Gratitude in Education

A Radical View

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Teachers at all levels of education will find this book practical and inspiring as they read how other educators have engaged with challenges that reveal different dimensions of gratitude, and how some have discovered its relevance in gaining greater resilience, improved relationships and increased student engagement. In the first comprehensive text ever written that is solely dedicated to the specific relevance of gratitude to the teaching and learning process, Dr Howells pioneers an approach that accounts for both dilemmas and possibilities of gratitude in the midst of teachers’ busy and stressful lives. She takes a contemporary and philosophical view of the notion of gratitude and goes beyond its conceptualisation simply from a religious or positive psychology framework. Exploring real situations with teachers, school leaders, students, parents, academics and pre-service teachers – Gratitude In Education: A Radical View examines many of the complexities encountered when gratitude is applied in a variety of secular educational environments.
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For my students
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“I can no other answer make, but, thanks, and thanks.” – William Shakespeare

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Where there is no gratitude, there is no meaningful movement; human affairs become rocky, painful, coldly indifferent, unpleasant, and finally break off altogether. The social 'machinery' grinds along and soon seizes up.¹

– Margaret Visser

Why gratitude in education?

Many frown upon the use of the words gratitude and education together. It seems like a strange combination. We might perhaps be able to contemplate the place of gratitude in aspirations for wisdom or transformation, but to picture how it relates to learning for information or understanding content may require a greater leap than many are willing to make. Gratitude could be seen to be more relevant to lists of values or mission statements rather than as a thread that can run through our curricula. Schools such as those based on the Montessori and Steiner traditions or those of a religious denomination often proudly advocate gratitude as one of their core values. Initiatives such as service learning² and ‘Tribes’³ capture the spirit of giving that is also embraced by gratitude. Recent studies in the field of positive psychology herald the potential of gratitude for enhancing the wellbeing of students.⁴ However, it is still difficult and extremely rare for much of mainstream education to make links between gratitude and teaching and learning pedagogy.

I first stumbled upon gratitude as a powerful learning strategy for students nearly two decades ago. I was teaching a philosophy unit called ‘Cultural and Ethical Values’ at a university which had the reputation of being the domain of the ‘privileged’ few. Students from all faculties were obliged to take the unit, alongside three other core units. I was filled with appreciation that so early in their university studies they had the opportunity to gain a foundation in ethics and be in touch with the greats of ethical philosophy – Plato, Augustine, Kant, Mill, Nietzsche, Sartre, Confucius, and Buddha. A large number of students, however, wandered into my tutorials full of complaint about being required to study something they did not choose, and which they believed had no links to their other studies or vocation. Other tutors in the same course were reporting similar resistance and low levels of student engagement. After the first two semesters of teaching the course and unsuccessfully trying to whip up enthusiasm, exuding my passion for the subject, using all the best teaching techniques I knew, but receiving
the same negative and unmotivated reaction from a large number of my students week after week, I decided that something had to shift. We were at a stalemate.

I took a different approach in the following semester. I facetiously informed my students, to their surprise, that I refused to teach them unless they chose to be ‘present’ enough to learn. I spent the first half of the tutorial in the first three weeks trying to understand what it was that was underneath the students’ refusal to learn and be engaged in the unit. I asked them to write non-stop for twenty minutes on topics such as their obstacles to learning and their perceptions of why they found it difficult to engage; and followed this with group discussion. I came to discover a number of incongruences that I believe are as prevalent in today’s university and school students as they were then. Although we may think that our students might be making conscious choices not to pay attention, to drift off, to be disengaged, in actual fact they want to be present, but do not know how to be. Most seem thirsty for answers about how to be more engaged, and look to us as educators to provide these for them.

I also discovered that the majority of students, no matter how privileged, were full of complaint about what they did not have, or about how their expectations were not being met, or that they wanted things to be different and were resentful that someone else was not initiating that change. They wanted to be engaged, and yet did not feel they were actively choosing not to be engaged. They were firmly entrenched as receivers, complaining about not receiving enough and feeling they deserved more. They were not seeing that their complaint and resentment could be undermining their ability to be engaged.

Without much preconceived intention at the time, I suggested that perhaps gratitude could be a valuable alternative paradigm to the one of resentment that predominated. Interestingly, many students started to approach their studies with more gratitude. They reported that as they practised more gratitude when they studied, they experienced increased engagement, greater connection to the subject and teacher, a deeper understanding of content, and increased motivation.

From that point onwards, the educational value of practising gratitude became my imperative. I started to embed gratitude as a learning strategy in each of my units, no matter what the subject. I have since taught the relationship between gratitude and student engagement in a number of different contexts and institutions – first-year orientation and transition programs, pre-service teacher education, Years 10, 11 and 12 high school studies, and other learning strategy courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Many of these students went on to apply an increased consciousness of gratitude to their learning of subjects traditionally immersed in the objectivist framework. They reported the benefits of applying gratitude even when they were studying information-dense subjects such as tax law, economics, psychology, and business administration. The contexts and age groups may be different but the outcomes were consistent: attention to gratitude serves a very important need for students to attend to their being at the same time as their thinking. If they think about what they have been given rather than looking
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only for what they can receive, their learning transforms and they are able to be more present in their learning.

While teaching these students, I came to see that the number one condition or teaching strategy for discussing gratitude as a learning strategy is my own practice of gratitude. As I reflected why some groups of students were able to embrace the place of gratitude more than others, or even why some seemed to express more gratitude than others, I discovered that there was an uncanny relationship between my own level of gratitude and that of my students. Before we can expect students to practise gratitude, teachers need to be practising. This is the rationale for my approach to this book, and why I have written it about teachers’ gratitude before addressing students’ gratitude.

From this realisation I developed a pedagogy for teaching gratitude to teachers and school leaders, and started to offer this in the form of professional development and action research projects at several schools and universities. Most seemed to embrace gratitude as a powerful way of combating the resentment they themselves were carrying into their classrooms and staffrooms. Instead of blaming the system, they felt empowered to investigate the part they could play and respond proactively. Most were motivated by the inherent wisdom that their students’ sense of entitlement and ensuing complaint affected their learning, and that gratitude presented a positive way forward.

Yet for some the concept of gratitude, especially the radical one I was proposing, was difficult. They were uncomfortable with connotations of indebtedness, reciprocity and obligation. I learned that unless this proposal is explored within a critical framework and in a way that empowers teachers, it could be seen to be adding to the heavy load of civic debt teachers already feel they carry. Indeed, they might ask, at a time when we have codes of ethics in education telling us that we are to act with ‘dignity’, ‘integrity’, ‘respect’, ‘empathy’, and ‘justice’, was I adding yet another weighty word, another loaded concept, to this ever-growing list? Am I also suggesting “another new technique” to teachers who complain already of an overcrowded and demanding curriculum and the most difficult generation of students they have ever had to teach? Some warned of the inherent dangers of suppressing negative emotions; of the possibilities of abuse of power where teachers expect their students to express gratitude to them; of the irrelevance of gratitude to the main game of teaching content; and of accepting the status quo in situations of inequity where much change is needed.

These teachers’ responses helped me realise that I needed to listen more closely to the underlying difficulties that students may have with the notion that they should be more grateful. If we agree that gratitude has a place in our students’ learning, and if gratitude is something that needs to be directly and consciously nurtured, where and when in the education system does this occur? Is it the place of education to nurture gratitude, or is this stepping over the traditional divide between the objective and subjective domain of the student? Can gratitude be ‘taught’ to another, in the traditional sense of imparting content, or is it so
complex, so subjective, and so far away from ‘the main game of teaching and learning’ that all we can hope for is to pass it on through our own example?

Over time, I came to discover it was the dual challenge of the mismatch of the concept of gratitude, and how it plays out when teachers consciously practised it in the classroom or staffroom, which they struggled with. Yet it is this complexity that gives real meaning to the term, and where its potential for enriching our lives is found. When educators practise gratitude in the midst of time-poor and stressful conditions – where their self-efficacy, collegiality and resilience are most under threat – gratitude takes on dimensions that are far deeper than those that come out of most other academic discussions and clinical research.

When I first started to discuss the role of gratitude in education, I received all manner of looks and recriminations – especially in the world of mainstream academia. Now I am invited into faculties such as accounting, optometry, and law – faculties that in the past were dominated by the positivist framework, considering the subjective domain of the student to be irrelevant to higher order thinking. Their interest in the role of gratitude is indicative of a wider phenomenon, a change in consciousness that reflects what thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Anthony Giddens, and Richard Tarnas discuss as a “radical reflexivity”, or Ronald Barnett calls an “ontological turn”, where we not only reflect on our thinking, but on the interrelationship between our thinking and our being.

My aim is to make the principles underlying this book appealing and accessible to those teachers who may see gratitude as part of their professional identity, but whose feelings of disempowerment and disillusionment often work against this. Gratitude in Education: A Radical View thus directly addresses factors that, I argue, strongly impact on student engagement and teacher presence, efficacy and resilience.

Why gratitude?

We live in a time when we are constantly exposed to the suffering of those less fortunate than ourselves, or those who have had the world at their feet snapped away by an earthquake, a wave, a bomb, a fire, or a rampant storm. As they plummet into chaos or flee for refuge, we are summoned to answer just how to respond to the millions reaching out for our regard. If we have our own fortunes intact (for the moment) just one glimpse of others’ suffering, can, if we allow it, generate a deep moral questioning of how we should react. A common refrain is that we should be grateful for what we have. But for gratitude to be an effective and moral response, we would need to embrace it as more than something that makes us feel good or reminds us of how good we have it. For if we were to meet gratitude face to face she would say ‘take action that serves others’, ‘give back’, ‘give up’, ‘say sorry’, ‘let go’, ‘clear the air’, and ‘connect’. We are in danger of staying with an impoverished sense of gratitude if we only entertain it at the level
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of our intellect, or indeed if we consider it in isolation from its meaning in our interactions with others. To reach into the true nature of gratitude, we need to engage with it through action, and discover an embodied understanding through our lived experience, our connectedness to the other.

There is much in today’s world that can numb our gratitude. Our excuses lead us to indifference when wholly reasonable indebtedness to each other and the environment knocks at our door. We have found numerous places to hide from gratitude. Some hide behind their concern about simplistic Victorian notions of gratitude where they may have felt they were required, ordered in fact, to put themselves in the shoes of others and never complain about their own pain. Some believe gratitude should remain in its cathedrals and religious inscriptions, neither to come out into contemporary discourse nor guide our secular life. Others are encased by a resentment that they have made their mission in life to protect. They take umbrage at any whiff of the word ‘gratitude’ as they think it suggests we ignore their pain.

In many circles, the greatest hiding place is in watered down versions of the word gratitude itself, so its role is as something that can make us feel good. It seems that the more we reach into the power of gratitude to answer some of our current psychological and social ills, the more the word is used to serve the very self-interests it wishes to destroy.

To hear the power of gratitude we need to listen with our heart. If we listen to one beat of nature, we would hear her crying out for us to give back for what we have received. Governments around the world are hearing that cry, but most do not hear it in their hearts. To take the kind of brave and urgent action our earth and humanity require, we need to be deeply moved by a force that connects us with each other, our environment, and perhaps to something greater than ourselves. If we allow gratitude to come out of hiding, and live in our hearts in an authentic and contemporary way, it can offer that bridge to community connection and action.

Many great thinkers of the past including Seneca, Aquinas, Hobbes, Einstein, Chesterton, Shakespeare and Kant have spoken about the place of gratitude in enriching our lives. For hundreds of years, gratitude has been discussed in many diverse fields. When we read or hear the word ‘gratitude’ it can often be enough to remind us of a missing piece, an incomplete part played in our giving back, a strength we gained from expressing gratitude in times past. For some it can be a source of pain. The word gratitude reminds them of how deep is the wound when they give and give to others and nothing is returned, or where all they seem to receive is ingratitude.

In the past decade we have witnessed an exponential growth in explorations of gratitude in both academic journals and general texts. Perhaps this signals a rising interest in sources from where we can enhance our wellbeing or reach a higher consciousness? Yet if our discourse wholeheartedly embraces gratitude without an awareness and respect for those who do not warm to its powers or value its intent, we can alienate them unintentionally.
We do not need another book that simply adores and adorns gratitude. Nor do we need one that prescribes how to be or how to feel good, or which assumes a neutral starting point that discounts the culturally rich and deep understanding of gratitude that many readers already bring to the text. We need a book that can explore the dilemmas raised when we place this giant of a term amidst a complex, pluralistic, secular context, so that we can better understand its contemporary meaning and potential. We do not need a book that patronises or offers a panacea for all of the world’s problems, but we do need one that mirrors the kind of dialogue we need if we are to bring gratitude to the table as we consider it as a meaningful way to respond and to be.

Why gratitude in education now?

Students orientate themselves to where they can feel valued and where there is trust. It is not until they find this safe haven that they can settle and be present enough to learn. Many of our educational environments – be they schools or universities or colleges of advanced education – are breeding grounds for conditions which make it difficult for gratitude and trust to take hold. Conditions that are the antithesis to gratitude – resentment, victim mentality, envy, or a sense of entitlement – are toxins that kill off goodwill. A toxic environment of ensuing complaint culminates in good teachers and leaders walking out wounded by ingratitude, extremely unlikely to return. It is our lack of consciousness of the impact of this malaise that keeps us in the dark, and stops many wonderful education initiatives from taking hold. At a time where measurement and economy are our guiding lights, we are neglecting to attend to our ontological domain, our way of being in the world, and the impact this has in our education communities.

We often condemn students for their disengagement and for their blatant displays of negative complaint and blame. Some say these are characteristics of a typical generation Y student, who is totally absorbed in his or her own needs and interests. Yet it is also the environment we provide that allows such attitudes to prevail. Although Charles Dickens’ satire of where gratitude has no place in Gradgrind school (described in his book Hard Times), was published as long ago as 1854, it bears a scary resemblance to the ethos that predominates today.

It was a fundamental principle of the Gradgrind philosophy that everything was to be paid for. Nobody was ever on any account to give anybody anything, or render anybody help without purchase. Gratitude was to be abolished, and virtues springing from it were not to be. Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across the counter. And if we didn’t get to heaven that way, it was not a politico-economical place, and we had no business there.
As the philosopher Michael Dale\textsuperscript{12} notes in his exposition of how the characteristics of Gradgrind philosophy play themselves out in our times, much of our current educational discourse is dominated by language that reflects a bargain across the counter, or by what some call an ‘exchange paradigm’. Genevieve Vaughan and Eila Estola describe the underlying logic and values of this paradigm as being ego-oriented, and something that “requires equal payment for each need-satisfying good”.\textsuperscript{13} In education this paradigm is characterised by individualism, instrumentalism and consumerism. For the philosopher Charles Taylor\textsuperscript{14}, the result is fragmentation and disenchantment, which has dissolved community and “split reason from self.”\textsuperscript{15}

As Dale notes, our present educational discourse is dominated by words that reflect this ‘bargain across the counter’ mentality – words like ‘client’, ‘service’, ‘stakeholders’, ‘consumers’, and hyphenated words such as ‘performance-referenced’, ‘outcome-oriented’, ‘competency-centred’, as well as unhyphenated ones like ‘cohort groups’, ‘market demand’ and ‘standard variations’. He then goes on to ask what is it that we teachers do at university? “We ‘deliver instruction’. Teaching in a classroom is an ‘instructional delivery system’, and the latest technology simply an ‘alternative delivery system’.”\textsuperscript{16} Instead of reflecting on the Socratic question of “How should one live?” Dale says, we are instead focused on “How to make a living?”

In his address to the House of Lords in August 2011, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, spoke of his views on the riots of the youth – as young as seven years old – across Britain. In his impassioned plea, he said:

...I believe one of the most significant questions that we ought to be addressing in the wake of these deplorable events, is what kind of education we are interested in, for what kind of a society? Are we prepared to think not only about discipline in classrooms, but also about the content and ethos of our educational institutions – asking can we once again build a society which takes seriously the task of educating citizens, not consumers, not cogs in an economic system, but citizens...\textsuperscript{17}

The archbishop issues a challenge for Britain to reconstruct its education not by using an instrumentalist model but one that builds “virtue, character and citizenship”. This echoes a cry from many quarters around the globe, for some time now, for character education to be at the heart of our curricula. Indeed through the ages, it has been at the forefront of debates about the purpose of education. I propose a way forward is to embrace a paradigm that stands at the opposite end of the exchange paradigm alluded to in this speech. If the exchange paradigm is self-orientated, then a radical counterpoint would be a ‘gift paradigm’, which is other-oriented. Vaughan and Estola describe the gift paradigm\textsuperscript{18} as one where
"a giver unilaterally satisfies the need of a receiver and thereby establishes bonds of mutuality and trust." Gratitude embodies a dynamic interrelation between giver, receiver and gift, and as such can provide a powerful dimension to the gift paradigm. Philosopher Robert Roberts describes gratitude as comprising of givers, gifts, recipients, and the attitudes of giver and recipient toward one another. It is a deeply social emotion, relating persons to persons in quite particular ways.

By encapsulating the relationship between giver, receiver and gift, gratitude is highly relevant to the educational context. The receiver of education recognises that what they receive is a gift, and this prompts them to give back. When the giver of the gift of education sees that what they give is perceived as a gift, they are motivated to give and give, without necessarily wanting anything in return. A true dynamic is restored where education encompasses a healthy flow of giving and receiving amongst all parties. In most contexts, education is currently constructed as the teacher who is giving the gift of education to the recipients, the students, and there is an absence of students being educated to give back for the gifts of education. Too often education is not seen by its receivers as a gift or privilege, but only as a right or expectation.

This book neither presents gratitude as the answer to how we might educate better citizens, nor as a panacea to cure all of the ills of society. However, it does present a strong case for why we may consider gratitude as an important missing piece of current educational practices and why it may play a part in being a powerful antidote to the exchange paradigm.

Archbishop Williams goes on in his speech to draw our attention to a need for greater awareness of a deepened sense of “empathy with others”, and “our involvement together in a social project in which we all have to participate”. Yet to rally us all to participate in a social project – particularly one that aims to consider the kinds of virtues, character and citizenship we wish to promote in education – we need to consider, intelligently and wisely, the global, pluralistic and post-structuralist society we cohabit.

Just around the corner, or at least somewhere in the vicinity of the parliament where the archbishop was speaking, there are a growing number of philosophers and educators who take issue with educational policy that advocates what they call the “happiness agenda”. In their recent work, educational philosophers Kathryn Eccleston and Dennis Hayes present an important and convincing warning against the rise of “therapeutic education”, which they define as “…any activity that focuses on perceived emotional problems and which aims to make educational content and learning processes more ‘emotionally engaging’…”. They object to the large amount of funding being poured into education programs that focus on emotional wellbeing, and the picture of the “diminished self” as being vulnerable and fragile, that lies behind these initiatives. They regard such therapeutic
education as “profoundly anti-educational”, as it attempts to “coach appropriate emotions as part of developing emotional wellbeing and happiness.” Moreover, they cite many poignant examples where education in these emotions is common across all levels of education, and is socially engineered by the state.

When Adam Smith, in his 1759 work *The theory of moral sentiments*, recommended gratitude as a crucial antidote to self-interest if we were to have a healthy political economy, and when G.K. Chesterton wrote of gratitude as the source of human happiness in the early 1900s, they were doing so at a time when society was much more malleable to embracing a common identity that was prescribed by the church or the state. The most we should aim for today is an invitation to engage in healthy and open dialogue. If a commitment to a particular aspect of character education should arise from this dialogue, it needs to be chosen consciously and critically, and be informed by a plurality of views and concerns.

This book is not aimed at prescribing a certain way of being, nor is it offered as something that can be considered in isolation from other dimensions that contribute to effective education. Rather, I am inviting my readers to engage with the hypothesis that gratitude may be one important aspect that, for reasons I explore in the following chapters, has been overlooked.

*Lived experience as my field of inquiry*

As a custodian of gratitude I would not consider letting it loose in education without a critical framework that honours its strong historical and cultural roots. If we introduce gratitude poorly, it could be swept up as part of the ‘happiness agenda’ (which is currently its place) and miss its educational purpose and potential. In order to examine the role of gratitude critically, we need to listen to the difficulties the term raises; we need to awaken to what these difficulties can teach us about ourselves and about the term gratitude; and we need to make time for our understanding of gratitude to evolve. To this end, this book engages with hermeneutic inquiry to invite the reader to explore both dilemmas and possibilities. By taking this approach, I consciously rebel against the simplistic ways in which the concept of gratitude is used in some of the contemporary discourse that dominates the so-called ‘positivity industry’.

*Gratitude in Education: A Radical View* uses impressionist ethnography to explore the potential of gratitude, and to bring to life the complexities which educators grapple with when practising gratitude. My approach is narrative and interpretive as I recount stories of academics, school leaders, teachers, students, pre-service teachers, and parents, and interweave them into an account of my own discovery of the significance and challenge of practising gratitude in my life as an academic, teacher educator and parent, and about gratitude as a radical act of agency in education. It is impressionistic because, using strategies of remembering, recalling, and imagining, I deliberately attribute certain characters, parts of
conversations, circumstances and events to players in my narratives in order to bring to life the dilemmas and give fullness to each story. In doing so I am able to bring the lived experience of gratitude to life in all its complexities and subtleties.

My ethnographic impressions draw together interpreted threads of teachers’ and students’ reflections, personal interactions, transcripts from interviews and focus groups, class discussions, and extracts from emails and student journals. The characters portrayed are real people, though some are composites. Sometimes I have embellished responses and dilemmas by incorporating those experienced by others in different contexts. The institutions where they are positioned are real places. All identities are masked. I do not wish any character or place to be associated with a particular portrait. My purpose is not to tell the story of a particular character or a particular institution, but to draw out general points that may be relevant to many.

I have extended some questions and answers or reinterpreted them to tease out the dilemmas more fully for the reader. Large bodies of text such as excerpts from transcripts remain true to their original form.

Through my years of study as a practising educator, many thinkers in the fields of philosophy, education, sociology, positive psychology, spirituality and anthropology have caused me to reflect deeply about the place of gratitude. Rather than looking to these texts to provide a unifying theory underlining my approach to gratitude, I propose that they each offer lenses of wisdom through which those who work in the field of education may view their experiences of gratitude. To this end, I interweave theoretical insights with the exploration of the complexities and potential of gratitude.

Each chapter starts with a scenario in a school or university setting and uses dialogue to tease out the possibilities and dilemmas regarding the chapter’s topic. After introducing the reader to various dimensions of gratitude practice for teachers, the book turns its focus on teaching gratitude to students, and invites the reader to further consider its pedagogical significance.

Although the effects of gratitude have been explored in other fields, this is the first full text to explore gratitude in the context of education, and the first to present gratitude as a pedagogy that underlies effective teaching. It acknowledges that gratitude is only one aspect of a teacher’s pedagogy, but argues that it is so important that it is worthy of this work in its own right.

I invite you to join me in an exploration of the worthiness of a greater consciousness of gratitude in your vocation and life.
CHAPTER 2

A LANDSCAPE OF GRATITUDE

The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.
– Marcel Proust

In this chapter I use a school workshop on gratitude as a backdrop that sets the scene for the various dilemmas and complexities that will be investigated in the book. As the responses from these primary school teachers show, for many people their notion of gratitude is inseparable from other notions, or can even be comfortably replaced by them. Through the enthusiasm of some and the reservations of others, I hope to pave the way to a deeper appreciation of the depths of gratitude that reflect its cultural and historical richness, and also its ambiguity.

Leaders first?

For many weeks I had been anticipating the prospect of introducing a gratitude workshop to twenty-five teaching staff at Eastgates Primary School. The nearer the time for the workshop, the more excited I became. Eastgates is situated within a large Australian metropolis, in a district where there is a distinct socio-economic advantage and wide multicultural representation amongst the people who live and work there. Eastgates’ students represent many different ethnic backgrounds. Some of their teachers come from South-East Asian, Indian and Maori cultures. As in many other schools, a few teachers are nearing retirement, some have been teaching at the school for over a decade, and others are at the very beginning of their careers. Two or three have just started teaching there.

Claire, the school principal, came to Eastgates less than a year ago from a school she described as amongst the most disadvantaged of the schools in the city. She was already growing tired of the complaints of some Eastgates’ staff and what she perceived as their petty behaviour, and so she was excited about the prospect of teachers practising gratitude and hopefully “waking them up to how lucky they are to teach in this school!” I was optimistic and pleasantly nervous because this was the first primary school where I had had a chance to introduce my workshop, called Gratitude in Education: Worthy pedagogy or prosaic hopefulness?
Over more than a decade of introducing a pedagogy of gratitude in high schools and universities, I had learned to modify the ways I was leading educators in workshops. When teachers see leaders practise gratitude, and see others benefit from their practice, it is likely that they would follow those leaders. Similarly, when a teacher practises gratitude, students are more likely to follow their teacher’s example. I will rarely accept invitations to introduce gratitude as a learning strategy for students, without first offering it to school leaders and then after that, to teachers and parents.

With this idea in mind, I had visited Eastgates Primary a few months before to introduce my gratitude research to a group of six school leaders, including Claire. My inquiry into the effects of other school leaders practising gratitude had revealed some positive effects. They reported enhanced wellbeing, better relationships with colleagues and students, increased self-awareness, and improved student learning outcomes. As one of these leaders wrote:

*I made the effort to think about the students (and) be grateful for this environment with so many delightful cooperative intelligent students and even those who may not have met my expectations – and thought about how good it was to be here working and interacting with students.*

After discussing the potential of gratitude to be an antidote to a culture of complaint, and to enhance student learning, all the leaders enthusiastically resolved to include the rest of the Eastgates’ staff in a forthcoming gratitude workshop. They could also see that first the leaders must practise gratitude. They knew this, although they wanted to jump right in and find a place for gratitude in the curricula for all students. All six leaders were keen to join what I called a ‘gratitude project’, which invited them to consciously focus on a gratitude practice and deliberately note the effects and challenges of their individual efforts. However, within the first week of practice, two members emailed me to apologise that they had too much on their plate and that they felt that it was too hard to be conscious of gratitude all the time. Two months later, only one of the school leaders had stayed on board with me. This was Julie, the assistant principal.

Claire agreed wholeheartedly with the idea of promoting more gratitude, but she said she would like to sit the year out and watch how the project progressed with the rest of the school, and let her staff get to know her first. As I had already sensed that all eyes were on Claire’s performance as a newcomer to the school, I could understand her dilemma. However, as an outsider and relative stranger, I did not feel that I was in a position to advise Claire that it was likely that the other staff would not benefit from the project as much as they would if she were involved.

Voluntary participation is an important ingredient for any gratitude initiative in a school. Unfortunately the principal was so eager to make an impact on what she
perceived as a culture of negativity amongst some of the staff, that she insisted that it would be essential for all the teaching staff to hear about the benefits of gratitude. Claire was so confident that this initiative was going to make a positive impact that she was proud to announce this in her targets for accountability in the following year. Dysfunctional and disharmonious relationships amongst colleagues in schools appeared to be of sufficient concern to school principals, to the extent that Claire could feel confident about announcing her goals so publicly.

I wanted to proceed with caution, to firstly see if this context was welcoming the gratitude initiative, and indeed if teachers also gave priority to Claire’s message of “turning the culture of negativity around this year”. I thought that because I was offering the workshop for free, coming in as a university researcher, I could somehow take a neutral position, be a free agent, and separate myself from Claire’s larger agenda. The politics of the situation spoke otherwise. My workshop was to be presented to all staff whether they liked it or not. To make matters worse, Claire’s express wish was that each one of the teachers would continue with the project for the remainder of the year. I needed to respect Claire’s desire to create a more harmonious school and that her heart was yearning for the atmosphere of respect and value that permeated her previous school. The most I could do was to share with Claire my view that the gratitude work was not a quick fix for the problems she perceived amongst her staff.

Leading with grace

On the day of the workshop, I flew into the city on a very early flight, accompanied by an array of mixed emotions. I was excited and wanted to put my best foot forward, but I was also apprehensive, disoriented and tired. I was struggling with my confidence to run a workshop on the topic of gratitude in my present state. I was exhausted from being immersed in marking hundreds of students’ essays for many weekends and late nights. The question of where I stood in relationship to Claire’s larger agenda and how this would affect my relationships with her staff weighed heavily on my mind.

Most of the time I espouse and do my best to follow Parker J. Palmer’s philosophy of teaching: “we teach who we are: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher”. On my way to the workshop I questioned the worthiness of anything much from inside myself. I felt divorced from integrity as I reflected on the amount of complaint I had been recently engaged in. I had had to double the amount of teaching and marking of students’ work compared with many of my colleagues. Although I had tried to reach into gratitude and whip myself up into a more positive state, I could only stay there for short bursts before negativity took hold. Gratitude could not live up to its derivative, grace, in me at this point of the workshop. I feared the ungraciousness I saw concealed inside me might reveal itself to the participants.
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My state of apprehension and exhaustion lessened quite dramatically on my arrival at the primary school, when I was greeted very warmly by Julie, who Claire had appointed to be in charge of the gratitude project.

“I’ve had all these amazing experiences,” she said. “I can’t believe how different I feel and even my husband and friends are noticing a positive difference. I feel calmer, more at peace, happier, and closer to my colleagues than I ever thought possible. I also feel more deeply connected to many of my students – even the difficult ones.”

In Julie’s office, posters on the wall seemed to envelop me from many sources of wisdom about gratitude. One by Balduin Schwarz caught my eye:

> Gratitude is vital for each of us
> if we are to understand ourselves and others;
> for gratitude sees, and fully affirms,
> our dependency, our lack,
> our need to receive all that
> which we cannot provide ourselves.  

At the moment of writing this down, I recognised my dependence on Julie’s enthusiasm. The grace her increased gratitude had brought wrapped itself around me, and my own sense of gratitude was renewed. Julie said that before the project she had not thought much at all about consciously practising gratitude, but by valuing people more, thanking students and staff with real heart, and finding little ways of telling people that she noticed their contribution, “there was an unbelievable shift.” Julie’s newfound joy infected me, filled me with energy and confidence. I was deeply relieved when she agreed to share her experiences of her gratitude practices at the opening of the workshop. It was the power of gratitude, not me, that was to do all the transformative work. I needed to let my fragile ego, my self-assuming importance, off the hook.

*Are teachers hot or cold on gratitude?*

The workshop started on Wednesday at 3.15pm. Most of the twenty-five teachers walked in exhausted, more ready to go home than to sit through a workshop. Soon many sat up straighter in their chairs as Julie inspired them with her experiences and enthusiasm. She talked glowingly about gratitude as the answer to many problems in the school. However, I noticed that some of the teachers were cringing. Might they have been thinking that her uncritical embrace of the concept was naive, that we have at least one ‘Pollyanna’ in the room? I decided to come clean as I introduced myself. My instinctive response was to reveal some of my tussle in getting there and to be honest in saying that I felt the least suitable person to conduct a workshop on gratitude. Many in the audience smiled as I told my story. I sensed the possibility of connecting with them.
I asked the teachers what gratitude meant for them. Their responses were many and varied. Gratitude was something they did not contemplate. Gratitude was something that they thought about deeply and practised. Heartfelt definitions of gratitude rolled off some tongues – giving thanks for the people and resources in our community and acknowledging their importance in our daily lives was one of them. The word ‘gratitude’ was uncomfortable for some, and one teacher pleadingly asked, “can’t we call it something else?” Many wondered if it would be better to use words like optimism, positive attitude, appreciation, thankfulness, praise, recognition or thanks?

When I moved on to discuss the question of the challenges raised by the notion that ‘gratitude’ should have a more prominent place in our education system, I immediately sensed that there is nothing like involuntary participation – and the absence of the principal – for strong opinions to be aired. Many teachers gave impassioned replies. Some felt that the idea of gratitude in schools was absurd. Even if there were some possible relevance for gratitude in other aspects of their lives, its place in education would be under scrutiny. Gratitude would be deemed the least appropriate response to all the perceived inequities and injustices teachers were suffering in a system that they believed was in rapid decay.

What was the big deal was a question asked by others. Gratitude was something they actively embraced to be a good teacher. They could not imagine a classroom or school without lots of praise and many utterances of thank you.

“But is that just a blind, ritual thankyou?” Bill’s question challenged them. “I’m tired of the empty words that lack the authenticity to inspire real gratitude!”

Hyun Ji was a teacher from South Korea. She agreed with Bill wholeheartedly. Her culture had instilled in her from a very young age many rituals and customs of gratitude. Yet she felt that these rituals and customs were rarely performed with much sincerity or real feeling behind them.

Bill’s doubting question and Hyun Ji’s disappointment charged the discussion with energy. Kathryn sat forward in her seat. She said how much she valued the gratitude of her own child’s teacher who would write notes of thanks in the school diary. She appreciated the teacher sharing these things with her. It had boosted her confidence as a parent and made her feel closer to the teacher.

“Funnily enough,” Kathryn said, “it would be so easy to do this for the children and parents in my own class.” Her eyes lit up as if she had not made the connection until that moment of speaking.

Some noted that were other teachers within this school community who radiated gratitude. It was uplifting to be in their presence. Nothing ruffled them. The atmosphere in their classes was “heavenly”. But it was difficult to be like those practitioners all the time. These observations turned our talk to the difficulties of maintaining our gratitude when we face long hours, difficult students and their parents, sickness, tiredness, systems not working, not being listened to, stress, our problems with our own children or ageing parents.
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Robert rose to emphasise these issues. I was to find out later that he was the union representative for the school’s teachers. He said that promoting gratitude was like sitting back and accepting the status quo and this would place one in a passive position. Heads nodded as he explained.

“Current disputes between the Education Department and the Teachers’ Federation highlight how little the teaching profession is understood or valued by our employer and society. If we have to be grateful, surely that is just going to give the message that all is okay when clearly it’s not!”

Then a woman of great presence and serenity called us to consider another aspect of gratitude. As a Maori woman, Tipene said that she was very protective of what gratitude meant to her and told us that her culture had other names and meanings that went beyond the normal everyday notions of gratitude. One cannot be a teacher in her culture without a profound sense of the importance of gift-giving as part of the act of teaching and learning.

I invited the teachers to work in small groups to further pursue their responses to points already raised. While everyone else jumped eagerly into deliberation and debate, Marie who was sitting close to me, asked quietly, “Are you promoting a particular religious viewpoint?” Perhaps her question was one of acknowledgment that gratitude is at the heart of many religions and spiritual paths, but Marie, who told me she was a Christian, seemed to need my answer. Possibly it was so essential for her to connect her notion of gratitude with her own faith that she needed to know about mine.

With Marie’s permission, I asked the whole group if they thought that the word gratitude had any religious overtones. My question revealed that there was disquiet similar to Marie’s amongst some participants. Others were critical of what they believed smacked of New Age, or another slogan, another ideal, another quick fix, or someone telling them how to be.

From another perspective, Ashok quietly shared threads of Hindu teachings about gratitude that ran from the Upanishads right through to his dinner table where he and his children offered thanks for their day and then sat in silence as they tasted and ate their food with ‘thanks’. As he spoke in a kind and unassuming manner, it seemed that Ashok’s whole being exuded relief at the thought of being able to bring his sacred world into what he considered to be an overly-secularised education system.

Meanwhile, two older male teachers slumped back in their seats, chins dropped to chest, legs stretched out, as if mimicking and in compliance with one another. Perhaps it was just sour grapes on my part because they were not engaging in the workshop, but I allowed myself to judgementally wonder whether they were complacently nesting and hatching their superannuation eggs. They were easily distracted and made underhand comments throughout the discussion. Their negative attitude was difficult for me, and others, to accept, and stood in stark contrast with a group of young teachers on the opposite side of the room, who were openly enthusiastic about the potential of gratitude. Where was
the place for their own gratitude when they could see that some people at the end of their professional lives were cynical and disenchanted with the vocation of teaching?

These young teachers reminded me of many of my student teachers, who seem to be more highly evolved in their consciousness than many who are twice their age. They might want everyone around them to embrace the wisdom of gratitude that they can so easily accept. Until it is pointed out to them, they might neglect to empathise with the conditions that have led to the resignation and cynicism they see in some older teachers. These two older Eastgates’ teachers may well have embraced gratitude as part of their natural response. They may have given a lot by devoting long hours and much of their energy to their teaching. Over the years, they may have felt undervalued or under appreciated by the parents and students, and in some cases their principal, receiving nothing but complaints or disrespect. They could be too tired and in too much pain to reach into the wisdom that was so accessible to the younger teachers, and thus unable to move past their resentment. They could have put up walls, withdrawn and found refuge in each other, in order to be able to protect themselves from being asked to give when they had nothing left inside.

The young teachers were cautious about the principal’s role. “Is Claire joining this project?” Katie asked me softly. She believed the project would only work if Claire came to the party and changed her habit of valuing some staff members and not others. Again, I wondered if this young teacher was expecting too much of her principal and was not able to put herself in Claire’s shoes. Katie also asked me if I was going to do something about paper wastage and lights being left on unnecessarily. “Surely gratitude for materials comes into the picture somewhere?” she asked.

Dianne tapped my elbow as I walked from the room for a coffee break. She said she did not want to be overheard and asked to speak to me privately. Almost whispering, she told me about the woman in her discussion group who recently came back to work after the death of her son who was killed in a car accident. Next she told me about the teacher who had lost his wife to breast cancer only a month ago. I could only nod in silence. Would those two teachers have wanted me to know what Dianne was disclosing to me? I knew that sometimes people feel they have to protect the secrets and welfare of others. Dianne did say that she thought I should know something of their situation so that I could be sensitive to how difficult the notion of gratitude might be for some of my workshop participants. I thanked her sincerely. She had reminded me of something that I was mortified to have forgotten to say – a habitual prelude to all my workshop discussions. My own woes had so distracted me that I had neglected to fulfil one of my promises to myself – to always express the most important of caveats in a gratitude workshop: Although gratitude for small everyday things, like what we can smell or see, may help in times of great adversity, there are some situations where it may be
impossible, or even perhaps inappropriate, to expect ourselves to initially respond with gratitude!

Respecting Dianne’s confidence, I waited till later to weave those words of caution into the workshop. The moment I did, a woman lifted her head and her sad eyes met mine for the first time. Was she the grieving mother, I wondered? How could my many years of research and all the numerous scientific papers written on the topic of gratitude possibly offer her solace?

I presented my caveat along with the remarkable story of a Rawandanese refugee whom I had come to know during my work. His name was Joseph. Joseph had survived terrible atrocities against his people. He had been in and out of refugee camps. Recently during a local gathering of friends, Joseph relayed a very moving story and message. He had been in different refugee camps since he was four and came to Australia two years ago at the age of 35. He had witnessed unimaginable acts of violence and the greatest of losses. He had seen both his parents murdered and had lost his brothers and sisters in genocide in his country.

When he was twenty, he was in a camp with many others who had lost everything – their loved ones and homes and for some, their professional identity as teachers, doctors and accountants. All those incarcerated in the camp were very depressed; it was difficult to find a reason to continue living. Then one day at one of their regular community meetings they decided to try to dwell no longer on their losses, but focus instead on the fact that they had each other. During later meetings each person was asked to share a gift, a talent or skill with the community. Many camp dwellers began to feel relief from their suffering as they discovered great respect and gratitude for each other. Young and old attended regular meetings; each in turn shared what they knew. From there they started a school for the young children of the camp. Instead of spending many more years depressed about what they did not have, they learned to value the knowledge and skills they possessed. When Joseph had uttered his last sentence, “My suffering is my treasure”, he had moved us all to tears. Joseph looked upon his life with gratitude.

Joseph’s story inspired some teachers to share accounts of people who had “come out of the other side of adversity” and for whom gratitude was “the only response to life”.

Empirical research: What a relief!

After a few moments’ silence, I raked around in the box of resources I had brought along and held up the *The Psychology of Gratitude*, a large and formidable compilation of recent studies from various fields. I was moving on to the question ‘Why gratitude?’ The release of tension in some parts of the room was palpable. Those who had been wriggling in their chairs were perhaps uncomfortable or embarrassed – had the discussion so far been unwanted, intruding upon personal and private domains? Perhaps for them, ‘appropriate’ professional development
might strictly relate to teaching techniques or curricula. Some teachers were animated, enjoying the focus on gratitude. Were others seeking a safer place to be, in the supposedly objective world of clinical, psychological research? For them was I, at last, stepping out of the ‘airy fairy’ into the real world of empiricism? I allowed a PowerPoint slide to slip onto the screen to show a list of some research findings.

Increased gratitude leads to:

– a greater sense of wellbeing
– increased optimism
– a tendency to exercise more often
– a decrease in depression
– a greater sense of connectedness
– a greater ability to deal with adversity
– improved relationships
– greater joy and satisfaction.32

This slide was to break the silence adopted by some teachers in the previous session.

They seemed to become increasingly alert when I shared the results of my own research into the effects of gratitude when addressing the vexed and perplexing issue of student disengagement. With another PowerPoint slide I displayed a quote from Johann, a first-year university student, who participated in a study-skills program where I introduced gratitude.

...thinking about things that I could be grateful for during the presentation itself, already increased my alertness in the class and my ability to learn. Often I feel lethargic during lectures, and although I am hearing what is being said, I am not properly listening to and taking in the content. I find that now, however, when I am grateful, that cloudiness in my head is gone and I can listen a whole lot better, without having to try so hard.

The workshop teachers were well acquainted with Johann’s “cloudiness”; they saw it in some of their own students. Could they awaken now to the possibility that gratitude could ‘clear the fog’ for their students so they might be present in their learning?

I also referred to the “HeartMath” work of Rolin McCraty and Doc Childre, who demonstrate that concentrating on the emotion of appreciation for prolonged periods of time leads not only to improved health, but also to enhanced cognitive ability. During their research, they discovered that students of all ages and levels showed a significant increase in positive “emotional well-being, classroom behaviours, learning and academic performance.” 33

From the teachers’ enthusiasm at the prospect of gratitude awakening a different kind of engagement in their students, I saw that I had found a way to reach into their hearts about the role of gratitude in education. They were interested in
motivating their students to learn. If research could show positive outcomes, they could perhaps see the point of helping their students to practise gratitude. If there was one thing that I could share with Claire about the outcomes of this workshop it would be that her teachers were motivated to take up gratitude because of their concerns for their students’ learning. This was far more important to them than Claire’s agenda “to make the teachers more positive and less complaining”.

Teachers’ gratitude before students’ gratitude?

Eager to teach their students the very next day to practise gratitude, the teachers were abuzz with creative ways of how they could do this. There were some activities that they had tried before with their students – and with quite impressive results: gifts and ‘thankyou’ cards to parents, librarians, parent helpers, the principal; placemats with pictures of all the things they were grateful for; students writing gratitude notes to each other.

I think the Eastgates teachers expected that my next move would be to further explore ideas of teaching gratitude. Instead, to intrigue them, I displayed on screen a photo of a massive waterfall in full flow. They caught my point immediately when I asked them to guess my aim. “Oh, so our gratitude flows down to our students”, said one teacher.

As I had with the school leaders, I asked the teachers to consider how their students’ ability to practise gratitude might be influenced by their own capacity to do so. I shared with them a time when I was trying to teach my pre-service teachers about the role of gratitude in the teaching and learning nexus, and received blank stares. On this memorable occasion the group of aspiring teachers did not seem to have a clue what I was talking about. I was trying to be passionate in teaching them about the power of their gratitude to influence their students’ learning outcomes but they remained distracted, uneasy and uncooperative. Later, unbeknownst to them, I remembered that I had spoken ungraciously and negatively about a colleague behind her back – and took this attitude with me into class. I had missed the opportunity to turn away from backbiting and look for the good in that person, or at least change the discussion to something else. It was no wonder I found it hard to convey my own gratitude in that class, let alone teach about gratitude in ways my students could fully embrace.

To my surprise, over half of the Eastgates teachers signed up for the next stage of the project – to adopt gratitude practices and take note of their effects in their teaching context. Later, we would meet again to share ideas on how they could introduce gratitude practices to their students.

Finally I asked them to envisage what their school could be like if the practice of gratitude were truly active in the school community. They foresaw engaged students, co-operative classrooms, parents and school leaders who valued them, and harmony in their relationship with their peers.
Learning from parents

That evening, half an hour before the parents’ gratitude workshop was due to begin, I was setting up at the back of the library when Claire arrived and advised me that twelve chairs would probably be enough. It was a wet evening and she did not expect a big turnout. Julie was more optimistic, saying that several parents had replied to her newsletter advertisement, headed *Gratitude in Education: Exploring the relevance for teachers and parents in assisting student learning.*

“Let’s start with twenty”, she insisted, “and we can always just move in a bit closer if not many turn up.”

Soon nine parents arrived and warmed the room with the colours of their origin: one wore a lotus pink sari, one a sky blue taberna, and another a kuta sava flowing with yellow and orange hues. I sensed straightaway the air of respect and reverence that was filling the library as those parents sat down – this was in stark contrast to the feeling that took hold of me when the teachers had entered the same space earlier in the day. More parents from diverse cultures came into the circle of chairs.

I could not help but ask about their countries of origin and found a father from Vietnam, a mother from Turkey, another from Iran, and a couple of Maori descent.

A constant stream of parents continued to fill the room.

Claire seemed a little puzzled, but at the same time delighted, by the number of parents who were turning up for the workshop. She walked over to introduce herself to someone who sat alone between some empty places. Julie and another teacher flurried around to find extra chairs. Soon, thirty-five parents had arrived and there were still five minutes to go before the workshop was to begin.

Claire enthusiastically greeted the parents and thanked them for coming and taking time out of their busy lives. She talked proudly about the gratitude project that many of the Eastgates teachers had signed up for earlier that day, and of it being part of her strategic plan for the school.

When my turn came to begin the workshop, I asked the parents their reasons for coming. They shared rich cultural interpretations of gratitude and what it meant for them. We heard that in Islam there is a belief that one should be thankful and praise God in every circumstance. For example, Muslims answer the question, “How are you?” with the Arabic phrase, “Alhamdulillah”, which means, “Praise and thanks be to God”. The Koran teaches that God created human beings for the purpose of being grateful to him. We heard that in the Hindu religion, gratitude for everything, without expecting anything, is a very important principle, and one that is closely tied to the sacred texts that teach, “We should do all our duties in the spirit of service to the Lord”. We heard from a Christian, who quoted from the books of the Corinthians, “It is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”

As these parents spoke passionately about why gratitude appealed to them and motivated them to come to the workshop to find out more, I could see that gratitude lay at the core of their faith. Their dialogue gave testimony to the view
that gratitude is at the heart of many religions, a theme that commonly permeates religious cultures. Robert Emmons and Cheryl Crumpler state:

…gratitude, like forgiveness and…love, bridges theological and psychological understandings of human nature…the roots of gratitude can be seen in many of the world’s great religious traditions. In the great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the concept of gratitude permeates the texts, prayers, and the teachings. Worship with gratitude to God for the many gifts and mercies are common themes…

These various interpretations sparked interest amongst those in the room, and presented an occasion for parents to learn more about the values and beliefs of others in their school community. Many of the parents seemed eager to take advantage of this forum, to see whether their sacred ways of expressing gratitude could fit the secular world of their children’s education. Their experience and deep understanding was to provide a foundation for us to consider the meaning of gratitude and how to apply it as the workshop proceeded.

Most parents said they came along because they were intrigued by how their gratitude could assist their children’s learning, and were eager to go straight home and teach their children how to be more grateful. I talked about the teachers’ workshop where I had explained how the gratitude practice of teachers has an enormous influence on their students’ gratitude. Similarly, the gratitude practice of parents and grandparents greatly strengthens this influence. Children find it easier to express gratitude if they see gratitude practices in their homes and feel their parents’ gratitude for them.

I illustrated what I meant with an example in my own experience of parenting. Sometimes as parents we are tempted to empathise with our children’s grievances about the school or their teachers. We support our children by joining in their negative complaint. This way we promote a negative attitude as being appropriate. An alternative approach might be to model gratitude to our children by speaking about what we are grateful for in their teachers or school, and expressing this often in tangible ways. Then our children are more likely to do the same.

One parent asked if all the teachers were going to be involved in this initiative, saying he could only envisage it working if all the school came on board. My response was to suggest that for the work on gratitude to have integrity, people must consciously and voluntarily choose to participate in the project.

“Just because teachers choose to not join the gratitude group doesn’t mean they’re not practising gratitude,” I added, “and some have already told me that they prefer to practise gratitude individually and not in a group.” I also assured the parents that the quality of the practice of gratitude from committed teachers – not the quantity – would be what would make the biggest difference.

As I shared some of the recent research on gratitude from positive psychology, I was acutely aware of a gap between the culturally rich stories that poured forth at
A LANDSCAPE OF GRATITUDE

the beginning of the workshop and the clinical, objective nature of these studies. One of the parents, Jane, a psychologist, questioned the validity of the research behind some of the claims of positive psychology. Brian, another parent replied to Jane that he, with other executives in his company, had attended a coaching seminar conducted by a “very skilled person”, who based his whole approach to coaching and facilitation on values and strengths. Brian talked of the positive results he witnessed from this kind of coaching in his company. He was convinced that “there is something very powerful in all of this.” I responded to Jane’s query by recommending some of the experiences of counsellors and psychologists who practised gratitude in other educational contexts. I presented some words from Amy, a psychologist working in a university student services unit, who had joined a gratitude project:

…gratitude for me has come to be about the reciprocal nature of things, and the follow-through action, not just the thought. So how has it made a difference to my work? I suppose it’s all in the attitude. Practising gratitude more consciously has enabled me to:

– step outside of complaint more often and therefore experience less suffering and be able to cope with the difficult situations (like overload) a bit better;
– appreciate more fully the positive experiences at work (e.g. with my counselling clients) and the positive benefits of just having a secure job with good pay;
– more fully appreciate the time I’m spending here at this workplace for what it is as I won’t have it forever (e.g. the team support, the skills enhancement etc.);
– feel the solidarity and deep understanding of others;
– break into an unexpected smile or laugh during a tough day… .

I continue to drift in and out of awareness of these issues, but I am always happy to gently guide myself back on the path of gratitude and become more aware, more conscious of it. I assume that practice can only make me get better and better at it over time!

Amy’s words seemed to appease Jane because she continued her involvement in our discussion.

Our consideration of the possible part gratitude could play in the role of school psychologists led to the idea of including everyone within the school community – librarians, counsellors, cleaners, and administrative staff. If we are to invite our students into gratitude, we need to work together as a community where gratitude can be natural for them.

We had already passed our allotted time for being together. It was time to close. Julie stood and asked the parents if they would like to join a parents’ gratitude group where they could continue the discussion on the role of gratitude and share their experiences and challenges. Claire followed by thanking them again for
coming, and voiced her pleasure at the turnout. Forty of the forty-five who attended registered their interest in joining the gratitude group.

The hope of gratitude

As we were stacking the chairs Julie told me how thrilled she was because many of the parents who had come that night had never before been to any school event or Parents and Citizens meeting. She said that her own understanding and respect for gratitude had been deepened by hearing how the tapestry of gratitude is so finely woven in the lives of parents. “The whole day has been uplifting,” was her comment.

Julie was full of ideas of how she was going to promote gratitude in the school, starting with newsletters to parents and providing a forum where teachers and parents could share their experiences. She asked to read the list of teachers and parents who had registered for the gratitude group. Her face lit up as she read aloud some names and she declared, “The whole school could be transformed by this gratitude project!”

Before I left, I took time to read another quote posted on Julie’s wall. This one was from Melody Beattie:

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life.
It turns what we have into enough, and more.
It turns denial into acceptance,
chaos to order, confusion to clarity.
It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home,
a stranger into a friend.
Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today,
and creates a vision for tomorrow.”

I wondered if Julie’s optimism was grounded simply in hope for a better world, or if it was a clear vision of a better life for teachers, a life where they feel deeply valued and appreciated. A candle in the dark lights a whole room. The candle was Julie’s. Would she be able to keep the flame alight in the everyday struggles of the workplace?

Seeing the landscape with new eyes

My experience of introducing gratitude to the teachers and parents at Eastgates Primary School marked a significant turning point in my approach to gratitude and how best to share it with others. I had previously believed that gratitude was something that could be clearly defined in a way that everyone could, and should understand. I had spent many years trawling through academic papers and philosophical texts to find the ideal definition that would suit all educators and
students. The idealistic notion that gratitude is something that everyone in education should wholeheartedly embrace had swept me away from reality. I had seen gratitude as an all-encompassing solution to many of the ills of education. And to help prove my point, I had welcomed the scientific findings about the positive effects of gratitude outlined in the burgeoning body of research in positive and social psychology.

Confronting my own inability to practise gratitude during recent times allowed me to listen more sincerely to the difficulties raised by the word ‘gratitude’, and the problems others have with putting it into practice. It seemed that at nearly every turn, life was reminding me of the saying that one needs to teach what one most needs to learn.

So for me, this primary school workshop heralded the adoption of a slightly more humble approach. As these teachers invited me back to explore their journey of gratitude in the course of that year, I began to follow the thinking of the Italian philosopher, Gemma Fiumara, and tried consciously to learn how to “dwell with” what was being said, rather than to know it and grasp it and control it in some way. Shifting my stance from thinking of myself as something of an expert to that of fellow traveller with these teachers, I found that I was no longer able to take refuge in Henry Sedgewick’s notion of gratitude as a “truly universal intuition”. I had moved into a world that speaks of gratitude with a multitude of different voices, feelings, opinions, beliefs and connotations.

I realised that for gratitude to have a wider presence in our lives, it had to appeal to and spread beyond the small group of already-converted practitioners who were radiant examples. If we are to deepen gratitude in our educational contexts, we need to find a compass to navigate around the abstract, inaccessible and, at times, inappropriate application of the word gratitude, in the hope that we might embrace its enormous power and importance in an age when disillusionment can so easily take hold. Again, in the wisdom of Marcel Proust, “The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes”. When we invite greater consciousness of the power of gratitude into our educational workplaces, we need not change the landscape to fit with our notion of what gratitude is, but attend to what the landscape can teach us about gratitude. Then we are more able to respond to gratitude as a source of energy, a catalyst for developing harmonious relationships, and a wellspring for transforming negative events into positive moments for growth.