Can Gratitude Help You Flourish?

By Jane Wilson

Imagine doing something every day that helps you flourish spiritually, psychologically, physically, and cognitively. Interested? The task is simple; God calls us to do it; and current social science research confirms its power to energize, heal, and transform lives (Emmons, 2014). What is this seemingly magic pill to flourishing? Being thankful.

Though we all possess a different genetic propensity towards feeling grateful, research suggests that 40% of our ability to be grateful lies in intentional activities (Emmons, 2007). People who take time to practice intentional gratitude experience enhanced personal wellbeing that positively impacts others. A small qualitative study (Wilson and Harris, 2015) revealed that pre-service teachers who engaged in gratitude practices were able to bring their increased levels of positivity and calmness into the classroom environment. Gratitude also strengthened the bond with their students, and it appeared that the students were then more willing to respond to requests. And practicing gratitude heightened the pre-service teachers’ cognitive skills and appreciation for learning, which appeared to compel students to be more focused and exert effort towards learning. When these pre-service teachers practiced gratitude, they and their students flourished.

Howells, a leading researcher exploring gratitude in education, argues that students want to be engaged learners, but do not know how to do so (2012). In her university courses, Howells guides students to examine the positive impact of a grateful
attitude by contrasting it with an attitude of complaint or resentment. When students enter class with a spirit of complaint, this attitude limits their ability to think, concentrate, integrate information, or see value in learning. By contrast, when students enter class with an inner attitude of gratitude, they are more engaged, focused, and motivated to exert effort towards learning. Howells encourages her students to take charge of their own attitudes by taking one minute at the beginning of class to be aware of their attitude and mindfully choose a grateful spirit.

To explore the impact of gratitude on learning, Wilson (2015) found that college students who intentionally practiced gratitude displayed a stronger ability to focus during class and remain resilient when learning felt challenging. It could be that when teachers model gratitude for their students and provide time and strategies to practice gratitude in the classroom, their students are better equipped to flourish as learners.

If the idea of practicing gratitude intrigues you, try these simple gratitude practices in your classroom.

1. Gratitude at the Threshold
   Stand at the door of your classroom as students enter your class each morning. Greet each student by name and express gratitude for him or her. A simple statement such as, “Good morning, __________. I’m so glad you are here today” sets a welcoming tone for the day. Consider including a handshake, a high five, or a fist bump.

2. Breathe and Focus
   Begin class with a brief “breathe and focus” exercise. The exercise begins by ringing a chime that reminds everyone to take three deep breaths. The teacher says, “Focus on your heart and think of things you are grateful for,” and then pauses for 10 seconds. “Focus on your brain and be grateful for the opportunity to learn.” Pause. “Focus on your effort and be grateful for the chance to work hard to learn today.” The teacher ends the exercise with another ring of the chime and the admonition, “Let’s make it a good day.” When they have learned it, your students might enjoy a chance to lead the exercise. Engaging in this gratitude practice sets the stage for noticing blessings throughout the day.

3. Gratitude Notes
   Write gratitude notes to students using 4” x 6” notecards with a small photo of yourself and “From the desk of ________.” Address at least two cards to each student. Be specific in how you affirm each student. You will be pleasantly surprised at the positive impact of these gratitude notes.

4. Gratitude Journal
   Provide regular time for your students to write down “three good things” in a gratitude journal. Consider playing soft music to set the tone to ponder blessings. Another option is to offer a prompt at the end of the day: “Today I appreciated …” Let students complete the sentence. You will find that ending the day or week with words of gratitude increases positive feelings about learning.

   God knew what He was doing when He reminded us to be grateful. He must have felt especially strong about expressing thanks; He emphasizes its importance nearly 150 times in Scripture. Not surprisingly, being thankful is easier to do when things are going well in our classrooms. Yet challenging ourselves to be mindful of our blessings no matter the circumstance is God’s will for us (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Practicing gratitude can strengthen our ability to handle difficult situations; a grateful heart helps us remain positive, calm, alert, focused, and appreciative of the opportunity to learn. God wants us and our students to flourish; taking time to practice gratitude cultivates the soil of our hearts and minds to do just that.

References

Jane Wilson, PhD, associate professor of education at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, CA, has devoted her 40-year career in education to helping students of all ages experience the joy of learning. Dr. Wilson is currently exploring the impact that gratitude practices have on students’ ability to focus and remain resilient during learning. If you have ideas of how to cultivate gratitude in your classroom, please e-mail Dr. Wilson at jawilson@westmont.edu.