Beyond Good Manners:

Gratitude and Student Engagement in Lower Elementary

An Action Research Report

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Abstract

Gratitude is associated with many benefits and positive life outcomes. However, few gratitude interventions have been applied to students as young as six, and little is known about their impact on students' engagement in school. This study implemented a gratitude intervention tailored towards younger students in order to determine its effects on grateful feelings, grateful thinking, and student engagement. Twenty elementary students (e. g., ages six to ten) at a private Montessori school underwent a four-week intervention. Raising awareness of adult benefactors within the school community was emphasized. It was found that younger children could be taught to recognize different aspects of beneficial exchanges and to express gratitude in appropriate degrees. In addition, student self-reports, teacher reports, teacher observations, and homework rubrics revealed post-intervention increases in student engagement. In conclusion, the gratitude intervention had positive effects on social-emotional development and student engagement.

Keywords: gratitude, student engagement, prosocial behavior, Montessori, elementary education, positive psychology intervention

Numerous studies have investigated the benefits of gratitude, focusing on outcomes such as enhanced well-being, strengthened relationships, and increased life satisfaction (Froh et al., 2011; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). However, research has primarily focused on adults and adolescents, leaving much to learn about gratitude in younger children (Emmons, 2013; Froh et al., 2014). Gratitude interventions have only recently been applied to students as young as six, seven, and eight, and very little is known about how they impact students' engagement in school (Froh et al., 2014; Poelker & Kuebli, 2014). The aim of this study is to determine what effects a gratitude intervention tailored to younger students will have on students' grateful feelings, grateful thinking, and engagement at school.

The current study was conducted over five weeks at a private non-profit Montessori school in California that serves approximately 102 students in kindergarten through the eighth grade. Student participants included 20 children ages six to ten years old in a mixed-age classroom with two teachers. A total of 21 teachers, administrators, parent volunteers, board members, and support staff participated in the study.

This section examines the connections between the Montessori approach, student engagement, gratitude research, and gratitude interventions in schools. Gratitude interventions and curricula are examined and various strategies and developmental aspects are considered. Finally, this section reviews school intervention suggestions specific to younger students (e.g., six to ten years old) and synthesizes them into a tailored intervention.

Montessori and Student Engagement

Montessori settings are designed to promote student engagement by furthering the

four essentials of student motivation—autonomy, interest, competence, and *relatedness* (Fredricks, 2011; Murray, 2011). Relatedness, or a sense of relationship, is cultivated in a Montessori setting via multi-age peer groups, the freedom to work with peers, and community problem-solving (Murray, 2011). Positive relationships between peers and supportive relationships between teachers and students motivate students to engage meaningfully in school (Christenson et al., 2008; Fredricks, 2011; Murray, 2011). Montessori programs also provide opportunities for small-group activities, partnered work, student-choice, voluntary participation, and individualized instruction (Murray, 2011; Rambusch, 2002). While Montessori programs strive to be environments of optimal engagement, it is vital to appraise classroom practices regularly through cycles of reflection, action, and evaluation (Christenson et al., 2008; Hendricks, 2013; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008).

For several reasons, this study will focus on the fourth essential principle of motivation, relatedness. First, the researcher has observed a need for more positivity and awareness of good intent in school relationships. Further, there are many positive outcomes associated with increased school engagement, including prevention of early school departure (i.e., school dropout), promotion of academic performance, high school completion, and positive changes to behavior (Carter, 2013; Fredricks, 2011; Furlong, Froh, Muller, & Gonzalez, 2013; Hart, Jimerson, & Stewart, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008). Lastly, student engagement is believed to be malleable and an appropriate focus for interventions (Carter, Reschly, Lovelace, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012; Hart et al., 2011).

Raising awareness of how adults at school support, value, and care for students is a

key component of an effective intervention. Encouraging students' prosocial actions, such as doing kind acts and writing thank you letters, can enhance relationships. Prosocial acts are often motivated by feelings of social worth. Feelings of social worth are defined as feeling needed, cared for, and valued by others (Grant & Gino, 2010). Therefore, identifying and acknowledging beneficial interactions within the school community strengthen positive relationships while inspiring prosocial behaviors.

Positive Effects of Gratitude

For the purposes of this study, gratitude will be the character strength of focus. Gratitude can be thought of as a mood, emotion, or disposition (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). For the purposes of this study, gratitude can be thought of in simple relational terms—"the appreciation experienced by individuals when somebody does something kind or helpful for them" (Furlong et al., 2013, p. 65). This definition brings to focus the goal of the study, which is to improve student engagement via enhanced social relationships.

Gratitude, humor, and love are the most common character strengths in American youth (Park, 2009). Positive psychology interventions that are designed to help students use signature strengths have been associated with benefits such as increased enjoyment and engagement in school and improved social skills (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Gratitude, specifically, has been linked to positive psychological, physiological, and social outcomes in adults, children, and schools (Bono & Froh, 2009; Emmons, 2013; Froh et al., 2011; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Gratitude is also associated with optimal functioning, resilience, satisfaction with self, family, friends, community, and satisfaction with life overall (Froh et al., 2011; Layous & Lyubomirsky,

2014). In fact, out of 24 character strengths, gratitude was found to be most strongly associated with life satisfaction in children (Froh & Bono, 2014). Social benefits include increased generosity, relationship quality, compassion, empathy, sense of belonging, and positive and prosocial interactions (Froh et al., 2011; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). When thanked, benefactors help longer, continue to help without being asked, and extend help to new beneficiaries (Grant & Gino, 2010). Gratitude helps people feel connected to a "caring community which values their contributions" (Froh et al., 2011, p. 1).

Gratitude has been associated with positive outcomes specific to schools, such as higher end-of-year grade point average, greater school satisfaction, and greater academic and social success (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Park, 2009). Promoting gratitude has also been found to increase school bonding and social adjustment and has been linked to greater perceived and actual social support from parents, peers, and teachers (Froh et al., 2011; Froh et al., 2014; Hasemeyer, 2014). Gratitude can increase a sense of connection to the organization that the benefactor and beneficiary belong to, such as to a school or workplace (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001).

Further, according to Montessori (2001), gratitude in schools can play a role in shaping society:

> [Schools] must foster a new understanding of the real values of humanity and gratitude must be felt for those workers upon whom human life depends. If man is not appreciated…how can we expect or hope that men will become friends and work in peaceful collaboration? (p. 3)

In summary, the reach of a grateful disposition may extend well beyond immediate benefits for students and schools, making a lasting impact on society at large.

Gratitude in Schools

Gratitude studies with adolescents have revealed the effectiveness of school-based interventions (Emmons, 2013; Froh et al., 2014). In one study, counting blessings was associated with life satisfaction, optimism, self-reported gratitude, a decrease in negative affect, and with a robust relationship between gratitude and school satisfaction immediately afterward and three weeks later (Froh, Sefick, and Emmons, 2008). In another study, writing and hand-delivering a gratitude letter was associated with significant gains in positive affect after the intervention and two months later (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, and Miller, 2009). Correlations were found between gratitude, perceived social support, and confidence in academic abilities (Hasemeyer, 2014). The results of these studies suggest that gratitude interventions can bring about several benefits for older children and adolescents.

Younger students (i. e. first, second, fourth, and fifth-grade students) have been studied to find a connection between "understanding the giver's effort and how grateful one should feel for the gift" (Poelker & Kuebli, 2014, p. 444). Older children (fourth and fifth graders) showed more development in this area than younger children (first and second graders). However, the results of the study imply that even when an undesirable gift is given, younger children can feel grateful and recognize that the thought does count. An effective approach to younger students, then, would be to raise awareness of how the giver "provides effort, time or money to buy or make a gift with the intention of making the recipient happy" (Poelker & Kuebli, 2014, p. 432).

The Gratitude-School Connection: Suggested Applications

Research suggests that in the elementary grades, children can be taught to

appraise the benefits they receive from others (Froh et al., 2014). Froh et al. (2014) conducted a unique gratitude intervention with children as young as eight over five sessions. The sessions covered the following: (1) introduction to gratitude, (2) the intention of the benefactor, (3) the cost to the benefactor, (4) the benefits of the receiver, and (5) a summary. Students in the gratitude condition reported statistically significant increases in grateful thinking, grateful mood, and grateful behaviors, including writing 80% more thank-you cards than the control group. In a second study, students in the gratitude condition reported moderate increases in positive affect and gratitude, while demonstrating large increases in benefit appraisal abilities. In conclusion, a brief cognitive intervention delivered in elementary classrooms taught students to think more gratefully (Froh et al., 2014) by "[breaking] gratitude down into smaller pieces" (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014, p. 154).

In Froh et al.'s (2014) gratitude studies, students became "gratitude aficionados" (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014, p. 157) when they grasped the three concepts integral to the gratitude experience—the giver's intentions, the giver's costs, and the receiver's benefits. Autonomy in such an intervention can be preserved, even within assigned activities, so long as choice-making is prioritized over teacher control (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Kneezel and Emmons (2006) also suggest that autonomy-supportive environments would "facilitate the development and internalization of grateful traits" (p. 275). For example, student choice of "when, to whom, and how to express gratitude" (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014, p. 157), may more authentically motivate students to engage in grateful behaviors. In conclusion, designing a gratitude intervention that fosters competence, connectedness, and autonomy is essential in a

Montessori setting where intrinsic motivation is a primary goal.

A Tailored Intervention

There are many ways to bring gratitude practices and interventions into the school setting. Froh, Miller, and Snyder (2007) suggest daily or weekly gratitude journals for all students. More specifically, the authors suggest that prompting students to "reflect on people, events, or activities at school for which they are grateful" (p. 9). Reivich (2009) recommends students write a gratitude letter and read the letter out loud to the recipient in what is called the *gratitude letter visit*. Reivich also emphasizes that students write reflective journal entries to explain the causes of each event. Other ideas include grateful sentence stems (e.g., Someone who helped me get through a tough time is__.), a classroom gratitude journal with weekly time dedicated to making a class entry, a gratitude bulletin board, and gratitude collages (Reivich, 2009). Many of these ideas are incorporated into the current study, including gratitude journaling, gratitude letter visits, and gratitude collages.

Gratitude interventions can help students recognize how adults enhance school life, leading to a greater appreciation of the board of education, the school administration, teachers, support staff, custodians, and community volunteers (Bono & Froh, 2011). Social bonds are strengthened when students take inventory of the concrete ways the adults in the school community value students. In particular, teachers and staff who receive gratitude messages from the students may be more satisfied with their work and more motivated to work harder on students' behalf. The current study emphasizes beneficial relationships between adults and students at school by showcasing 20 different benefactors and encouraging students to write and read aloud thank you letters to them.

Designing a gratitude intervention in a lower elementary classroom with students as young as six poses some challenges. Gratitude is thought to emerge gradually between the ages of seven and ten (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). An understanding of complex emotion does not usually develop until age seven or later and studies have shown that "only children aged 7 years or older showed an association between gratitude and happiness" (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014, p. 155). The most promising intervention to date, Froh et al.'s (2014) benefit appraisal curriculum, was conducted with students ages eight and older, and relies on certain developmental competencies. On the other hand, Poelker and Kuebli (2014) found a relationship between first and second graders' gratitude levels and their perceptions of gift givers' efforts or intentions.

In the current study, the developmental needs of younger students are addressed by modifying Froh et al.'s (2014) gratitude curriculum so that it aims to a younger audience. First, the current study draws on Hussong's (2014) gratitude study of children ages six to nine. Based on the data collected thus far, Hussong (2014) has developed a three-part model: initial step (i.e., awareness), meaning making (i.e., attributions and positive affect), and expression (i.e., behavior). Further, the current study will address Hussong's (2014) discovery that children and parents tend to put more attention on good manners rather than on the gratitude process. The current study will also take into consideration Bono's (2014) discovery that students appreciate different things at different ages. Based on preliminary data, five- to six-year-olds are more likely to appreciate concrete gestures, seven- to eight-year-olds are more likely to appreciate the help of peers, and eight- to ten-year-olds are more likely to appreciate encouragement, emotional support, and social inclusion (Bono, 2014). These findings will be synthesized

with the findings of Froh et al. (2014) in order to create a developmentally appropriate gratitude intervention for younger students.

In the current study, concrete and meaning-rich experiences, such as role-plays (e.g., coordinated role modeling of reciprocity and gratitude) and creative gratitude expression projects (e.g., gratitude posters and collages) are incorporated to appeal to the younger student. Montessori-type three-part cards provide a concrete representation of beneficial relationships at school by showing photos of adults from the school community, the adults' names, and examples of what the adults do for the students' benefit. Writing activities are based on a process familiar to younger students, setting them up for success with more abstract concepts. Additionally, a symbolic model representing how gratitude works is utilized as a memory tool.

The researcher explores these different modes of experiencing, teaching, and learning about gratitude in order to promote benefits for all students in a Montessori environment where character development is an integral part of the daily lives of students (Montessori, 2001). The specific aim of this study is to determine how a tailored gratitude intervention impacts the grateful feelings, grateful thinking, and school engagement of younger students (i.e., ages six to ten).

Methods

Students' gratitude and engagement were measured by a combination of the following methods: (1) student self-reports, (2) teacher reports, (3) homework completion logs, (4) writing rubrics, (5) teacher observation tally sheets, (6) teacher field notes, and (7) student work samples. The study took place over five weeks, and was conducted by the classroom teacher who is the author of this study.

Student self-reports of gratitude were chosen carefully, and were not the only measure of gratitude employed. Froh et al. (2011) tested gratitude scales for validity in students ages 10-17, and found that only two of the scales, the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) and the 3-item Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC) were validated for the younger children (10-13 year-olds), presumably due to a variety of developmental factors (McCullough et al., 2002). While the GAC and GQ-6 may be useful for children younger than 10, Froh et al. (2011) suggest additional alternative measures, including linguistically simplified versions of the adult scales, observations, and empirical data. In the current study, the GAC and GQ-6 were modified to replace the numeral scale with a visual 'thumbs up' to 'thumbs down' scale (see Appendix A). The GQ-6 was renamed the Gratitude Agreement Test (GAT). Teacher observations of compliments and appreciations during class meetings, student writing samples, and writing rubrics provided alternative measures (See Appendix B for Gratitude Writing Rubric).

Student self-reports of engagement were also chosen carefully. While many models exist to describe and categorize student engagement, Fredericks & McColskey (2012) reviewed engagement literature and suggest a three-subtype theory— (1) behavioral, (2) cognitive, and (3) affective. A self-report aspect is required to measure cognitive and affective engagement. Researchers have tested a self-report instrument called the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) and simplified it to be more appropriate for elementary-age children (Carter et al., 2012). The current study employed a modified thumbs-up and thumbs-down version of the SEI-E (see Appendix C).

Behavioral engagement is often measured in schools through attendance, grades, and completion of work, as well as by teacher reports and student self-reports (Skinner et

al., 2008). The self-report measure of behavioral engagement employed in the current study is a modified thumbs-up and thumbs-down version of Skinner et al.'s (2008) Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning: Student Report (see Appendix D). Homework completion logs and teacher observation tally forms were completed throughout the current study as alternative measures of behavioral engagement (see Appendix E). Finally, a modified thumbs-up and thumbs-down version of the Teacher Engagement Report Form-New (TERF-N) (Hart, et al., 2011) was used as an additional measure of all three subtypes of engagement from the teacher's perspective (see Appendix F). Five teachers, including the two classroom teachers and three of the 'resource' teachers (i.e., art, music, Spanish, physical education, mindfulness, etc.), completed the TERF-N.

Student and teacher forms were completed before the intervention and at its conclusion. For many students this was their first time filling out a Likert-scale type form. It was explained that there are no right or wrong answers, just answers that 'feel true' to the student. Students were told that their forms would be private, and would be shredded at the conclusion of the study. To modify for early readers, each question was read out loud during administration, and tests were administered in smaller same-age groups of six to eight students.

Key community members were identified and invited to participate in the study in order to prepare one of the materials for the intervention. Each participant supplied information about something they had done recently on behalf of the students that went above and beyond the regular expectations of their role at school (Furlong et al., 2013) (see Appendix G). Each participant also described how this action benefits the students,

and at what personal cost. A picture was taken of each participant in a setting that visually represented his or her beneficial action. The photographs and participant information were compiled into a material that was laminated in small three-part card format (picture, label, and description) and larger letter-size poster format (photographs on the front and text on the back). The twenty participants in the current study, called 'benefactors,' included maintenance staff, administrators, teachers, parent volunteers, and board members.

The gratitude curriculum was delivered twice a week over a four-week period. Students sat in a large circle on the floor for group activities, and had a variety of spaces to choose from to do their independent and partnered work, including two large tables, two small tables, individual desks, and portable floor desks. Materials and lessons were Montessori-inspired and based upon a synthesis of Froh et al.'s (2014) gratitude lesson plans, Hussong's (2014) preliminary findings, and Oxenhorn and Calkins's (2003) "Small Moments: Personal Narrative Writing" Writing Workshop unit. The researcher delivered the curriculum in seven sessions—(1) Gratitude; (2) Beneficial Relationships at School; (3) Benefits and Grateful Feelings; (4) Cost of the Benefactor; (5) Intent and Positive Attributions of the Benefactor; (6) Gratitude Beyond Good Manners—The Gratitude Visit; and (7) Gratitude Experts; and (8) Grateful Writing—Posttest. Symbols were used as a visual representation of each of the six major concepts (i.e., benefactor, benefit, grateful feelings, cost, positive attribution, and gratitude expression). Role-plays, literature, video, discussion, gratitude story writing, and hands-on activities were incorporated to deliver this multi-modal curriculum to younger (i. e., ages six to ten) elementary students (see Appendix H).

Each student wrote a thank you letter to one of the benefactors of his or her choosing and read the letter out loud to the benefactor. The gratitude letter visit conducted between the sixth and seventh sessions synthesized the curriculum by combining all six major concepts into one. The gratitude letter visit was selected as the final project instead of a traditional thank-you letter sent in the mail. Gratitude visits have been recommended as an effective gratitude intervention by several researchers, and have shown positive effects for up to two months in studies with youth (Emmons, 2013; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Reivich, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson, 2005). The seventh session included a review of the activities and lessons that took place in the first six sessions, reflection upon the gratitude visit, and a final discussion of what the students now know about gratitude. Each student was awarded a certificate of training as a "gratitude expert in practice" (see Appendix I). As a posttest, students wrote a final gratitude story without referencing the list of symbols and questions. During the month following the intervention, students worked on their gratitude stories and published them.

Results

By nature, action research involves the researcher as a participant, bearing both benefits and drawbacks. Action research allows for educational theory to be tested systematically by teachers in the rich context of the classroom, and aims to improve teaching and schools. Action research bridges academic research and the classroom by providing "situational verification" (Hendricks, 2013, p. 9). Teachers conducting action research have intimate knowledge of the situation, and have the flexibility to make necessary changes during the study. Action research is dynamic as researchers continuously spiral from reflection, to evaluation, to action, back to reflection, and so on

(Hendricks, 2013). However, when the researcher is also a participant, there is a small sample size, and there is no control group, it is not possible to collect purely objective data, as in quantitative studies. Data collection is primarily utilized to inform practice, rather than to create a set of generalizations. Therefore, simple data analyses, such as central tendency, can be utilized to illuminate patterns and trends in action research.

Gratitude

The changes in gratitude scores on self-report measures were highly dependent on grade level and question asked. Self-reported gratitude composite scores decreased post-intervention for all but the third-grade GAT and GAC scores, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Self-Reported Gratitude and Engagement

Measure	Grade					
	1 Pretest	1 Posttest	2 Pretest	2 Posttest	3 Pretest	3 Posttest
Gratitude composite (GAC)	4.33	4.25	4.00	3.78	4.39	4.78
Gratitude composite (GAT)	5.88	5.83	6.06	5.22	6.44	6.47
Behavioral engagement	4.58	4.70	3.90	3.73	4.50	4.73
Behavioral disaffection	2.18	1.78	2.30	2.47	1.87	1.73
Affective and cognitive engagement (SEI-E)	4.42	4.61	4.22	3.90	4.49	4.61

Note. All scores are the numerical mean. Scores for the gratitude composite (GAC), behavioral engagement, behavioral disaffection, and affective and cognitive engagement tests could range from 1 to 5. Scores for the gratitude composite (GAT) test could range from 1 to 7.

When analyzed by question, the overall mean GAC scores for gratitude and thankfulness increase while the appreciation score decreases, as shown in Figure 1.

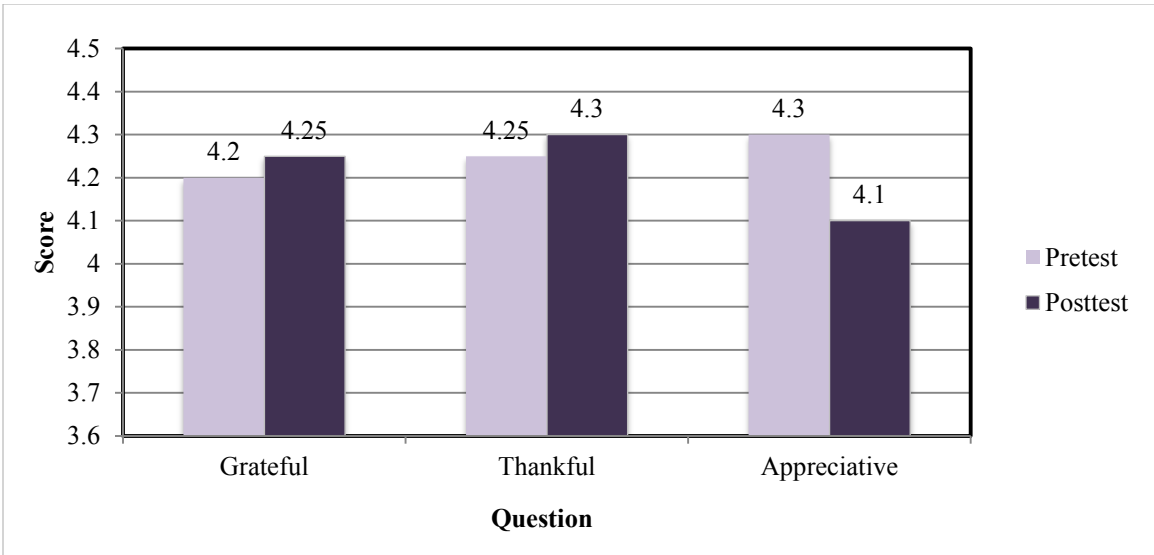

Figure 1. Self-reported gratitude (GAC) by question. All scores are the numerical mean. Scores could range from 1 to 5.

The GAT also reveals nuances by question, as shown in Figure 2.

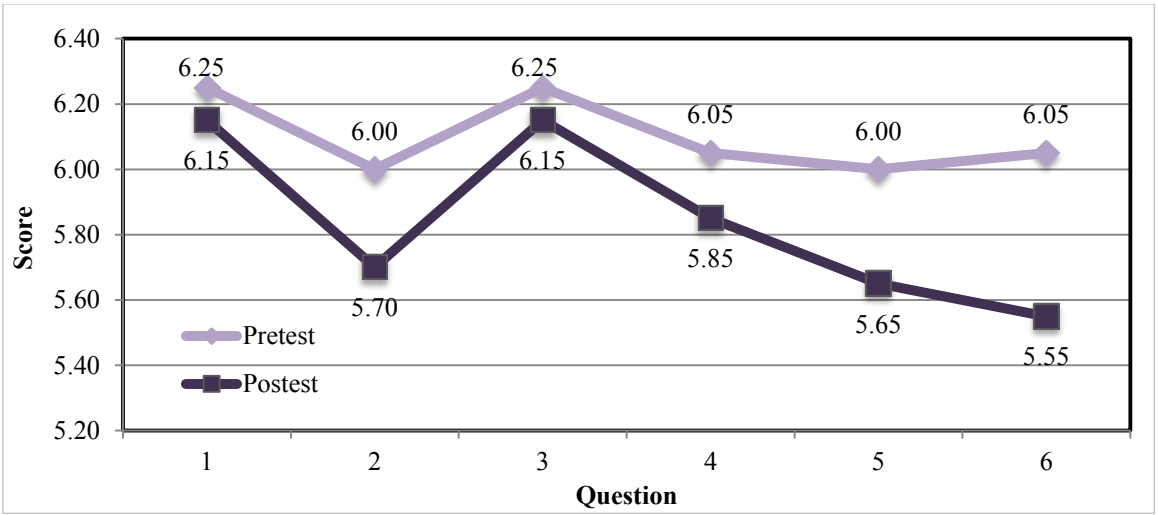

Figure 2. Self-reported gratitude scores (GAT), by question. All scores are the numerical mean. Scores could range from 1 to 7.

Gratitude scores on teacher-observed measures increased. Students were observed choosing a higher giving-to-getting ratio of compliments and appreciations during class meetings as the intervention progressed, as shown in Figure 3.

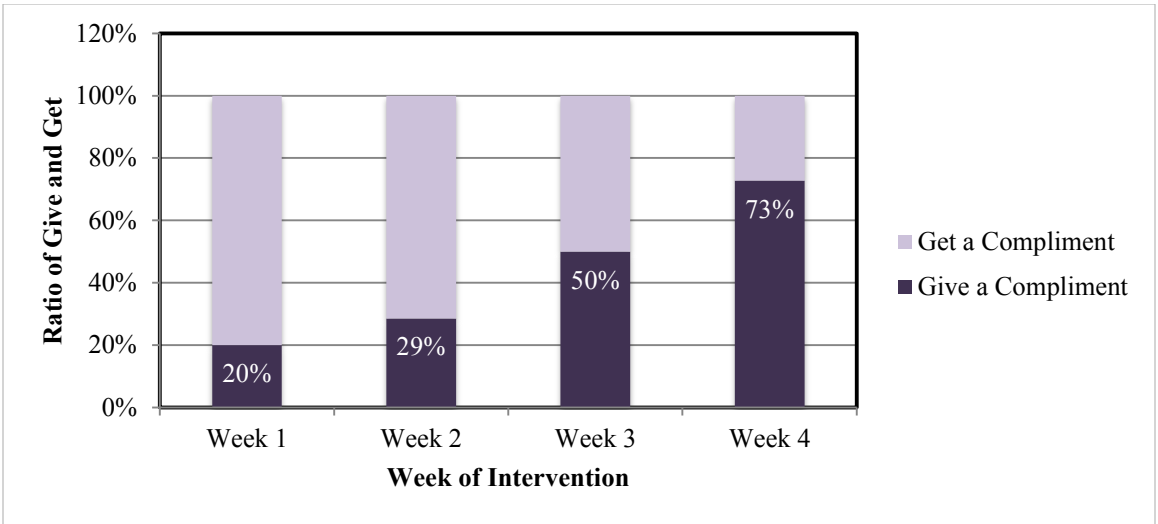

Figure 3. Teacher-observed gratitude expression during class meetings. Student participation was optional during compliments and appreciations. No week 5 data due to school closure on class meeting day. Percentages are *give* choice in relation to the total.

Posttest scores in gratitude writing increased in all but one measure, as shown in Figure 4.

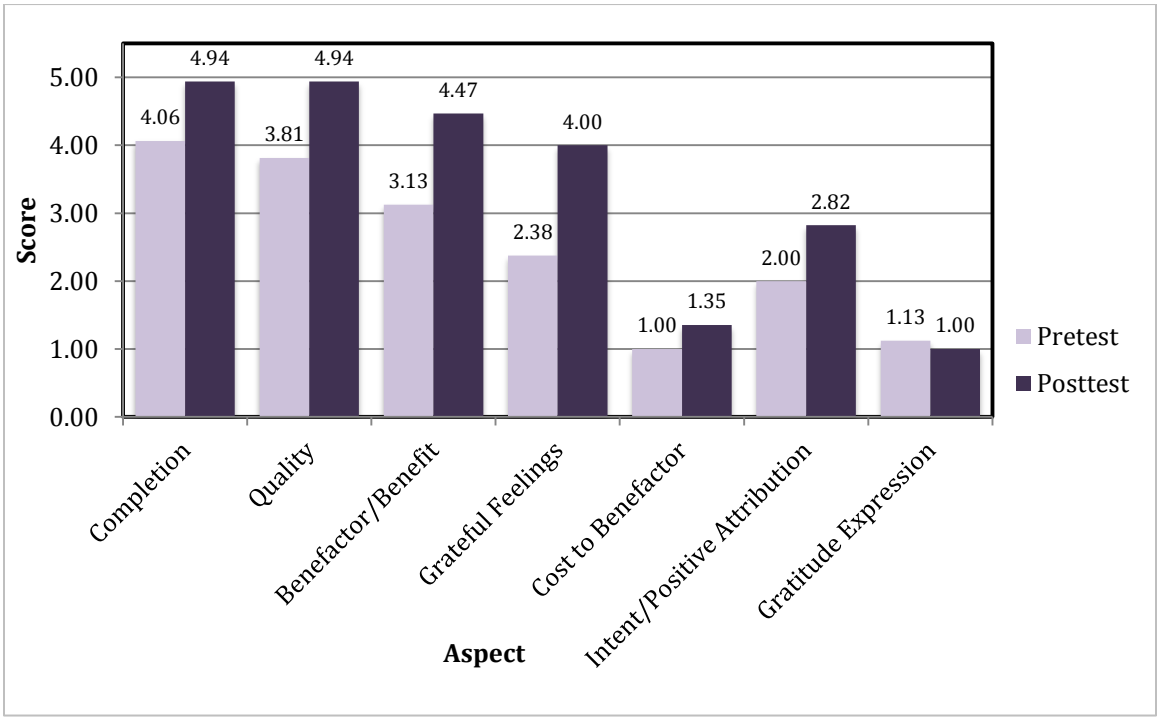

Figure 4. Teacher-observed gratitude expression during writing assignments, by aspect. All scores are the numerical mean. Scores could range from 1 to 5.

Gratitude writing scores increased from one session to the next, aligning with the

introduction of each new concept, as shown in Figure 5.

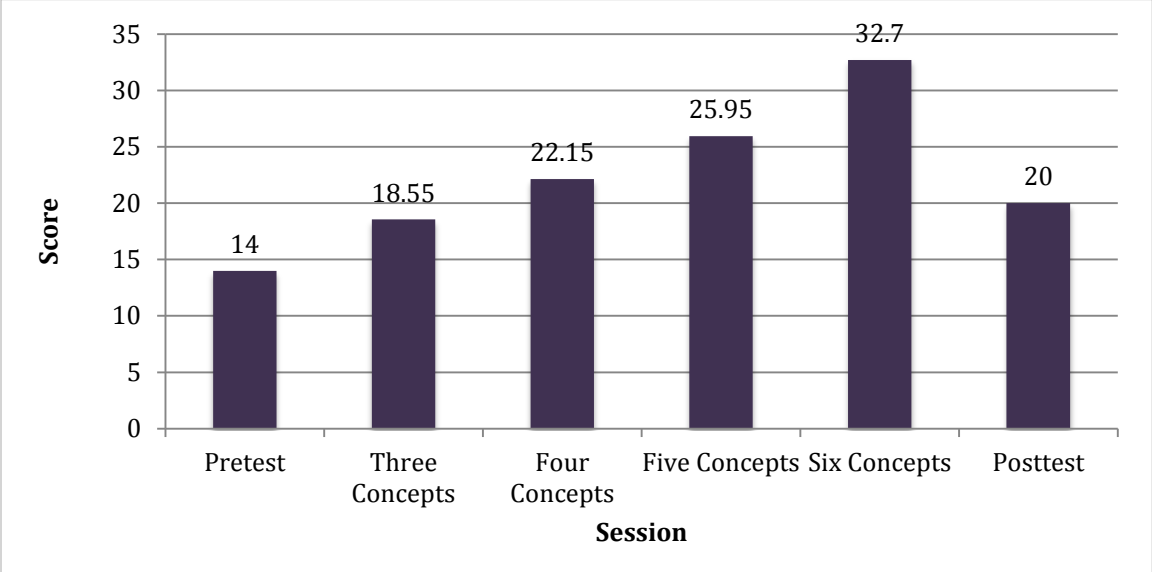

Figure 5. Teacher-observed gratitude expression during writing assignments, by session. All scores are the numerical mean. Scores could range from 5 to 35.

Engagement

Student self-report engagement scores were impacted by grade level, as shown in Table 1. Second-graders showed a decrease in both behavioral and cognitive/affective engagement and an increase in behavioral disaffection. The first-graders and third-graders, however, had increased engagement and decreased disaffection scores.

Teacher-reported engagement from the TERF-N pretests and posttests increased overall for all subtypes, as shown in Figure 6.

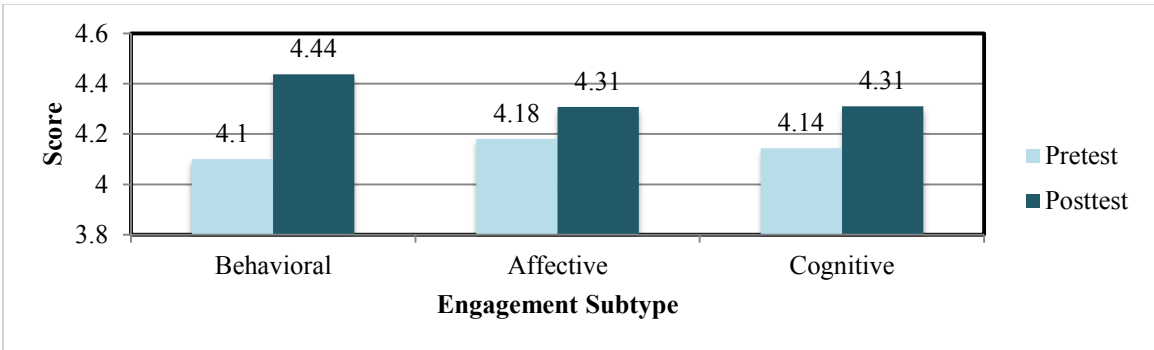

Figure 6. Teacher-reported engagement (TERF-N), by subtype. All scores are the numerical mean. Scores could range from 1 to 5.

Teacher-reported engagement scores from the TERF-N increased by different amounts for each student, as shown in Figure 7.

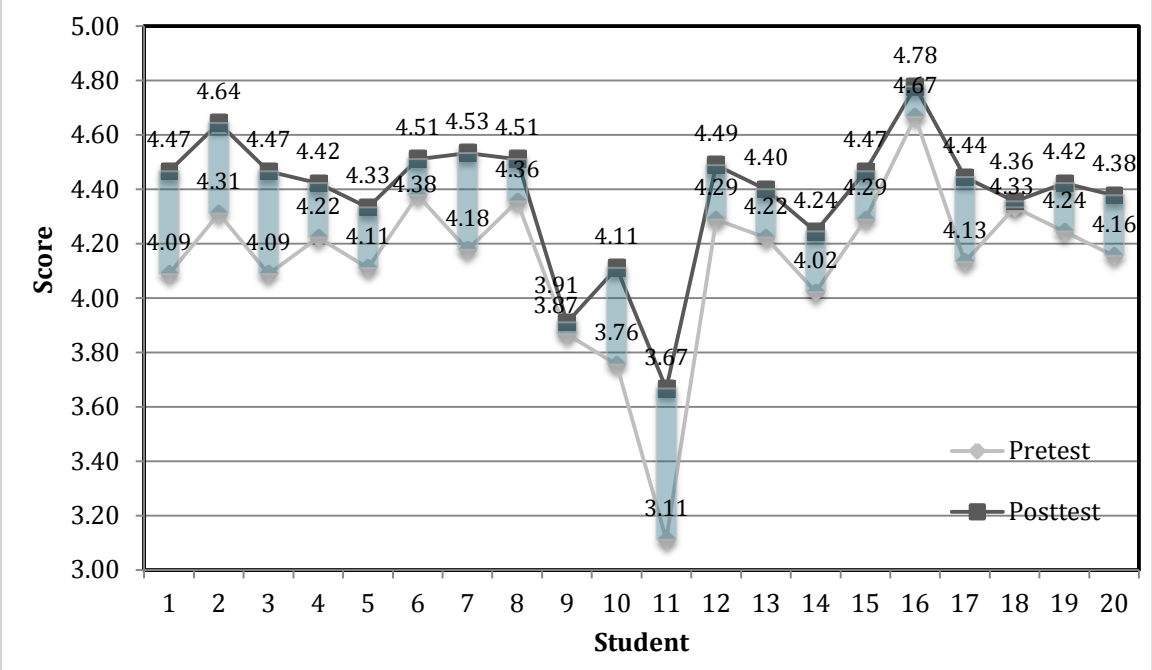

Figure 7. Teacher-reported engagement (TERF-N), by student. All scores are the numerical mean. Scores could range from 1 to 5.

Teacher-observed behavioral engagement increased in both homework and classroom observation scores, as shown in Figures 8 and 9, respectively.

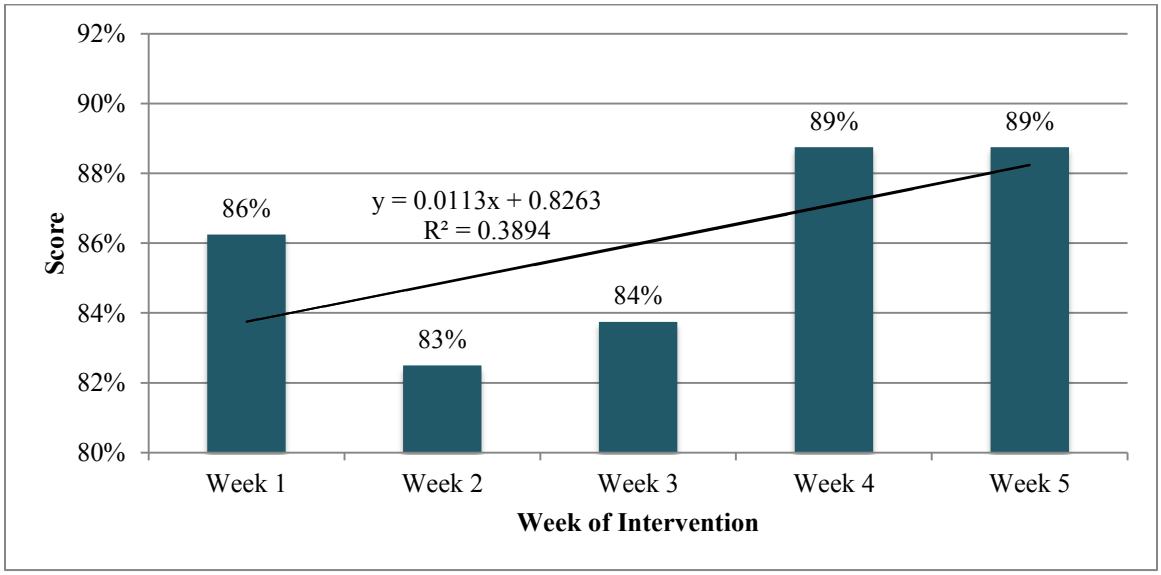

Figure 8. Teacher-scored behavioral engagement, by homework timeliness and completion. Percents are numerical means of the raw scores divided by the highest possible score. Raw scores could be from 0 to 4.

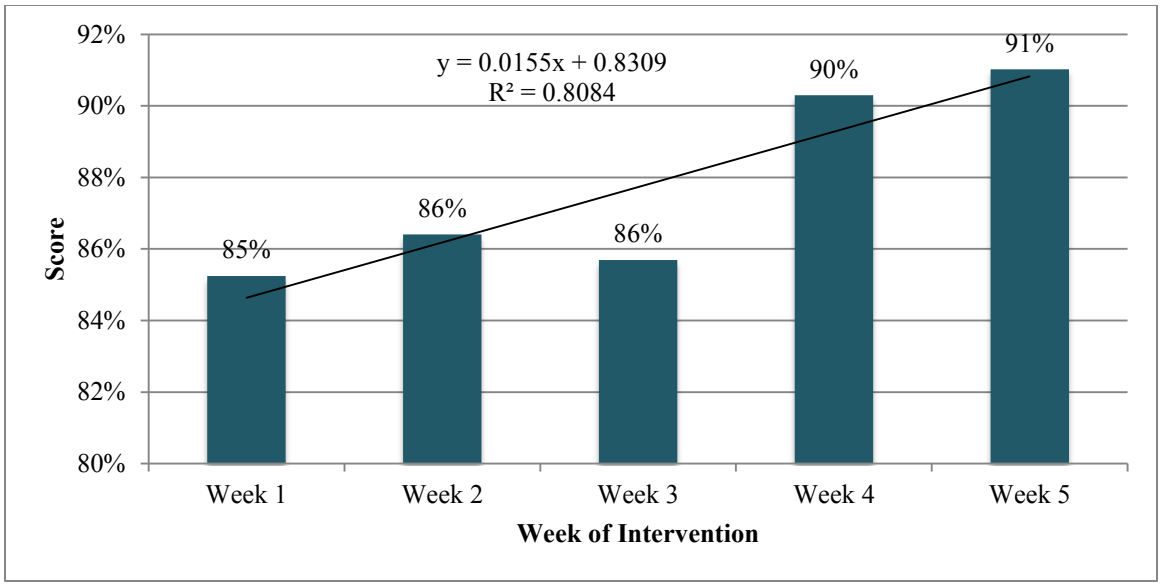

Figure 9. Teacher-scored behavioral engagement, by observation of on-task and off-task behaviors. Percents are numerical means of the raw scores divided by the highest possible score. Raw scores could be from 0 to 3.

Discussion

Many of the younger students reported lower composite gratitude scores while teachers generally observed increased frequency of grateful behavior and increased development of grateful thinking. This contradiction could be explained by a change in students' comprehension of the concepts being tested. During the intervention, a deepening of students' overall understanding of gratitude occurred, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, which could have led to an alteration of the students' sense of scale for self-reporting. By broadening students' understanding of gratitude, the intervention may have led to a more critical analysis of the concepts in the posttests. For example, the simpler statements in the GAT, numbers one and three (see Appendix A) had higher overall scores and changed the least, as shown in Figure 2. In the GAC, scores may have dropped in the appreciative category because the word appreciative was rarely used in the intervention as compared to the words grateful and thankful. Lastly, third graders may

have reported both higher overall average scores and shown increases in their scores on the GAC and GAT because they are developmentally more likely to benefit from a gratitude intervention and to have comprehended the concepts of the self-report pretests.

The gratitude curriculum successfully increased the application of concepts of grateful thinking when writing gratitude stories, and increased grateful and appreciative behaviors during class meetings. It can be concluded that elementary-age students, even those as young as six or seven, can be taught concepts such as benefactor, benefit, grateful feelings, cost, and intentions, and can be shown how to express gratitude beyond good manners. For example, instead of saying a simple thank you, a six-year old from this study wrote the following thank you letter to a parent volunteer:

> "You worked really hard restructuring the way songs are requested for the school dance this year. I loved the music for the dance party. I felt happy when I heard you were doing it. You spent a lot of your time doing it. You must be very nice. Thank you!"

The scores for the concepts of benefactor, benefit, and grateful feelings increased by at least one point in the posttest. The concepts of cost, intent, and positive attribution increased by less than one point in the posttest.

Gratitude expression stayed at a very low score for the pretest and posttest, but this was largely due to the nature of the assignment, and was not necessarily a reflection of students' ability to express gratitude to a benefactor. In fact, students generated dozens of ideas about how to express gratitude to the tree from *The Giving Tree* and created a lengthy list of ways to express gratitude beyond good manners to benefactors (see Appendix K for photos). All students earned a score of four or five in gratitude

expression on their final gratitude letters, with many students adding embellishments and details (see Appendix L for a sample of student work). In discussions following the gratitude letter visit, several students reported feeling positively during and afterwards and observed the positive feelings of the recipient. Lastly, several students wrote additional thank you letters in the weeks following the gratitude visit.

Engagement

The gratitude intervention was associated with increases in student engagement across all subtypes (i. e., behavioral, cognitive, and affective). Students reported greater overall scores in the posttests, and teachers observed overall improvements in all three subtypes. It could be argued, then, that gratitude interventions offer an effective way to positively impact student engagement. However, it is worth noting that most of the students began with high engagement scores. It is not possible, then, to draw strong conclusions about how this intervention would apply to students with lower engagement scores. For example, only three students began with an average score below four on the TERF-N. The three lower-score students experienced a wide range of gains, including the greatest gain of the entire sample, 0.56 points, and the least gain, 0.03 points. For individual students with lower scores, interventions may need to be selected on a case-by-case basis.

Action Plan

Gratitude interventions that emphasize grateful thinking and beneficial relationships at school have the potential to bring about noteworthy improvements to student engagement. Students can be taught to think gratefully when shown how and prompted to, and can carry forward some of the concepts on their own. The intervention used in this

study was tailored towards the developmental level of the students and designed around the motivational concepts of autonomy, interest, competence, and relatedness. In particular, this intervention was crafted to emphasize how adults at the school work to benefit the students. This emphasis was chosen based on the researcher's observations of what was lacking in the school environment. Future interventions of this kind should be tailored towards emphases that would best fit the unique characteristics of the setting and the students' developmental plane.

At the researcher's current setting, future applications of this intervention will be based on observations of student attitudes towards benefactors. As needed, the emphasis on adult benefactors at school may shift to peer benefactors and/or family benefactors. Teaching gratitude concepts with symbols, role-plays, literature, writing activities, modeling, and hands-on activities were effective components for this age group (e. g., ages six to ten), and will be incorporated into future interventions. Following the intervention, several follow-up activities will be selected based on what teachers observe.

The current "practicing gratitude experts" have expressed motivation and interest in publishing their gratitude stories and having access to thank-you letter-writing materials. Several writing sessions will be dedicated to the addition of missing gratitude concepts and to readying their stories for publication. Gratitude story collections will be shared at a publishing party and students will be encouraged to continue writing thank you letters to benefactors at school and in general.

Based on the observation that students did not write as many gratitude stories about their peers as they did about their family members, a classroom gratitude journal will be made for students to record their gratitude stories about each other. This will provide a

balance to our problem-solving journal where students identify problems to solve for the class meeting. Each class meeting will end with a gratitude story from the new gratitude journal. In addition, activities from the intervention that have been placed on the practical life shelf will be made available so long as students are interacting with them. A permanent work will be added to the classroom that includes the gratitude concept symbols and prompts. The work will be available to students during work time, and will be selected as a tool by teachers when applicable.

The intervention took place during regularly scheduled writing workshop sessions, and emphasized gratitude story writing. Students achieved high levels of quality and content overall, giving the gratitude unit academic merit. Additional benefits, such as increased engagement at school, were associated with the unit as well. Therefore, similar writing workshop units that introduce new socio-emotional concepts and that also emphasize relatedness and/or positive emotion could bring about benefits beyond the traditional open-theme format of writing workshop. Future action research could explore how other topics (e. g., kindness, optimism, resilience) impact student engagement.

Lastly, sharing the successes of the intervention with the wider school community may lead to school-wide gratitude practices. When school leadership also adopts a grateful attitude, this can also further the social cohesion and functioning of the organization itself. Gratitude could be incorporated into existing programs through curriculum, school-wide recognition of acts of kindness, coordinated modeling, and service learning (Bono & Froh, 2011).

The researcher believes that the gratitude intervention has effectively created a classroom atmosphere in which positive actions between members of the community are

recognized and valued. The researcher also believes that the increases in engagement indicate that students will be more successful learners post-intervention. A positive impact on engagement extends to younger students when developmental concerns are addressed and the content is delivered in a familiar setting and format. The researcher will continue to reflect, evaluate, and act to improve student engagement in school by fostering relatedness, the fourth component of intrinsic motivation. Relatedness is a compatible focus in a Montessori program where cosmic curriculum highlights the interconnectedness of all things. In addition, increased engagement in schools is a worthwhile aim as it is associated with academic performance, positive behavior, and high school completion (Hart et al., 2011). In conclusion, the researcher agrees that fostering positive interpersonal relationships at school via interventions such as gratitude curriculum is one of the keys to increasing student engagement (Furlong, Froh, Muller, & Gonzalez, 2013, Skinner et al., 2008).

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Appendix A

Sample of "Thumbs-Up Thumbs-Down" Scale for GAC

				
very slightly or not at all	a little	moderately	quite a bit	extremely

Sample of Thumbs-Up Thumbs-Down Scale for GAT

						
strongly disagree	disagree	slightly disagree	neutral	slightly agree	agree	strongly agree

Sample of Thumbs-Up Thumbs-Down Scale for SEI-E and the Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning: Student Report

				
strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree

The Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC)

Think about how you have felt during the past few weeks.
Circle the thumb that best describes how you feel.

1. How grateful do you feel?
2. How thankful do you feel?
3. How appreciative do you feel?

From "The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography," by M. E. McCullough, R. A. Emmons, and J. A. Tsang, 2002, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*(1), p. 127.

The Gratitude Agreement Test (GAT)

Circle the thumb below each statement to show how much you agree with it.

1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.
2. If I had to list everything that I felt thankful for, it would be a very long list.
3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be thankful for.
4. I am thankful to a wide variety of people.
5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.
6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel thankful to something or someone.

From "The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography," by M. E. McCullough, R. A. Emmons, and J. A. Tsang, 2002, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*(1), p. 127.

Appendix B
Grateful Writing Rubric

Teacher Name:
_____

Student Name:
_____

Date:_____
Date:_____
Date:_____
Date:_____
Date:_____

	1	2	3	4	5
Completion	All items are left blank.	Less than half of the items are complete.	Half of the items are complete.	More than half of the items are complete.	All items are complete.
Quality	The work is sloppy and unorganized. It is hard to understand what is represented.	The work is not very neat and parts are difficult to understand.	The work is partly neat and organized. It is somewhat easy to understand what is represented.	The work is neat and organized. It is easy to understand what is represented.	The work is very neat and very organized. It is very easy to understand what is represented. There are signs that great care and attention was taken to produce high quality work.
Benefit and Benefactor	There is no representation of the benefit and the benefactor.	There is little representation of the benefit and the benefactor.	There is some representation of the beneift and the benefactor.	There is a complete representation of the benefit and the benefactor.	There is a complete representation of the benefit and the benefactor. There are signs of putting extra attention or detail into the representation.
Grateful Feelings	There is no representation of grateful feelings.	There is little representation of grateful feelings.	There is some representation of grateful feelings.	There is a complete representation of grateful feelings.	There is a complete representation of grateful feelings. There are signs of putting extra attention or detail into the representation.
Cost of the Benefactor	There is no representation of the giver's cost.	There is little representation of the giver's cost.	There is some representation of the giver's cost.	There is a complete representation of the giver's cost.	There is a complete representation of the giver's cost. There are signs of putting extra attention or detail into the representation.
Intent and Positive Attributions of the Benefactor	There is no representation of the intent and the positive attributions to the giver.	There is little representation of the intent and the positive attributions to the giver.	There is some representation of the intent and the positive attributions to the giver.	There is a complete representation of the intent and the positive attributions to the giver.	There is a complete representation of the intent and the positive attributions to the giver. There are signs of putting extra attention or detail into the representation.
Gratitude Expressions that Go Beyond Good Manners	There is no effort made to express gratitude beyond good manners.	There is little effort made to express gratitude beyond good manners.	There is some effort made to express gratitude beyond good manners.	There is clear effort made to express gratitude beyond good manners.	There is clear effort made to express gratitude beyond good manners. There are signs of putting extra thought or energy into the expression.

Appendix C
The Student Engagement Instrument-Elementary Version (SEI-E)

Circle the thumb below each statement to show how much you agree with it.

1. My family/guardians are there for me when I need them.
2. My teachers are there for me when I need them.
   Other students like me the way I am.
3. Adults at my school listen to the students.
4. Other students don't care about me.
5. Students at my school are there for me when I need them.
6. My education will not create many chances for me to reach my future goals.
7. The rules at my school are fair.
8. Continuing to learn after high school is not important.
9. My family/guardian(s) don't want to know when something good happens at school.
10. Most teachers care about me as a person, not just a student.
11. Students here don't respect what I have to say.
12. My teachers are honest with me.
13. I plan to go to college after I graduate high school.
14. School is important for reaching my future goals.
15. When I have problems at my school my family/guardian(s) are ready to help me.
16. Adults at my school are fair towards students most of the time.
17. I don't like talking to the teachers here.
18. I enjoy talking to the students here.
19. I have friends at school.
20. I don't feel safe at school.
21. My family/guardian(s) want me to keep trying when things are tough at school.
22. I am hopeful about my future.
23. Teachers at my school care about students.

From "Measuring student engagement among elementary students: Pilot of the Student Engagement Instrument—Elementary Version," by C. P. Carter, A. L. Reschly, M. D. Lovelace, J. J. Appleton, and D. Thompson, D, 2012, *School Psychology Quarterly*, *27*(2), p. 70.

Appendix D
Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning: Student Report

Circle the thumb below each statement to show how much you agree with it.

1. I try hard to do well in school.
2. When I'm in class, my mind wanders.
3. In class, I work as hard as I can.
4. When I'm in class, I think about other things.
5. I pay attention in class.
6. When I'm in class, I listen very carefully.
7. I don't try very hard at school.
8. When I'm in class, I participate in class discussions.
9. When I'm in class, I just act like I'm working.
10. In class, I do just enough to get by.

From "Engagement and disaffection in the classroom: Part of a larger motivational dynamic?" by E. Skinner, C. Furrer, G. Marchand, and T. Kindermann, 2008, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *100*(4), p. 781.

Appendix E
Teacher Observational Tally Sheet

Date:_____
Time(s):_____ _____ _____

Student	engaging in challenging work	choosing/ organizing challenging work	learning talk/ activity with others	Other (Describe)	on-task total
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					
17					
18					
19					
20					

From "Decreasing Off-Task Behaviors in an Elementary Classroom," by C. Bradley, 2014, *Masters of Arts in Education Action Research Papers,* Paper 47, p. 23.

Appendix F
Teacher Engagement Report Form-New

Circle one number for each item that most accurately reflects your observations of the student over the past few weeks.

The student…	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
seems interested in school	1	2	3	4	5
is self-motivated	1	2	3	4	5
seems to care about his/her performance	1	2	3	4	5
persists on challenging tasks	1	2	3	4	5
participates in class	1	2	3	4	5
receives consequences	1	2	3	4	5
is respectful to staff	1	2	3	4	5
demonstrates appropriate effort for task	1	2	3	4	5
gets along with peers	1	2	3	4	5

By completing this form, you are giving your consent to participate in this study. Completing this form is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time.

From "The student engagement in schools questionnaire (SESQ) and the teacher engagement report form-new (TERF-N): Examining the preliminary evidence, by S. R. Hart, K. Stewart, and S. R. Jimerson, 2011, *Contemporary School Psychology: Formerly" The California School Psychologist," 15*(1), p. 73.

Appendix G

Benefactor Letter

In our gratitude curriculum, one step is to raise the students' awareness of the many things adults do at school to support student success. In order to raise their awareness in a concrete way, I will create a material that captures this idea through photos and examples of adults acting on the students' behalf.

By filling out the questions below, you will be giving the children a better sense of how adults at school go out of their way to do positive things for students. Based on research with this age group, raising awareness of beneficial relationships can lead to a more positive perspective of school, greater feelings of gratitude and connection with their benefactors, and greater reciprocity and engagement in school activities.

Please do your best to answer in terms that a lower elementary student would understand. For example, try "stayed later than I was supposed to that day" instead of "did overtime". Please be as succinct as possible. **Can't think of anything?** See the back of this letter for some general examples to get your thoughts going.

1) Name something that you have done recently at MFS with the intent of having a positive impact on lower elementary (or all) students. Try to think of a time where you went above and beyond the basic expectations of your role at the school.

_____

_____

_____

2) How do you think this benefitted lower elementary students?

_____

_____

_____

3) What, if anything, did this cost you (i.e., time, energy, money, effort, etc.)?

_____

4) When would be a few good times to take your picture?

_____ _____ _____

By completing this form, you are giving your consent to participate in this study. Completing this form is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time.

General examples from research (Furlong et al., 2013):

- ✓ 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)
- ✓ Community volunteers (e.g., hours committed to enrichment events)

Appendix H
Sample Gratitude Lesson

Session 3: Benefits and Grateful Feelings

Goal: to establish the concept of benefit, to describe grateful feelings, to practice writing outside and inside stories, and to introduce the person, gift, and happy face symbols

Materials: benefactor work, large photographs of benefactors, symbols of the person, gift, and happy face, poster paper and markers, writing paper, prompt slips, pencils, and writing surfaces

Group Activity: (15 minutes)

1. "Today we are going to talk more about what we talked about last week. Did anyone have a chance to try the benefactor work?" Encourage students to share what they discovered about what adults at school do on their behalf.
2. "I have three more benefactor stories to share with you." Discuss three of the larger photographs you haven't shared with them yet by saying, "Did you know" before each fact.
3. "To help us keep track of what we are learning, we will use symbols to represent different things." Hold up the person symbol. "This drawing of a person will represent the person doing the nice thing to help you." Hold up one of the photographs. "What did this person do to help you?" Confirm student responses.
4. Hold up the gift symbol. "This drawing of a gift will represent the benefit you received. The benefit is what improved because of their help." Hold up the photograph. "How did you benefit when (person's name) helped you?" Confirm student responses.
5. Hold up the photograph, the person symbol, and the gift symbol. "Let's review. This person, (name), helped you by (what the person did), and you benefited from their help because (what good thing happened to the students). How does it make you feel to know that this person wanted to make things better for you?"
6. Write student responses on a poster that says, "We feel…" and has a happy face on it.
7. Hold up the happy face symbol. "This happy face will represent how you feel about the person's help." Review all three symbols with the other two photographs.

Writing Activity: (30 minutes)

1. "Today we are going to use our new symbols to write a very important story. Last time, I noticed that you each wrote about the outside story. We are going to do something new that I'm excited to show you."
2. "Writers write two kinds of stories. Outside stories tell what happened. This makes a pretty interesting story. For example, to describe what happened in

a story, I could write, 'my grandma poured the soda carefully into the glass.' But writers also have another, even more interesting story to tell called the inside story. Inside stories tell how writers feel about what happened. For example, I could write 'I held my breath and felt nervous that she might spill.' This makes an even better, more complete story because we know about what's happening on the outside and on the inside."

3. "In our gratitude stories, our outside stories would be what the person did (hold up the person card) and how we benefited (hold up the gift card). The inside stories would be how we felt about what the person did to help us."
4. "For example, I can remember a time when I lost my voice and I was sitting in the kitchen having lunch. (Name) heard me talking and could tell that my voice was almost gone. (Name) made me a hot cup of water with honey and lemon in it, and brought it over to me. That would be the outside story. Wouldn't it be so much more interesting if I also wrote that I was surprised and overwhelmed with happiness? That would be the inside story."
5. Sketch and write the example on a large sheet of poster paper. "I wrote what the person did (hold up the person symbol), how I benefited (hold up the gift symbol), and how I felt (hold up the happy face). Now it's your turn." Point to the symbols. "Think of a time someone when out of his or her way to do something nice for you, you benefited from his or her help, and you felt thankful or grateful. It can be one of the examples from the benefactor work, or you can think of your own."
6. "You will sketch first and then write your words. You will share one of these slips of paper with a partner (hold up the slips). It has the three symbols on it and questions to help you remember what the parts of the story are. If there is time, you can go back to fix and fancy up your writing. As you write, remember to include your inside stories! When you have an idea, please put up your thumb."
7. Distribute the papers, slips, and pencils to pairs of students who have their thumb up. Help any remaining students think of something to write. Help students who need clarification on the assignment, referring back to the symbols and questions on the slip. Give the students a two-minute warning then invite them to come back to circle. Read out loud a few of their stories.

Session 3 Prompt:

Grateful Feelings
Think of a time that someone went out of his or her way to help you.

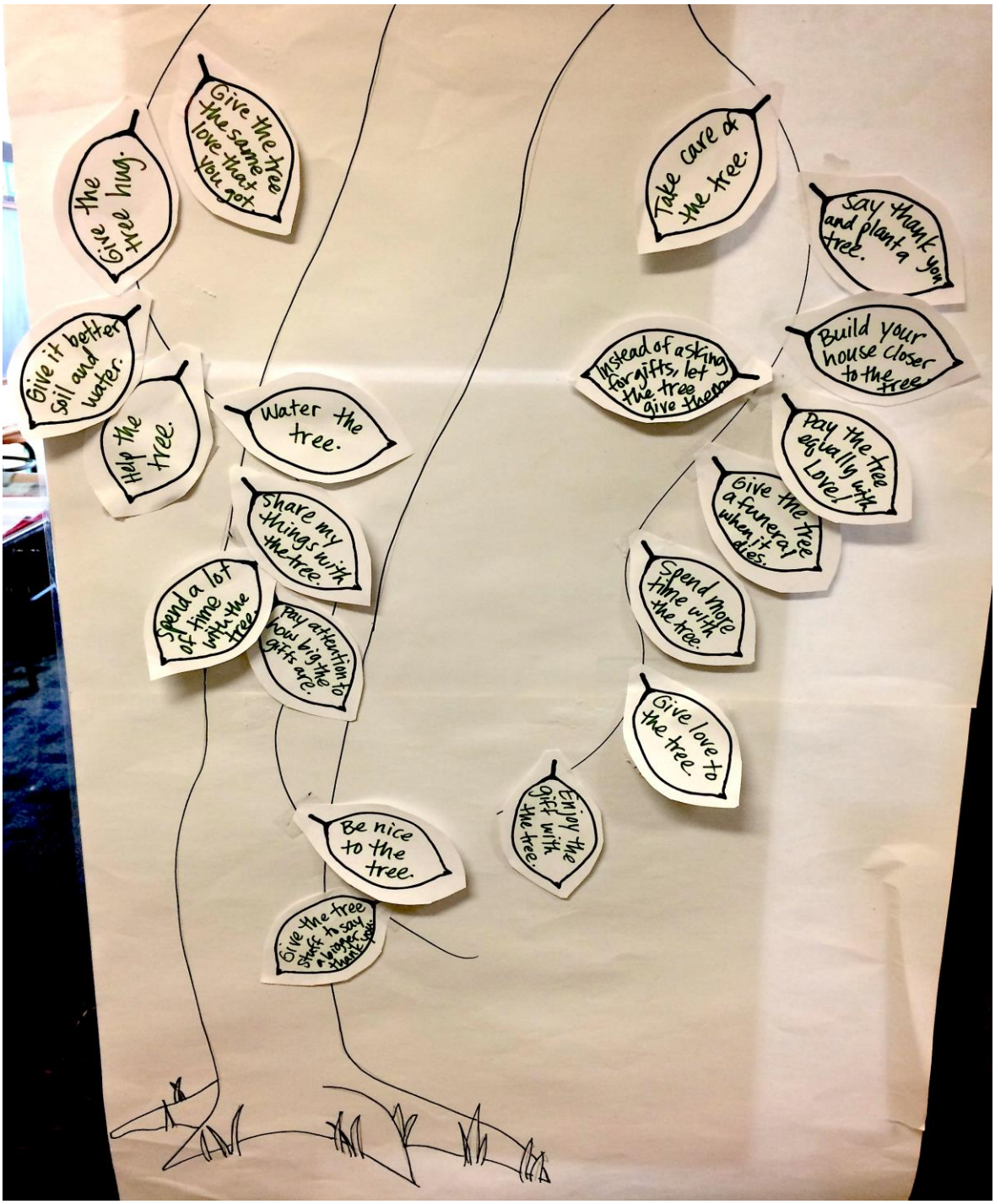

What did the person do to help you?


How did you benefit from the help?

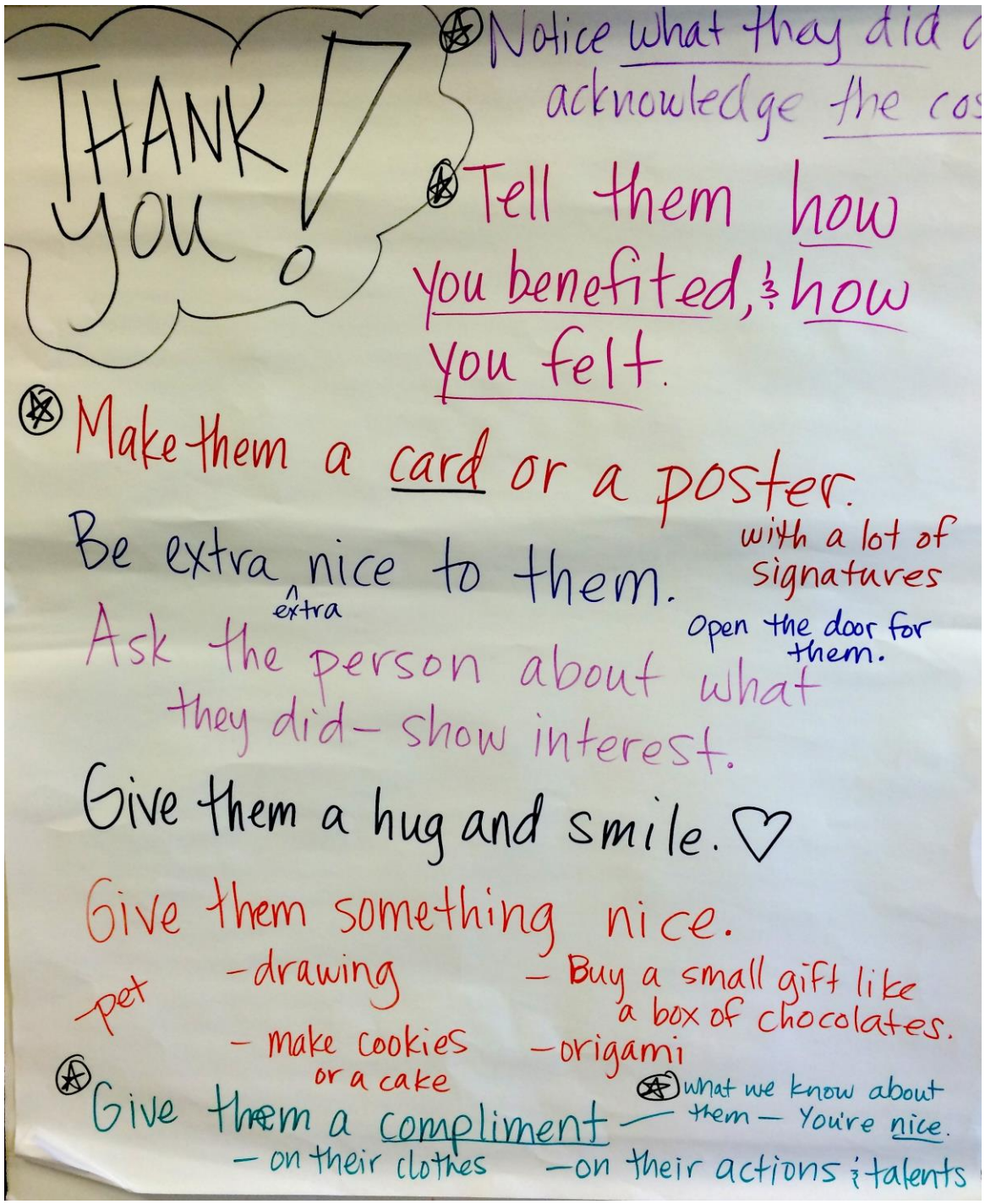

How did that person's help make you feel?

Appendix I
Practicing Gratitude Expert Certificate

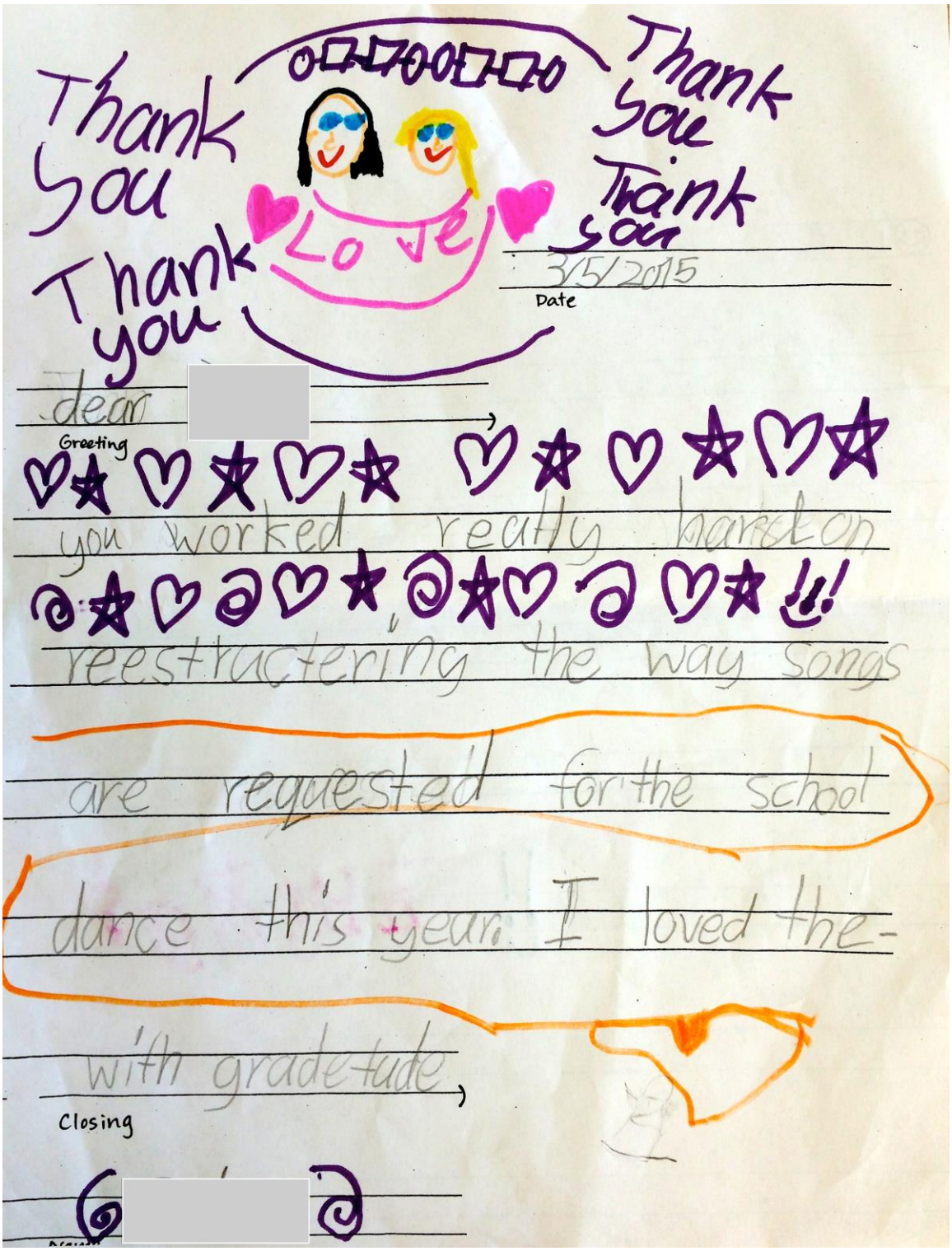
Appendix J
Giving Back to the Giving Tree Poster



Gratitude Expressions That Go Beyond Good Manners Poster



Appendix K
Gratitude Letter Sample from a Six-Year-Old (Front)



Gratitude Letter Sample from a Six-Year-Old (Back)