

Gratitude in Education: Three perspectives on the educational significance of gratitude

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Gratitude is defined as the “feelings of respect or affinity to objects other than the self, either animate or inanimate, which are sources of happiness or benefit.” Gratitude is a general feeling we often experience daily, and researchers from a variety of disciplines have discussed its significance and value (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Studies on gratitude in psychology have been increasing approximately since the year 2000 and the advent of positive psychology that deals with positive aspects of the human mind. Such studies have indicated the educational significance of maintaining and cultivating feelings of gratitude (e.g., Froh et al., 2014). Also, some researchers have argued about the issues on gratitude education (e.g., Howells, 2012). This article emphasizes the diversity of educational significance of gratitude, which has been overlooked in these days.

As an example to suggest the diversity of gratitude education, we shall introduce a Japanese situation. In Japan, gratitude is taught in moral education lessons of public elementary and junior high schools. Moreover, many self-help books for adults have advocated the significance of gratitude. However, the role of gratitude in the schools and the books are inconsistent. More concretely, picture books for young children present gratitude as a social rule that people should follow. In contrast, many self-help books consider gratitude a state of mind that results in happiness and social success. In each approach, there is a tendency to focus only on a significant aspect of gratitude among others.

This article suggests the diversity of the educational significance of gratitude by identifying three standpoints based on three aspects of gratitude; “gratitude itself,” “the results of gratitude,” and “causes of gratitude.” The article explains these standpoints and intrinsic tasks related to them, i.e., the tasks included in each perspective.

A. Deontological standpoint focusing on gratitude itself

The final goal of the first position is to develop gratitude itself. The deontological standpoint perceives gratitude as a moral obligation and focuses on the state of gratitude in children. Gratitude is logically derived from a moral basis, i.e., accepting one's personality (Kant, 1797/1991). According to this standpoint, gratitude itself is an educational goal, and various educational techniques are used to develop the feeling of gratitude. For example, in Japan, the Course of Study for Primary School (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2017) advocates the need to recognize human beings as living in relationships with other objects, including nature, and respect and gratitude are the bases of this relationships. The Course of Study for Primary School specifies the ideal states of gratitude for each age. For example, "expressing gratitude to people who provide everyday care, including the family," is specified for elementary school children in 1st and 2nd grades.

Intrinsic tasks

Major educational tasks underlying this standpoint include;

- Seeking and defining "proper gratitude"
 - Children should learn the concept and the prerequisites of "proper gratitude" such as the benefactor's altruistic intention, the causality of the benefactor's act and so on. The first position requires the clear formal conditions for proper gratitude.
- Integration with other moral values, including social fairness
 - Social fairness might conflict with gratitude. Gratitude strengthens the specific human relationship between a person providing benefits and a person receiving them, resulting in unfair treatment of people not included in the human relationship network.

B. Instrumental approaches focusing on results of gratitude

In these approaches, the final educational goal is not gratitude itself, but something that gratitude brings. Thus, these approaches focus on the effects or results of gratitude on students, their groups, and so on. Recent positive psychology research has suggested that having or expressing gratitude increases one's mental, physical, and social health and well-being and deepens relationships with others (e.g., Davis et al., 2016). Some researchers have designed

educational programs to increase well-being through experiences of gratuitous feelings. For example, Froh et al. (2014) developed a gratitude education program for elementary school students based on the findings of positive psychology and examined its effects. Their program is based on the following ideas;

1. Allowing gratuitous feelings increases a person's well-being and facilitates altruistic behaviors to increase others' and society's happiness.
2. Psychology research has identified the following factors that promote gratitude;
 - Altruistic intentions of people offering benefits
 - The cost for the person offering benefits
 - The size of benefits ("profits" in a broad meaning)
3. Children might develop gratuitous feelings by reconsidering the above factors under appropriate conditions.

The educational program developed by Froh et al. (2014) aimed to allow children to experience gratuitous feelings and increase the tendency to feel gratitude by reflecting on what is overlooked as a matter of course and confirming that children have received benefits and are aware of the intentions of people offering benefits. The final goal of the program is to increase well-being through gratuitous feelings.

Intrinsic tasks

Major educational tasks underlying this standpoint include;

- Clarifying the results of gratitude
 - The first task is to clarify the results of gratitude. For example, the educational program developed by Froh et al. (2014) emphasizes the effects of gratitude on well-being based on the findings of positive psychology.
- Managing adverse aspects of gratitude
 - Gratitude does not always lead to positive results and sometimes cause adverse outcomes. In some cases, gratitude in an unbalanced relationship may lead to even more unfair obedience (Wood, et al., 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the adverse aspects of gratitude and manage them.

- Managing negative feelings such as indebtedness and the threat to self-esteem, among others.)
 - People have various feelings after receiving others' benefits, including indebtedness, and threats to self-esteem, among others, that must be managed, even though negative feelings do not always result in adverse outcomes. For example, *Naikan therapy*, a form of Japanese psychotherapy, suggests that negative feelings aroused together with gratitude for the support from others might lead to a gratitude based positive living (Reynolds, 1983).

C. Using gratitude as a sign of final goals: focusing on causes of gratitude

This standpoint perceives and focuses on gratitude as a measure of attainment of final educational goals such as moral development, ego development and so on. It has been suggested that the state of gratitude reflects a person's moral status. The Japanese saying, "People rich in spirit feel gratitude, whereas those poor in spirit complain," suggests that gratitude is an index or symptom of a person's moral status.

This function of gratitude may be well-observed in varieties of educational and clinical settings. For example, many counselors are interested in the psychological changes behind the gratitude, when elder clients begin to express gratitude to others. Also, a Buddhist monk might consider whether the person's gratitude is due to a strong desire for material things, a thirst for human relationships, or a growing knowledge of the wider interdependence of the world.

Intrinsic tasks

Major educational tasks underlying this standpoint include;

- Searching for causes of gratitude
 - There is a need to investigate factors promoting or disrupting gratitude. Gratitude may reflect on a state of morality, ego development, and environment. For example, gratitude might conflict with narcissism and excessive independence orientation of adolescents (Solom, Watkins, McCurrach, & Scheibe, 2017).

Final words

This article identified three typical standpoints regarding the role and the significance of gratitude in education. These viewpoints are useful for developing broader perspectives on the educational significance of gratitude and clarifying differences among current educational programs for developing gratitude.

In the final part of the article, we suggest possible conflicts that may arise between those standpoints. For example, a conflict may arise between the obligatory approach (A) and the instrumentalist approach (B). That is, “right” gratitude as a moral obligation may conflict with gratitude for enhancing well-being. Most people might expect proper gratitude from a moral perspective to increase well-being. This article reveals an entry point to such an argument as a next step.

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