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Grateful students are motivated, engaged, and successful in school: Cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental evidence[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Previous research on gratitude has mostly focused on its effects on well-being. However, scant attention has been paid to how gratitude is associated with key learning-related outcomes. The aim of this series of studies was to examine how gratitude is associated with students' motivation, engagement, and achievement. Study 1, a cross-sectional study, found that gratitude was positively associated with higher levels of autonomous motivation and engagement (r s ranging from 0.17 to 0.20, $p < .05$). Study 2, a longitudinal study, found that gratitude was concurrently and prospectively associated with autonomous motivation (r s ranging from 0.20 to 0.78, $p < .05$), self-reported and teacher-reported engagement (r s ranging from 0.11 to 0.68, $p < .05$), and achievement (r s ranging from 0.38 to 0.41, $p < .05$). Study 3, an experimental study, showed that students who were in the gratitude condition perceived themselves to be more engaged (Cohen's d ranging from 0.58 to 0.63) compared to those in the control condition. The three studies provided converging evidence that grateful students have better learning-related outcomes. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Grateful individuals are able to notice and appreciate positive events in the world (Emmons, 2009; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). There is a growing consensus in the psychological literature that gratitude when measured as a state or a trait is associated with key indicators of optimal functioning such as higher levels of life satisfaction (Datu, 2014; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Kong, Ding, & Zhao, 2015; Tsang, Carpenter, Roberts, Frisch, & Carlisle, 2014; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009) and positive affect (Nezlek, Newman, & Thrash, 2016). Other studies have found that gratitude is positively associated with a sense of meaning (Datu & Mateo, 2015; Kleinman, Adams, Kashdan, & Riskind, 2013), personal growth (Ruini & Vescovelli, 2013), and positive interpersonal relationships (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; Williams & Bartlett, 2015). Gratitude has also been found to buffer individuals against maladaptive outcomes such as stress, depression, and negative affect (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Lambert, Fincham, & Stillman, 2012; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008).

Much of the research on gratitude has focused on how it is associated with well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Kong et al., 2015; Tsang et al., 2014; Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, & Atkins, 2009). Well-being is a “broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction” (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999, p. 277). Individuals with optimal well-being are characterized as having high levels of life satisfaction and positive emotions and low levels of negative emotions (Diener et al., 1999). Studies have shown that the positive association between gratitude and well-being is robust

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across different age groups—children, adolescents, and adults (Froh et al., 2011).

1.1. Gratitude in the educational context

Given the role of gratitude in optimal functioning, the implementation of gratitude interventions in schools is gaining traction (Froh, Miller, & Snyder, 2007; National Association of School Psychologists, 2009a, 2009b). Although the literature suggests these programs may benefit student well-being (Froh & Bono, 2008), not much is known about how gratitude is associated with key learning-related outcomes. Ultimately, schools are interested in improving not only students' well-being but also their learning and achievement. Therefore, the aim of these three studies was to examine how gratitude is associated with different learning-related outcomes—motivation, engagement, and achievement—using cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental approaches.

Studies on gratitude in the educational context have either used a correlational design or an experimental design. In terms of correlational studies, researchers have investigated how gratitude is associated with a diverse set of positive and negative indicators of well-being. For example, Froh, Fan, et al. (2011) found that gratitude was negatively correlated with depression and positively correlated with life satisfaction among youths aged 10 to 19 years old. In a study conducted among middle-school students, researchers found that gratitude predicted social integration, prosocial behavior, and life satisfaction (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010). In another study conducted among middle school students, Froh, Yurkewicz, and Kashdan (2009) documented that gratitude was negatively correlated with physical symptoms but positively correlated with positive emotions such as feeling proud, hopeful, inspired, forgiving, and excited. They also found gratitude to be positively associated with life satisfaction, social support, and optimism. Studies conducted among college students have found similar results. For example, Watkins, Woodward, Stone, and Kolts (2003) found that gratitude was positively correlated with positive affect and satisfaction with life but negatively correlated with depression. In another study with college students, McCullough, Tsang, and Emmons (2004) found that gratitude was positively correlated with life satisfaction, happiness, and positive emotions.

Taken together, these correlational studies show that gratitude is positively related to positive indicators of well-being and negatively-related to negative indicators of well-being. A meta-analysis by Renshaw and Olinger-Steeves (2016) focusing on gratitude studies conducted in school settings found that the magnitude of the association between gratitude and positive indicators of well-being (e.g., positive affect, $r = 0.40$; life satisfaction, $r = 0.45$, happiness, $r = 0.37$) was larger (i.e., medium effect size) than the magnitude of the association between gratitude and negative indicators of well-being (e.g., depression $r = -0.28$, negative affect $r = -0.17$).

Aside from correlational studies, experimental studies have also been conducted both among college and school-aged students. Emmons and McCullough (2003) divided undergraduate students into three groups: a gratitude condition, hassles condition, and control condition. Those in the gratitude condition were asked to write about the things they are most grateful for. Those in the hassles group wrote about the inconveniences they experienced, whereas those in the control group wrote about the events that happened during the week. Results showed that students in the gratitude condition had higher levels of well-being compared to those in the hassles and control condition. Those in the gratitude condition also demonstrated lower levels of physical symptoms compared to the other groups.

Froh and his colleagues have conducted most of the experimental studies on school-aged students (Froh et al., 2008, 2010, 2014; Froh, Fan, et al., 2011). One of their studies involved a counting blessings intervention. Froh et al. (2008) randomly assigned different classes to one of three conditions: gratitude, hassles, or a control condition. Students in the gratitude condition listed five things for which they were grateful every day for two weeks. Those in the hassles conditions listed five things which made them irritated for the same amount of time, whereas those in the control condition were not asked to engage in any activity but merely answered the gratitude and well-being questionnaires. Those in the gratitude condition had higher levels of school-related life satisfaction compared to those in the hassles condition (Cohen's $d = 0.32$) and the control condition (Cohen's $d = 0.26$). Those in the gratitude condition also had lower levels of negative affect compared to those in the hassles condition (Cohen's $d = 0.38$).

In another study, Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, and Miller (2009) randomly assigned children to a control group or a gratitude-visit condition. In the gratitude-visit condition, they wrote and then read a thank-you letter to someone they wanted to thank but had not had the opportunity to thank properly. Children in the control condition wrote about their daily experiences. Results showed that children in the gratitude-visit condition who were low in positive affect benefited the most from this intervention. They reported more gratitude and positive affect during the post-test and the delayed post-test two months later compared to those in the control group. The positive effect of the gratitude intervention, however, was only applicable to those who started out low in positive affect. The researchers did not find statistically significant main effects for positive affect and negative affect when analyzing the sample as a whole.

A more recent study involved designing a curriculum (called the “benefit appraisal curriculum”) to teach elementary school children grateful thinking (Froh et al., 2014). Students were randomly assigned to either the benefits appraisal curriculum (gratitude intervention) or the attention-control curriculum (control group). The students received the curricula weekly over five weeks. In the benefit appraisal curriculum, students were taught to be more attentive to perceptions that could elicit gratitude (e.g., understanding a benefactor's intention of helping, understanding the cost to the benefactor). In the attention-control curriculum, students focused on mundane social activities with emotionally neutral content. They found that the benefit appraisal curriculum was effective in improving students' gratitude and positive affect.

Aside from the work of Froh and his colleagues, other researchers have also designed gratitude interventions for school-aged students. For example, Owens & Patterson, 2013 conducted a study among elementary school students and they compared students in the gratitude condition, best-possible-self condition, and a control condition. In the gratitude condition, students were asked to draw

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