

## The Science of Gratitude: Implications for School Leadership

Organizations in general and public schools in particular are marked by change and a need to adapt to meet evolving expectations. Leaders play a pivotal role in positioning their organizations to meet these demands by facilitating change in their systems. Current research in educational leadership is exploring ways in which leaders redefine ideas of power and responsibility with the aim of transforming both individuals and organizations. Fielding found that “an organization’s commitment to personal transformation is the sine non qua of a person-centered learning community” (as cited in van Oord, 2013, p. 432). In connection with these concepts, research is being conducted on the science of gratitude. Waters & Stokes (2015) stated, “Research in non-education settings has found that action gratitude is positively related to social wellbeing through its impact on motivating people to provide help, support and praise for others as well as show empathy, forgiveness and trust in relationships” (p. 5).

The idea that teachers’ feelings about their work in schools contributes to the success of school change is not new. However, the effects of gratitude in schools is just beginning. Further research into how gratitude is experienced in school settings will be necessary for school leaders to reasonably consider gratitude as significant contributor to their schools’ culture and to their own ability to affect changes in their systems. However, the practicing school leader can still learn a good deal about how teachers’ experiences of gratitude may make a difference in their school climate and even their ability to affect change in their schools.

Positive psychology is routinely discussed as the antecedent of the science of gratitude and is considered the field from which gratitude studies emerged. Hoy & Tarter (2011) wrote about positive psychology and its implications for educational administration. Hoy & Tarter (2011) defined positive psychology as “the study of ordinary human strengths and what goes

right in life. Its interest is in discovering what works, what is right, and what is improving, not what fails, what is wrong, and what is declining” (p. 428). How different could the last four years of our collective professional work have been if the changes we have implemented began with a positive psychological approach?

Advancing from positive psychology to the study of gratitude as its own field, Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr (2015) extensively discussed the findings of recent studies on the impacts of experiencing gratitude. The benefits discovered include increases in subjective well-being and life satisfaction, better interpersonal relationships, and increases in pro-social behavior. In the school setting, research has found that developing gratitude can increase adolescents’ level of satisfaction with school experience and academic attainment (p. 99). Morgan et al. (2015) stated, “Given the significant correlations between gratitude and positive psychological, social and emotional benefits that have been reported in recent years, it is not surprising that research has honed in on how feelings and experiences of gratitude can be increased” (p. 99). From the findings about gratitude in general, some writers have begun exploring gratitude specifically in schools.

One of the most prolific researchers and writers in terms of linking gratitude research and schools is David Chan. In terms of gratitude research in schools, David Chan (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013) has studied the effects of gratitude interventions on teachers and students in Hong Kong, explored life satisfaction and gratitude’s role in preventing teacher burn-out, among other topics in school settings. As an example, in studying gratitude and teacher burnout, Chan (2011) found that “more grateful teachers were more likely to experience life satisfaction, and less likely to experience depersonalization or alienation from others” (p. 820). Imagine the impacts this sort of emotional state could have on a school.

In terms of school leadership and change, the concepts of empowerment and transformation have been studied by a variety of researchers. In considering effective models for school leadership, Lukacs & Galluzzo (2014) proposed a model “in which teachers who have specific areas of expertise become the primary agents of school change and are empowered to generate the improvements their schools need to better serve their students” (p. 101). One can see a connection between the relationships leaders build with their teachers, the sense of empowerment teachers possess, and the ability of leaders to affect change. In terms of relationship building and collaboration, Lukacs & Galluzzo (2014) stated, “Teacher change agents actively make an effort to reach out to colleagues and gain their commitment and energy to work on school improvement. Teachers who are agents of change have deep and creative responses to working collaboratively with peers” (p. 104). Considering how leaders play a role in the transformative experiences of teachers, van Oord (2013) stated, “The leadership of an educational organization—the way leadership is perceived and shaped—will to a large extent determine the success of the transformation it instigates among its students and members of staff” (p. 420). Connecting the dots between change research and what we have learned about gratitude could be a boon to school leaders.

Despite the relative newness of gratitude research, school leaders at all levels would be remiss not to learn more about their teachers’ experiences of gratitude in their schools and the inherent implications of these experiences for school leadership. More information about the science of gratitude, including examples of gratitude interventions, can be found at The Greater Good Science Center of the University of California, Berkley.

## References

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