A Review of Gratitude Researches in Youth: Implications for Moral Education

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to offer a review of gratitude researches in youth. Gratitude is a positive emotion occurred in exchange-based relationships when one person acknowledges receiving a valuable benefit from others. Gratitude is essential to well-being and mental health throughout the life span. Although the adult literature on gratitude has grown substantially in the past few decades, the empirical research on gratitude in children and adolescent is in its infancy. Gratitude interventions in children and adolescents have a short history, but initial findings are very promising. In this article, I review theoretical and empirical work on gratitude as a moral emotion, discuss the unique benefits of gratitude for youth, and analyze interventions for promoting gratitude in children and adolescents. Finally, I conclude by suggesting implications of gratitude interventions that can be applied in moral education.

Key words - gratitude, gratitude interventions, moral education, positive psychology, virtue ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

We experience gratitude when we receive something valuable or beneficial to us. Gratitude is the appreciation we feel when somebody does something kind or helpful for us. Thus, gratitude is triggered by the perception that one is the beneficiary of another’s intentionally provided benefit. Throughout history gratitude has been gained considerable attention in philosophical and theological explanations of the good life. While moral philosophers and religious thinkers have recognized gratitude as being beneficial to experiencing a happy and good life for centuries, psychologists have
recently begun to systematically study gratitude. In psychology, gratitude has been one of the most neglected emotions and one of the most underestimated of the virtues.\textsuperscript{1} However, gratitude has recently attracted considerable interest from both the mass media and the academic community. Current research on gratitude are mostly concerned with the psychological benefits of gratitude or gratitude interventions. According to Emmons, factors contributing an increased focus on gratitude are the positive psychology movement, a renewed interest among social scientists in people’s religious and spiritual lives, and resurgent interest in virtue ethics.\textsuperscript{2}

Gratitude is essential to well-being and mental health throughout the life span. Gratitude is beneficial in both individual and society at large. Research indicates that gratitude is strongly related to healthy psychological and social functioning because it focuses people on self-improvement and helps them maintain and build strong, supportive social ties. In this regard, White claims that gratitude is essential to a flourishing democracy because it helps foster universal amity between citizens.\textsuperscript{3} However, most researches on gratitude are exclusively focused on adults. There is a dearth of research on gratitude in children and adolescents. Several recent studies indicate that gratitude is also beneficial to children and adolescents. Although gratitude interventions in children and adolescents have a short history, initial findings are very promising.

Given a fact that gratitude interventions are effective to cultivating gratitude in children and adolescents, moral educators should consider gratitude a viable path for students’ moral development. The reason is that gratitude is the overflow of a humble heart as well as a respectful expression toward the benefactors. In addition, gratitude promotes a sense of fairness and equality. Thus, considering that gratitude has a lot of moral merits, searching for practical implications of gratitude interventions in moral education as a separate subject is timely appropriate and pedagogically imperative. The primary aim of this article is to shed light on what is known about gratitude in youth. My discussion begins with the major findings from current researches on the benefits of gratitude in youth and then proceeds to what is known so far about

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  \item \textsuperscript{1} Robert C. Solomon, “Foreword”, In Robert A. Emmons & Michael E. McCullough (Eds.), \textit{The psychology of gratitude} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), v.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Robert A. Emmons, “The psychology of gratitude: An introduction”, In Robert A. Emmons & Michael E. McCullough (Eds.), \textit{The psychology of gratitude} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6-7.
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Patricia White, “Gratitude, citizenship and education”, \textit{Studies in Philosophy and Education} 18(1999): 47.
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