

## Gratitude a Paradigm: Correlates of Wellbeing in Schools

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### ABSTRACT

Gratitude in its general connotation can be understood as appreciation for a favour or for simply any other thing, person or a phenomenon that a person may value in their life. Gratitude has been looked at through several lenses and perspectives. It has strong spiritual and religious correlates. Cross-cultural evidence points to religious involvement. Neuroscience research indicates how gratitude and wellbeing intersect. Within the Child Development framework, developmental, cross cultural and well-being paradigms are the most researched. This paper attempts to provide an overview on gratitude and why should it be used as an intervention for increasing the well-being and positive health of students and teachers. Several studies have been done to establish the positive effects of practising gratitude and how it aids in positive well-being and upkeep.

**Keywords:** *Gratitude, Cross-Cultural, Interventions, Children, Adolescents, Teachers, Well-Being*

The word gratitude finds its roots in the Latin word ‘*gratus*’ (*Gratitude / Definition of Gratitude by Lexico*, n.d.). The words *आभार, कृतज्ञता, धन्यवाद, एहसानमंदी* in Hindi and *प्रत्युपकार* in Sanskrit are often times referred to denote gratitude. Gratitude is a notion that has been endorsed by various thinkers, philosophers and writers, this includes the likes of Buddha, Plato, Aristotle, Epictetus, Cicero et cetera (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Gratitude is often identified as a moral obligation in return of a favour or a gift. According to Emmons, it can be described as “a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty” (2004, p. 554). It can also be understood as the recognition of whatever we have received from others and identifying the positive value, meaning and kindness of their gesture (McCullough et al., 2002; Sheldon et al., 2011). The understanding about gratitude comes from the simple realisation and recognition of others’ kindness, compassion, benevolence. For a person to feel thankful towards other people, one must be receptive of their goodwill. Thus, this *disposition* of the person makes them more receptive and inclined towards gratitude (McCullough et al., 2002; Sheldon et al., 2011).

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Received: February 11, 2021; Revision Received: March 21, 2021; Accepted: March 31, 2021

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Gratitude has strong spiritual and religious correlates (R. A. Emmons & Hill, 2009; R. A. Emmons & Kneezel, 2005). Several religious texts of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism (Tiwari, 2015), Islam talk about gratitude and its relevance in one's life. Cross-cultural evidence points out that involvement in religious activities, praying et cetera have positive impact on people and their well-being (Aghababaei et al., 2018; R. A. Emmons & Hill, 2009; R. A. Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Krause, 2009; Mills et al., 2015).

Gratitude is considered to be a primary Christian virtue and is a recurring element of the Holy Bible. According to the Bible, God is considered as the benefactor and people the beneficiary. Everything existing in the world and in one's life has been given by God. Thus, one should be thankful to God and to those who help them by being good and kind to them. Studies (R. A. Emmons & Hill, 2009; R. A. Emmons & Kneezel, 2005) have been done within Christian population which suggest strong relations between religious or spiritual beliefs and intensity of gratitude. Similar to Christian beliefs, Jewish also value gratitude as a central aspect of their life and of the Hebrew scriptures. The Jewish believe that God is the creator of the world and has given us everything. Thus, expressing gratitude to God is a critical component of their prayers and daily worship (R. A. Emmons & Hill, 2009; Manala, 2018).

One of the shlokas in the Hindu scripture the *Bhagvad Gita*, translated as, "Remembering the small amount of water which it was given in its early age, the coconut trees carry nectar like water on their head throughout their life. [In the same manner] good and noble people do not forget a favour done to them" (Narayanashramatapovanam.org, 2021) mentions gratitude and its value. The shloka outlines the importance of gratitude and how one should be grateful for what they get from others and in general in life. The Islamic literature discusses about *Shukr* meaning gratitude which also influences the level of satisfaction and contentment in people (Ali et al., 2020). The Holy Koran directs the people to practise gratitude which will ensure abundance in their lives. Gratitude is a central component of prayers, especially during the month of *Ramadan* which is exclusively dedicated to show gratitude to God.

Gratitude correlates with various factors, such as spirituality and religiosity, prosocial characteristics, positive affect (McCullough et al., 2002). There is enough research evidence supporting these correlates, for instance, it has been seen that regularly praying or worshipping causes people to become more grateful and these people tend to show decreased depressive symptoms as they experience increased positive emotions like happiness, joy, love satisfaction, humility et cetera (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Fredrickson, 1998; Krause, 2009; Kruse et al., 2014; McCullough et al., 2002). Positive emotions tend to act as "buffer" against negative physical implications of a stressful event (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 649). This means that positive emotions help a person to deal with stressful situations and cope with them in a better and a positive way, gratitude being one of them. It has been noted that grateful people have a higher tendency (addressed as *grateful disposition*) to experience positive emotions (McCullough et al., 2002). This implies that better coping mechanisms are adopted by grateful people.

### ***Evolutionary Perspective***

Reflecting upon gratitude from a developmental perspective, foundations of gratitude can be found in the disciplines of Evolution, Mind, Genetic Footprints, Human Development and is not just limited to social, cultural notions revolving around it. Traces of what is called as *reciprocal altruism* (Allen, 2016; McCullough et al., 2008; Trivers, 1971) have been found

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to exist in both primates and non-primates ranging from birds, fishes to bats and chimpanzees. This feeling may have arisen due to one animal helping the other with the slight expectation of being returned the favour sometime in the future. This predisposition to repay the generosity of another being is what can be loosely termed as gratitude. Studies with chimpanzees have shown sharing of food with other chimpanzees who had helped them previously. This developmental understanding among our ancestors is thought of as the antecedent to development of gratitude in humans. (Allen, 2016; Nelson et al., 2013; Tudge et al., 2016)

Nowak & Roch (2007) have suggested the concept of *upstream reciprocity* which suggests that when a person helps someone, then that person will be motivated to not just the benefactor (direct or reciprocal altruism) but also a stranger (upstream reciprocity) and this behaviour will evolve by natural selection in a population that is primed for direct reciprocity (McCullough et al., 2008).

### ***Developmental Perspective***

Children as young as 5 years old are seen to exhibit altruism and gratitude (Allen, 2016; Nelson et al., 2013; Shahaian et al., 2011). This recognition and the ability in young children have been attributed to the neural makeup of humans with specific areas that recognise gratitude and hence our predisposition to the same (Allen, 2016; Fox et al., 2015; Tudge et al., 2016). This is also evidenced in the children's capability to understand other people's mental states as a result of their own, which is more commonly known as social cognition or theory of mind (Meltzoff, 2013). Research also suggests that practising gratitude stimulates certain areas of the brain which are attributed to cognition of morality, prosocial behaviour, positive emotions (Burton, n.d., 2016; Fox et al., 2015).

### ***Socio-Cultural Context***

According to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory of Developmental Processes (cf. Lerner et al., 2015), the *Process-Person-Context-Time* model describes the developmental course and trajectory of humans. These four components essentially define the process- as the dynamic and bidirectional interface between person and their ecology, person- as the individual in context, context- as in the ecological setup, surroundings and environment within which the individual is situated and time describes the temporal magnitudes (Tudge et al., 2016).

To create a profound conceptualisation about gratitude, it is critical to loop in both aspects of evolutionary as well as socio-cultural behaviour. With the aforementioned model (Lerner et al., 2015; Tudge et al., 2016), the socio-cultural dimensions of gratitude can be understood. This is so because the practice of gratitude is embedded in our daily interaction patterns and exchanges. This practice will also be reinforced depending on the immediate environment of a child, his personal disposition, familial outlook and placement. As one moves to the outer spheres, from the local (doing a favour, giving aid or help, gifting) to national and then global context (perceptions, culture, community, religion et cetera). Individual growth and development, a child growing up to become an adult, has his own cognitive stance and thereby behaviour. At each juncture there are changes happening in beliefs, mindsets, attitudes. All this happens against the backdrop time and history and the interplay of all these factors.

Lerner's Developmental Contextualism (Lerner et al. 2015) also focuses on the bidirectional nature of the interactions taking place between individuals and their environment and

context. According to this approach, these dynamic exchanges eventually form the human attitude and behaviour. Thus, this concept reinforces the idea that gratitude as a construct is closely situated within a person as well as their environment, context, exchanges against the historical period (Algoe, 2012; Naito & Washizu, 2015).

Several studies (Floyd et al., 2018; Naito & Washizu, 2015; Newman, 2019; Srirangarajan et al., 2020) indicate the cross-cultural similarities and differences in the feeling and expressions of gratitude. There has been a common consensus that the English-speaking western nations (more individualistic in orientation) emphasise on the use of words ‘thank you’ even for the most basic of tasks which might be expected of the person. This falls in contrast to the Asian or other collectivistic cultures where the tasks which are expected from people as their duty are not supposed to be returned with a ‘thank you’. Conversely, if the act is reciprocated with the words then they are often considered absurd or might even offend the other person. Also, in these English-speaking nations saying ‘thank you’ could also be considered a way of being polite and well-mannered while in countries like India and Japan (Naito & Washizu, 2019; Newman, 2019), saying ‘thank you’ might even instil a feeling of guilt or shame in the receiver’s mind as they might think that they should have returned the benefactor’s favour with a gift or something else. Thus, in the collectivistic cultures doing things for others is as normal as any other activity for people and thus expressing gratitude particularly may not be considered necessary.

An interesting view on gratitude in Indian, particularly Tamilian society by Appadurai (1985) depicts how there are several hidden notions rather than blatant declarations of thanking others. He highlights the concept of evil eye, non-verbal communication, gestures, showing respect to authority, abiding by hierarchical norms, reciprocal relations, appreciating or praising the gift et cetera as ways by which people in Tamilian society express their gratitude and that there is no particular translation for the words ‘thank you’.

A similar view is presented by Singh (2015) wherein he makes a comparison between the meanings ‘thank you’ and *dhanyawad* in America and India respectively. According to him, in America thank you is used very often and mostly not to actually express gratitude but has some hidden message (for instance, in a party the host would thank you for coming which would often indicate that the guest should now depart). In India though, saying thank you is most considered offensive but saying *dhanyawad* (thank you in Hindi) would mean that it is really heartfelt. Both Appadurai (1985) and Singh (2015) reiterate the same point that in India gratitude is often expressed non-verbally rather than ‘saying’ thank you.

### ***Gratitude and Well-Being in Children and Teachers***

The COVID-19 pandemic has really shaken all our lives and turned it upside down. The scare of the virus, disrupted lives and routines has created a lot of stress and anxiety in people. The pandemic has particularly affected the children and adolescents as they are faced with several difficulties like online classes, school closures, no physical contact with friends and peers, disrupted schedules and routines (Holmes et al., 2020; Kochhar et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Nathiya et al., 2020). These stressors may cause the children to become irritable, hostile, frustrated, feeling anxious, conflicted et cetera (Connor, 2002; Goodman & Scott, 2012; Krapić et al., 2015). Experiencing positive emotions, group social support aids in building collective resilience, increases individual strength and capacity and also buffers negative feelings and stress (Fredrickson, 1998; Meneghel et al., 2016; Peñalver et al., 2020).

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The effects of pandemic are long lasting and continue to influence our lives. In these testing times gratitude can be of great help because in times of adversity such as this, reminding ourselves to be thankful for what we have will bring the positives in our consciousness and vision. Expressing gratitude will make us look at what is good among so much bad. Greater Good Science Centre's online journal *Thnx4.org*, provides its users with a gratitude challenge; upon analysis of the users' well-being before and after the challenge, it was found that regularly journaling one's gratitude is advantageous as it enhanced resilience, life satisfaction among and decreased their loneliness (Adam Smith & Simon-Thomas, 2020). The pandemic has given the world a digital makeover, where earlier gratitude could well be expressed in person by communicating to the person verbally or by gestures, now it can be done by either writing to people or in a journal, positive reappraisal or reframing (Fishman, 2020). Thus, practising gratitude during times of trials can help one in removing their focus from negative experiences or situations and bring their focus back on the positives that they already have. Positive experiences can be found in our daily experiences which may often go unnoticed (Adam Smith & Simon-Thomas, 2020; Fishman, 2020; Fredrickson, 2009). As Emmons (2013) suggests that by recounting and revisiting the bad times, one is able to realise how fortunate they are in the present times. Gratitude helps in better coping of the adversities one may have previously faced in their life, which however will only happen if the event is viewed with a fresh perspective and not simply relived. Thus, for a person to actually be redeemed, they have to seek out what was something positive from that situation (R. Emmons, 2013).

Children and adolescents spend most of their in schools and thus, it is relevant and important for them to have positive experiences in schools for enriched learning and better performance (Furlong et al., 2014). Gratitude has effects on the social relationships, social integration, social support, happiness, contentment, prosociality and well-being in people (Algoe, 2012; R. A. Emmons & Hill, 2009; Robert A. Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Jeffrey J. Froh et al., 2016; Gottlieb & Froh, 2018). Therefore, its importance and necessity can well be understood, especially in a school because the most critical component of the internal processes in a school are the intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships (for instance- student-teacher, student-student, teacher-teacher) (Furlong et al., 2014). Positive environment at school and positive attachment to teachers leads to better academic achievements (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Thus, the role of gratitude in school-based interventions is significant as well as positive (Delamater, 2017; Sood, 2012).

Several studies have been done with children, adolescents (Giacomo Bono et al., 2017; Jeffrey J. Froh et al., 2010) and youth (Jeffrey J. Froh, Fan, et al., 2011) which highlight the importance of gratitude interventions (Jeffrey J Froh et al., 2014; Terjesen et al., 2004) and how it promotes positive health, prosocial behaviour, life satisfaction in them (Bausert & Froh, 2016; G. Bono et al., 2014).

A study by Froh et al. (2011) demonstrates how high school students who practise gratitude relative to materialism, do well in life in terms of academic achievement (G. Bono et al., 2014; J. J. Froh et al., 2007), satisfaction with life, social life et cetera and decreases negative indicators such as envy, depression and materialism (Chaplin et al., 2018). Another study by Froh et al. (2008) revealed the effectiveness of the gratitude interventions among adolescents. The adolescents were asked to 'count their blessings' for 3 weeks, which led to an increase in the satisfaction levels and enhancement of their positive well-being. Thus, practising gratitude has definite positive impact on emotional well-being, social relationships, positive affect and leads to greater school satisfaction (Bausert & Froh, 2016;

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Delamater, 2017; Robert A. Emmons & McCullough, 2003; J. J. Froh et al., 2007; Terjesen et al., 2004).

Research (de Lucca Freitas et al., 2011) done with 7- to 14-year-olds suggests that children move from concrete (reciprocate the favour with what the child likes) notions of gratitude to more connective (reciprocate with what the benefactor likes/wishes to) ones (Naito & Washizu, 2019). This development paves way for the generation of positive feelings among children and also stimulates moral behaviour, further significant to foster morality (Delamater, 2017). In another study, (Kruse et al., 2014) it was established how humility and gratitude foster each other. They are seen to reinforce each other mutually and thus, moral behaviour- which is another reason as to why gratitude interventions are beneficial for children due to the social desirability of moral behaviour (G. Bono et al., 2014).

Kumar & Dixit (2014) have done a study with young adults, which highlights that higher gratitude levels lead to decrease in stress and depression levels in people and also positively impact the resilience of people making them better equipped in dealing with negative events in life. The effects of gratitude interventions also include increased job satisfaction, enhanced well-being (Burke et al., 2009; Cortini et al., 2019) and gradual decline in detrimental effects of financial stress on depressive symptoms over time (Krause, 2009). Thus, it is beneficial for not just students (Sood, 2012) but also for the well-being of teachers which can further be extended to the other staff members at school (Bausert et al., 2018).

There is research evidence suggesting the significance of school based interventions for children and that teachers and parents can use modelling and reinforcement to foster gratitude in children (Bausert & Froh, 2016; G. Bono & Froh, 2009; Gottlieb & Froh, 2018). Consciously practising gratitude yields not just in better health and well-being but also better learning, concentration, motivation and resilience (Patra, 2015; Wilson, 2016). Interestingly, it has been seen that there is an understanding and recognition of positive emotions and gratitude in children as young as 5 years old (Nelson et al., 2013). This points towards potential interventions which can be designed for children in early years.

The literature referred previously strongly suggests the inclusion of gratitude-based interventions for children (G. Bono et al., 2014; J. J. Froh et al., 2007; Terjesen et al., 2004), especially adolescents (due to increased stress experienced by them) in schools and as an extension for the teachers and staff as well (Bausert et al., 2018; Sood, 2012).

### **CONCLUSION**

*"Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some." -Charles Dickens*

As discussed in the paper, humans are genetically and cognitively predisposed to experiencing gratitude. This reiterates the point that gratitude is essentially an evolutionary construct which is then reinforced by the socio-cultural milieu of a person. It is the acknowledgement, recognition and appreciation of what a person has received, be it in any form material or abstract or a feeling. When a person identifies their favourability, they feel and experience positive emotions which is ultimately beneficial for them in the short as well as long term (G. Bono & Froh, 2009).

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Contrary to its potential benefits, gratitude has been thought of as limited to just being a moral value and is no more than a formal 'Thank You'. Although appreciation is a foundational aspect of gratitude, yet we often fail to penetrate the several layers surrounding this concept. There is an urgent need for us to create a profound understanding of this construct (Jeffrey J. Froh, Huebner, et al., 2011). Since the general conceptions surrounding gratitude as a construct are vague, rendering it unnoticed and often disregarded.

There are studies being conducted on the correlates of gratitude and neuroscience (Burton, n.d., 2016; Fox et al., 2015). More studies using brain and neural mapping will be hard core evidence of the importance of practising gratitude. The brain releases a surge of dopamine when we express gratitude, a neurotransmitter that plays an important role in many vital functions. This surge of dopamine gives you a natural high and creates positive feelings. Gratitude has also been associated with increased serotonin production which is called the *happy molecule* giving us feelings of well-being and putting us in a better mood. Brain scans of the medial prefrontal cortex have shown that there was a surge of activity in the area of the brain when subjects expressed gratitude which was different from the brain activity seen when the subjects were feeling grateful but didn't express it (Fox et al., 2015).

In our country, where social relationships are so valued, it becomes all the more pertinent to explore the correlates of gratitude. It is not just a moral value that is prescribed in the holy texts but a cultural phenomenon with deeply rooted underpinnings. It is that virtue which gives rise to other virtues of transcendence, forgiveness, resilience, patience, joy among several others. It is also essential for us to explore the various ways by which we feel and express gratitude- particularly because the area is relatively less explored and also because the 'Indian' connotation of gratitude differs from the surrounding western notions. Thus, it is significant to explore gratitude in depth so as to further build effective interventional strategies.

Practising gratitude in schools is essential because children and adolescents spend the maximum amount of time in schools and with teachers and for their engagement to be effective and fruitful it is important that the time is also positive. It is when this arrangement is positive that it leads to success in academics and for the children to develop positive experiences within school. Some possible interventions that can be done include, 'counting blessings' (Jeffrey J. Froh et al., 2008) wherein the children and adolescents regularly write what their blessings are in a journal; doing a 'gratitude visit' (J. J. Froh et al., 2009) which involves either writing a letter/paying a visit to a person they feel they haven't properly expressed gratitude and doing this regularly, introducing a school-based gratitude curriculum which is extremely effective in bringing about the required changes (Lomas et al., 2014). The interventions can also be introduced in clinical therapy (Giacomo Bono et al., 2012; Miller, 1995; Wood et al., 2010), as meditation (Giacomo Bono et al., 2012), used as visualisations (J. J. Froh et al., 2007; J. J. Froh & Bono, 2008), socio-cognitive reappraisal (Jeffrey J. Froh et al., 2014).

Introducing gratitude interventions will certainly bring positive changes in not just the lives of students and teachers but also in the internal processes of the school as an institution, which will definitely bring about a much-required positive change in our education system. Gratitude is an effective positive emotion and its assured effects are evidenced by abundant research literature, thus, setting the case for relevance and significance of using gratitude-based interventions in schools. This paper was an attempt to demystify the construct of

gratitude and how critical it is for children's development, school environment and atmosphere, teacher effectiveness and satisfaction.

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### **Acknowledgement**

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Sharma S. & Bhargava V. (2021). Gratitude a Paradigm: Correlates of Wellbeing in Schools. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(1), 1368-1380. DIP:18.01.142/20210901, DOI:10.25215/0901.142