Gratitude Interventions in Schools: Implications for School Counselors

A Literature Review

Presented to

The Faculty of Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

By

Andrea Laedtke

Chair: Doug Pelcak
Reader: Amy Foell

May 2017

Copyright ©2017
Andrea Laedtke
All rights reserved
Abstract
This paper provides an overview of gratitude including its benefits to individual well-being, how it is moderated, factors that inhibit gratitude, and how youth experience gratitude at different developmental stages. Possible personal/social, academic, and school culture interventions at are looked at through a school counseling lens as ways to successfully improve student outcomes and inspire growth for students and staff in elementary, middle, and high schools. An Adlerian perspective on gratitude examines how gratitude impacts encouragement, social interest, and striving along the horizontal and vertical planes for students; specific Adlerian gratitude interventions are identified. A discussion of the implications for school counselors and recommendations for future research are included.
Acknowledgements

I’ll forever be grateful for my caring family and friends, as their unwavering support has always kept me motivated. I also express my sincerest gratitude to Doug Pelcak, Amy Foell, and other Adler staff; their guidance throughout the school counseling program and in the writing of this paper was invaluable; without their contributions, this paper would not have been possible.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... 3  
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 5  
Understanding the Grateful Disposition .......................................................................................... 5  
  Benefits of Gratitude ..................................................................................................................... 6  
  Gratitude Moderators .................................................................................................................. 8  
  Gratitude Inhibitors .................................................................................................................... 10  
Gratitude in Youth ........................................................................................................................... 12  
Gratitude & Student Personal/Social Growth .................................................................................. 16  
  Personal Development .................................................................................................................. 16  
  Social Development .................................................................................................................... 17  
  Prosocial Behavior .................................................................................................................... 18  
Gratitude & Academic Development .............................................................................................. 20  
Gratitude & School Culture .............................................................................................................. 22  
  Enhancing Student/Staff Relationships ..................................................................................... 22  
  Classroom Culture ..................................................................................................................... 24  
Gratitude & Adlerian Theory .......................................................................................................... 25  
  Social Interest ............................................................................................................................ 26  
  Adlerian Striving ......................................................................................................................... 26  
    Vertical striving ....................................................................................................................... 27  
    Horizontal striving .................................................................................................................. 27  
  Adlerian Gratitude Intervention ................................................................................................. 28  
Implications for School Counselors ................................................................................................. 29  
  Accountability ............................................................................................................................ 29  
  Delivery of Services ................................................................................................................... 30  
Recommendations for Future Research ........................................................................................... 31  
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 32  
References ......................................................................................................................................... 33
Gratitude Interventions in Schools: Implications for School Counselors

Introduction

Most of a school counselor’s time is spent reactively addressing student challenges; rarely are positive interventions prioritized in a school counseling program. Positive psychology interventions designed to cultivate gratitude have been found to benefit individual well-being. In this traditional literature review, an overview of gratitude, the impact of gratitude interventions and the school counselor’s role in implementing them will be discussed. Through the use of gratitude interventions, schools can proactively impact student mental health, academic achievement, and school culture.

Understanding the Grateful Disposition

Although many may be familiar with the concept of gratitude, not all can easily define it. The word derives from the Latin word gratia, and further derivatives relate to common understandings of gratitude such as giving and receiving, kindness, and generosity (Pruyser, 1976). Discussion of gratitude dates back to early theological writings; major religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism recognize gratitude as a desirable human disposition (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Despite its early beginnings, the scientific community did not to seriously begin to study gratitude and its impact on well-being until the end of the twentieth century.

Although often discussed as a disposition, gratitude is referenced in many forms including affect, trait, emotion, and attitude to name a few. According to McCullough et al. (2002), “the grateful disposition is a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains” (p. 112). While people with a grateful disposition will be able to recognize
individuals and experiences that have attributed to their achievements, it does not necessarily
follow that they cannot recognize their own accomplishments; rather, they are also able to
recognize the individuals and experiences in addition to their own contributions.

Some people seem more inclined toward a grateful disposition than others. In a series of
studies, McCullough et al. (2002) sought to discover what set grateful people apart from their
peers. They focused on three main domains: emotionality/well-being, prosocial behavior, and
spirituality/religiousness. The authors developed a self-report for participants and controlled for
constructs related to yet separate from gratitude including some such as happiness, general life
satisfaction, and optimism. Compared to others, grateful people are “higher in positive emotions
and life satisfaction and also lower in negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, and envy.
They also appear to be more prosocially oriented in that they are more empathic, forgiving,
helpful, and supportive than are their less grateful counterparts” (McCullough et al., 2002, p.
124). Additionally, the authors found a positive correlation between spirituality/religiousness
and people with a grateful disposition. Other commonalities the authors found to people with a
grateful disposition include extraversion, agreeableness, and less neuroticism than their peers.
The authors are not suggesting that gratitude causes these things, but rather that they often
coincide with people with a grateful disposition. Similarly, just because the authors identify
traits that are more likely to occur in people with a grateful disposition, the authors do not
suggest that peers with different traits are unable to express gratitude.

**Benefits of Gratitude**

Cultivating a grateful disposition has numerous benefits to well-being. Watkins, Uhder,
and Pichinevskiy (2014) sought to see the connection between gratitude and well-being found by
past researchers, but fine-tuned their study from the work of their predecessors to avoid areas of
doubt to the findings. Using undergraduate student participants, Watkins et al. (2014) created a one week treatment with daily gratitude exercises, and measured well-being using participant scores on the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Positive and Negative Affect Scales. Findings confirmed their hypothesis and the work of previous researchers; the gratitude intervention produced greater well-being for participants in the intervention group. In addition, participants in the gratitude intervention recalled more recent positive events than their peers in the control group, indicating that gratitude may make good memories more accessible (Watkins et al., 2014). These findings are significant since they validate the early findings on the benefits of gratitude with a more fine-tuned, reliable study design.

Gratitude is beginning to be taken seriously in the clinical community. Kerr, O’Donovan, and Pepping (2015) sought to find out if gratitude interventions have a place in clinical settings. Concerned with how challenging it is for patients to access psychological treatment, the researchers strategized ways to address client well-being before they enter treatment. Using adult participants on a wait-list for outpatient psychological treatment, Kerr et al. (2015) created gratitude and kindness two week long interventions that could be self-administered by the participants. After recalling things they were grateful for and kind acts they had committed, participants rated how intense their feelings were in an effort by Kerr et al. (2015) to address frequency and intensity.

Results not only indicated that participants were able to cultivate gratitude over the two weeks, but that life satisfaction was also enhanced (Kerr et al., 2015). Findings did not prove that kindness could be cultivated, though it is important to note that those in the kindness intervention experienced more optimism, connectedness with others, and overall improved satisfaction with life (Kerr et al., 2015). The research demonstrated that “gratitude and kindness
have a place in clinical practice; not as end states, but as emotional experiences that themselves have the capacity to stimulate positive change to daily individual and relational well-being” (Kerr et al., 2015, p.32). These results indicate that gratitude interventions can not only impact well-being for the better, but that it can be an intervention that helps address the challenges associated with access to psychological treatment.

**Gratitude Moderators**

In an effort to expand the field, researchers sought to further findings on gratitude and well-being to discover when and for whom interventions are the most effective. Harbaugh and Vasey (2014) argue that pre-intervention moderators can influence the results of a gratitude intervention, and should be identified and controlled for. One moderator they controlled for was level of depressive symptoms. Participants completed a two-week gratitude list exercise and reported back to the researchers. Harbaugh and Vasey (2014) found that participants with high baseline depressive symptoms experienced reduced symptoms over time while completing the gratitude exercises, compared to the control group which saw no change in their depressive symptoms. This suggests gratitude interventions can be worthwhile for people experiencing high levels of depressive symptoms.

Another moderator Harbaugh and Vasey (2014) controlled for was pre-intervention levels of trait gratitude. Results indicated that the intervention was most effective for participants with the lowest levels of trait gratitude prior to completing the exercises (Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014). Although “low trait gratitude typically predicts lower levels of happiness and positive emotions and higher levels of depressive symptoms over time as it did in the control condition in the present study, a gratitude exercise can apparently break that link such that low trait gratitude individuals can maintain levels of happiness, positive emotions, and depressive symptoms
similar to their higher trait gratitude counterparts” (Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014, p.537). This is significant, as it suggests that regardless of how grateful a person is before an intervention, completing gratitude exercises can still be beneficial.

Personality arose as another moderator for gratitude in other research. Senf and Liau (2013) sought to test how gratitude affects happiness and depressive symptoms while also considering how personality impacted the results. Senf and Liau (2013) focused on five main personality variables: neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness. Before the intervention, participants completed a personality scale to later be compared to the findings and then completed exercises relating to the intervention group they were randomly assigned (Senf & Liau, 2013). After the intervention, higher levels of happiness were reported from participants in the gratitude intervention, but no significant changes in depressive symptoms were found. Of the personality traits identified, extraversion had significant positive correlations with gratitude interventions for happiness, indicating that it is a moderator for gratitude; these results fit with other research that has documented the relationship between extraversion and happiness (Senf & Liau, 2013). Openness had modest positive correlations with happiness, but not as strong as extraversion (Senf & Liau, 2013). Although only five personality constructs were selected, the evidence suggests that personality can be a moderator for the effects of gratitude on happiness.

Others looked at cultural backgrounds as a potential moderator for gratitude. To discover the effectiveness of gratitude with people of different cultural groups, Boehm, Lyubomirsky, and Sheldon (2010) selected Anglo Americans and foreign-born Asian Americans adults; participants in the gratitude intervention wrote letters to someone who had done something they were grateful for. Participants rated the strength of their cultural heritage identification and completed the
Satisfaction with Life Scale (Boehm et al., 2010). Compared to the control group who listed weekly experiences, those in the gratitude intervention overall saw enhanced life satisfaction; more specifically, though, Anglo Americans benefited more than foreign-born Asian Americans (Boehm et al., 2010). Although the causes for these differences between cultures is unclear, Boehm et al. (2010) hypothesized it could be due to “Western culture’s emphasis on self-improvement and personal agency” (p.1269) compared to collectivist cultures lessened focus on individual goals. While the findings indicate that most people should be able to experience the benefits of gratitude, culture may impact the effectiveness of an intervention; further research is needed to continue to find out what can moderate or even hinder gratitude.

**Gratitude Inhibitors**

The factors that contribute to a grateful disposition are well documented; similarly, there is also literature on factors that inhibit the ability to be grateful, making it more challenging to have the benefits to well-being. McCullough et al. (2002) went beyond just identifying traits that grateful people have, and also studied traits negatively associated with gratitude. The correlation between gratitude and the traits of materialism and envy was strongly negative. Findings indicated that grateful people report being more generous and less focused on material possessions, indicating that being grateful and materialistic or envious simultaneously is challenging as they are so different in nature (McCullough et al., 2002). Although the McCullough et al. (2002) findings were relevant, they were certainly not extensive in addressing all factors that could contribute to a grateful disposition.

In an effort to continue the investigation into gratitude inhibitors, Solom et al. (2016) expanded the work of McCullough et al. (2002) and identified other variables that could be opposing the gratitude development. In order to address how gratitude may be inhibited over
time, Solom et al. (2016) developed a two month prospective design focused on the traits of narcissism, cynicism, materialism/envy, and indebtedness. Participants completed questionnaires at both the beginning and end of the two months. Although Solom et al. (2016) did not find a statistically significant connection between indebtedness and gratitude, other traits indicated more relevant findings.

Solom et al. (2016) found narcissism and cynicism to be most strongly negatively associated with gratitude. Since narcissism is founded in a love of oneself and his or her own accomplishments and cynicism centers on a suspicion around others intentions, Solom et al. (2016) did not consider the results surprising. The connection between gratitude and materialism/envy was there but weaker. Solom et al. (2016) suggest this may be attributed to materialism and envy having a focus on things one should have rather than what one does have. While these findings on the traits that inhibit gratitude certainly advance the field, others have addressed gratitude inhibitors in alternative ways.

Rather than looking at specific traits that make it difficult to have a grateful disposition, Chen et al. (2012) sought find out if there was a connection between uncertainty about expressing emotions and the effects of gratitude. Individuals who experience ambivalence over emotional expression “either are inexpressive because they inhibit their desire to express, or are expressive but regret their expressiveness” (Chen et al., 2012 p.383). Ambivalence over emotional expression relates to lower well-being, as expressing emotions has repeatedly been found to be healthy (Chen et al., 2012). Participants completed questionnaires relating to gratitude, subjective happiness, and ambivalence over emotional expression, with results indicating that having ambivalence over emotional expression does inhibit the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness. This indicates that someone experiencing
uncertainty around expressing emotions likely may not benefit from gratitude interventions. Chen et al. (2012) suggest two reasons as to why ambivalence over emotional expression moderates the well-being benefits of gratitude interventions: cognitive bias when interpreting emotion and/or incongruent behavior and reactions when feeling grateful. Regardless of the reasons for uncertainty about expressing emotions the findings remain significant, especially for groups such as adolescents or youth who often struggle with expressing emotions.

**Gratitude in Youth**

Although much of the literature on gratitude interventions regards adults, more is increasingly about youth. Generalizing adult gratitude findings to children and adolescents may not always yield accurate predictions; the more research that comes out on gratitude and youth, the more the field will advance. Even though young participants can make research more challenging, gratitude interventions are being aimed at toddlers. Nelson et al. (2013) recognized the lack of literature on young children’s understanding of gratitude and sought to learn more with a longitudinal study. The participating children were read vignettes with gratitude themes, and their reactions to them were recorded. Findings indicated that 5-year-olds had a beginning understanding of what gratitude is, yet younger children’s emotional intelligence proved important as well. The researchers found “5-year-olds’ understanding of gratitude was predicted by emotion knowledge at age 3, the developmental progression of mental state knowledge from age 3 to age 4, and the developmental progression of skills from 3-year emotion knowledge to 4-year mental state knowledge” (Nelson et al., 2013, p.52). Consequently, the earlier emotional understanding is developed in a child, the more likely they are going to be able to understand and identify gratitude.
Rather than studying youth directly, other researchers have used parent perceptions of their children’s gratitude to add to the field. Halberstadt et al. (2016) asked the parents children between the ages six and nine about their children’s understanding of gratitude. Using a focus group format, the researchers collected parent responses. Parents reported that their children could be grateful for both physical and non-physical gifts, identified seeing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral gratitude in their children, and recognized that gratitude developed over time in their children (Halberstadt et al., 2016). As egocentrism naturally wanes in children, parents recognized empathy and the ability to show gratitude naturally increase in adolescence. Even though they are a secondary source, parent perspectives on youth gratitude can be beneficial as children often have a harder time expressing their understanding of abstract concepts.

Some researchers specifically chose to target gratitude interventions to early adolescents. Froh, Bono, and Emmons (2010) recognized how important early adolescence is for development. Cultivating gratitude can help early adolescents “secure and build important resources (e.g., assistance and cooperation from others, opportunities, and knowledge) and establish supportive, fulfilling relationships early on—all benefits that are mutually reinforcing in development” (Froh et al., 2010, p.145). Having already recognized the immediate benefits of gratitude on well-being, Froh et al. (2010) sought to discover the long-term effects of cultivating gratitude with early adolescents. Using a large sample of 700 middle school students from a Long Island, NY public school, Froh et al. (2010) had students fill out questionnaires including the Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC), Child Social Behavior Questionaire, Multidimensional Students’ Satisfaction with Life Scale, and the Engage Living in Youth Scale to gather participant data once and then again 6-months later.
Results indicated that gratitude and social integration continue to increasingly influence each other over time (Froh et al., 2010). While it is hard to determine a causal effect, Froh et al. (2010) give some suggestions as to why they correlate. Youth who “perceive the investments that others make in them at an early age feel valued and trusted, which leads to more life satisfaction and prosocial behavior later; we contend that this in turn makes them feel more socially integrated (Froh et al., 2010, p.153). Froh et al. (2010) recognize that while the results were still significant six months later, they can only hypothesize that the positive effects of gratitude were on track to continue further into the future. They also acknowledge that developmental maturation over time may influence social integration. Regardless, Froh et al. (2010) effectively demonstrate the importance of using gratitude to increase social integration during the critical period of early adolescence.

Although the effects of gratitude on youth are significant, the level of impact can differ from person to person. Froh et al. (2009) sought to find out who receives the most benefits from a gratitude intervention. Focusing on youth, the researchers targeted both youth with positive and negative effects. Concerned that youth with a positive affect had already reached a positive emotional ceiling, they hypothesized that youth with negative effects may experience greater changes after a gratitude intervention (Froh et al., 2009). Participants were between the ages of 8 and 19 with the average age around 12, and included almost equivalent amounts of boys and girls. Youth were asked to read a letter they had written to a person who they had not shown gratitude to in the past. Froh et al. (2009) measured affect and gratitude through The Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children and The Gratitude Adjective Checklist.

The researchers hypothesized that “after completing the gratitude intervention, youth low in positive affect might realize a new relation between previously separated objects: being a
beneficiary and held in high regard by a benefactor. Therefore, in the immediate aftermath, students low in PA might get a surge of positive emotions” (Froh et al., 2009, p. 413). Results indicated that the hypothesis was correct; youth with low positive affect were more responsive to the gratitude intervention and derived more well-being benefits (Froh et al., 2009). This indicates that youth who benefit the most from positive psychology interventions like gratitude are the most negative children and adolescents. For helping professionals working with youth, this is significant as emphasis is often placed on coming up with creative, cheap, fast, and effective ways to address youth experiencing negative emotions.

It is difficult to discuss gratitude and youth without addressing schools, as youth are so shaped by their educational experience. In their extensive overview, Bono, Froh, and Forrett (2014) focus on the relevance of gratitude in schools. They suggest natural places in the schools for gratitude interventions to be worked into curriculum. Although time and staff resources can often be a challenge when introducing new interventions, numerous staff roles can help implement gratitude interventions. Character and civic education lessons are often a good fit as competencies and learning outcomes often align with gratitude concepts (Froh et al., 2014). Additionally, “English classes could benefit from the inclusion of gratitude and appreciation exercises; not only would such exercises help develop writing skills in general (given the interpersonal dynamics involved in gratitude experiences), they might help motivate students to focus on their unique life stories and priorities” (Froh et al., 2014, p.77). Other school professionals such as counselors, psychologists, and social workers who address character development and student mental health could find gratitude interventions to be an easy way to impact outcomes.
Gratitude & Student Personal/Social Growth

Students have a variety of standards that they are expected to meet in school; these include standards within the personal/social domain. School counselors are often tasked with addressing concerns within this domain, though how they do so can vary. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2012) provides national standards to help build the foundation for school counseling programs that addresses personal and social growth. These standards target areas such as acquiring and applying student self-knowledge, as well as developing interpersonal skills (ASCA, 2012). School counselors work to identify and implement interventions that can help address these personal/social standards; gratitude interventions may be able to help school counselors improve outcomes and inspire growth in their students.

Personal Development

A key focus of personal development in the schools is student depression. To determine whether positive psychology interventions such as gratitude can be effective in preventing depressive symptoms in students, Kwok, Gu, and Kit (2016) created an eight-session group-based intervention with Chinese students. The groups met for around 90 minutes once a week during the school day, and the curriculum was designed to enhance gratitude, specifically promoting self-gratitude as well as encouraging gratitude behavior towards others (Kwok et al., 2016). The Gratitude Questionnaire-6 Likert scale was used to determine intensity, frequency, span, and density of gratitude feelings, depressive symptoms were measured using the HADS Likert scale, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale was also used to collect data (Kwok et al., 2016).

Results from the study were found to be statistically significant. The intervention participants saw higher levels of hope and gratitude, reduced depression, and greater life
satisfaction (Kwok et al., 2016). Positive psychology interventions like this that focus on gratitude “teach children ways to increase their positive cognition, emotions, and behaviors, which may help children cope with current emotional problems and increase their life satisfaction as well as enhance their capability to deal with future stress and adversities” (Kwok et al., 2016, p.358). Not only can it help students currently experiencing depressive symptoms, but gratitude interventions can also help currently healthy students who may experience mental health concerns in the future. Though the study used school social workers and a school based therapist, the intervention could easily be administered by a school counselor. This intervention may be of particular interest for school counselors wanting to address students both with and without current mental health concerns.

Social Development

When addressing how gratitude impacts youth well-being and social development, schools are a natural fit for intervention. Froh et al. (2014) created a study to determine whether gratitude can be developed in students and how it affects student social development. Since gratitude is social in nature as it centers on providing and receiving benevolence, Froh et al. (2014) saw schools as a good setting to intervene. The intervention targeted children aged eight to eleven years old for a week; students responded to questions in relation to benefit-appraisal vignettes to measure grateful thinking (Froh et al., 2014). Using the GAC, students rated how grateful, thankful, and appreciative they felt over a few weeks on a scale from very slightly to extremely. To measure behavior, teachers presented students with the voluntary option of writing thank you notes to the PTA after they had given an in-class presentation or just hanging out (Froh et al., 2014). Compared to the control group, the treatment group that was read benefit-
appraisal stories showed increases in gratitude leading the researchers to believe that gratitude can be developed in school; more of the treatment group students wrote thank-you cards.

Though the first study showed significant results, Froh et al. (2014) still sought to go beyond developing gratitude to determine how it affects the students. Froh et al. (2014) kept student age the same and maintained the benefit-appraisal vignettes, but increased the length of the study to five months and used the Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children to measure changes. The treatment group saw an increase in positive affect in comparison to the control group, which saw no changes in mood (Froh et al., 2014). Developing gratitude at this critical age of childhood has significant future implications. The ability to acknowledge “kind acts from others strengthens relationships, helps secure new relationships, and improves health and well-being” (Froh et al., 2014, p.132). This intervention addresses ASCA (2012) standards such as acquiring self-knowledge and interpersonal skills, indicating that gratitude interventions may be worthwhile for a school counselor as it has positive social and personal implications for students, is financially viable, and can be administered by a variety of staff members not limited to school counselors.

**Prosocial Behavior**

For school counselors, developing prosocial behavior in students is becoming an increasingly popular goal. In an attempt to see how gratitude impacts prosocial behavior, Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) sought to determine if feeling grateful can make someone more likely to carry out prosocial tasks. In the randomized study, 105 mostly female participants were used. In a highly orchestrated situation to cultivate gratitude, participants in the study interacted with a study confederate who did them a favor; the confederate helped the participant fix an intentionally broken computer, regaining the participants lost progress on a task (Bartlett &
DeSteno, 2006). Following the favor, participants were asked how grateful and appreciative they were of the confederate in addition to how positively they thought about the person (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). Thinking their work was over, the participants then left the room and came upon the confederate again who asked the participant for help on a time consuming, optional task (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006).

Compared to the control group participants, those who had been in the gratitude cultivation condition overwhelmingly chose to help the confederate complete the task (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). This indicates that feeling grateful toward someone makes you more likely to lend them a hand, which is at the core of prosocial behavior. The causal nature of the research is especially relevant for school counselors, who are often looking for evidence-based interventions to affect the individual students as well as the school as a whole. Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) make the case for social emotions like gratitude to be considered as being impactful on adaptive social behaviors.

In another study, prosocial behavior in students was examined more closely. Tian, Du, and Huebner (2014) describe prosocial behavior as “acts undertaken to protect or enhance the welfare of others” (p.879). They created a study to learn more about the nature of prosocial behavior, hypothesizing that it will positively correlate with individuals with cultivated gratitude (Tian et al., 2014). Using Chinese elementary school students in grades four through six, participants completed a packet of questionnaires that took about 20 minutes. Tian et al. (2014) used Likert scales including the Gratitude Questionaire-6 and the Prosocial Dimension of the Mental Health Scale to measure participant reports. Results indicate that their hypothesis was partially supported. Though the results were not as strong as they would like, they were strong enough to indicate that gratitude increases prosocial behavior in students (Tian et al., 2014).
authors suggest that the social nature of gratitude could relate to the Moral Affect Theory, as “the prosocial behavior of a benefactor to a beneficiary is thought to produce gratitude in the beneficiary, which in turn stimulates the beneficiary’s prosocial behavior, further strengthening the benefactor’s prosocial behavior” (Tian et al., 2014, p. 888). This is significant as it suggests that developing gratitude in one student can impact the gratitude of another.

**Gratitude & Academic Development**

Another major concern for school counselors is how to best help their students be successful academically; the responsibility does not lie on teachers alone. The ASCA school counseling model includes academic development as one of the three domains school counselors should be working in. The ASCA standards for academic development “guide school counseling programs to implement strategies and activities to support and maximize each student’s ability to learn” (2012, p.5). The standards outline improving academic self-concept, improving learning skills, and achieving school success as goals for interventions a school counselor implements. Compared to the numerous gratitude interventions targeting personal/social concerns, fewer address how gratitude and academic success correlate. While gratitude interventions have been proven to be effective interventions to address student mental health, literature on how specific gratitude interventions impact student academic achievement have generally not been found to be significant.

Although gratitude interventions targeting academic development have been tested, positive results are not necessarily found. In a recent study, Ouweneel, Le Blanc, and Schaufeli (2014) sought to test how positive psychology interventions such as gratitude effect study-related emotions as well as academic engagement. During the one-week intervention, students were emailed a questionnaire style gratitude intervention daily that encourage them to think and write
about someone they were grateful for (Ouweneel et al., 2014). Study-related emotions were measured using an altered version of the Job-related Affective Well-being scale, substituting studying for work; academic engagement was assessed by using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-Student Survey (Ouweneel et al., 2014).

The students reported mixed results, with some of the authors hypotheses being confirmed while others weren’t. Ouweneel et al. (2014) did not find significant interactions between gratitude interventions and academic engagement; it neither hurt nor helped. In regards to study-related positive emotions, however, the intervention group saw significant increases in positive emotions but no changes towards participant negative emotions (Ouweneel et al., 2014). For school counselors hoping to directly address academic engagement, this is not the right intervention. If a counselor is willing to try a more indirect approach to addressing student academics, the results of this study in regards to increasing positive studying emotions could potentially be a viable intervention to use.

Although it is not a specific intervention, data has been collected and published on the correlation of having a grateful disposition and academic success. Earlier, materialism was identified as a gratitude inhibitor (McCullough et al., 2002; Solom et. al, 2016). In an effort to broaden the literature, Froh et al. (2011) studied how gratitude and materialism impact youth outcomes; student grade point average was one of the variables. Just over a thousand public high school students in grades 9 through 12 completed questionnaires to address their levels of materialism and gratitude. Using the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 and Material Values Scale, Froh et al. (2011) measured student responses and compared them to the students self-reported grade point averages. Students high in gratitude had higher grade point averages than their peers, and students high in materialism had lower grade point averages (Froh et al., 2011). This is
significant, as Froh et al. (2011) have seen an increase in materialism in youth over time. If “a growing interest in material things in youth continues to show links to poorer school performance, negative attitudes about school, and unhappiness… encouraging gratitude may help counter this trend” (Froh et al., 2011, p.300). While this study does not suggest a specific intervention to cultivate gratitude as a way to address academics, it makes a case for the importance of literature on the subject. Other ways to support academic success may be achieved through a school counselor’s creation of a safe and caring school culture.

**Gratitude & School Culture**

As a school counselor, understanding the culture of a school is critical to impacting how the school functions. Every school is different and has its own unique culture. Peterson and Deal (2009) suggest that culture can be made up of traditions, language, values, norms, morals, relationships, behaviors and so many other factors; climate and ethos, while similar to culture, are also considered under the more all-encompassing culture umbrella. Culture “exists in the deeper elements of a school: the unwritten rules and assumptions the combination of rituals and traditions, the array of symbols and artifacts, the special language and phrasing that staff and students use, and the expectations about change and learning that saturate the school’s world” (Peterson & Deal, 2009, p.9). Although school culture is influenced by many people, ASCA (2012) identifies school counselors as having an important role in the development of a school culture. Though not always an easy or fast process, shaping school culture positively is essential to the successful functioning of a school and can be done so through gratitude interventions.

**Enhancing Student/Staff Relationships**

Included in Bono, Froh, and Forrett’s (2014) previously discussed overview of gratitude in the schools is a discussion of how benevolent individuals can influence the culture of a school
system. They suggest that when students know others believe in them, as demonstrated by others through acts to bring out the best in them, will have significant impacts. Recognizing “the contributions and investments others make toward their welfare would focus students on concrete ways that they and their progress are valued at the school” (Bono, Froh, & Forrett, 2014, p.76). The impact of gratitude goes beyond just students; Bono, Froh, and Forrett (2014) suggest that students’ feelings and expressions of gratitude can impact staff in addition to their peers.

Bono, Froh, and Forrett (2014) suggest that the changes students may experience from a gratitude intervention can positively impact teachers; its possible teachers feel more accomplished seeing student changes, helping to reduce feelings of burnout. Gratitude benefits can work from the top down as well. The “positive emotions of leaders (e.g., principals, teachers) predict the performance for their entire group. Indeed, evidence suggests that gratitude promotes social cohesion, relational and job satisfaction, and even enhanced organizational functioning” (Bono, Froh, & Forrett, 2014, p.76). Regardless of whether it is coming from staff or students, it appears as though gratitude and the benefits associated can be contagious.

Other research investigates whether teachers with high levels of gratitude are more focused and intentional in their relationships with students. In a case study of 59 high school teachers, Howells (2017) had participating teachers explore their pre-study levels of gratitude, select one or two gratitude practices aimed at students, and take a post study questionnaire to determine the effects of the practice on the teachers themselves, their students, their colleagues, and the atmosphere of the class. Teachers conceptualized gratitude as a direct action, an emotional state, or a social interaction. After going through the gratitude intervention, teachers identified positive changes in themselves. Teachers reported feeling more connected to their
students; they “enjoyed their company more, were more proactive in getting to know their students, and were able to build rapport” (Howells, 2017, p.64). These positive changes are significant, but the benefits went beyond just the teachers.

As is common with gratitude, the pro-social nature of it allows for mutual benefits for the person expressing gratitude and the receiver; when teachers went through the gratitude intervention, their students benefited as well. After the gratitude intervention, teachers reported that “‘students enjoy coming to class’, ‘are coming out of themselves more’, ‘offering more – telling you about their lives’, and listening and engaging more fully with ‘more proactive behavior’” (Howells, 2017, p.64). In addition, the mutual flow-on effect impacted the greater school culture. Teachers commented on the increased goodwill in the school and described the culture as friendlier and more respectful (Howells, 2017). The effects of gratitude extended even further; some teachers called and thanked parents for the things students were doing in their classes (Howells, 2017). Although “the focus of the study was teachers attempting to build better relationships with their students, the results demonstrated that there was a reciprocal effect, where students also started to build better relationships with their teachers” (Howells, 2017, p.66). For school counselors looking to make a big impact, introducing the effects of gratitude with teachers can positively impact the larger school culture as a whole.

**Classroom Culture**

To address school culture, some have looked to increase meaningfulness and engagement in the classroom. In their recent study, Flinchbaugh, Moore, Chang, and May (2012) wanted to determine if there was a positive correlation with gratitude journaling could enhance the value of class activities and develop more student engagement in school. The researchers hypothesized that engagement and meaning would increase upon “reflection on the positive events in the
classroom” (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012, p.197). Students in the Flinchbaugh et al. (2012) intervention group spent 12 weeks journaling about five things in their lives that they were thankful for in an attempt increase feelings of gratitude. The participant sample was made up of 117 mostly Caucasian undergraduate business students, so it is important to note that recreating the study with K-12 students may not necessarily yield the same results. To measure meaning and engagement, items such as “The work I do in this class is very important to me” or “Doing work for Mgmt XXX is so absorbing that I forget about everything else” were included (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012, p.201). Compared to the control group, those who spent time about gratitude or gratitude and stress management techniques saw heightened levels of meaningfulness and engagement in their courses (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012). Consistent with other research, this study also demonstrates the success of gratitude interventions and positive outcomes for students and schools.

**Gratitude & Adlerian Theory**

Theoretically, positive psychology interventions like gratitude are Adlerian in nature. Alfred Adler grounded his theory in encouragement, which is at the core of gratitude. Similar to how Adlerians “perceive their clients as discouraged individuals who have the inner strength and potential to overcome, strive from felt minus to felt plus, positive psychology calls for looking at individual strengths, virtues, and areas of well-being rather than focusing solely on pathology, weakness, and deficits” (Hamm, Carlson & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2016, p.255). Rather than focusing on a problem or diagnosis, Adlerians instead focus on strengths (Corey, 2016). In Adlerian theory, gratitude “can be conceptualized as expressing and accepting encouragement, respect, and social interest, which in turn leads to fulfillment and optimism” (Hamm, Carlson, &
Interventions based on cultivating gratitude are strengths based, and are often able to impact well-being without focusing on the issues someone may have.

**Social Interest**

Gratitude relates directly to the Adlerian social interest, a concept that Adler considered essential to psychological health. Oberst and Stewart (2003) describe social interest as reflecting “both the attitudes and behaviours of caring, concern, and compassion for fellow humans” (p.201). Well functioning individuals will be able to accept contributions from others, and in turn contribute to others as well (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). An individual with a grateful disposition would be considered to have well developed social interest, since they are able to see the positive and meaningful impact others have had on him or herself. As a “holistic, strength-based, humanistic approach which focuses on individuals’ innate capacity to solve their problems through contributing to others and emphasizes understanding the social cultural context of individuals, Adlerian theory presents itself as a unique approach that can provide a theoretical framework to the positive psychology movement” (Hamm, Carlson, & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2016, p.256). A person’s well-developed social interest is not only a sign of caring for others, but also an ability and motivation to contribute to those around him or her.

**Adlerian Striving**

Adler focused much of his work on what motivates behavior. In concordance social interest, Adler suggests that striving for superiority, perfection, completion, and belonging are common motivations of behavior (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). In their attempts to feel as though they belong, people work towards their best self while also trying to fit in (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). This is often easier said than done. The “striving for compensation or usefulness implies in the Adlerian sense of social interest, that this individual does not only try to overcome his or
her personal misfortunes but will also contribute to help others in some way” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p.106). Adler proposes that people strive to understand themselves in relation to others, which can be done in both useful and useless ways.

**Vertical striving.** The least useful type of behavioral striving happens along the vertical plane. For discouraged individuals, vertical striving happens when they don’t feel as though they belong (Powers & Griffith, 2012). They try to triumph over their peers to avoid feeling inferior (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). A diminished social interest and community feeling often are attributed to individuals striving vertically; they may even partake in “self evaluation at the expense of the community” (Powers & Griffith, 2014, p. 21). Adler would likely find discouraged individuals striving on the horizontal plan to have an undeveloped sense of gratitude. Richard Watts, the President of the North American Society for Adlerian Psychology, suggests “as we tend toward gratitude, we connect with fellow human beings more readily. We are more apt to approach others in a “horizontal manner” (contribution / cooperation) rather than a vertical manner (competition / one-up)” (Arnold, 2014). Gratitude aligns much more naturally for horizontal rather than vertical striving.

**Horizontal striving.** Adlerians find encouraged individuals striving horizontally, with a strong sense of belonging (Powers & Griffith, 2014). They have a well-developed social interest and community feeling, in addition to respect towards others and a general focus on equality rather than competition (Powers & Griffith, 2014). Striving on the horizontal plane allows for gratitude to flourish. Watts suggests, “When we cultivate a grateful attitude, we develop a capacity for satisfaction and contentment. And gratitude builds bridges to others.” (Arnold, 2014, p. 24). Due to its positive impact on social interest and its place on the horizontal plane, Adler would find cultivating gratitude to be on the useful side of life.
Adlerian Gratitude Intervention

Some Adlerian interventions are created to increase meaning by cultivating gratitude. In an Adlerian group intervention designed by Hamm, Carlson, and Erguner-Tekinalp (2016), youth participants created a gratitude journal and wrote about three good things that happened during the day. Participants did this daily throughout the duration of the group and had the option to share with the group what they wrote about at each next session. Another session in the group intervention focused on a person that participants felt a grudge towards, and participants had the chance to write about the things they were grateful for that the person had done (Hamm, Carlson, & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2016). For one of the homework assignments given in the group, Hamm, Carlson, and Erguner-Tekinalp (2016) directed participants to write a letter of gratitude to someone they had not expressed gratitude to before and present it to them in person.

The group helped the participating youth to work towards a more meaningful and fuller life (Hamm, Carlson, & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2016). Prior to the group intervention, the “participants’ lifestyle was characterized by avoiding or combating adversity rather than focusing on what works and building on their strengths” (Hamm, Carlson, & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2016, p.265); this group offered them the opportunity to learn useful skills like gratitude cultivating activities that positively affected their well-being. In addition, Hamm, Carlson, and Erguner-Tekinalp (2016) also observed that outside of the group peer interactions were affected by the positive energy of the group. This group intervention offered an effective example of how gratitude works within Adlerian theory. Positive psychology interventions like gratitude that address the importance of contributions to and from others are ways Adlerians can cultivate social interest.
Implications for School Counselors

The impact of gratitude on students is especially relevant for school counselors. With the rise in popularity of positive psychology interventions, more research continues to come out on how addressing the positives can impact the negatives. While it is not only important for students to be receptive to new interventions, making services enjoyable for students also has been found to be more effective (Hamm, Carlson, & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2016). With so many standards to meet and competencies to address, addressing student needs can feel overwhelming as a school counselor. Cultivating gratitude in alignment with ASCA guidelines can positively impact both individual students and school culture as a whole.

Accountability

As a school counselor, it is important to rely on data to show how the efforts of school counselors are impacting students both short and long term; relying on effective, evidence-based programming is an ethical essential for the well-being of all. The ASCA (2012) suggests using both qualitative and quantitative data to shape school counseling programming. Both immediate and future implications to a gratitude intervention should be considered when working with students. Layous and Lyubomirsky (2014) identify the short-term benefits to gratitude cultivation, and also consider possible long-term impacts. Short term, student to staff and student to peer interactions can improve, in addition to nearly immediate increases in happiness. Long-term benefits such as creating early social habits in youth that will persist into future endeavors as well as addressing mental health concerns before they become problematic were identified as intervention benefits (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Gratitude programming that can demonstrate its effectiveness will not only help students and the school as a whole, but can also increase confidence in a school’s counseling program.
School counselors have a responsibility to be addressing the possible downsides to an intervention. Although the majority of gratitude interventions are overwhelmingly positive, school counselors should be alert to possible negative impacts or lack of student growth. Layous and Lyubomirsky (2014) suggest that if a gratitude intervention feels too much like an obligation, students may not have the intrinsic motivation to participate to the extent needed to receive the benefits; placing it amongst academic curriculum may make it feel like another assignment that students do not want to complete. In cases such as this, school counselors should work to be strategic in their implementation of a gratitude intervention in the school setting. If an intervention is harming students or having no significant positive impacts, school counselors should work to find and implement more effective programming.

**Delivery of Services**

Gratitude interventions can be an effective way for school counselors to serve students. As literature exists on gratitude interventions with pre-K, elementary, middle, and high school students and beyond, all counselors can consider using cultivating gratitude as an effective approach to impact students. Gratitude is also an intervention that can impact all students, not just those with certain needs, making it a powerful piece of developmental school counseling curriculum that can be used with individuals, groups, in the classroom setting, and even larger assemblies; school counselors who find themselves struggling to impact all students rather than just the students with the most pressing needs may find gratitude interventions to be useful on large scales. Encouraging staff involvement in the school counseling program is important to achieving desired results (ASCA, 2012); since many gratitude interventions can be done by other staff members and worked into different sets of curriculum, serving students can be made easier for school counselors. It is also important to recognize that literature on gratitude interventions
largely is based within two of the three ASCA (2012) domains: personal/social and academic; this indicates the need for further research.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Although the literature base on gratitude interventions continues to expand, there are still opportunities for growth. Despite its relevance in the academic and personal/social domains, there is a significant lack of research on how gratitude interventions influence college/career development for students. ASCA (2012) standards for students include various career related competencies, so it is essential that school counseling programs address the needs of students in this area. There can we ways to design gratitude interventions for students around some of the main career standards. One career standard addresses the expectation that students “will acquire the skills to investigate the world of work in relation to knowledge of self and to make informed career decisions” (ASCA, 2012, p. 7). Many students can identify a person or experience that they are grateful for in regards to their college/career decisions; recognizing the influence of these people and experiences could be a way to address standards within this domain with a gratitude intervention in some form. The gap in literature within the career domain offers an opportunity to develop more research on gratitude interventions that can help school counselors create programming to help school counselors meet the needs of their students.

The most glaring gap in gratitude literature is a lack of a multicultural focus. With demographics in the United States changing quickly, it is more important than ever that counselors work toward being culturally competent in their services to students. School counselors are expected to demonstrate “multicultural, ethical and professional competencies in planning, organizing, implementing and evaluating the comprehensive school counseling program” (ASCA, 2012, p. 2). If a new gratitude intervention is going to be tried with students,
school counselors must be aware of whether or not the results of the research are replicable with diverse populations. As addressed earlier, some cultures may have more hesitation feelings of gratitude than others, specifically non-western cultures (Boehm et al., 2010). When creating new studies on gratitude, researchers could work to create a sample size that is not homogeneous and is representative of the types of students school counselors are working with in modern schools. Regardless, future research on gratitude and students should be looked at through a multicultural lens.

Conclusion

Sooner than later, most children are pressured by adults into adding “thank you” to their vocabulary before they even fully understand what it means. Teaching youth “how gratitude works--that is, the process by which one recognizes that benefactors choose to help, add value, and suffer costs--might help them to internalize the importance of gratitude, setting them up with a habit and attitude that will deliver hedonic and tangible returns for years to come” (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014, p. 5). With Adlerian theory in mind, school counselors can encourage the students and staff at their schools by cultivating gratitude; the personal, social, and cultural consequences can be significant for both individuals and the school as a whole. School counselors can be thankful for the existing literature base on the benefits of gratitude interventions and excited for the future research to come. Cultivating gratitude has become increasingly relevant in addressing student problems in a positive, preventative, and effective manner; and that, is something to be thankful for.
References


individual psychology. New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge


