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Fostering Gratitude in Schools

Positive Psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that focuses on human flourishing rather than on the development and treatment of mental illness. Although the term was first coined by humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1954, Positive Psychology was officially launched as an area of study in 1998 when APA President, Dr. Martin Seligman, chose it as the theme for his presidency. Since that time, researchers have published a growing body of scientific papers that explore both the characteristics associated with, and the interventions that foster, human happiness and well-being.

Positive Psychology studies have focused on the relationship between mental health and various character strengths and virtues, including curiosity, open-mindedness, forgiveness, kindness, and humor. Several of the most promising interventions have targeted appreciation/gratitude, which is defined as an acknowledgment of the meaning and value of something, and a positive emotional connection to it. Research with adolescents has demonstrated that gratitude is related to greater positive emotion, optimism, life satisfaction, and academic achievement; improved social functioning; and decreased depression, materialism and envy.

A recent study published in *School Psychology Review* described the results of an educational intervention to foster grateful thinking in students ages 8-11. Previous gratitude research has suggested that specific thoughts and beliefs give rise to gratitude: people feel grateful when acknowledging an intentional act of kindness that they perceive as valuable to them (known as “benefit appraisal”), that was provided intentionally and with altruistic rather than ulterior motives, and that was costly (in time, money, and/or effort) to the person who acted kindly (the “benefactor”). Drs. Froh et al. hypothesized that interventions to increase these thoughts and beliefs would increase feelings of gratitude in the children, as well as behaviors associated with gratitude (e.g., expressing thankfulness, and other positive social behaviors.)

Students receiving the grateful thinking intervention were given 5 daily lessons that included specific instruction on the social-cognitive perceptions that elicit gratitude (e.g., understanding the intention of the person who acts kindly, the cost to that person, etc.). A variety of measures were used to assess grateful thinking and behavior (e.g., writing a thank-you note), and results indicated that the intervention induced grateful thinking immediately (within 2 days), and led the children to express gratitude behaviorally (they wrote 80% more thank-you notes to their PTA than students in the control group).

Given the apparent ease of inducing gratitude in students, the authors strongly encourage educators to include similar interventions as a way to improve both individual well-being and school climate. Especially as we approach Thanksgiving and the other fall/winter holidays that can be fraught with stress, teachers can use the following strategies to support grateful thinking:

- Facilitate regular “count your blessings” exercises
- Encourage students to keep and share gratitude journals
- Help students plan and execute “gratitude visits”, i.e. write a detailed “thank you” letter to someone, and then read the letter in person to the individual
- Teach the components of “benefit appraisal”: acknowledge an intentional act of kindness that is perceived as valuable; assess whether it was provided intentionally and with altruistic rather than ulterior motives; assess whether it was costly to the person who performed the act of kindness

RESOURCES:

Froh, J. J., Bono, G., Fan, J., Emmons, R., Henderson, K., Harris, C., Leggio, H., Wood, A. (2014). Nice Thinking! An educational intervention that teaches children to think gratefully. *School Psychology Review*, 43, 132-152.

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