



An exploration of the role of gratitude in enhancing teacher–student relationships



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Strong rationale for conceptualising gratitude as a practice.
- Teachers initially conceptualise gratitude as a direct action or emotion.
- Gratitude practices, particularly greetings, lead to increased social interaction.
- Positive impact in areas of relationships and wellbeing, and school atmosphere.
- Challenges noted add to the refinement of the conceptual framework.

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ABSTRACT

Flourishing relationships are at the core of teachers' work and effective pedagogy. This paper presents an exploratory case study of 59 secondary schoolteachers to investigate the role that gratitude may have in enhancing teacher–student relationships. Although the potential of gratitude has been gaining international attention in the areas of positive and social psychology, there have only been a few studies on the effect of teachers' gratitude. The paper presents a conceptual framework that postulates the meaning and significance of gratitude in this context and then describes a qualitative case study. Results indicate that gratitude impacted positively on the teachers, classroom and school environment.

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1. Introduction

While discussion and research on the topic of gratitude have long been taken up in fields as diverse as anthropology, sociology, theology, positive and social psychology, political economics and ethics, until recently it has largely gone unnoticed in mainstream education. Although in its infancy, preliminary empirical research points to the role gratitude could play internationally in educational contexts.

This paper investigates the proposition that teachers' practice of gratitude brings both focus and intentionality to their relationships with their students. The paper builds on more than a decade of research on gratitude in fields other than education that highlights its potential to build and maintain healthy relationships (e.g. [Algoe, Haidt & Gable, 2008](#); [Emmons & McCullough, 2004](#); [Fredrickson,](#)

[2004](#); [Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010](#); [Grant & Gino, 2010](#); [Tsang, 2006](#); [Visser, 2009](#)).

After exploring the role gratitude can play in enhancing teacher–student relationships and the conceptual framework underlying the study, the potential of the practice of gratitude is explored within the context of a qualitative case study of 59 schoolteachers at a senior level high school in regional Western Australia.

Studies of gratitude in school environments have found that it enhances the motivation for prosocial behaviours and therefore leads to stronger relationships and increased engagement within school communities ([Freitas, Pieta, & Tudge, 2011](#); [Froh et al., 2010](#); [Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009](#); [Froh, Miller & Snyder, 2007](#); [Weber & Ruch, 2012](#)). However these studies focused on adolescent students' gratitude and to date, there have been only three research studies that focus on teachers' gratitude. Two of these have been taken up in the context of pre-service teacher education ([Howells & Cumming, 2012](#); [Chan, 2010](#)). A recent study by [Chan \(2013\)](#) focused on the impact of gratitude on the subjective

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wellbeing of teachers in Hong Kong. The current paper builds on this research to focus on the importance of gratitude in teacher relationships.

Importantly, aside from the study by [Howells and Cumming \(2012\)](#), the other research on gratitude in the context of education has been quantitative in nature and thus is limited in taking account of crucial qualitative and contextual differences. The investigation reported in this paper is distinctively qualitative and is seen as exploratory as it inquires about teachers' *perceptions* of the relevance of their relationships to their students, rather than engaging in randomised controlled studies that engage the objective views of others. The paper takes into account some of the complexities and constraints that are particular to investigating gratitude in the context of teacher–student relationships, and thereby addresses significant gaps in gratitude research to date.

2. The educational imperative of focusing on positive student–teacher relationships

An abundance of educational literature and research highlights the importance of teachers' ability to build relationships with their students. Educational theorists such as Paulo Friere, Nell Noddings, Maxine Greene, Carl Rogers and Parker J Palmer, to name a few, place respectful and trusting relating with others at the heart of effective pedagogy. A recent study positions positive relationships with students at the core of “pedagogical wellbeing” ([Soini, Pyhalto, & Pietarinen, 2010](#)), and another large-scale study nominates “relationship to pupils and learning environment” as one of the two most emphasised pedagogical principles guiding teachers' work ([Atjonen, Korkeakowski, & Methalain, 2011](#)). Similar findings were revealed in a large-scale longitudinal study conducted by [Day et al. \(2006\)](#) examining factors that contribute to teacher effectiveness. It was shown that teachers attached the highest importance to leadership, relationship with colleagues, and relations with and behaviour of students. [Rodgers and Raider-Roth \(2006\)](#) discussed the qualities of a teacher that engender “relationship authenticity” crucial to teacher presence – qualities of self-knowledge, trust, relationship and compassion. Indeed it is difficult to view the art of teaching as anything less than an interpersonal and relational act, though varying degrees of importance are placed on this dimension in schools and in individual practice.

Many critique the belief that relationship goals can be achieved solely through enacting the curriculum ([Alexander, 2010b; Cushman & Cowan, 2010](#)). [Hattie's \(2012\)](#) recent work on “Visible Learning” establishes the need to revise expectations that the curricula and standards alone suffice in the act of educating. Citing the work of Levin, he advocates “strong personal connections between students and adults” as an essential practice for improved student learning outcomes. Hattie highlights the importance of “warm, trustworthy, empathetic climates”, and argues that such climates are essential for students to feel confident that they can make mistakes and learn from these. He thus advocates as one of his eight “mindframes” for effective teaching that teachers “believe that it is their role to develop positive relationships in classrooms” (p. 165).

While positive relationships are said to be at the heart of good teaching, the priority they assume in reality is increasingly contested in the midst of an over-emphasis on such dimensions as testing, content-based curricula goals, and performance-based work evaluation ([Alexander, 2010a; Beatty & Brew, 2005; Watkins, 2004](#)). Many instances of current policy and discourse reflect an “exchange paradigm” ([Vaughan & Estola, 2008](#)), where performance on task takes precedence over relationships, and many interactions in education are based on what [Dale \(2004\)](#) calls a “bargain across the counter”. If relationships are seen as a means

to an end rather than being important in themselves, then the very essence of good teaching is under threat. As teachers get busier with the increasing degree of public accountability for the many tasks they are required to perform, they are also more likely to partition the boundaries between their personal and professional aspects and relationships may take a lower priority ([Uitto, 2012](#)).

Students' sense of relatedness with school, including with their peers and teachers, mediates their academic engagement ([Mulford, 2007](#)). Indeed, research has shown that a positive relationship between teachers and students has a strong correlation with student performance ([DeSantis King, Huebner, Suldo, & Valois, 2006; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Hattie, 2012; Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007; Trzcinski & Holst, 2008; Watkins, 2004; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005](#)). These relationships are also seen to be the cornerstone of effective behaviour management that affects all aspects of student learning ([Barry & King, 1998; Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, Le Cornu, 2007](#)). They play a crucial role at both the individual teacher level and whole school approach in School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS), which aims to create “positive interactions between individuals” ([Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007, p. 27](#)).

As [Hopkins, Beresford, and West \(1998\)](#) highlight, teachers need to work at developing healthy relationships with their students, rather than assuming that this comes naturally. Similarly, [Zajonc \(2006\)](#) reminds us that “human relationships do not happen automatically; each of us must cultivate them intentionally” (p. 2).

3. The relationship enhancing capacity of gratitude

Teacher professional development that focuses on teacher–student relationships could take greater note of the relevance of recent empirical investigation that has uncovered some important findings about the benefits of gratitude. Although concepts such as ‘reward’ and ‘reinforcement’ have long been considered pivotal to relationship dynamics in classroom settings, a focus on gratitude offers an important point of contrast in the ways in which student actions are recognised by the teacher. Although there have been many criticisms of the benefits of rewards, including those of praise (e.g. [Kohn, 1999](#)), [Marsh \(2004\)](#) discusses the notion of ‘secondary reinforcers’ as “the supportive/friendly manner of persons” (p. 37) that are central to the extrinsic motivation of students when they receive a reward. Marsh argues that when rewards and reinforcement are delivered or expressed in appropriate ways in order to overcome possible issues of diminished intrinsic motivation and self-determination, they can positively influence student performance and are an effective way of recognising student accomplishment. An important distinction between such actions and gratitude is that gratitude focuses on what the teacher receives from the student and leads to an action of wanting to give back in some way. While acts of reward and reinforcement are more of a one-way process where the teacher recognises certain behaviour and responds accordingly, there is no implication of the giving and receiving dynamic that is inherent in gratitude. Rewards and reinforcement are usually a premeditated response to a certain stimulus and aim to improve performance, whereas gratitude is inherently orientated towards an acknowledgement of relationship and the gifts that ensue from this relationship. There is also a strong likelihood that the benefactor will return with gratitude, creating a beneficent circle of giving and receiving ([Howells & Cumming, 2012; White, 1999](#)).

Many researchers in the field of positive psychology report on the prosocial effects of gratitude, especially where it has been shown to contribute to building and maintaining healthy relationships and enhancing social behaviour ([Algoe et al., 2008; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010](#)). Gratitude is often heralded as being “profoundly interpersonal” ([Emmons & Crumpler, 2000](#)), where

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