
THE ROLE OF GRATITUDE IN HELPING SCHOOL LEADERS STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS

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Introduction

Much importance is given to the interpersonal skills of an effective school leader. Empirical research has shown the potential of gratitude to build and maintain healthy relationships (e.g. Algoe, Haidt & Gable, 2008). Sociologist Georg Simmel (1996) sees gratitude as the most important cohesive element for an effectively functioning society. It is the “moral memory of humankind”, the bridge connecting one human being with another where, “If every grateful action which lingers on from good turns received in the past was suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart.” (p.45). When one gives back out of acknowledgment for what one receives, a connecting force comes into play. Importantly, when one neglects to do so, consequent disconnection gives rise to resentment and misunderstanding. School communities where there is little gratitude are in danger of breaking apart.

School leaders can play a pivotal role in modelling the gratitude needed to ensure their community thrives in a dynamic flow of giving and receiving. However, there are many factors in the current educational climate that mitigate against this being a natural response. A focus on performance and tasks rather than relationships, along with an accompanying exchange paradigm that is creeping into educational discourse and policy, undermines the trust, goodwill and generosity that are at the heart of healthy interactions. If school leaders embark on a more conscious practice of gratitude, they are more likely to give priority to relationships and operate from a gift paradigm, where they look for what they receive from the teachers, students, parents and others in their school. This article draws on the author’s extensive experience of introducing a pedagogy of gratitude in a range of different educational contexts (Howells, 2012; Howells & Cumming, 2012) to illustrate how school leaders can more fully acknowledge what they receive through practices of gratitude.

Gratitude as a practice

Gratitude has been defined in a variety of ways in the literature, with most empirical studies in the area of positive psychology giving priority to gratitude as an emotion, the impact of which can be measured quantitatively. I argue that although a sense of appreciation is the starting point for gratitude, its full potential, and indeed meaning, is only realised when gratitude is expressed in an action of giving back – though this does not necessarily need to be of a reciprocal nature. Such a distinction is important in the context of education so as to heed warnings of the dangerous rise of therapeutic education (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009) and to thus ensure that the recommendation for attention to gratitude is not about “coaching the emotions” of school leaders (Morrison & Ecclestone, 2011). Moreover, it is only in the enacted dimension of expressed gratitude that the full potential of gratitude to enhance relationships can come to the fore. As Harpham (2004) notes, “gratitude is always embedded in the relationship between two parties. The capacity to be grateful and generous develops in the context of a social relationship” (p.21).

Although they may be able to see the importance of expressing gratitude, one of the biggest stumbling blocks in principals being able to do so is the misconception that they need to feel grateful all the time, or that they need to be grateful to everyone. Such an expectation is not only impossible but in many ways dangerous as it might force the principal to put a positive veneer over negative situations that are crying out for attention. This is particularly problematic if gratitude has been incorrectly conflated with positive thinking or there is the misconception that they need to feel positive before they can express gratitude.

It is far more realistic and helpful to frame gratitude as a ‘practice’ – as an action one consciously cultivates over a period of time until it has become natural or the gratitude has been fully expressed. Examples of practices that my research participants have embarked upon include making a point to get to school early to thank parents as they leave their children at school; looking for what they

appreciate in a student and their parents in readiness for a school meeting with them; thanking teachers regularly; and finding many ways to acknowledge their efforts. It is effective to just focus on one practice over a period of time in an area where one has not focused on gratitude in the past, and to ensure it is both challenging and achievable. Although this may seem over-simplistic, if we apply Fredrickson's (2004) "broaden and build" theory, we can witness the capacity of gratitude to broaden "people's momentary thought action" (p.147), and build "enduring personal resources" (p.149). My research has shown that just one practice of gratitude by a principal can not only greatly enhance their own personal wellbeing and satisfaction, but also contribute significantly to deepening the relationships beyond the person to whom they are directly expressing gratitude.

Gratitude as 'recognition'

A helpful way to conceptualise gratitude is to draw on the insights of the social anthropologist, Margaret Visser (2009), who tells us that the French word for gratitude is *reconnaissance*, which contains the meaning 'recognition'. Gratitude is a way of recognising the other. Moreover, "there is in human beings a powerful longing to be recognised" (p.389). Visser sees the need for recognition as a "fundamental struggle for identity, relationship and belonging" (p.389). Importantly also, "Recognition is not something one inherently has, it must be given" (p.390). Because of their role and sphere of influence and authority, school leaders have a particular part to play in recognising their staff, parents and teachers through expressing gratitude to them. My research has shown that one of the most effective ways of expressing this recognition is in greetings that are given with the heart, or what I call 'inner attitude' of gratitude. Another way is to acknowledge the good points of others often, and this can be enhanced by also reflecting on what one receives from them.

Gratitude as a way of restoring trust

Trust plays a vital role in helping students feel orientated to their learning. If we want our students to be engaged we need to look to the importance of the culture of trust that is generated by school leaders. This trust is often undermined by a culture of negative complaint arising from resentment amongst members of the school community. Roberts (2004) has pointed to an important symmetrical relationship between resentment and gratitude, where they are at opposite ends of a spectrum. In other words, where there is gratitude there can be no resentment and where there is resentment, gratitude cannot exist. They cancel each other out. Our expressions of gratitude unite us with others and encourage us to recognise, celebrate difference, and acknowledge the efforts of others. Resentment on the other hand leads us to reject, divide, ignore, lament, blame, backbite and criticise.

A powerful gratitude practice can be to take one step out of resentment by at least recognising that this is what we are feeling or to behave in a proactive way by expressing our complaint directly and respectfully to the person to whom we feel resentment. A step out of resentment is a step towards gratitude. In this way gratitude can provide a powerful point on the compass by which school leaders can navigate their way towards trusting relationships in schools, and question the paradigm through which we are viewing the actions of others.

The art of expressing gratitude in ways that it can be received

An important reason why teachers may feel resentful is that either gratitude is not expressed towards them or it has not been expressed in ways they can receive it. Therefore, they do not experience the 'recognition' intended. In my research on the role of gratitude in schools, I find that this is a sticking point that can interrupt the giving and receiving process. A principal may declare that they are good at expressing gratitude to their teachers, and that they do this all the time. Many of the teachers in that school, however, may tell me that their principal never expresses gratitude to them. Indeed this may be perceived as ingratitude – often manifesting for them as lack of acknowledgement for what they give, or under-appreciation. A principal's seeming lack of gratitude can bring down school morale or even drive good teachers out of the teaching profession. Gratitude is as important as that. However, the principal's gratitude is only effective if they make the effort to know their teachers well enough to understand how they can express their gratitude in ways that their teachers can receive it. How can gratitude be personalised? Does the recipient like to hear it publicly or personally? Is it best in words or in some kind of gesture or gift? When is the right time and place? Such questions grow even more in importance when considering teachers from other cultures.

In addressing and acting upon these questions the principal is not only expressing gratitude appropriately but also coming to know their teachers in ways they may not have attempted to in the past. For to do so one needs to move beyond self-interest and self-focus – as in the case of giving in ways that we would like to receive gratitude – and move towards immersing oneself as fully as possible in the world of the other.

Paramount to this is also the purity of the intention behind the principal's gratitude. In many ways this is more important than the expression of gratitude itself. Is it genuine and authentic? Or is it expressed so that a certain box can be ticked next to a performance management schedule that gives emphasis to 'acknowledge staff' or 'build relationships'? Is it given with the expectation of receiving something back in return? Is it merely a routine or habitual gesture?

Conclusion

This article has started to look at the meaning of gratitude and its potential within the context of school leadership. In doing so it has highlighted both the relationship-building capacity of gratitude along with just a few of the challenges that this important concept poses when trying to enact gratitude in a complex, secular, pluralistic and busy school environment. In taking up even one gratitude practice sincerely and authentically, a school leader strengthens their capacity to build healthy relationships and school community. They also powerfully model gratitude so that teachers can more effectively express gratitude to their students. In the words of one school leader who was involved in a whole-school approach to the conscious practice of gratitude:

“Students now meet and greet with enthusiasm and listen to and value each other’s conversation more...there is better attendance and interest in being involved in conversation...There are stronger relationships between teachers and students in the school. I have personal satisfaction at helping achieve a more positive environment...Gratitude is an attitude and value that is inherent in good relationships. We can all make it happen...”

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