators should aim to help students experience and express an embodied gratitude.
REFERENCES

1. Books


2. Articles


