The Role of Gratitude in Fostering School Bonding

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A body of research has emerged during the past three decades focusing on how students engage in the schooling process and the broader positive developmental outcomes associated with high levels of engagement and lower involvement in high-risk behaviors. This chapter suggests that gratitude might offer a unique contribution for understanding how affective engagement and positive relationships could enhance student school bonding and thereby student social-emotional and academic outcomes.

Educators have a compelling interest to understand the factors that facilitate students' involvement in school. This interest is related to a body of research that has emerged during the past three decades focusing on how students engage in the schooling process and the broader positive developmental outcomes associated with high levels of engagement.

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It is known that engaged and motivated students are more likely to (a) have fewer discipline referrals (Holt, Bry, & Johnson, 2008), (b) obtain higher course grades (Hanlon, Simon, O'Grady, Carswell, & Callaman, 2009), and (c) complete high school at the expected age (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). As important as scholastic achievement is to consider, engagement in school has other known benefits, particularly when the nature of the student–teacher relationship is considered, which, among other terms, has been referred to as *school bonding* (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). High levels of school bonding are associated with lower rates of involvement in health risk behaviors such as substance use (Henry & Thornberry, 2010) and victimization at school (Skues, Cunningham, & Pokharel, 2005), and enhanced psychological well-being (Furlong, Sharkey, Quirk, & Dowdy, 2011).

Although the value of fostering student–teacher bonds is an important goal (Needham, Crosnoe, & Muller, 2004), there is an incomplete understanding about how students come to believe that adults at school care for them and thereby facilitate the formation of positive relationships. In this chapter, we review the engagement literature and present the argument that fostering students' gratitude might be one mechanism to provoke and enhance school bonding. To make this argument, we first present information about the various constructs that have been used to examine the broad engagement phenomenon and then discuss how differences in research disciplines, and their dependent variables of interest, have created parallel bodies of research that have not attended closely to each other. However, one element of this broader engagement research literature, interpersonal bonding, is a common component across these research disciplines. Moreover, the bonding aspect of engagement is particularly important when considering youth development outcomes that are not school specific. Positive school bonding is an important element of engagement that is linked not only with academic achievement (Bryant, Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2003) but also with positive youth development and robust psychological well-being (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011). We then make the case for the unique role of gratitude in fostering positive relationships with adults in school and discuss school-based programs that promote a student's sense of gratitude as one approach that specifically seeks to foster positive student–teacher relationships, which is a key component of student engagement (Wentzel, 2009).

SCHOOL BONDING: A COMMON ELEMENT OF ENGAGEMENT

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) authored an influential article that conceptualized the engagement construct. Using the term *school engagement*, they suggested that it was a metaconstruct composed of three core elements—*behavioral* (e.g., following classroom rules, completing academic tasks, and participating in nonclass school activities), *cognitive* (e.g., having a psychological investment in learning), and *affective* (e.g., feelings experienced while completing learning tasks and feelings toward school). Although engagement-related research has gravitated toward this metaconstruct model (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004), others have commented on its conceptual ambiguity and inconsistent application across research (Barber & Schluterman, 2008; Furlong, O'Brennan, & You, 2011; Libbey, 2004; You, Ritchey, Furlong, Shochet, & Boman, 2011).

To provide a perspective for this discussion, we first identified studies indexed in PsycINFO using the terms in Libbey's (2004) review of student relationship constructs, identifying the first article that clearly addressed each construct, the top three cited articles, and the key dependent variables used in these studies (see Table 1). When one considers this multidisciplinary engagement research, two general patterns are apparent. First, *engagement* (school engagement, student engagement, academic engagement) is the term used by education researchers who are primarily interested in academic outcomes (e.g., optimal participation in learning activities, poor academic performance, dropping out) and most directly focused on students' participation in, and motivation to engage in, academic tasks. These researchers addressed questions related to how effectively schools do the job of educating students and if students learn and maximize their academic potential. Second, other researchers, primarily from noneducation fields (e.g., public health, social work, sociology), have found a relation between students' interpersonal relationships at school and their research disciplines' outcomes of interest (e.g., substance use, violence, and mental health problems), with positive relationships with adults at school considered to be a protective factor associated with lower rates of involvement in risk behaviors.

We note that these two broad engagement-related research agendas have not attended closely to each other and often have examined engagement in a parallel manner. For example, the educational psychology work of Fredricks et al. (2004) and Appleton et al. (2008) did not cite or mention public health school connectedness research (e.g., Resnick et al., 1997), and Barber and Schluterman (2008) did not cite the seminal educational psychology work of Fredricks et al. (2004). Notwithstanding

Table 1. Frequency of Citation Patterns for Engagement-Related Citations Appearing in the PsycINFO Reference Database

Keyword Term	# times appears	First major citation	1st most often cited	2nd most often cited	3rd most often cited	Discipline & theory base
Student Engagement Key dependent variables	493	Peterson & Fennema (1985) N = 51 Mathematics Achievement in Grade 4	Finn & Rock (1997) N = 438 Academic resilience (school dropout & academic performance)	Marks (2000) N = 316 Engagement in math & social studies instruction, Grades 5, 8, and 10	Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) N = 224 Grade 1 reading and writing achievement, teacher instructional approaches	Education Positive Psychology Motivation Theories Flow Theory Academic Achievement
Academic Engagement Key dependent variables	212	Walker et al. (1987) N = 12 Instructional engagement among antisocial first-grade boys	Furrer & Skinner (2003) N = 498 Sense of relatedness & motivation	Rumberger & Larson (1998) N = 261 High school completion	Shonk & Cicchetti (2001) N = 183 Academic & behavioral adjustment	Education Instructional Pedagogy Academic Achievement Classroom Behavior
School Engagement Key dependent variables	205	Pierson & Connell (1992) N = 67 Academic performance	Steinberg et al. (1992) N = 806 Academic performance	Fredricks et al. (2004) N = 729 Review engagement research and constructs	Finn & Rock (1997) N = 438 Academic resilience (school dropout & academic performance)	Education Educational Psychology Academic Achievement

[a] Resnick et al. (1997) was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and is indexed in PsycINFO, but it is not linked in PsycINFO to the keyword *school connectedness*; however, this study specifically examined school connectedness. The impact of the Resnick et al. study is demonstrated by it being cited by 3,130 other studies (at the time of this manuscript's preparation) in Google Scholar.

School Belongingness/ Membership Key dependent variables	137	Goodenow (1993) N = 377 Development of school membership scale	Anderman & Maehr (1994)	Anderman & Midgley (1997) N = 291 Differences goal orientation in Grades 5 and 6	Goodenow & Grady (1993) N = 271 Motivation measures of academic success	School Psychology Child Development Interpersonal Bonding
School Connectedness Key dependent variables	104	Neumark-Sztainer et al. (1997) N = 97 Health-compromising behaviors	Resnick et al. (1997) [a] N = 3,130 Emotional distress & problematic behavior	Jacobson & Rowe (1999) N = 123 Depression	Dornbusch et al. (2001) N = 114 Adolescent substance use	Public Health Attachment Theory High-Risk Behavior Mental Illness
School Attachment Key dependent variables	87	Liska & Reed (1985) N = 83 Delinquency	Dornbusch et al. (2001) N = 114 Adolescent substance use	L. O'Donnell et al. (2004) N = 94 Suicidal ideation and attempts	Catalano et al. (1999) N = 89 Substance use and delinquency	Social Work Social Development Model Social Control Theory High-Risk Behaviors and Delinquency
School Bonding Key dependent variables	64	Eggert et al. (1994) N = 110 Control of substances, school performance, mood	Hawkins et al. (1997) N = 324 Substance use	Hawkins et al. (2001) N = 156 Long-term patterns of school bonding	J. O'Donnell et al. (1995) N = 134 Substance use and antisocial behavior	Social Work Social Development Model High-Risk Behavior

Note. The PsycINFO search identified citations for which the complete term (e.g., "school engagement") appeared as a keyword, and/or in the title, and/or in the abstract. All citations were listed as empirical, peer-reviewed articles as of October 24, 2012.

these citation oversights, a common link across these parallel research areas is their emphasis on the nature of the relationships a student has with her or his teacher(s) and other adults at school; in fact, drawing on the most cited article related to this broad research area by Resnick et al. (1997), Blum and Libbey (2004) defined "school connectedness" as "the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals" (p. 231). Of particular relevance to the present discussion are findings that when students perceive positive relationships with teachers and are more "engaged," it contributes to reciprocal interactions that confirm and reinforce these positive relationships (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). From this perspective, positive interpersonal relationships at school should not be confused with engagement itself, but can be thought of as *antecedents* (Fredricks et al., 2004) or *facilitators* (Appleton et al., 2008) of engagement, as studied by most educational researchers. Appleton et al. (2008) saw this as a part of the self-system process, and its "relatedness" aspect (emotional security and wish for closeness), which draws from self-determination theory's proposal that "relatedness" is a basic human need (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The saliency of the student–teacher relationship was emphasized by Wentzel (2009), who stated that "effective teachers are typically described as those who develop relationships with students that are emotionally close, safe, and trusting, that provide access to instrumental help, and that foster a more general ethos of community and caring in classrooms" (p. 301).

Suggestions have been offered about what teachers can do individually to create caring learning contexts (e.g., Bergin & Bergin, 2009) in their classrooms and thereby facilitate positive relationships with their students. In addition, substantial public resources have been devoted to offer suggestions on how schools can foster student connections and bonding (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, 2011). These efforts to promote student bonding are promoted by the U.S. Office of Education, which in 2011 funded 11 states to implement school climate initiatives that include student engagement as one of its three conceptual pillars (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This school-climate-focused strategy might be thought of as the "if you build it, they will come" approach. In other words, if teachers and other adults at school truly care and express this caring in their work and their interactions with students, it is natural to expect that positive student–teacher bonding and attachments will form. In fact, this process happened long before researchers applied the lens of student engagement to organize research about this phenomenon. However, by definition, the student–teacher relationship requires reciprocity for it to form and be sustained over time. To let student–teacher relationships form only via a natural process might not work

for all students and could leave the relationships less strong than they might potentially become. Hence, we suggest that there might be benefits to consider what schools can do not only to create caring campus environments but also to provoke and sustain students' movement toward forming relationships with adults at school; ultimately, it is the students' beliefs about their teachers that are proposed to activate their protective influences (Blum & Libbey, 2004). What can be done to foster students' beliefs that adults at school value and care for them—that is, to increase their beliefs about student–teacher bonding?

WHAT FOSTERS A STUDENT'S SENSE OF SCHOOL BONDING?

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions hypothesizes that an individual's ideas of possible actions are expanded by positive emotions (e.g., feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, joy while engaged in academic tasks and related to interpersonal interactions), thus increasing his or her awareness of thoughts and actions usually considered personally uncharacteristic (Kok, Catalino, & Fredrickson, 2008). This can increase learning opportunities in physical, intellectual, and social realms (Fredrickson, 1998). Research has shown that positive emotions in school are related to greater student engagement in school-related activities and more caring relationships with adults, such as teachers (Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008). Additionally, more positive emotions in school are associated with more use of greater cognitive and behavioral coping strategies (Reschly et al., 2008). Thus, positive emotions seem essential for academic and social success and would appear to play a central role in students forming school-bonding-related attitudes and beliefs. However, what is needed is a better understanding of the factors that may increase positive emotional experiences at school and that in turn also foster positive relationships.

Gillham et al. (2011) have suggested that individual youth "strengths that promote connections to other people and to causes outside the self appear to be especially important" (p. 40). To this end, we turned to the emerging positive psychology literature as it relates to the broader topic of student engagement. A review of research on student engagement, school engagement, academic engagement, school connectedness, school attachment, school bonding, school belonging, and school membership was conducted. Using these key terms, we explored the link between each term with several components of the positive psychology construct, such as hope, optimism, flow, and empathy. We found that many positive psychology traits were considered throughout engagement research. For example, most notably, *flow* has been studied as a behavioral component

of student engagement (e.g., Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Shneider, & Shernoff, 2003) by examining the optimal confluence of student interest, task challenge, and emotional immersion in a learning process. Hope and optimism are other examples of positive psychological traits that have been studied in school engagement literature (Gallagher & Lopez, 2009) and are positively correlated with academic achievement (Van Ryzin, 2011). Although flow, hope, and optimism are positively associated with student engagement, their direct link with student bonding is less clear because they focus more on the learning process and students shaping and forming academic goals—alone, they do not appear to provide the mechanisms that might foster student–teacher bonding. Where students can be said to "have" hope, they can have it outside the context of relationships, and it may not necessarily be directly related to positive emotional experiences. This is not to argue that these are unimportant constructs or traits that students should not develop, but that if one goal is to foster student bonding, another positive trait might be more salient. Among the positive psychology constructs, gratitude offers a unique contribution for understanding how affective engagement and positive relationships could enhance student engagement and bonding.

GRATITUDE AND SCHOOL BONDING

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT GRATITUDE IN YOUTH?

Gratitude is the appreciation experienced by individuals when somebody does something kind or helpful for them. It has been defined more specifically as "a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty" (Emmons, 2004, p. 554). Gratitude has been conceptualized as an emotional trait, mood, or emotion (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Trait gratitude, or the disposition toward gratitude, is a "life orientation toward noticing and appreciating the positive in the world" (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010, p. 891). As a moral emotion, the experience and expression of gratitude promotes beneficial exchanges and relationships between people and the welfare of society at large (Haidt, 2003)—a view long shared by religions and cultures across the globe (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Specifically, McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) proposed that gratitude serves three moral functions. It serves as a *moral barometer* for beneficiaries by signaling the value of the relationship with the benefactor for the gift bestowed on them; as a *moral reinforcer* by increasing the probability that the benefactor will bestow gifts again in the future; and as a *moral motive* by spurring

beneficiaries to respond prosocially toward the benefactor and/or toward other people. McCullough et al. (2001) adduced evidence from an array of studies in personality, developmental, social, and evolutionary psychology in support of gratitude's barometer and reinforcer functions. Recent experiments have also produced convincing evidence in support of the moral motive function (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006, 2007). Considered an important virtue for psychological and social functioning, gratitude is an emotion that can instill a sense of meaning and connection to other people (such as educators) (Emmons, 2004).

People are grateful when they *notice and appreciate the good things* that happen to them and *express thanks* to those responsible (Emmons, 2007). Gratitude serves to alert individuals to the valuable relationships in their life, to reinforce the kindness of their benefactors, and to motivate individuals to reciprocate kindness to their benefactors and/or extend it to others (McCullough et al., 2001). Its experience and practice promote supportive exchanges between people and nurture trusting relationships, benefiting society at large (Haidt, 2003; McCullough et al., 2001). Ample evidence attests to a variety of positive outcomes in adults, including improved health behavior, mental health, and psychological/social well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Two recent longitudinal studies indicate why gratitude may be beneficial to youth in particular. One study linked gratitude to greater social support (perceived and actual) and protection from stress and depression over time (Wood, Maltby, Gillet, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). A second study, of an actual gift-giving event among sororities, showed that beneficiaries ("little sisters") were most grateful when they felt understood, valued, and cared for by a benefactor ("big sisters") and that these perceptions predicted later increases in both parties' sense of connection to each other as well as beneficiaries' sense of connection to the sorority overall (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). These results suggest that gratitude not only helps people form, maintain, and strengthen supportive relationships but also helps them feel connected to a caring community that values their contributions. Such assets are critical to the resilience and healthy development of children and adolescents (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003).

Aside from several isolated studies that preceded current theorizing on gratitude (e.g., Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938; Becker & Smenner, 1986; Gleason & Weintraub, 1976; Harris, Olthof, Meerum Terwogt, & Hardman, 1987; Russell & Paris, 1994), the study of gratitude in youth is yet in its early stages (for reviews, see Bono & Froh, 2009; Froh & Bono, 2008). Generally speaking, the emerging evidence replicates for younger populations many of gratitude's advantages mentioned previously for adults.

For instance, compared with their less grateful counterparts, early adolescents (ages 11–13) who were more grateful reported more positive affect, optimism, social support from peers and family, and satisfaction with school, family, community, friends, and self (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009). They also reported having fewer physical symptoms and giving more emotional support to others. Among late adolescents (ages 14–19), those who were more grateful reported greater life satisfaction, social integration, and absorption in activities and academic achievement, and less envy, depression, and materialism (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011). Given the significance of such concepts as life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and strong social ties for youths' sense of connectedness to school, achievement, and adjustment (Appleton et al., 2008; Barber, 2005; Huebner, Suldo, & Gilman, 2006), it appears that gratitude is related to healthy psychological and social functioning in youth, as it is with adults. Longitudinal evidence also indicates links to greater psychological and social functioning up to 6 months later (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010). Together, the aforementioned results, as well as those from a true experiment (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009), suggest that promoting gratitude in young people might enhance their psychological, academic, and social well-being.

DOES GRATITUDE BUILD SOCIAL BONDS?

Gratitude acts in tandem with other positive emotions to boost well-being and success in life because it broadens people's modes of thinking (Frederickson, 2004). Therefore, it might have benefits that are unique to adolescents. Adolescents with high-quality friendships fare better in school (Rubin, Wojslawowicz, Rose-Kransor, Booth-LaForce, & Burgess, 2006). Youth who dislike school are more likely to lag in academic functioning, extracurricular activity, and connecting to school (Huebner & Gilman, 2006). Feeling connected to school is a chief determinant of low-risk behavior and academic growth (Resnick et al., 1997) as well as student engagement (Appleton et al., 2008). Research has shown that youth exposed to a gratitude intervention reported higher levels of satisfaction with their school experience compared with controls (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). Thus, gratitude might foster positive student–teacher relationships while engaging other social-emotional skills that build character, success, and well-being. Gratitude orients people to the social exchanges in their lives that sustain or enhance their welfare (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & Bauer, 2004) because people feel grateful when they receive aid or gifts that they consider personally valuable or that they see as being provided

intentionally by, or at some cost to, a benefactor. Gratitude also increases youths' sense of interpersonal trust and embeddedness in caring relationships (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). This might also elicit positive expectations about future exchanges with others. Consistent with this view that gratitude can positively shift the way individuals perceive themselves and others, recent evidence indicates that gratitude lends individuals a sense of coherence in life precisely because it causes them to positively frame events and circumstances (Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, 2009). McCullough, Kimeldorf, and Cohen (2008) raised the possibility that gratitude evolved to facilitate social exchange. Compelling evidence suggests that gratitude evolved to stimulate not only direct reciprocal altruism but also "upstream reciprocity" (Nowak & Roch, 2007)—the passing on of benefits to third parties instead of only returning benefits to benefactors. Therefore, gratitude's association with increases in social bonding might foster a broader motivation to connect with others—particularly adults in school.

From a positive psychology lens, gratitude is a good candidate to consider as one that potentially helps one to understand "how" students' sense of affective engagement (or connectedness) is formed and can be fostered. Gratitude has the characteristics of bridging among positive psychology traits in that it is a construct that youth cannot experience on their own. When considered from the affective engagement perspective, gratitude is different from other positive psychology traits because it links across a student's peer and adult relationships at school while it elicits positive emotions—both of these have known association with enhanced psychological well-being. In contrast with other positive psychology traits, gratitude is not something that a student "has," as much as it is something that he or she experiences. Typically, gratitude is based on the experience and interpretation of the motivation driving the support and help received from others. Students interact with their teachers from the first day they enter school. There are innumerable opportunities for students to observe and experience support and caring from their teachers. As this occurs, students implicitly consider and evaluate what their teachers do for them. To the extent that students conclude that their teachers are kind and helpful, they have gratitude-associated experiences. Students' teachers must truly be caring, but it is equally important that students accurately perceive their teachers' caring expressions and come to believe that they have positive relationships with their teachers. In the next section, we turn to a more general discussion of evidence supporting the role of gratitude in promoting positive reciprocal relationships, which characterize student–teacher relationships.

CAN GRATITUDE BE FOSTERED IN SCHOOL SETTINGS?

Gratitude might be one perceptual lens through which school bonds form, and it might foster a desire for achieving academic success and participating in extracurricular activities—both of which increase student engagement. Gratitude might be a facilitator of student engagement in the following ways: *academically* (grateful youth report higher GPAs; Froh et al., 2011), *behaviorally* (grateful youth are more prosocial) (Froh, Kashdan, et al., 2009; Froh et al., 2010), *cognitively* (grateful youth report more meaning in life) (Froh, Kashdan et al., 2010), and *affectively* (grateful youth report more positive emotions) (Froh, Kashdan et al., 2009; Froh et al., 2011). Given gratitude's proposed contributions to student engagement, an important question to ask is: Do school-based curricula exist to teach youth how to become more grateful? In the following section, we describe such a curriculum and the related outcomes, specifically school bonding.

The most recent development in the area of gratitude interventions for youth comes from a gratitude curriculum that trained the appraisal of benefit exchanges (Froh et al., 2012). Here, middle school classrooms (of 8- to 11-year-olds) were randomly assigned to the benefit appraisal curriculum or to a control condition. Lessons in the benefits appraisal curriculum followed this outline:

session 1—introduction

session 2—understanding benefactors' intentions when being a beneficiary

session 3—understanding the cost experienced by benefactors when giving a benefit

session 4—understanding the benefits of receiving a gift bestowed by a benefactor

session 5—review/summary, which incorporates components of the previous sessions

The lessons included classroom discussions, writing assignments, and role-playing activities. To illustrate, in session 2, students learn that gratitude is experienced when individuals recognize that another person has *intentionally* helped. The facilitator starts out by helping the students define and understand the word *intentional*. The facilitator provides an example, and the intentionality behind the good deed is explained. The students are encouraged to think of examples of gratitude in their own life and share the experiences with the class. Next, the facilitator and students read two scenarios in which a good deed occurred. The intentionality (or

lack of intentionality) is discussed for each scenario. The students are then asked to write about a time someone went out of their way to help them and describe how it made them feel. Finally, the facilitator briefly reviews the day's lesson and encourages the students to continue to look for grateful moments in their life.

Applying the gratitude curriculum, the researchers found that children's awareness of the social cognitive appraisals in receiving help from another can be strengthened, made them more grateful, and benefitted their well-being. A weekly intervention obtained such effects up to 5 months later. A daily intervention produced these effects immediately (2 days later) and showed further that children expressed gratitude behaviorally more often (i.e., wrote 80% more thank you cards to their parent-teacher association) and that their teachers even observed them to be happier. Preliminary evidence thus supported the effectiveness of this intervention.

Simmel (1950) argued that gratitude is the moral glue of a functioning society and the "moral memory of mankind" (p. 388). This logic might be applied to school communities. School psychologists can help students identify resources provided by the board of education (e.g., funding for extracurricular activities), school-level administration (e.g., support for school plays), teachers (e.g., giving up lunch to help students), support staff (e.g., cleaning the facilities), and community volunteers (e.g., hours committed to enrichment events). Most important, recognizing the contributions and investments others make toward their welfare would focus students on concrete ways that they and their academic and social progress are valued at the school. Knowing that others believe in them and care to bring out the best in them might motivate self-improvement. Gratitude felt and expressed by students and the improved behaviors that could ensue might likely spread to teachers and staff, encouraging them to work harder for students and helping to prevent burnout. Therefore, teaching students to count blessings and develop an attitude of gratitude might foster stronger bonds to schools *and* communities, helping both students and schools to thrive.

Social exchange is necessary for most organizations in society to function properly. The positive emotions of leaders (e.g., principals, teachers) predict the performance for their entire group (George, 1995). Grateful principals may beget grateful teachers, who beget grateful students; grateful teachers and grateful students might outperform their less grateful counterparts. Indeed, evidence suggests that gratitude promotes social cohesion, relational and job satisfaction, and even organizational functioning (Emmons, 2003). Appreciation interventions indicate that many people—in organizational, educational, and health care settings—benefit from experiences of gratitude (Childre & Cryer, 2000). More supportive

relationship networks among teachers and staff would only help meet the rising challenges of student diversity. Examining such issues could yield novel ways of improving schools.

Having strong social ties is a fundamental need, and securing strong and supportive relationships early is bedrock for many positive outcomes in development. Experiencing and expressing gratitude can help improve youth moods, strengthen their social ties, and cultivate a sense of purposeful engagement with the world. Though such experiences are critical for healthy development, research on gratitude in youth or the development of gratitude is only now emerging. Gratitude can lead to many positive outcomes of central importance to children and adolescents—psychological well-being, satisfaction with school and with other domains, and prosocial relationships—and it likely improves focus on priorities and fulfillment of meaningful goals. Thus, developing gratitude applications for students holds promise for catalyzing achievement and improving school bonding. For instance, perhaps gratitude could be designed into existing programs (e.g., character and civic education) to enhance their effectiveness. Moreover, classes in English and writing might also benefit from the inclusion of gratitude and appreciation exercises; such exercises not only would help develop writing skills (given the social emotional nuances involved in benefit exchanges) but also may motivate students to focus on their unique life stories and priorities, helping to forge their purpose.

In general, teachers can encourage appreciative responding in students by emphasizing and reinforcing kind acts in the classroom, and teachers and staff can model reciprocity and thankfulness in coordinated activities with students—all things parents can do at home too. Would school service learning activities be enhanced if students appreciated firsthand the gratitude of the people they help? The more youth are exposed to such behaviors and engaged in environments where balanced and supportive exchanges take place, the more likely they will develop a capacity for gratitude. The prospect that fostering gratitude in students could even have positive impacts that spread to the rest of the school underscores the value of gratitude for students and schools. At best, gratitude could help make schools places where youth and their potential are valued above all else, and all the people (and communities) involved thrive too.

CONCLUSION

Largely missing in previous discussions about student engagement is an attempt to understand how a student actually forms beliefs that adults at school care about him or her and can be trusted. We note that this process is different from an individual teacher's efforts to create a caring, trusting classroom or to have a positive overall school climate, given that there are ample suggestions on this topic (e.g., Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). Even in contexts in which optimal caring campus conditions are present, it is also true that each child must accurately perceive what adults at school are doing and come to value their efforts—that is, to develop a sense of appreciation for teachers' efforts, which in turn fosters positive student–teacher relationships. It must be the case that this is a developmental process that begins when a child enters school and is responsive to his or her daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly interactions with teachers and peers. Researchers have recognized that this process occurs naturally and that when children's school experiences lead them to implicitly or explicitly conclude that their teachers care for them, they are more likely to have positive developmental outcomes and, in particular, to report having higher satisfaction with school (Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011). In addition, attempts to identify strategies that can be used at the classroom and school levels to encourage positive student–teacher relationships have typically taken the appropriate route of actually creating conditions on school campuses that send genuine messages of care and support via the actions of staff and the implementation of supportive school policies (Fan, Williams, & Corkin, 2011; Zullig et al., 2011). These positive practices, however, might be enhanced if schools included social-emotional curricula that purposefully seek to provoke students to consider how teachers and other people at school act to support them in special ways and thereby initiate the positive interpersonal reciprocity associated with high levels of gratitude. Specifically, school personnel can help foster a culture of gratitude by encouraging students to count blessings, by helping students to recognize the contributions others make to their school (e.g., board of education), and by dedicating specific times of year for students to express gratitude to others (Froh & Bono, 2011).

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