Positive Education for School Leaders: Exploring the Effects of Emotion-Gratitude and Action-Gratitude

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This qualitative study describes the effect of two gratitude interventions designed to trigger emotion-gratitude (gratitude diary) and action-gratitude (gratitude letter) in school leaders. Case study methodology was applied to analyse reflective journals of 27 school leaders. The gratitude diary served to foster a more balanced view of the positive and negative events that occur at school, to engage in more appreciative problem solving (with respect to their role as mediators), to see the value in relationships, and to experience positive emotions such as hope, happiness and optimism. However, the gratitude diary also triggered a frustration in school leaders who were dealing with the paradox of having to look for things to feel grateful for at school when their role required an emphasis on fixing problems. The gratitude letter prompted emotional catharsis, a desire to invest in professional relationships, greater use of gratitude in leadership roles, and sparked reciprocated gratitude from staff and students (as reported by the school leaders). On the downside, the gratitude letter created feelings of vulnerability and concern for the potential ill-ease that the letter might cause for the recipient. Gratitude was not only used during the ‘good times’ of leadership but was also drawn upon to deal effectively with the difficult aspects, such as conflict. The results suggest that both types of gratitude interventions have value for school leaders and that leaders need to mutually attend to the emotional element of gratitude and the action element of gratitude.

Keywords: positive psychology, school leadership, gratitude, case study methods

School leaders operate within a constant complexity of attempting to meet the differentiated learning and welfare needs of each student in their care while balancing competing organisational priorities in ways that satisfy staff, parents, school council, other school stakeholders and the regulations of larger education systems (Lawson, 2008; MacNeill & Cavanagh, 2013). This leadership role exerts considerable impact on the energy, time, resources and emotions of a school leader (Cahill, Wyn, & Smith, 2004; Francis, 2013; Wells, 2013). Increasing standardised and high-stakes testing, budget cutbacks, constant assessment, challenging students, disgruntled parents, time...
pressures, siloed teaching and professional envy all lead to high levels of stress and burnout in school leaders (Caldwell, 2006; Friedman, 2002; Robbins, 2013; Supovitz, 2009; Wyn, Turnbull, & Grimshaw, 2014).

It is easy to see why calls have been made for research to investigate practices that will reduce distress and build positive, hopeful states in school leaders (Robbins, 2013; Waters, Barsky, & McQuaid, 2012; Waters & White, 2015; Wells, 2013). To what field can we turn in order to learn more about these positive approaches? Hoy and Tarter (2011) suggest that positive psychology (PP) is a field that offers important knowledge to educational psychologist and educational administrators. While the study of positive constructs is not new to education, Hoy and Tarter (2011) advocate that:

*the strength of the positive perspective is that it encompasses much of what already is good in our research and gives a lens to see events from a new vantage, a framework to incorporate existing positive research, (and) a means to correct the negative imbalance and shift from the negative to the positive. (p. 441)*

The current study adopts a PP approach in order to explore the emotions and actions of school leaders who engage with gratitude interventions.

Adopting a PP Approach

PP is the scientific study of human strengths and virtues (Sheldon & King, 2001) and aims to ‘map the domain of human optimal functioning’ in individuals, groups and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 108). By studying human flourishing, PP aims to create a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour to extend the established knowledge base of mental illness and human pathology that has been accrued over many years in the field of psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Since the formal inauguration of PP in 1998, the number of peer-reviewed PP articles has grown by 410% (Rusk & Waters, 2015). PP now represents about 4% of the PsycINFO® article database and has an aggregate impact factor of 2.64, making it the fourth highest discipline in terms of impact behind psychiatry, neuroscience and experimental psychology, and ahead of disciplines such as developmental psychology, clinical psychology, social psychology and educational psychology (Rusk & Waters, 2015).

One of the major contributions of the field of PP has been the development of evidence-based PP interventions (PPIs; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2011). PPIs are characterised by Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) as programs, practices, methods or activities ‘aimed at cultivating positive feelings, positive behaviors, or positive cognitions’ (p. 467).

Over the past decade, education researchers have developed school-based PPIs to cultivate positive states in students, such as resilience, optimism, hope, gratitude, mindfulness and persistence (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Marques, Lopez, & Pais-Ribeiro, 2011; Proctor et al., 2011). In a review of the field, Waters (2011) concluded that the evidence for the effect of PPIs on student wellbeing was significant and robust. Although PP research has concentrated predominantly on student samples, Kern, Waters, Adler, and White (2014) researchers have also called for the application of positively oriented science to be applied to school staff as well as students (Calabrese, Hester, Friesen, & Burkhalter, 2010; Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006). For example, Waters (2011) advocated that positive psychology needs to be ‘woven into the DNA
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of the wider school culture’ (p. 85) so that its effects reach beyond students to also include teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and school leaders.

Recent empirical results from Kern, Waters, White, and Adler (2014) found that positive factors such as supportive relationships, a sense of meaning, a sense of accomplishment and positive emotions (e.g., feeling inspired and feeling enthusiastic) added additional significant variance/predictive power to the wellbeing and physical health of school staff (teachers, school leaders and support staff) over and above the impact of reducing negative affect. This result suggests that building the wellbeing of school staff takes more than the reduction of negative states, and prompted us to conduct a study looking at how school leaders can increase the positive experiences at work through the practice of gratitude.

Of course, this is not to say that we should avoid addressing the negative aspects that school leaders face, and one common criticism of the field of PP is that a focus on the positive may serve to invalidate, or keep hidden, negative experiences (Oliver, 2005). Certainly, this approach may have been evident in the early stages of PP. However, Held’s (2004) critique of the field found evidence of a ‘second-wave message from within the ranks of the positive psychology movement’ (p. 18) that eschews the separatist approach and calls for attempts to understand the interplay between the positives and negatives in creating human flourishing (Wong, 2011).

In the current qualitative study, we aim to study gratitude and examine both the positive and negative outcomes that may be activated by gratitude (Morgan, Gulliford, & Kristanjsson, 2014; Tsang, 2006). We follow the argument of Howells (2012) that gratitude should not be confused with positive thinking, and that although gratitude can have many positive outcomes it is a distinctly different phenomena to positivity and optimism.

In establishing the field of PP, Seligman (2002) argued that PP research must be firmly anchored in the scientific method. He placed experimental-control studies with randomised assignment as the ‘gold standard’ of science and stressed that the research conducted in the field needs to be ‘replicable, cumulative, and objective’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001, p. 91). This approach has been vitally important in providing empirical ways to measure positive concepts that were previously fuzzy (e.g., hope, empathy, gratitude). The empiricists’ approach has also allowed scientists to measure the degree to which PPIs enhance human functioning, thus assisting the field in its applied orientation.

However, PP has come under criticism for its reductionistic approach (Rathunde, 2001; Rennie, 2012; Resnick, Warmoth, & Serlin, 2001). While quantitative methods provide us with cause-effect information and large-scale trends, they run the risk of airbrushing important differences experienced by individuals. Qualitative approaches offer PP researchers a window into the intricate stories of individuals and the contours of PP experiences for individuals. As such, there have been calls for PP to adopt a greater range of epistemological methodologies to complement the empiricist approach (Rennie, 2012; Resnick et al., 2001). Of particular relevance for the current study, Miller, Nickerson, and Jimerson (2009) and Hoy and Tarter (2011) have called for researchers within the field of PP and education to use qualitative methods so as to best guide the tailored applications of PP in schools.

In the current study, we adopted a qualitative method in order to uncover the unique ways in which gratitude is experienced in the role of a school leader, the potential co-activation of positive and negative emotions that leaders may experience.
as a result of undertaking the gratitude interventions, and the ways in which gratitude becomes embedded into leadership practice within schools.

Gratitude

Gratitude may be broadly conceived as ‘noticing and appreciating the positives’ (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009, p. 443). Over the past decade, the topic of gratitude has gained considerable research interest within the field of PP, and it has been shown to benefit one’s emotional and social wellbeing (Emmons, 2003, 2007; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Cicero (106–43 BC) is quoted as saying ‘Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues, but the parent of all virtues’ (as cited in Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007, p. 18). Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) argue that gratitude interventions are among the most successful of all PP interventions in promoting wellbeing.

Despite the growth in empirical research, conceptualisations of gratitude remain contested. Gratitude has been variously defined as a cognitive appraisal process, a positive emotion, a sacred emotion, a pro-social emotion, a moral emotion, a moral motivation, a virtue, a character strength, a disposition, a behaviour, and an action (see Gulliford, Morgan, & Kristjánsson, 2013; and Wood et al., 2010, for a detailed discussion of the various definitions of gratitude).

In the current study, we adopt a conceptual model of gratitude recently put forward by Gulliford et al. (2013) that explores two elements of gratitude: ‘emotion-gratitude’ and ‘action-gratitude’ (p. 295). The co-existence of these two dimensions of gratitude have been supported in recent empirical evidence by Gordon, Arnette, and Smith’s (2011) research in married couples, where the feeling of gratitude was distinguished from the external expression of gratitude. Let us further explore the two aspects of gratitude below.

The emotion of gratitude is triggered when a situation has occurred that the individual judges as beneficial (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Frederickson, 2004; Wood et al., 2008). The emotion of gratitude is typically acute, intense and relatively brief, and it triggers a cascade of changes in physiology, body temperature, facial expression, and subjective experience (Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Frederickson, 2004). Experimental research that used gratitude exercises to induce participants into a grateful state showed that the emotion of gratitude produced stable sine wave-like patterns in variations of heart rate, respiration and blood pressure (McCraty & Childre, 2004; Rash, Matsuba, & Prkachin, 2011).

The emotion of gratitude leads to many wellbeing outcomes for the individual, including reductions in depression, negative affect, physical pain and somatic symptoms, as well as increases in happiness and life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Wood et al., 2008). In education research, Chan (2010, 2011) studied the effects of emotion gratitude on teachers who used a weekly gratitude diary together with the Naikan meditation questions for an 8-week gratitude intervention. The diary is likely to stimulate feelings of gratitude but does not require an expression of gratitude towards others. The teachers reported improvements in life satisfaction and positive affect as well as reductions in burnout and depersonalisation. The positive benefits were especially strong for teachers who began the intervention with low scores on gratitude. In a sample that included school teachers, Waters (2012) found that gratitude at work significantly predicted levels of job satisfaction. Waters, White, and Murray (2012) found that appreciative inquiry
was related to school staff valuing other school members and feeling more clearly connected to the school mission and strategic goals. Clearly, the *emotion* of gratitude is beneficial to a person’s wellbeing.

In addition to the wellbeing outcomes of gratitude for the individual, there are also likely to be cognitive benefits for the individual that are triggered by gratitude. Emmons and Mishra (2011) have postulated that gratitude triggers a broaden-and-build reaction within the individual. The broaden-and-build theory outlined by Fredrickson (1998, 2001) proposes that positive emotions trigger people to think more broadmindedly than do negative emotions, which serve to narrow one’s attention to directly and specifically focus on a problem. Science shows that when people experience positive emotions they think more clearly, are better at problem solving, are better at brainstorming, are more creative, and see the larger picture (Isen, 2000; Frederickson, 1998, 2001, 2009). Positive emotions, through their expanding effect on thought-action repertoires, build up a person’s intellectual resources over time.

However, as outlined above, there is also an action component of gratitude. Gratitude has been commonly conceptualised as a reciprocal behaviour and a prosocial motivator (McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough & Tsang, 2004). Weiner and Graham (1989) see gratitude as ‘a stimulus to return a favor’ (p. 403). Emmons (2003) asserts that gratitude displayed by one person will beget acts of gratitude from the recipient, which sets up a ‘beneficent circle’ (p. 90) because ‘The capacity to receive and be grateful fosters the desire to return goodness’ (Emmons & Mishra, 2011, p. 253). In other words, gratitude motivates and energises us to want to repay the gift through *our actions* and, thus, we have the phenomenon of action-gratitude (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006).

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 (see Table 4 of Wood et al., 2010). Turning to education research, Howells (2009, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) and Howells and Cummings (2012) have found that action-gratitude increases communication ease for pre-service teachers with other staff at the school, fosters positive student-teacher relationships, deepens the relationships of school leaders beyond the person to whom they are directly expressing gratitude, and creates gratitude in teachers towards the role that non-teaching staff play in a school.

Therefore, the research findings suggest that the two elements of gratitude that are the focus of this study — emotion and action — can lead to different but equally important outcomes for school leaders. Emotion gratitude is likely to lead to wellbeing and broadened thinking *within the individual*, whereas action gratitude is likely to lead to relational wellbeing *between individuals*. We believe that school leaders will gain benefit from both aspects of gratitude — emotion and action — and, as such, we have established a study design to give leaders the opportunity to feel the emotion of gratitude through a reflective diary, and to express their gratitude through the action of writing and delivering a gratitude letter.

In this way we depart from Howells’ (2012) work, which downplays the role of emotion-gratitude and places a dominant emphasis on action-gratitude. Howells (2012) defines gratitude as ‘the active and conscious practice of giving thanks. It finds its true expression in the way one lives one’s daily life rather than as a thought or an emotion’ (italics added, p. 12). Howells argues that gratitude is ‘an act of giving back’ (italics added, Howells, 2013, p. 58), that ‘gratitude in its complete and most powerful
sense is *an action* (italics added, p. 58), that the full meaning of gratitude is ‘only realised when gratitude is expressed in *an action* of giving back’ (Howells, 2014a, p. 61) and that gratitude is ‘more than an emotion or thought’ (Howells, p. 2014a, p. 61).

While Howells (2013) sees emotion as a starting point for gratitude, we argue that emotion is a central feature of gratitude itself, and the feeling component of gratitude is a legitimate form of gratitude that brings value alongside the action component of gratitude.

Howells’ focus on action is, in some respects, a backlash to the emphasis on emotion in the gratitude research that has come from PP. One concern of Howells (2012, 2013) is that a focus on emotion-gratitude may lead school leaders to think that they need to feel grateful all of the time and that this is an unrealistic pressure on school leaders. However, we argue that she has swung the pendulum too far with her dominant emphasis on action, as this might also lead to a similar pressure on school leaders who feel they have to act gratefully all of the time, and that this is an unrealistic pressure on school leaders.

By focusing on the action aspect of gratitude, school leaders might not see the legitimacy or allow themselves to experience the benefits that come from the emotion of gratitude in and of itself, such as the individual wellbeing outcomes and broadened thinking that has been found in past research with other samples (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Park et al., 2004; Wood et al., 2008). The individual benefits of emotion-gratitude are equally as important as the relational benefits that come from action-gratitude, given the high stress rates of school leaders outlined in the introduction of this article. In addition, it is not always possible in schools to practise the actions of gratitude, and Howells (2012) herself contends that ‘many of our educational environments . . . are breeding grounds for conditions which make it difficult for gratitude and trust to take hold’ (p. 6). Thus, it may be that even when gratitude cannot be expressed, it can still be felt as an emotion by the leader, and thus benefits can still be obtained. As such, we argue that that leaders need to mutually attend to both the emotional element of gratitude and the action elements of gratitude.

The Downside to Gratitude
In the PP literature, gratitude is represented as a positive construct. Indeed Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, and Atkins (2009) described gratitude as the ‘quintessential positive psychology trait’ (p. 43). However, despite the benefits of gratitude outlined above, gratitude may not always be an enjoyable state. The realisation of how much we receive from others and how interdependent we are on others can invoke feelings of indebtedness and obligation. In Tsang’s (2006) experimental research, receiving a favour prompted both gratitude and a sense of burden that the favour needed to be reciprocated. In Morgan et al.’s (2014) research, 29% of a sample of 108 UK lay people associated gratitude with indebtedness. Similarly, in a sample from the United States, Lambert, Graham, and Fincham (2009) found that 4.4% of the sample associated gratitude with indebtedness.

Aside from indebtedness, gratitude can activate other negative emotions. Howells (2012) and Emmons (2007) suggest that resentment and cynicism may be triggered in gratitude-inducing situations. The sample of adults in Morgan et al.’s (2014) research who were asked to compile a list of features of gratitude cited guilt, embarrassment...
and awkwardness. Similarly, Lambert et al. (2009) found that gratitude was related to jealousy and envy.

In summary, this study is the first to apply Gulliford et al.’s (2013) conceptual model of gratitude and to distinctly examine the experiences that school leaders have with both emotion-gratitude and action-gratitude. In addition, we explore the theme of co-activation to both the positive and negative aspects of emotion-gratitude and action-gratitude.

Method
A qualitative case study methodology was adopted for this study. Qualitative methodologies are used when the aim of a study is to understand experience (rather than identify cause and effect), to explore narratives (rather than test predictions about variables), and to look for participant-defined meanings (rather than impose the researcher meaning; Langdridge, 2004; Willig, 2008). Following the approach of Howells and Cummings (2012) and Howells (2014a), we used a qualitative reflective methodology so as to allow the participants to draw upon their own conceptualisations of gratitude.

One particular methodological area that draws on qualitative research is case study research. Miles and Huberman (1994) define a case as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. They describe the case as having a heart or focus (in our study the impact of gratitude interventions was the focus) and then a boundary that defines the edge of the case of what will, and will not, be studied. Cases can be bound in a number of ways. For example, cases can be bound by time, place, role, or activity (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). In our study, the cases were bound by the time over which the study took place (e.g., reflections took place over a 1-month period), the role of the participant (e.g., we chose to study school leaders rather than other school staff), and the activity (e.g., gratitude interventions).

A case does not have to be isolated to only one geographical setting. In our study, multiple schools formed the case for us to study gratitude (rather than a ‘case’ being only one school or person). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), multiple cases add confidence to findings and strengthen the validity and stability of the results as researchers build findings by generalising from one case (e.g., one leader) to the next on the basis of a match to the data.

The participants in this study wrote reflections of their experiences with gratitude that assisted them to construct their own understandings of gratitude. As a constructivist paradigm contends that truth is relative and dependent on one’s own perspective (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), this is therefore relevant for this case study methodology.

Sample
Twenty-seven school leaders drawn from the government and private school sectors across two states in Australia (Victoria and South Australia) formed the sample for this case study (55% female, age range = 25–60 years). These leaders were enrolled in a university Masters Degree in School Leadership and were all in leadership positions within their schools: 49% were in the Principal Officer Class, 3% were in educational management positions, and the remaining 48% were senior teachers in school leadership positions (e.g., Head of Curriculum, Head of Senior School, Leading Teacher).
The majority had worked in their current schools for between 11 and 20 years, and 40% had worked for over 20 years in those schools.

One year after the leaders had completed their degree, the researchers contacted the leaders to seek permission to use the reflective writing as data in a case study. All participants in the course were willing to contribute their reflections to the research.

Study Design
As part of the study design, participants undertook the two PPIs and then monitored the impact over a 1-month time period. Further to this, as part of their university assessment, the school leaders were invited to undertake two gratitude interventions over a 2-week duration and then engage in reflection for 1 month, at which time they submitted a 2,000-word reflective assignment on their experience of these two interventions. The reflective assignments formed the data source for the current study. There were 27 x 2,000-word assignments, which culminated in 54,000 words of data.

We chose two well-known, evidence-based gratitude interventions: the gratitude diary and gratitude letter. We chose these interventions to ensure that we triggered both the emotional and action elements of gratitude. The diary is likely to stimulate feelings of gratitude but does not require an expression of gratitude towards others. The letter is likely to stimulate feelings of gratitude and also requires an expression of gratitude. Given the potential downside of gratitude expression that some people may experience (i.e., duty, obligation), we wanted to ensure that the gratitude diary was completed first so that school leaders could get connected with their own feelings of gratitude as separate from the expression of gratitude.

Gratitude diary (three good things exercise). Described by Wood et al. (2010) as the ‘classic gratitude intervention’ (p. 897), this exercise asked school leaders to keep a diary for one week and, at the end of each day, to write about three things about their school for which they were grateful (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) found that gratitude diaries were more effective than a placebo condition (e.g., writing about one’s childhood) in improving the wellbeing of adults, and that the positive effects of gratitude diaries persisted for up to 6 months.

Howells and Cumming (2012) used gratitude diaries with pre-service teachers as a way to allow the teachers ‘to reflect and gain insight into their own thoughts and opinions of gratitude’ (p. 79). Referring to the constructivist paradigm mentioned before, we used the diaries with the school leaders for the same reason. This was to allow the leaders to explore, for themselves, what makes them feel grateful and what gratitude feels like for them in their own school, rather than using a researcher-imposed definition of gratitude.

Gratitude letter. While the gratitude list is designed to promote feelings of gratitude within the individual, the gratitude letter is conceptualised as a ‘behavioural intervention’ that requires the relational action of sharing the letter with the benefactor/target of gratitude. School leaders in this sample were invited to write a gratitude letter to a significant person in their life, preferably a professional colleague or someone who had been especially helpful, inspiring or kind to them on their own leadership journey. They were instructed to deliver and read the letter in person. They were asked to put in specific details and examples of how the person had helped/inspired them to become...
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Seligman et al.’s (2005) research showed that, compared to study participants in the placebo group (i.e., those who wrote about their early childhood), adults who wrote and delivered a gratitude letter reported more happiness and less depression immediately following the intervention. These beneficial effects lasted up to a month after the gratitude letter.

The gratitude letter was chosen so as to allow the school leaders to determine their own benefactor for gratitude and to use their own examples, thus helping them to reflect on and make meaning of what triggers gratitude for them. By using a constructivist paradigm and qualitative data collection and analysis, importance is placed on participants bringing their own meaning to the data. Moreover, the research of Lambert et al. (2009) and Morgan et al. (2014) has shown that explorations of gratitude by the participants themselves is a valuable endeavour compared to imposed definitions of gratitude that have been put forward by researchers.

Data Analysis

We used the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework to analyse the data from the 27 school leaders. This framework follows a four-step process: data reduction, data display, identifying themes, and verifying conclusions. In the data reduction stage, we coded the statements of each participant according to the positive and negative outcomes identified by participants undertaking the gratitude diary and the gratitude letter. Yin (2003) proposes that linking the data to themes assists in keeping the analysis within the scope of the research questions. We then organised the reduced data based on the principle of selectivity, which involved both deductive and inductive analysis.

With the synthesised data, we moved onto the data display stage where we considered all the initial topics (generated through the coding in stage 1) and looked for patterns and interrelationships in the data. The patterns and interrelationships identified in data display allowed for higher-order themes to emerge from the data, which went beyond those first discovered during data reduction. Finally, using step 4 of Miles and Huberman’s (1994) framework, we drew conclusions by stepping back to consider what the analysed data meant with respect to the two types of gratitude and to assess the ‘confirmability’ of our data against theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that qualitative analysis is ‘confirmable’ if it is credible, defensible, warranted, and able to withstand alternative explanations.

Results

Qualitative Themes Generated From the Gratitude Diary

The emphasis of the gratitude diary on cultivating the emotion of gratitude fostered five key positive outcomes: (1) positive emotion, (2) more balanced thinking/see larger perspective, (3) valuing the importance of relationships, (4) taking a more appreciative approach to relationships, and (5) negative reactions to the paradox of having to look for things to feel grateful for when the role requires an emphasis on fixing the negative things.

Not surprisingly, the primary positive emotion reported by the leaders was that of gratefulness. However, leaders also discussed the fact that the interventions triggered other positive emotions, such as optimism, happiness, inspiration, satisfaction, calmness and feeling energised. Representative comments included:
My week of savouring the good events significantly improved my mood and feelings of happiness and engagement that in turn impacted positively on my family and work colleagues. (Principal, Primary, Regional)

The gratitude diary helped me to appreciate better my own connections to my work and sees me acting with greater confidence and optimism about the work in my role. (Principal, Secondary, Regional)

A feeling of deep gratitude was experienced when I focused on the good things in my job. (Leading Teacher, Primary, Metropolitan)

Br drawing my attention to all the positive things at school, I finished the week of completing my gratitude diary with a great sense of hope about the future. (Principal, Secondary, Regional)

In relation to theme 2, the balanced thinking between the negative and the positive, leaders commented on how the need to seek out positive events in order to complete the gratitude diary had allowed them to see the bigger perspective of what was occurring at school and to put the negative events more in proportion against the positive events. Representative comments included:

I still tackle all the problems but I do so with the knowledge that most of what is happening in my school is good and it helps to keep the problems in perspective. It is easy to feel that everything is always going wrong. Gratitude has helped me to be more realistic in how I see my school. The good and the bad. (Principal, Primary, Regional)

The intentional focus on positive activities and achievements had an almost immediate effect on my mindset. Rather than dwelling on what I had failed to achieve in a set period or negative feedback received during a project meeting, I began to actively seek out positive experiences in the course of a day. This positive mindset would intensify in the lead-up to the nightly ritual of ‘experience sorting’ for my gratitude diary. (Educational Manager, Metropolitan)

If not for this gratitude exercise, my mind would have been stuck, ruminating on the fight I had to break up in the school yard. Instead, after that incident, I made myself walk through the grounds and deliberately notice all things to be grateful for: the children who were cooperating and playing a friendly manner, the teachers on yard duty who were laughing with the students, the student who cleaned away his rubbish. One student opened the door for me, which I am sure I would not have noticed if I had still been fixated on the fight. (Assistant Principal, Secondary, Metropolitan)

When I consider how I can make a difference in my own school, I have come to the realisation that I need to stop focusing my attention exclusively on how I can fix what is wrong about the school and also concentrate on what is right about it, what is working well and how we can make it even better. (Leading Teacher, Primary, Metropolitan)

With respect to the theme of valuing the importance of relationships, representative comments included:

Through the daily reflections in my gratitude diary, it became very clear that most of the good things that happen at my school happen because of the efforts of other people. I am deeply grateful for the committed people and parents that I get to work with. (Principal, Secondary, Metropolitan)

By noticing the role that others play I gained a greater understanding and appreciation for all the different tasks that need to be done to run a school. You might say that I went beyond
appreciation to also experience empathy for my colleagues. (Leading Teacher, Secondary, Metropolitan)

On most days what had gone well involved me working to support others with professional moments, including coaching sessions and informal conversations that shared my craft knowledge and encouraged my staff to see their own capacity in the classroom. (Leading Teacher, Secondary, Metropolitan)

I have now built in a regular gratitude routine in class and the students have asked me to move the exercise to a different day if we are going to miss our regular class. After four weeks the gratitude sharings have become more honest, more personal and more entertaining. (Leading Teacher, Secondary, Metropolitan)

In relation to theme 4, taking a more appreciative approach to relationships, one leader talked about how the gratitude diary and its focus on ‘hunting for the good’ had helped him to handle a dispute between two students because it reminded him to look for the good that could come from the situation instead of just focusing on the problem. He commented:

I believe my leadership was more positive during this time. I solved a dispute between Year 12 students using a positive ‘no blame’ approach rather than a punitive approach. (Assistant Principal, Secondary, Regional)

Another leader reflected on how she prepared for a meeting where she had to give a staff member some negative performance feedback. The gratitude diary helped her to think about what she valued in her colleague and she decided to start the meeting by providing positive feedback. This made the meeting a more successful/less defensive experience. Other leaders reported that they had continued the practice of deliberately looking for the positives at work and that this was helping them deal with difficult situations that they faced. One commented:

I needed to deliberately seek out what I felt grateful for. With a good ratio of positivity I was able to deal with challenging moments. The wounding did not seem as great as it could have been and my mind was clear to focus on the issue without being emotionally hijacked. (Leading Teacher, Secondary, Metropolitan)

Finally, the fifth theme that came from the leaders’ reflections on the gratitude diary was the paradox of having a role that requires a focus on problems yet having an assignment that required them to find things to be grateful for. Some leaders found that the roles they undertake at school and the issues they faced made it difficult to identifying things to be grateful for. Comments included:

Initially I wondered about the leadership paradox of finding three good things every day when as a principal much of my work is often about solving problems. (Principal, Primary, Regional)

On some days I actually had difficulty finding three good things that happened in my day and I certainly did not have the presence of mind to savour these moments. (Assistant Principal, Primary, Metropolitan)

At times I can honestly say it was exhausting to be consciously trying to block out worry in order to find things to be grateful for. (Leading Teacher, Primary, Metropolitan)
Qualitative Themes Generated From the Gratitude Letter

Analysis of leaders’ reflections on the gratitude letter found five themes: (1) emotional catharsis, (2) engaging in further grateful actions, (3) receiving reciprocal gratitude back from others, (4) feeling vulnerable, and (5) concern for the potential ill-ease that the letter might cause in the recipient.

Writing and delivering the gratitude letter triggered deep emotional reactions in some leaders, who commented on how the gratitude letter had promoted feelings of emotional catharsis. The emotional response that the leaders experienced had surprised them with its intensity:

*It was a cathartic experience to remember many years of experiences, challenges and conversations, sharing with my colleague the impact of her feedback, trust, intellect and professional nurturing.* (Principal, Primary, Regional)

*Later I felt an incredible sense of relief, calmness and spirituality.* (Principal, Primary, Regional)

*The gratitude letter almost felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. This was unexpected as that was the feeling I would normally associate with the release of guilt.* (Leading Teacher, Primary, Metropolitan)

*Perhaps I felt guilty that I had never properly thanked the receiver and a sense of relief that the receiver now knew how much I appreciated them.* (Leading Teacher, Primary, Metropolitan)

Leaders reflected on how the letter prompted them to value their colleagues and see the importance of their relationships:

*The experience took me away from my own inwardly focused thoughts and enabled me to look externally to acknowledge the contributions of another person. I found this experience to be quite liberating.* (Educational Manager, Metropolitan)

*Reading this letter out loud to her was an emotional time for us both. It created a sense of recognition and appreciation for the work relationship we have developed over time, but also expressed the gratitude we have for the friendship we share between us.* (Leading Teacher, Secondary, Metropolitan)

Leaders discussed how the gratitude intervention had motivated them to invest further in their relationships:

*Presenting my letter . . . had me thinking of other ways I could show gratitude. I sent a text message to all my staff that Sunday evening thanking them for the effort they had put into their work so far this term and how I appreciated working with them.* (Principal, Primary, Regional)

*Having written the letter, I then wrote a letter to the team I have left behind. I framed the letter in terms of concrete actions identifying strengths that I saw in each and acknowledging my gratitude for what they did and what they bring.* (Principal, Secondary, Regional)

*Since writing the letter, I have noticed it being easier to identify opportunities to express my gratitude for other people also. A recent example includes the writing of a thank-you card to a staff member for helping me with NAPLAN® preparations. This staff member felt it was part of her role but I pointed out to her that she had abandoned things that she could have been doing to help me and that I was appreciative.* (Leading Teacher, Regional, Primary)
The pleasure I felt from expressing gratitude has led me to incorporate thankfulness into my daily life and to do so with humility. In the last week I have singled out people for their contribution to the faculty and made sure that I thanked them. (Assistant Principal, Regional, Primary)

On reflection, the activity was actually quite transformational. I had been conscious for some time that gratitude was not a character strength. Hence, the activity gave me the opportunity to ‘practise’ gratitude — an opportunity I have since been able to capitalise on by being more pro-active in the workplace in expressing thanks for people’s efforts. The result of this increased self-awareness on my part has been profound, with administrative staff responding with increased work satisfaction and productivity. (Educational Manager, Metropolitan)

The grateful behaviour of the leaders was reported to be reciprocated with grateful behaviour from staff and students. Two leaders who were prompted by their experience with the gratitude letter to send thank-you texts and letters to a wider group of staff then reported that their gratitude actions were reciprocated:

Out of my 27 staff, all but two replied expressing their thanks. The contagion effect of this act was obvious the next day at school. Each time I was thanked again for the text message I glowed and so did my staff. (Principal, Primary, Regional)

The responses were great, from hugs to return letters, but the greatest outcome from my personal perspective has been the increase in confidence that they now display as a team while I am away. (Principal, Secondary, Regional)

Another leading teacher discussed how she realised after writing a gratitude letter to her own mother, thanking her for the support of her own education, that she was thankful to the parents of her students for helping her to teach the students. She sent a thank-you email home to the parents, thanking them for assisting the students with their homework and describing the great outcomes/learning that had been achieved through the assignment. In her assignment, she reflected on the reciprocal gratitude that was returned by the parents:

I was overwhelmed to see the number of reply emails sitting in my inbox from parents the next day. More than half had replied to thank me for my email and to say how reassuring it was to know that the parents and the teacher act as a ‘team’ to help their children learn and grow. I feel much more connected to my parents through this one act of gratitude and I intend to now keep up a more regular email connection with my parents. (Leading Teacher, Primary, Metropolitan)

There were two downsides to the gratitude letter reported by school leaders. The first was that writing the gratitude letter and then presenting it to a recipient engendered feelings of vulnerability. For most leaders, this intervention was something they had not done before and was also new to the recipients of their letters, so it was a step into the unknown. Comments included:

Writing the letter was difficult in that it was making me potentially vulnerable. (Assistant Principal, Secondary, Metropolitan)

I did not realise the emotional impact it would have on me. I was beyond the realm of my personal comfort in the writing of the gratitude letter. (Leading Teacher, Primary, Regional)
Reading my expression of gratitude was incredibly difficult. (Principal, Primary, Regional)

I struggled with writing a letter and handing it over. Things in writing can be reinterpreted, passed on to a third party and return to haunt you. At work there is no space for this type of conversation. I needed a safe environment to overcome my chief blocker of anxiety. (Leading Teacher, Secondary, Metropolitan)

I must confess that expressing gratitude did make me feel vulnerable at times. To thank someone means you needed them for something and as the leader I am supposed to be the one who is needed, not the other way around. It was confronting for me to reverse the roles that normally occur in school hierarchy. (Principal, Secondary, Metropolitan)

The second downside identified by leaders was concern about the uneasiness that expressions of gratitude can cause for others:

As a Principal, I worry that gratitude can be misinterpreted by others as showing favouritism. Gratitude can backfire if it makes some of your staff feel left out. (Principal, Primary, Regional)

Whilst she did not start crying I could see the letter was making her feel uncomfortable because, like many people, she did not want to show her emotions in front of people. (Leading Teacher, Secondary, Regional)

I think now how difficult it was for her to sit and listen to my letter when culturally it is not something we do. She saw herself as having a job to do and she did it. No thanks required. (Principal, Primary, Regional)

Discussion

The current study used a PP framework in order to explore the emotions and actions of school leaders who engaged with gratitude interventions. The study adds to the gratitude literature by substantiating the view that gratitude can be understood for both its emotion and action elements. The study adds to the field of PP by showing how the adoption of a qualitative approach can uncover the nature of PP constructs by allowing people to reflect on both their positive and negative experiences of gratitude at work. Finally, the study adds to the field of positive education by showing that PP concepts, such as gratitude, can be applied to school staff, in addition to students.

Leaders were invited to complete two well-validated gratitude interventions, one that focused more on cultivating the emotion of gratitude (i.e., the gratitude diary) and one that was focused more on the action of gratitude (i.e., the gratitude letter). Differences in these two aspects of gratitude were apparent and are discussed below.

Both interventions stimulated emotional responses, yet while the gratitude diary led to the promotion of high-activation positive emotions such as optimism and happiness, the gratitude letter triggered the release of negative emotions such as guilt, as well as inducing low-activation positive emotions such as relief and calmness.

The theme of catharsis was also identified. This is interesting and has been hinted at in past gratitude research. For example, Roberts (2004) found that gratitude dissolved regret, and participants in Morgan et al.’s (2014) research associated gratitude with feelings of guilt, relief and calm. “Catharsis” is derived from the Greek word meaning cleansing or purification. Catharsis used as a form of therapy, according to Scheff (2001), has two main aspects — emotions (including their expression) and cognition (which includes insights and new realisations). Both of these aspects lead to...
positive change. Greenberg (2002) emphasises the cognitive aspects of catharsis and the need to use cognition to make sense of emotions. Positive change in emotions is reached through awareness and healthy emotional expression, leading to the cognitive integration of emotions.

The current study found evidence of both the emotional and cognitive benefits of the cathartic reactions triggered by the gratitude letter. Participants spoke of how, in the process of writing the letter, they thought about, consolidated and integrated the many actions of their benefactor. This clarity of the gift given to them by the other brought about cognitive insights and new realisations to do with the importance of many others (beyond the benefactor in the letter) in their leadership journey and thus inspired them to share their gratitude more widely. The letter also evoked intense feelings that some equated to being a transformational and/or spiritual experience. Leaders reflected on the need to integrate their emotions more consciously into their leadership and not always be so task focused. It seems that the awareness and healthy emotional expression prompted by the gratitude interventions led to the cognitive integration of emotions in their leadership role to the point where they were consciously seeking out reasons to feel gratitude at work and deliberately expressing gratitude through actions.

The gratitude diary inspired leaders to better balance the negative and positive aspects of work in a way that broadened their perspective of school. They also brought this balanced approach into leadership tasks such as planning and running team meetings, handling student disputes, and providing corrective feedback to staff. In this way, gratitude was not only present and used during the ‘good times’ of leadership, but was also drawn upon as a resource to help them deal effectively with the difficult aspects inherent in school leadership.

The actions motivated by the gratitude letter were different to that motivated by the gratitude diary in that the actions were less about achieving a balanced approach and more about directly expressing gratitude and acting in prosocial ways towards staff, students and parents. For this reason, the actions triggered from the gratitude letter were more likely to lead to reciprocation of gratitude from others back towards the leader (as reported by the leader) than the actions triggered from the gratitude diary. New gratitude practices included: thanking the whole of the staff at staff assemblies, thanking individual teachers on a regular basis, using gratitude as a positive primer in staff teams’ daily debrief, adopting the practice of sending thank-you postcards to the home addresses of teachers and students, leaving chocolate in the pigeonholes of all staff during report writing week, erecting gratitude boards in staff rooms, and adding a thank-you column to the newsletter.

Using Frederickson’s (1998, 2001) broaden and build theory, our analysis would suggest that the gratitude diary was more likely to broaden the leader’s cognitive resources and perspective, while the gratitude letter was more likely to build social resources.

These results suggest that it is important for leaders to engage in interventions that focus on the emotion of gratitude in addition to interventions that focus on the action of gratitude. To date, the only research conducted into gratitude in school leaders has been two pilot studies by Howells (2009, 2012), who used an intervention that focused on the action of gratitude. The current study can be used to legitimise the emotion of gratitude as an important endpoint in and of itself, rather than as a mere ‘starting point to true gratitude’, as conceptualised by Howells. Leaders cannot always
act in grateful ways at school, and the leaders in this study discussed barriers to the expression of gratitude, such as power relations, the backlash of being seen to favour certain staff, and the discomfort of others in receiving gratitude. But even in those times where action-gratitude is not suitable, leaders can still gain benefits from feeling the emotion of gratitude.

Thus, the results of this study suggest that leaders need to mutually attend to both the emotional element of gratitude and the action element of gratitude. These two aspects have benefit both for the leaders themselves and for others at school because they trigger the leaders to feel more positive emotions, think more clearly, see and interact with staff in balanced ways, be motivated to express thankfulness towards others, and spread gratitude across the organisation.

Dealing With the Downside of Gratitude

Leaders in this study understood that gratitude is not purely a positively phenomenon and that gratitude interventions can coactivate positive and negative reactions. For example, the gratitude diary was reported by the school leaders to induce positive emotions such as happiness, hope and optimism, but also lead to frustration in trying to feel appreciative when the structure and function of their leadership role required them to act in a critical, problem-focused way. Writing the gratitude letter and expressing gratitude stimulated emotions of calmness, spirituality, pleasure and appreciation, but it also connected leaders with emotions such as guilt, vulnerability and anxiety.9

In this study, the leaders reported that the positive outcomes outweighed the negative outcomes and they understood that gratitude was not just about feeling good, but was also a deeper and more complex process that brought with it other benefits such as a broader perspective and stronger relationships (even in handling difficult relationships). These benefits helped to put the downsides into balance.

Our results support Ryff and Singer’s (2003) arguments ‘to move beyond false dichotomies that separate positive and negative features of the human condition’ (p. 271) and explore people’s lived experience in order to understand where people join the negative and positive in ways that promote meaning and allow for ‘engaged living’. We suggest that emotion-gratitude and action-gratitude can be used to more deeply engage school leaders with their own emotions, thinking patterns and relationships.

Methodological Considerations and Practical Implications

The conclusions of this study need to be considered against the methodological concerns of qualitative research. The qualitative design limits the generalisability of the findings due to the small sample size and the nature of the sample. The sample in this study were students of a Masters in School Leadership degree, which may mean that the generalisability of their experiences are different to those school leaders who have not chosen to engage in postgraduate study. The leadership degree encouraged reflective practice, and students studied topics such as transformational leadership, emotional intelligence and PP. This may have made them more receptive to the potential positive benefits of gratitude compared to the scenario where a school leader decides to practise gratitude without having studied supportive frameworks such as transformational leadership, emotional intelligence and PP.

A further consideration comes from the fact that the data source for this study was the leaders’ university assignments. It could be that some leaders overstated
their experience with gratitude if they believed that it would influence their grades. However, there are a number of factors that suggest this was unlikely to occur. First, the assignment was graded according to the following criteria: level of analysis, ability to integrate evidence, use of scholarly articles, and academic writing style. It was clear to students that the assignment grades were based on their capacity for reflection and scholarly writing rather than the gratitude experience itself. Second, the richness and authenticity of the writing highlights that the school leaders were writing about genuine experiences rather than ‘faking’ their reactions to get good grades. Third, leaders wrote about the negative aspects of gratitude, suggesting that they did not feel pressure to write false positive experiences. Fourth, the leaders were also given critical readings on PP as part of their assignment, and the learning culture of the course encouraged dissident views and constructive critiques of the ideas being studied. Leaders had voiced their wariness about being ‘Pollyanna Principals’, and the teaching staff encouraged these conversations.

It is also important to note that although this study explored school leaders’ experience and perceptions of how gratitude influenced their professional relationships, the design was not dyadic and data was not collected from other staff and students with whom the leaders were in relationship. As such, there is no way to verify in objective ways the reports that leaders made about how others responded to their actions of gratitude. Future researchers could consider using research designs that collect relational data from multiple stakeholders to study the effects on others that arise from school leaders who adopt gratitude practices.

In considering the strengths of the qualitative design used in this study, the researchers gained insights into the cathartic effects of gratitude for the leaders, the barriers to gratitude that school leaders experience, and the ways in which the gratitude interventions became embedded into leadership practice over time. These insights would not have been gained by using a survey design, which would have shown quantitative shifts in wellbeing and gratitude scores without giving insight into how gratitude is experienced and expressed in the school context.

The practical implication of this research suggests that professional development programs for school leaders would benefit from including the study of gratitude to build emotional resources, cognitive resources, and relational resources. Professional development programs can introduce leaders to a range of gratitude interventions and practices as well as assist leaders in exploring their emotional responses (both positive and negative) to gratitude, and encourage leaders to tailor gratitude in a way that suits their own leadership style and school context.

Conclusion

Within education, Howells (2012) conceptualises gratitude as ‘a resource, a source of energy, a catalyst for developing harmonious relationships and a wellspring for transforming negative events into positive moments for growth’ (p. 25). Howells’ ideas are substantiated by evidence in the current study. We suggest that gratitude is an important emotional and relational resource. We also argue that school leaders can gain benefit from interventions that will boost the emotion of gratitude and inspire actions of gratitude. Both types of gratitude are available and beneficial to leaders in schools, not just in ‘good times’, but also to handle difficult leadership situations. Finally, the results of this study help school leaders to understand that while gratitude
is largely a positive phenomenon, it can also trigger negative outcomes and that it is the process of reconciling the positive and negative that allows gratitude to bring a deeper and more engaged way to lead.

**Endnotes**

1 Naikan meditation is a Japanese technique that fosters self-reflection and assists people to give meaning to life events. After listing the things they felt grateful for, teachers in Chan’s study were asked to reflect on three questions: (1) What did I receive? (2) What did I give? and (3) What troubles and difficulties did I cause to others?

2 However, the story is not so clear cut and it is possible that emotion-gratitude can also lead to relational wellbeing, while action-gratitude can lead to individual wellbeing outcomes. Take, for example, Howells and Cummings’ (2012) research, which found a relationship between action-gratitude expressed by pre-service teachers and the emotional wellbeing of the pre-service teachers who reported improvements in happiness, calmness, positivity, and resilience as a result of engaging in gratitude practices across the time period of their school-based teaching practicum/placement.

3 The most frequent and central features cited by the UK sample were happiness, thankfulness, appreciation, smiling, and gratefulness.

4 The most frequent and central features cited by the US sample were thankfulness, appreciation, happiness, kindness, and loving.

5 The positive psychology assignment was one of 12 different assignments completed during the degree. Other assignments focused on leadership theory, leadership wounds/challenges, team skills, and research skills.

6 Leaders were given an alternate assessment option if they did not wish to complete the gratitude interventions. However, all leaders chose to complete the interventions.

7 Confirmability is similar to the test of ‘validity’ used in quantitative analysis.

8 NAPLAN = National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy.

9 Interestingly, all respondents resolved to continue with the exercise and deal with their uncomfortable emotions. This is similar to the findings of Howells and Cummings (2012), where the barriers to gratitude identified by trainee teachers did not stop them from practising gratitude.

**References**


Lea Waters and Helen Stokes


