

3-27-2021

Count Your Blessings: The Practice of Gratitude in New Jersey Elementary Classrooms

Rebecca Stillman

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Count Your Blessings:
The Practice of Gratitude in
New Jersey Elementary
School Classrooms

By Rebecca Stillman

Advisor: Jessica Fede, Ph.D.

Date: March 27, 2021

Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the University Honors Scholar designation
at Johnson & Wales University

Acknowledgments

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have received enormous support and inspiration from a variety of people whom I would like to acknowledge.

First, I would like to thank my parents for continuously being by my side and giving me the motivation to write this thesis. High achievement and recognition was never my motivation for being an honors student. Yet, it was, and forever will be, my love for learning. I thank my parents for reminding me of this idea and supporting me at times when I didn't think I would be able to finish.

I would next like to thank Professor Fede for acting as my advisor for this project. Her professional knowledge on psychology was a great tool to me, as psychology is not my main course of study. I appreciate all of her guidance particularly in how to begin this tremendous feat.

I want to thank Dr. Wagner for her dedication to the honors program and all of the students within it. Without her commitment to the success and well-being of each student, the honors program would be incomplete. At the start, the thought of composing a 30+ page thesis paper was extremely overwhelming, and I thank Dr. Wagner for answering all of my questions, being understanding about deadlines, and making herself available to me whenever I needed it.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Professor Medeiros for being an extraordinary support system to me throughout my college career. I had the privilege of taking numerous seminars with Professor Medeiros and her influence on my writing abilities and outlook on the power of language has been enormous. Her impact as an educator is what gave me the inspiration to write about education. Researching and writing about this topic over the past months has given me a greater appreciation for the continuous work educators do.

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Abstract

“Count Your Blessings” takes a deeper look into the changing education landscape to better understand the topic of gratitude. The main research question at hand addresses whether gratitude is being utilized by educators in New Jersey elementary classrooms, and if so, what is its impact. The research additionally prompts whether educators prefer this topic be mandated as part of elementary school curricula. This study examined the specific audience of K-8 educators in the state of New Jersey in hopes to gain a better understanding of their awareness, rated importance, and support of the topic of gratitude in elementary education. Specific steps in this research included reviewing relevant literature, conducting a survey, and leading an in-depth interview. The major finding obtained from completing this research is that gratitude is a valued tool that teachers support and want to introduce in their classrooms, but want to do so at their own pace and style, free from standardization or embedment in curriculum.

Research Question

Are teachers in New Jersey incorporating the concept of gratitude into their classroom lessons? If so, what are these practices, and how are they being measured and analyzed? If there is a strong enough need for this topic to be introduced within the classroom setting, what is the best methodology to do so: through formal means such as embedding the topic within educator curriculum, or less formal means such as within educator workshops and professional development days?

Literature Review

Gratitude

“Practicing gratitude is how we acknowledge that there’s enough and we’re enough.”

This quote, by Brené Brown, embodies the true meaning of the philosophy of gratitude.

Gratitude is the appreciation for what one receives in life, whether it be good or bad. With this practice, “people acknowledge the goodness in their lives” (Harvard Health Publishing) and understand that the idea is larger than their individual selves. Although not new, the concept has gained great popularity in recent years as a part of the health and wellness trend among society. According to the Global Wellness Institute, “the global wellness movement is now valued at \$4.2 trillion, up 12.8% from \$3.7 trillion in 2015 — and it’s only expected to continue growing over the next few years as we continue to recognize the importance of valuing ourselves first” (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). As a whole, the practice of gratitude can have the ability to positively affect many aspects of a person’s life. Gratitude is perceived as one of the most underutilized tactics in increasing one’s overall happiness.

The article “Gratitude and Well Being: The Benefits of Appreciation” speaks to this idea of how practicing gratitude can produce higher levels of well-being in individuals. In order to support this claim, the article presents various empirical studies, in which people were studied before, during, and after participating in gratitude practices. One study conducted by Wood et al. determined “higher levels of gratitude predicted better subjective sleep quality and duration” (Sansone, 2010). Another study done by Polak and McCullough found that “gratitude may have the potential to reduce the negative effects of materialistic strivings” (Sansone, 2010).

A second article titled “Extending the Tradition of Giving Thanks: Recognizing the Health Benefits of Gratitude,” directly highlights the health benefits of the practice. In addition to increasing one’s sense of well-being, those who engage in practicing gratitude reported higher levels of “happiness, optimism, and satisfaction with their lives, greater progress in attaining important life goals, higher frequency of feeling loved, and lower reported incidence of stress and depression” (Alspach, 2009). The author also speculates on how the practice of gratitude can create a “ripple effect” of “reciprocal kindness.” This means those who practice gratitude will, in turn, want to help others in their lives, foster “greater generosity” and show “emotional support” (Alspach, 2009). In addition to these psychological benefits, the article also states that practicing gratitude produces a myriad of physical health benefits as it says, “grateful people take better care of themselves and engage in more protective health behaviors” (Alspach, 2009).

While at first the concept of practicing gratitude had a large presence in the fields of science and medicine, it has now spread to areas such as the workplace, and more recently, the classroom. Gratitude has become a popular topic in colleges, with various universities offering courses specifically centered around it. For example, the University of Michigan offers a course titled “Unleashing the Power of Gratitude,” and Garrett College offers “The Gratitude Project.” Additionally, many universities offer counseling and psychological centers on campus, where students can voluntarily participate in programs that teach and promote gratitude. In the article “Brightening the Mind: The Impact of Practicing Gratitude on Focus and Resilience in Learning,” the author concludes that “educators may want to consider embedding gratitude practices in classes” for students, based on the beneficial results of her study (Wilson, 2016). Teaching the concept of gratitude has gained popularity among many elementary school

classrooms as well, with teachers promoting the concept either based on their own philosophies, or through mandated school curriculum. In Brookwood Elementary School in Georgia, teachers promote gratitude to their students through a series of lessons adopted from “7 Mindsets Academy.” This concept is also being practiced in Wisconsin at Kegonsa Elementary School, where teachers promote lessons based on “Nurturing Gratitude From the Inside Out: 30 Activities for Grades K-8,” developed by the Greater Good Science Center at Berkeley University. Research provides evidence that various states across the nation are having educators teach this concept to elementary school students, but there is not enough information to support whether this is being done through mandated professional curriculum, recommended practices fostered through professional development, or simply a personal practice that the educator wants to embed with classroom lessons.

Gratitude Development in Youth

There have been many studies done on the topic of gratitude intervention, or the age when the practice should begin being taught to people. In the article titled “Benefits, Mechanisms, and New Directions for Teaching Gratitude to Children,” Kristen Layous provides an explanation for the age when these philosophical teachings should be introduced to children. The author’s research shares that gratitude should be introduced and taught to people ideally between the ages of 8-11 years old. She goes on to add that “an understanding of more complex emotions (necessary for the learning of gratitude) is not achieved until 7 years of age and increases through adolescence.” Layous presents the “Theory of Mind,” which is a concept that outlines cognitive ability for one to internalize his/her own mental state, beliefs, and feelings, as

well as those of others. Research indicates that a “child cannot think through the intention of a benefactor without recognizing that the other person has thoughts distinct from his or her own ” (Layous, 2014). She acknowledges that “Theory of Mind” should be ingrained in children before attempting to teach gratitude to them, as the concept requires that a person be able to acknowledge the gratefulness present in his/her own life, as well as in the lives of others.

Another article titled, “Positive Psychological Interventions for Children: A Comparison of Gratitude and Best Possible Selves Approaches” additionally addresses the developmental research on gratitude and the age at which it’s best perceived in children. The author notes that although studies have suggested the skill to be found in those as early as 4-5 year olds, “some aspects ... may require greater cognitive development or interpersonal experience to understand fully” (Owens, 2013). The authors go on to reference another source that says older (9-12 years old) children were more likely than younger (4-8 years old) children to report gratitude for a variety of people and interpersonal relationships, including family members, friends, teachers, police, and firefighters” (Gordon et al., 2004). A final article, “Establishing the Effectiveness of A Gratitude Diary Intervention on Children’s Sense of School Belonging” adds that “gratitude is likely to emerge during middle childhood and develop towards adolescence. It would be beneficial to implement gratitude teachings in elementary school settings because “such interventions teach strategies and perspectives that not only aid in times of need, but also help prevent future difficulties” (Kirschman et al. 2009).

Gratitude Practices in Elementary School Classrooms

The average American elementary student spends 6.66 hours of their day in the classroom (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008), which could be equal to, or even more than the amount of time spent awake at home with parents/guardians. Therefore, it makes sense to understand greater information about interventions in the classroom setting. Several studies have been done to investigate current applications of gratitude practices within the school classroom environment, as teachers really do have the capacity to help shape the minds of students. In the article, “Establishing the Effectiveness of A Gratitude Diary Intervention on Children’s Sense of School Belonging,” authors Tara Diebel et al. delve into this topic to understand if regularly engaging students through “simple and intentional activities” (Diebel et al., 2016) has a positive effect on their well-beings. The authors share that in another study done by Froh et al. (2008), tested on children ages 11-13, there was a “notable increase in school satisfaction” (Diebel et al., 2016) present, yet when done on children ages 5-11, the intervention was not as effective. The authors did notice one strength of the study though, that the intervention technique was able to be easily adapted to “reflect the academic skills of the participants” (Diebel et al., 2016). For example, younger students were able to draw pictures of things they were grateful for, rather than writing their thoughts. The actual study conducted by the researcher found that the use of gratitude diary interventions “had a beneficial effect on both gratitude towards school and sense of school belonging” (Diebel et al., 2016). The study corroborates with Froh et al.’s, which concluded that “a school-based gratitude intervention with adolescents was linked to a significant increase in school satisfaction” (Diebel et al., 2016).

In a second article titled “Nice Thinking! An Educational Intervention That Teaches Children to Think Gratefully,” the authors examine the interactions between social-cognitive

appraisals and gratitude. “Social-cognitive” describes how individuals process information about surrounding people and social situations. The main goal of the study was to understand whether “a new gratitude intervention that targets appraisals of beneficial social exchanges” (Froh et al., 2008) is effective in increasing gratitude in children. Rather than having students journal about gratitude, which is the most common methodology found across research, this study involved educating an experimental group of students on the topic of gratitude itself. The lesson plan was executed through classroom discussions, writing assignments, and role-playing activities. The lesson plan included topics such as: “understanding a benefactor’s intention behind helping a beneficiary,” “understanding the cost experienced by benefactors when giving a benefit,” and “understanding the benefits of receiving a gift bestowed by a benefactor” (Froh et al., 2008). Both the control and experimental groups were then placed in a situation a week later where they were asked to write “thank you” cards. Results showed that more cards were produced by those introduced to the concept of gratitude. The authors add that the benefit appraisal curriculum introduced by them offers a “uniform, structured lesson plan that provides a relatively easy-to-implement tool that complements other positive psychology exercises available for use by school psychologists” (Froh et al., 2008).

Social and Emotional Learning

According to various websites such as My Learning Tools, the topic of gratitude falls within a larger educational category called Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL is “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive

goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2021). Although this concept has gained popularity in recent years, its origins date back to the 1960s in Connecticut when a man named James Comer began piloting a program called the Comer School Development Program at Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center (The Comer School Development Program, 1993). In an analysis of his findings, Comer concluded that "the contrast between a child's experiences at home and those in school deeply affects the child's psychosocial development and that this in turn shapes academic achievement" (The Comer School Development Program, 1993). From there, educators across Connecticut, specifically in the New Haven area, became pioneers in integrating SEL into classroom teachings. Additional educators began experimenting from the 1960s to 1990s with the topic of SEL, until finally in 1994, the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2021) was founded. The topic became more mainstream in 1995 when *New York Times* science reporter, Daniel Goleman published, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, “in which he argued that character matters and, more significantly, the skills that build character can be taught” (Edutopia, 2011).

The article titled, “Plays Nice With Others: Social–Emotional Learning and Academic Success” provides additional information on SEL and how it has become increasingly popular over the years. According to the authors, “It is becoming ever clearer that SEL must be given the attention required to maximize not only children’s success in social relations and personal well-being but also their broader school/classroom adjustment and academic” (Denham et al., 2010). The literature goes on to discuss this idea of how SEL plays a major role in contributing to the academic success of a students as they state, “For the child with SEL strengths, social

interactions in the classroom are replete with information about the self and how to succeed, to become competent; it is within these social environments that children learn academic values, standards, and motivation” (Denham et al., 2010). The authors want it to be known that although SEL is a newer intervention in education, it’s something that can aid in enhancing a student’s development and academic success, thus contributing to the educator’s goal. This study, along with “Promoting the Social and Emotional Learning of Millions of School Children,” by Roger Weissberg, both stress the importance of the environment and how it can impact a student’s SEL development. Weissberg, who worked at CASEL for 25 years, shares, “SEL programming fosters students’ social-emotional competencies by establishing positive classroom and school cultures, climates, and conditions for learning that are caring, cooperative, culturally responsive, well-managed, participatory, and safe.” (Weissberg, 2019). The study goes on to discuss how individuals within the environment, educators, play a large role in helping to engrain these values and practices with students. Weissberg references another study within his literature where “two major meta-analyses examined the short- and long-term effects of universal, school-based SEL programs across 265 reports on student outcomes.” The findings of the meta-analyses included the following information: “compared with control students, students who participated in SEL programs showed significantly more positive outcomes, including an 11-percentage-point gain in achievement,” and that “SEL programs that were well-implemented and adhered to a combination of recommended practices were more likely to promote positive outcomes” (Weissberg, 2019).

In the study “How Social and Emotional Learning Can Succeed,” Jal Mehta addresses why SEL can successfully develop schools and students within them. She too references the

meta-analyses noted by Weissberg and concludes that the reason SEL interventions have worked well while others have failed is due to one reason: demand. Mehta emphasizes that in reality, “there is no shortage of possible educational solutions,” but there is a shortage of demand from teachers looking to try new methodologies (Mehta, 2020). She points out that in studies done on SEL, there has been a considerable demand from the educational community for implementation; “ninety-three percent of teachers in a nationally represented poll say that it is very or fairly important for schools to promote SEL” (Mehta, 2020). Similar to other pieces of literature, Mehta emphasizes that not only do parents encourage the introduction of the topic, but so do teachers as it will ultimately help to bolster the academic success of students. Mehta points out that the SEL interventions that have worked well are the ones that have specifically focused on a one concept within the overriding category, such as “understanding emotions” or “developing interpersonal skills” (Mehta, 2020). A third and final reason Mehta concludes the introduction of SEL programs to have been successful is due to the fact that it has not been a “one size fits all” situation; each school is able to adapt the teachings differently based on considerations such as budget, age of students, etc. Mehta continues to offer solutions as to how to best introduce the practice into school systems and finishes by suggesting that schools should “stimulate demand but don’t mandate.” By this she means that schools should encourage their educators to introduce the topic to students, rather than mandating it as a portion of the curriculum (Mehta, 2020).

Educational Climate in New Jersey

The main reason this research question inquires specifically about the state of New Jersey is for two reasons. First, New Jersey is my state of origin where I went through 12 years of

schooling, which provides me with a basis of familiarity and access. Second, and more importantly, New Jersey's socioeconomic and educational climate is progressive compared to other states in the U.S. According to the U.S. News & World Report, New Jersey is ranked number 2 in education out of all 50 states (U.S. News). More specifically, New Jersey is also ranked number 2 for Pre-K through 12th education (U.S. News), which is a statistic that specifically applies to this study. Therefore, a state with an education system such as New Jersey's might be already incorporating teachings about gratitude into classrooms.

In-depth research about New Jersey's educational programs has allowed me to have a better understanding of the types of progressive topics, similar to gratitude, that have successfully been integrated into classrooms. For example, one topic that has been introduced to classrooms across the state of New Jersey is mindfulness. The New Jersey School Board Association has a page on its website dedicated to the topic of mindfulness, and how educators can integrate these tools into their own classrooms. The association provides a video series titled, "Video Series: NJSBA's Education Matters: Mindfulness" (NJSBA 2019), that is public for all educators to view. The videos included in this playlist are "What is Mindfulness?," "The Impact of Mindfulness on a School District," "Getting Teacher Buy-in on Mindfulness," and "How is Mindfulness Implemented in the Schools." Here, we can see that the website first explained the topic, then discussed the impact of the topic on students, and finally gave suggestions on how this topic can be integrated into the classroom setting. Another well established education organization in New Jersey called The New Jersey Education Association provides teacher-contributed resources for mindfulness (Caputo, 2020). The organization also released an article sharing that educators at a school in Scotch Plains, NJ, were awarded a grant to help

further something called “The Mindful Zone” (One Mindful Education 2019) that they had already been working on. Individuals have even founded companies in hopes to further this initiative. For example, Lou Redmond founded a company called One Mindful Education, which is “a mindfulness & SEL education company that offers training for schools across the country.” Overall, mindfulness as an initiative has really taken off and become very popular across certain parts of the state since it’s introduction in 2017, and I anticipate it to only evolve from here.

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of the current educational climate, specifically in regards to gratitude curricula in New Jersey School Systems, mixed methods of research were conducted. Prior to beginning primary research, I first conducted secondary research. This specifically meant going to the JWULibrary hosted EBSCO database as well as Google Scholar analyzing scholarly, peer reviewed journals and publications that were relative to the topic of gratitude. There was initial difficulty in finding said publications as the topic of gratitude in the educational systems is very new. To fill this gap, I researched topics surrounding gratitude in education. This meant looking into gratitude and children and the current state of elementary education. The scholarly reviewed articles that appear in earlier literature review sections were the main pieces of research that helped to shape the eventual direction of this thesis; the presence of gratitude discussions in New Jersey elementary classrooms. Once New Jersey was established as the state of examination for this thesis, research was done to analyze the current environment of New Jersey education. This was specifically accomplished by taking an in-depth look into websites such as New Jersey Education Association, The New Jersey School Board Association, and New Jersey Department of Education. More detailed information on the topic of education in New Jersey can be found within the chapter titled “Educational Climate in New Jersey.”

Primary Research

After the appropriate journals and websites were analyzed, the next step was to conduct my own primary research. Both qualitative and quantitative research was necessary for this study in different ways. Quantitative research was done in order to “find patterns, make predictions,

test causal relationships, and generalize results to wider populations” (Bhandari 2020). To quantitatively understand the presence and efficacy of gratitude teachings in kindergarten through grade 8 classrooms in New Jersey, I developed and conducted an online survey titled, “Gratitude and K-8 Education” (Appendix A). As stated within the survey’s introduction, all of the research included within the survey was reviewed according to Johnson & Wales University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. Also included within the survey’s introduction is information about the purpose of the study, the estimated time of completion, and a confidentiality statement to assure participants that their identity would not be disclosed. Following this introduction is Question 1 (Figure 27) which asks participants if they have read the above information, voluntarily agree to participate, and are at least 18 years of age. This question was important as it certified that the individuals agreeing to participate in the study did indeed fit the description of a Kindergarten - Grade 8 teacher in New Jersey.

The questions in the 12-question survey were designed to eventually lead into the topic at hand, gratitude teachings in New Jersey elementary classrooms. To build up to this topic, I needed to understand other information about these individuals first. This included finding out about the participant’s age and what grade the participant teaches. After base information was established, I discovered what these individuals knew about gratitude by asking how familiar they were of the concept. Questions 5 - 8 then delved deeper into the topic of gratitude within the classroom setting. These questions inquired about if the participant spoke of gratitude in their classroom, the frequency of which the participant spoke about gratitude in their classroom, why this participant spoke about gratitude in their classroom, activities/mechanisms this participant utilized to aid discussions about gratitude in their classroom, and the impact of discussing

gratitude on this participant's students. Questions 9 - 11 were action-oriented in an effort to understand the participant's thoughts on implementation of the topic in classroom settings in the future. This meant asking how important the participant felt teaching gratitude to elementary students was, how likely the specific participant would be in implementing gratitude into their classroom, if the time and resources allowed, and if the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic would deter or encourage the participant to implement the topic of gratitude into their classroom. Finally, Question 12 asked the participant if there was any other further information they would like to share about the topic. An in-depth discussion of the survey question results and findings can be found within the section titled "Survey Results and Analysis."

On the other hand, qualitative research was done in order to "understand concepts, opinions, or experiences and gather in-depth insights" (Bhandari 2020) into the research question at hand. To qualitatively understand the presence and efficacy of gratitude teachings in kindergarten through grade 8 classrooms in New Jersey, I created an in-depth interview. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, this in-depth interview took place over a Zoom video call. Prior to beginning our discussion, I first restated the purpose of the research study, the estimated time the interview would take, and a confidentiality statement to assure this participant that their identity would not be disclosed. Although this participant chose to tell me their identity, this information, and any other identifying details about their workplace will not be disclosed at any point within this thesis. The in-depth interview questions were very similar to those outlined within the survey, but instead ask for more descriptive answers to gain insights about the individual's opinions and experiences.

Similar to the survey, the first set of questions in the 8-question interview were designed to act as a transition into the topic at hand, gratitude teachings in New Jersey elementary classrooms. Question 1 served as a way to obtain background information about the school the individual teaches at. This question asked about an overview of the school/community the participant teaches at, with an emphasis on details such as socioeconomic background, diversity, grade range, student population, teacher population, etc. Question 2 was additionally used to gain background about the participant by asking for an overview of him/her and their job description at the school they teach at. An emphasis was placed on the participant's subject, grade, years as a teacher, years in the position, professional educational background, race, age, etc. After background information was obtained, I then transitioned to the topic of gratitude by asking if this participant teaches any other lessons in their classroom, besides the subject matter they cover; I was specifically trying to understand if they ever spoke about ideas of leadership, creativity, teamwork, adaptability, professionalism, responsibility, etc. If so, were these topics part of their curriculum, or was it a personal choice to include them? The goal at this point was to understand what social emotional learning related topics were being integrated into the classroom by the educator. After establishing the transition into this subject, I asked the participant if he/she was familiar with the topic of gratitude. If so, was this something that had ever been integrated in the classroom setting? From there, I asked the participant to elaborate on why he/she chose to include this in the classroom, examples of how/when the topic was incorporated into classroom lessons, and if there was a noticeable difference in students from choosing to discuss this topic. Question 6 was then focused on understanding this participant's opinion on the practicality of implementing gratitude teachings into elementary school

classrooms. This meant asking if gratitude should be discussed in classrooms, and if so, would the participant prefer that the topic be included as part of mandated curriculum, or incorporated through educator workshops/professional development sessions. The final section of the interview was to understand the participant's thoughts on the impact of COVID-19 and this topic, and if the participant had any other thoughts to add to the discussion. A discussion of the participant involved in this survey, and the interview question results and findings can be found within the section titled, "Survey Results and Analysis."

Recruitment Methodology

Various mixed methods were utilized in order to recruit individuals to participate in this study. Similarly to most researchers, I first contacted people within my network who fit the description of a New Jersey elementary educator, or people who knew others with that description. However, the way that proved to be the most successful was through means of social media, specifically Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn. Survey recruitment began in September 2020 and went through the month of February 2021. The prompts used within each social media post (Appendix B) were each based on and included the same information; an introduction about the researcher, the purpose of the study, a confidentiality statement, and note saying that all research was approved by the Johnson & Wales IRB.

Facebook was the most-used social media platform out of all of the others mentioned, due to the fact that the platform has "groups" and "pages" designed for all types of people, even New Jersey educators. Starting in September 2020, I identified groups on Facebook such as "New Jersey Educators Unite," "New Jersey Education Association," "New Jersey Teacher

Network - Social & Professional Group,” “NJ Teacher 2 Teacher,” and more statewide pages/groups to post the survey in. Referencing back to my research on New Jersey educational systems, I then chose 10 different counties’ Facebook pages to post the survey in. Not only were counties with premier and progressive education systems chosen, but so were ones with average, and even poorly performing education systems. It was important to obtain a diverse group of participants to understand the impact of socio economic climate on the topic at hand. The identified Facebook pages had anywhere from 200 to 13,000 members in them. I chose to post my survey on the following county’s town resident/school system Facebook pages:

- Bergen County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - Ridgfield, Closter, Rochelle Park, East Rutherford, Saddle River, Edgewater, Montvale, Teaneck, Tenafly, Englewood, Fort Lee, Franklin Lakes, Woodcliff Lake, Hackensack, and Paramus.
- Camden County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - Pennsauken, Bellmawr, Haddon Township, Haddonfield, Brooklawn, Laurel Springs, Camden, Voorhees, Cherry Hill, and Collingswood.
- Hudson County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - Bayonne, East Newark, Union City, Hoboken, Jersey City, Kearny, North Bergen Secaucus, Weehawken, and West New York.
- Mercer County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - East Windsor, Hamilton, Hightstown, Lawrence, Princeton, Robbinsville, Trenton, and West Windsor.
- Middlesex County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):

- Cranbury, East Brunswick, Edison, Jamesburg, Metuchen, Middlesex, Monroe, New Brunswick, Old Bridge, Perth Amboy, Piscataway, Plainsboro, Sayreville, South Amboy, South Brunswick, Spotswood, and Woodbridge,.
- Monmouth County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - Asbury Park, Colts Neck, Deal, Eatontown, Freehold, Hazlet, Holmdel, Howell, Long Branch, Manalapan, Manasquan, Marlboro, Matawan, Middletown, Neptune, Rumson, Tinton Falls, and Wall.
- Ocean County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - Barnegat, Bay Head, Berkeley, Brick, Dover, Jackson, Lakehurst, Lakewood, Lavallette, Manchester, Ocean, Point Pleasant, Seaside Heights, and Stafford.
- Passaic County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - Clifton, Haledon, Hawthorne, Little Falls, Passaic, Paterson, Ringwood, Wayne, and West Milford.
- Sussex County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - Andover, , Branchville, Frankford, Franklin, Hamburg, Hopatcong, Lafayette, Montague, Newton, Sparta, Sussex, Vernon, Walpack, and Wantage.
- Union County (Specific towns Facebook pages included):
 - Berkeley Heights, Clark, Cranford, Elizabeth, Kenilworth, Linden, New Providence, Plainfield, Rahway, Roselle, Scotch Plains, Summit, Union, and Westfield.

In order to recruit participants on LinkedIn, I utilized the same exact prompt as shown on Facebook (Appendix B). I tried to keep the language as professional as possible, knowing that

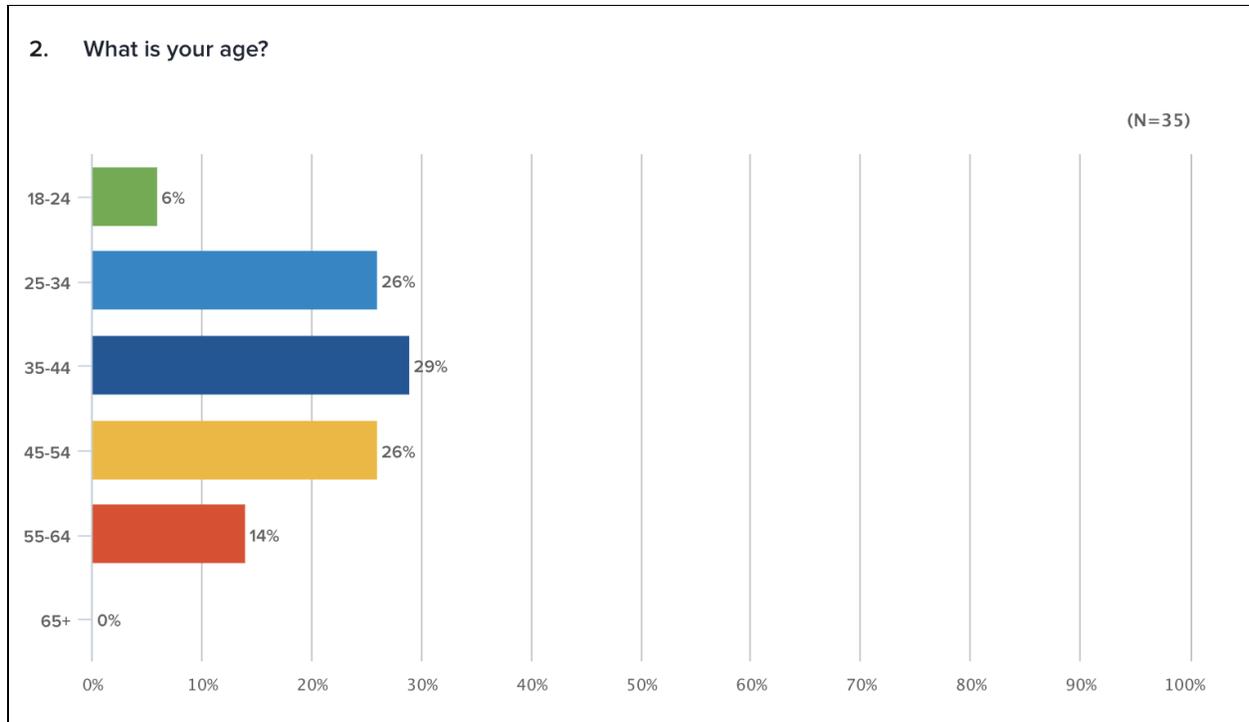
LinkedIn is a more professional space. However, on Instagram, I chose to use better suited language to match the younger audience. All of the most relevant information was still included, but knowing that “the average Instagram user looks at a story for about 15 seconds” (Villa 2020), it made sense to make the prompt as brief as possible. I originally was not going to utilize TikTok, as I was unsure if the audience would be appropriate, but I decided that it could only provide a benefit. Because TikTok is a video-based platform, I simply read the post content out loud and asked users to interact with the link that was provided in my biography. On LinkedIn, Instagram, and TikTok I posted the prompts solely on my own personal pages and did not interact with any established groups. The survey platform utilized, SoGo Survey, was unable to provide me with specific insights about how many individuals I gained through each separate distribution channel. More information would be needed to identify how many users on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and TikTok participated in the survey.

In order to recruit participants for this in-depth interview, I included a sentence in the end section of the initial survey that read, “Thank you for your participation in this survey! Please email gratitudeinedu@gmail.com if you would be interested in participating in an in-depth interview on this topic.” I chose to create a custom email specific for this thesis, as not to reveal my own personal details on a public survey. One individual reached out to this email, and from there, we reviewed different dates and times that would be convenient to set up a Zoom video call. Additional details on the in-depth interview question results and findings can be found within the section titled “In-Depth Interview Results and Analysis.”

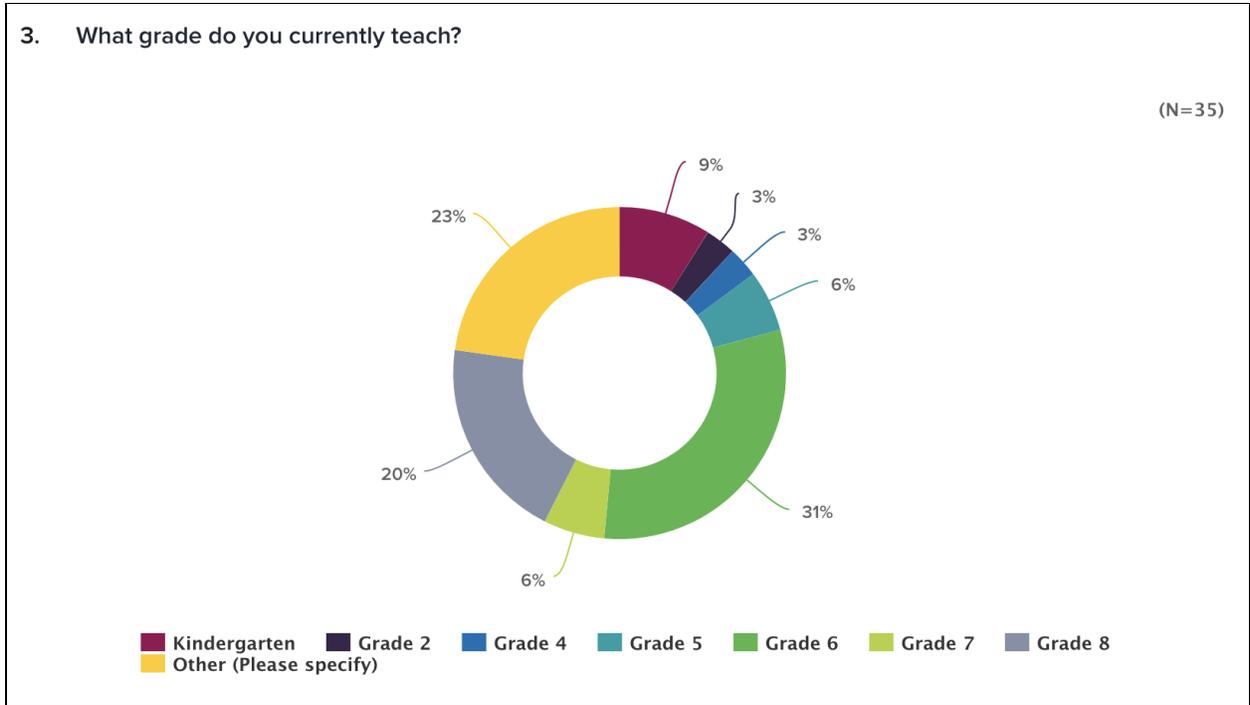
Survey Results and Analysis

By conducting both qualitative and quantitative data, I was able to obtain broad insights concerning gratitude in New Jersey elementary education. The main insight that was developed after analyzing both the survey question responses and the in-depth interview answers is that New Jersey elementary educators support the idea of gratitude and think that it's necessary to introduce to their students, but currently don't have the time or resources to do so.

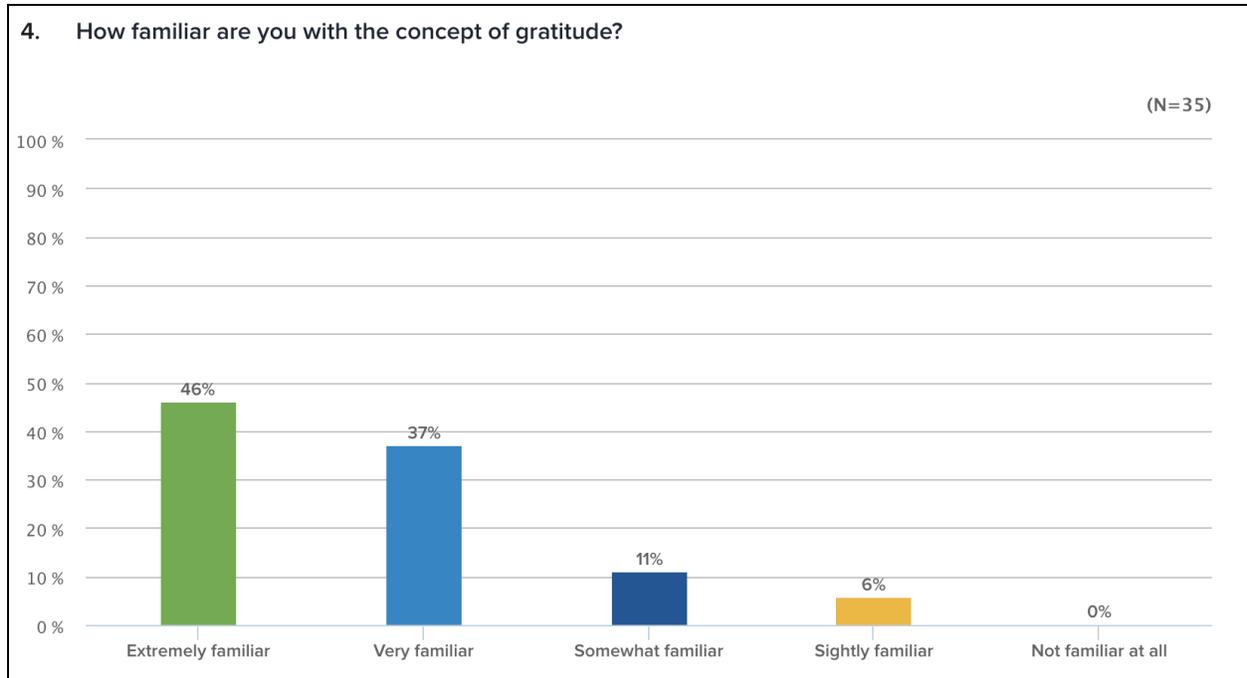
Through the survey, "Gratitude and K-8 Education," I obtained a total of 35 responses. Although slim, the research samples were each diverse and provided me with a more realistic understanding of how an educator would view this topic. Prior to viewing the results, I predicted that most respondents would be people in their 20-30s who are familiar with gratitude and in support of introducing the idea to their students. Although some of this information was correct, most was not. To begin, the highest age group of participants who took part in the study were between the range of "35-44" years old (29%). Age groups of "25-34" and "45-54" each had 26% of participants. I anticipated participants to be mostly under 35 years-old, as the topic of gratitude is on the newer side of educational teaching topics. Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 1.



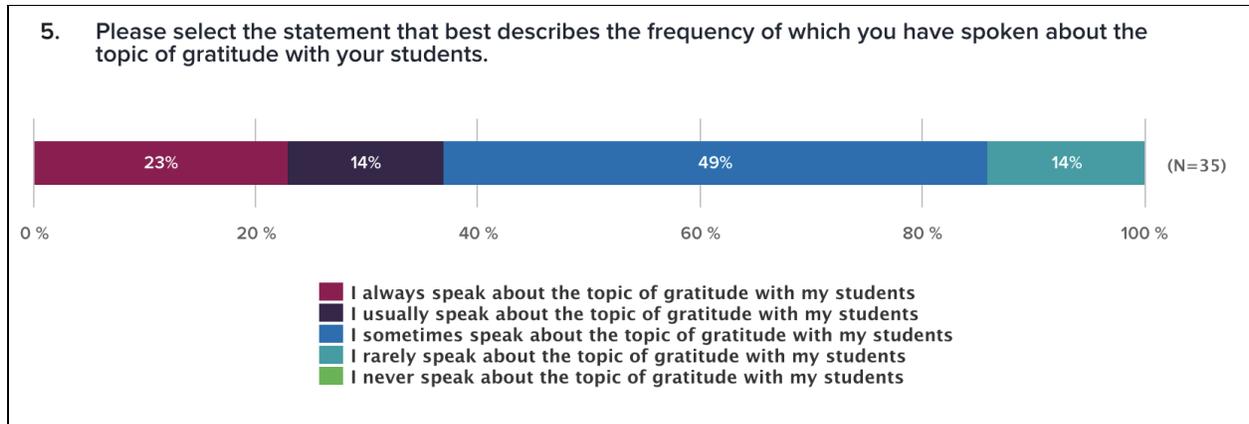
Although the intended audience for this survey was originally for elementary school educators, I decided to add additional answer options to Question 3, which asked about which grade the survey participants currently teach. This meant adding “other,” with a textbox for the participant to write in, just in case this person taught multiple grades, was a special needs educator, or something else I hadn’t thought of. It was important to include a variety of options in order to make participants feel recognized, and thus want to continue answering questions. The most chosen answers were “Grade 8” (20%), “Grade 6” (31%), and “Other” (20%). Some of the answers found within the “Other” choice that were typed by participants included, “Preschool,” “High School,” “Multiple Grades,” “Speech Therapist,” and “Specials Teacher.” Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 2.



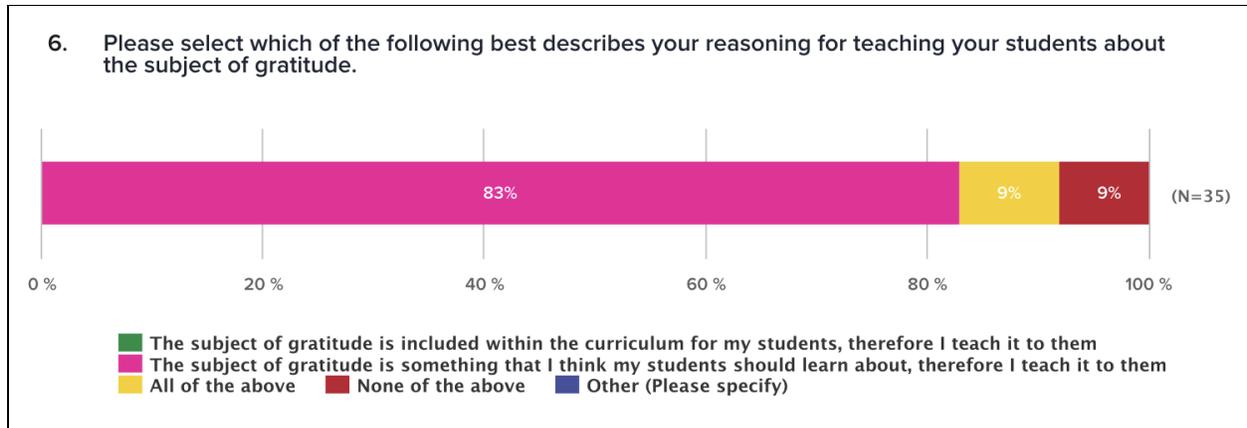
Question 4 was the first of any questions regarding the topic at hand, gratitude. My prediction was that most respondents would be pretty familiar with gratitude. I ended up being correct; 46% of participants were “Extremely Familiar” and 37% “Very Familiar,” with the numbers continuing to decrease in that suit. Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 3.



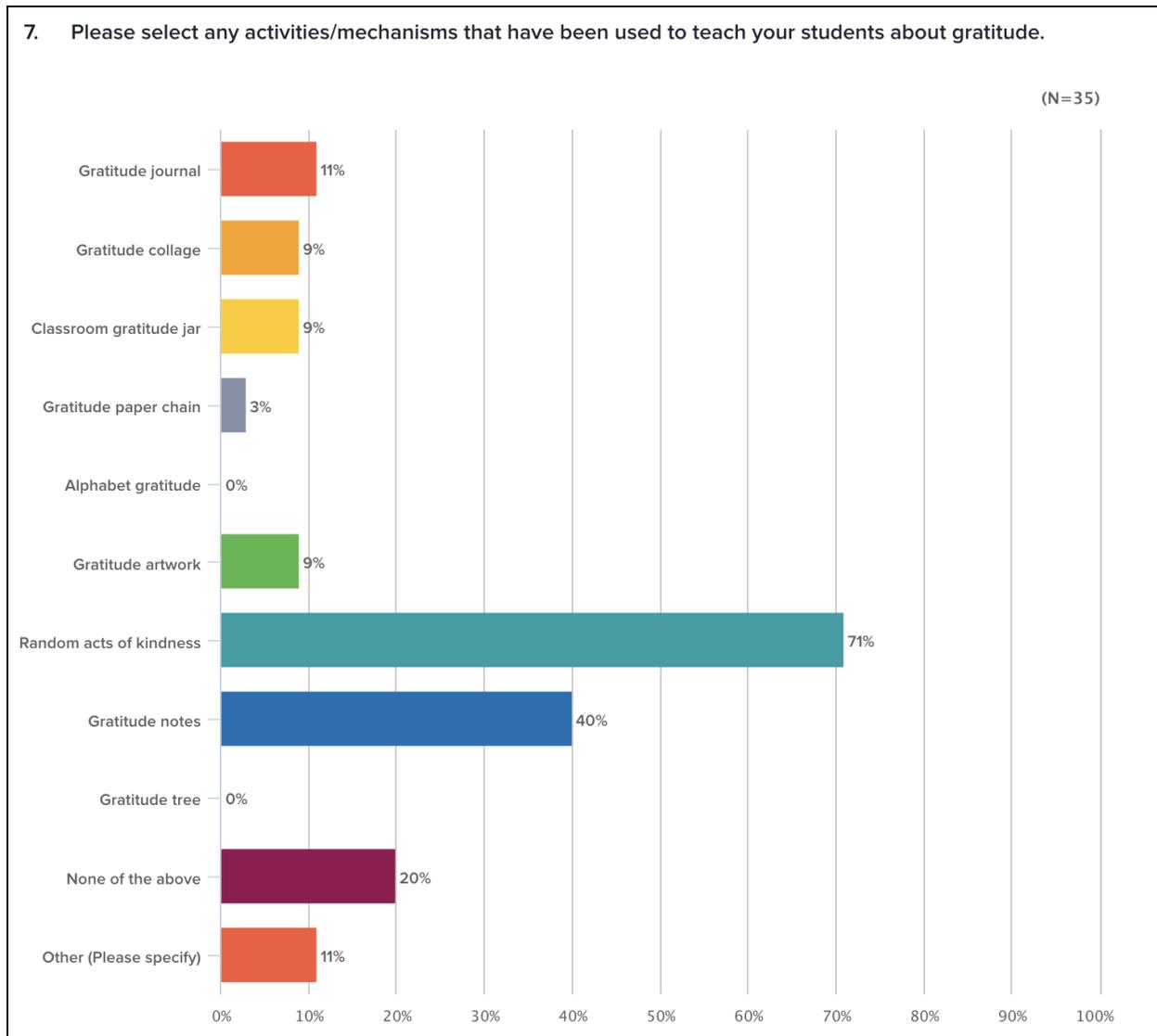
Question 5, which inquired about the frequency at which the participants have spoken about gratitude with their students, yielded mixed results. I expected the answer choice, “I never speak about gratitude with my students,” to receive the most votes, but it actually didn’t get any. The answer with the greatest amount of responses was, “I sometimes speak about gratitude with my students” (49%). Although there’s no way of knowing, I hypothesize that most people probably choose this answer as it acts as a “neutral,” which is appealing to individuals, according to a study from the NCBI (Moors, 2007). In this case, respondents might have not known what their typical gratitude classroom habits are at that specific moment while answering the question. The Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 4.



The purpose of Question 6 was to understand why educators were teaching gratitude; was it a personal choice or was it recommended/enforced by the school system? Findings from a study done by Luis Miguel Dos Santos titled, “The Cultural Cognitive Development of Personal Beliefs and Classroom Behaviours of Adult Language Instructors: A Qualitative Inquiry” reveal that “most teachers utilize their personal belief systems to engage their students through interactive teaching strategies” (Dos Santos, 2018). Data from the question in my survey support the previous claim as 83% of participants were in alignment with the answer choice, “The subject of gratitude is something that I think my students should learn about, therefore I teach it to them.” Additional information on the breakdown of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 5.

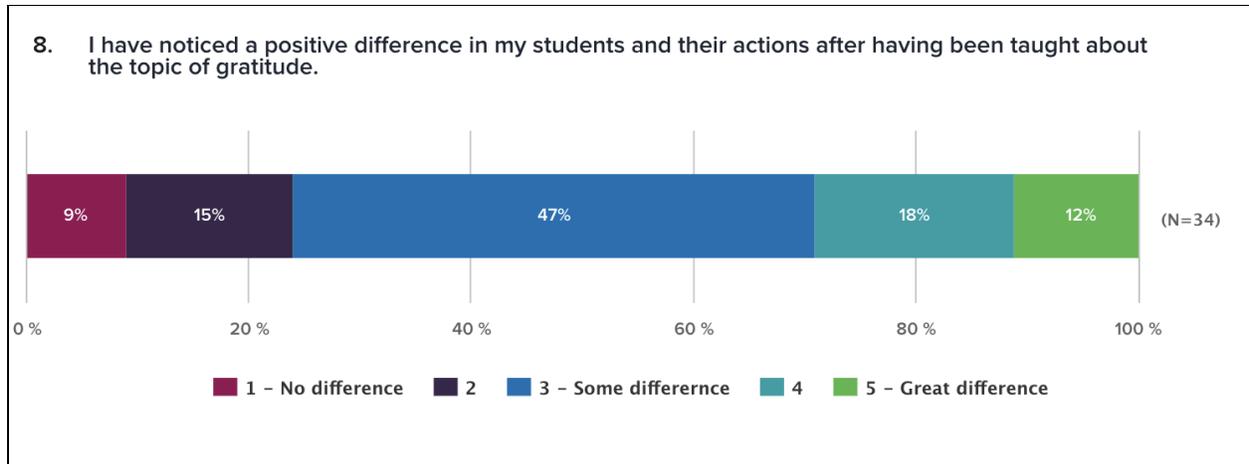


After establishing why educators chose to discuss the topic of gratitude with their students, I next wanted to know how this was being accomplished. The 10 activities listed as answer choices were both brainstormed and obtained from different educator resource websites, such as imaginelearning.com. In addition, an “other” option was included to see if there were any other additional methodologies participants were utilizing to teach gratitude to their students. Answer choice “random acts of kindness” was by far the most popular at 71%. I hypothesize that many teachers probably include this activity in their daily lessons without even knowing that it is a way to teach gratitude to their students. Please note that because participants were allowed to choose multiple answers, the total percentage exceeds 100%. Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 6.

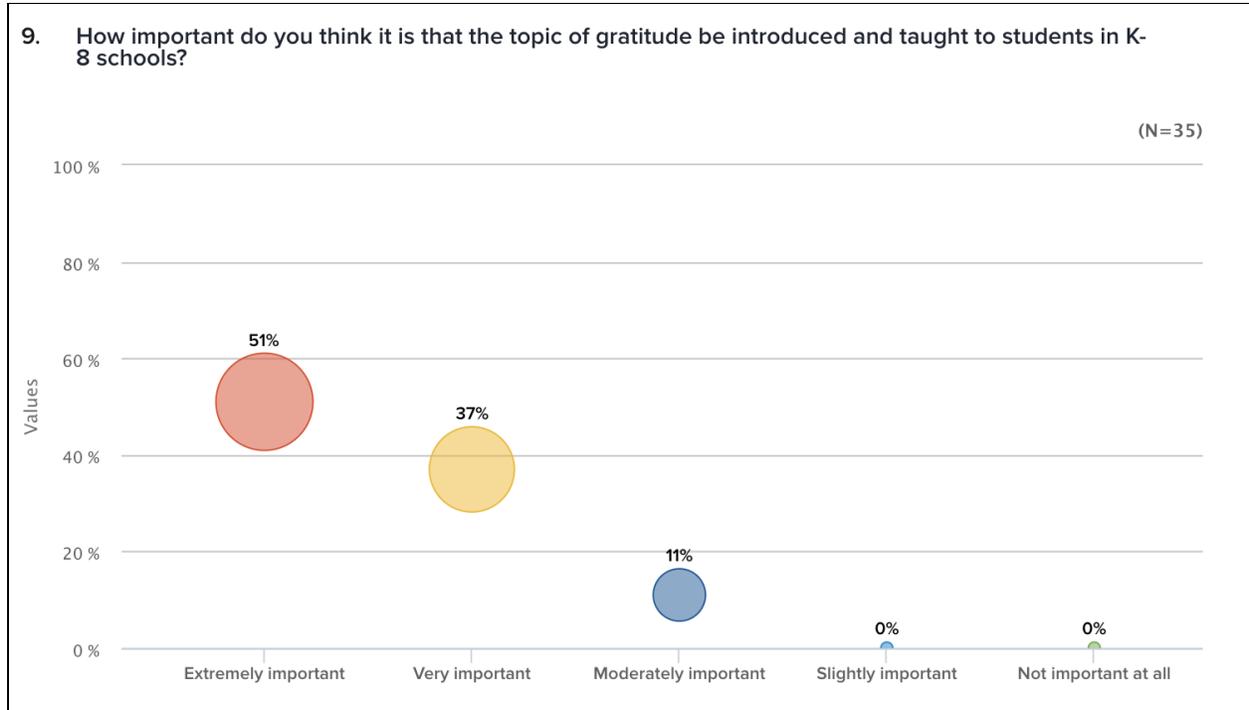


Question 8 asks participants how much difference they have noticed in their students since introducing gratitude teachings into the classroom. I anticipate the answers from this question to be flawed for one main reason; I don't think educators are avidly paying attention to how much the introduction of gratitude has had an impact on their students, making it difficult to answer this question. According to ASCD.com, educators utilize mixed methods to help track student progress such as homework turn-ins and assessments. The authors say that, "When teachers use systematic progress monitoring to track their students' progress in reading, mathematics, or

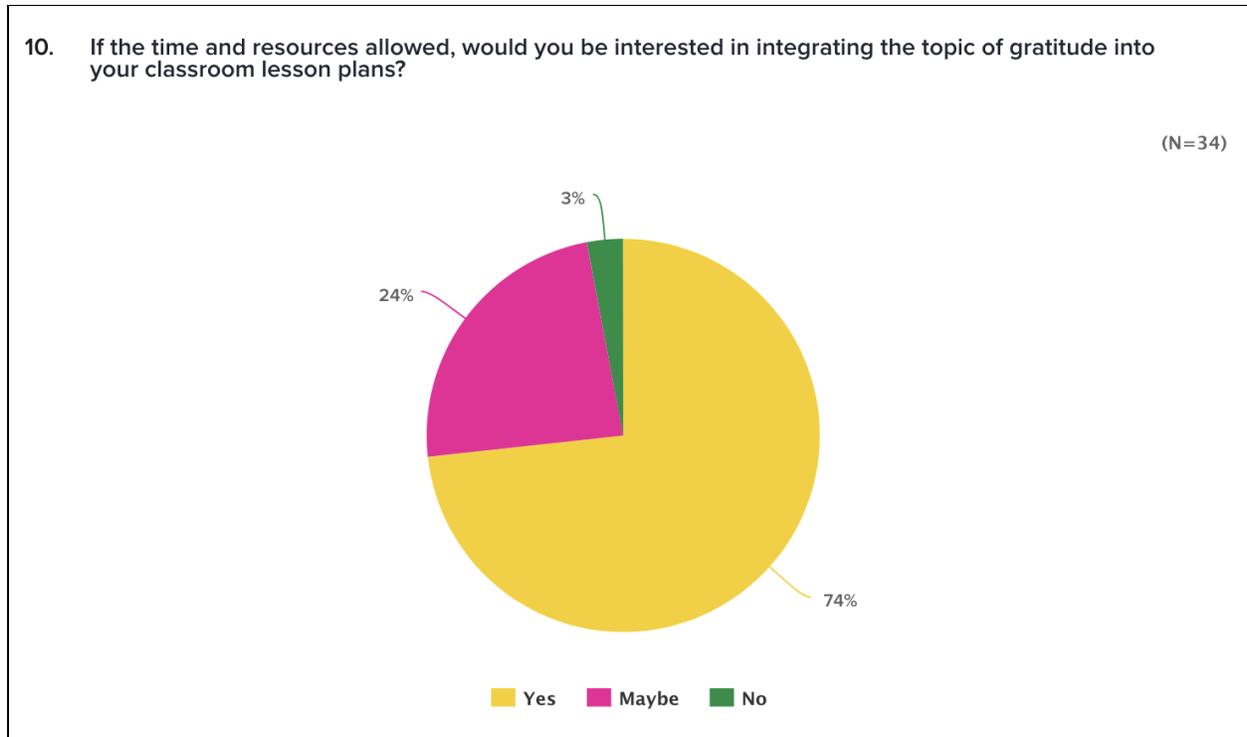
spelling, they are better able to identify students in need of additional or different forms of instruction, they design stronger instructional programs, and their students achieve better.” This information, and other research, leads me to believe that educators are tracking the progress of topics that are specifically embedded within their curriculum, not so much other topics such as gratitude. Therefore, it makes sense that the data from this question reveals that almost half (47%) of participants notice “some difference” in their students. This question would need to be asked after an educator has introduced a program within their classroom, and analyzed their students prior to it. Contributed answers from participants listed under the “other” choice included: “I tell my students to thank the person who helped them get on zoom,” “Every morning, we would go around in a circle and compliment the student next to us, and say thank you. It would be something as little as complimenting their shirt. It was a great way to start off our day in a positive way. This helped the most. I always received compliments on how my students were exceptionally grateful, kind, polite, and appreciative in comparison to other classrooms,” and “I just incorporate it into my lessons & daily interactions with my students.” Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 7.



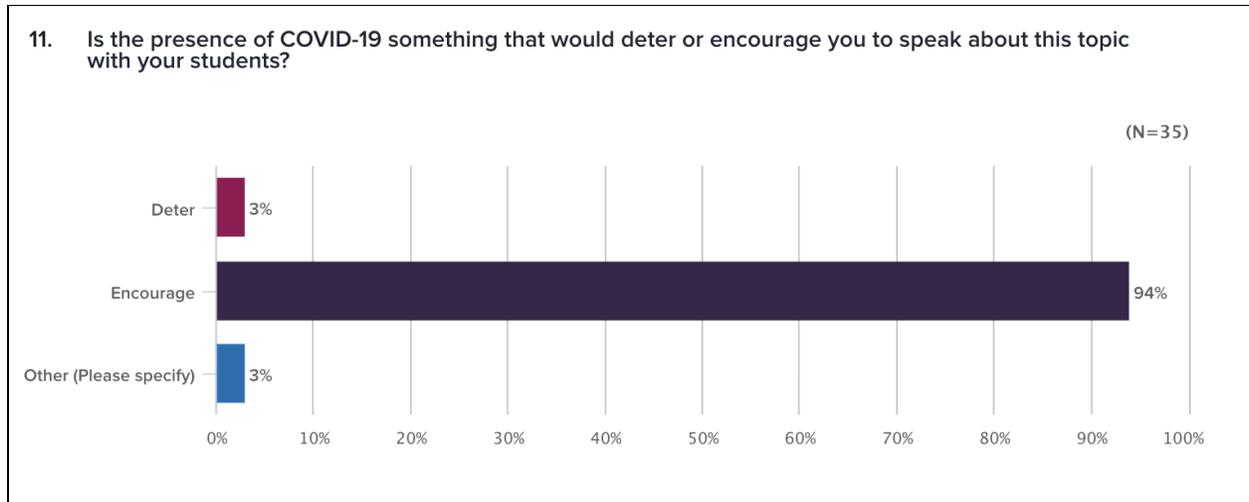
In Question 9, participants were asked how important they think it is that gratitude be introduced to students in grades K-8. My prediction, which was correct, was that most participants would agree with this answer choice. 51% of participants selected the answer choice “extremely important,” with 37% of participants following with the answer choice “very important.” This question added great value in deciding on an overall insight from research data; despite all other information, participants were in alignment that teaching gratitude is important. Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 8.



Adding onto the above information, Question 10 aided in understanding that not only do educators find this topic important, but they themselves would integrate into their own classrooms if the time and resources allowed them to do so. 74% of participants picked the answer choice, “yes.” More information would need to be done to understand exactly how much time and what specific resources are required in order to allow teachers to introduce this topic. Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 9.



Being that this research topic was developed prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Question 11 was originally not included in the initially drafted survey. However, I decided to include it simply to see what impact, if any, the COVID-19 pandemic would have on participants' perception of the topic. My prediction was that the COVID-19 pandemic would negatively impact participants' perceptions on this topic; however, the opposite actually occurred. As seen below, 94% of participants answered that the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic is something that would encourage them to speak about gratitude with their students. One participant chose the answer choice, "other" and specifically commented, "Neither. It has nothing to do with it." Additional information on the breakup of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 10.



I chose to include a final open-ended question that would allow participants to share any other thoughts they had about the survey or topic, to ensure that all opinions were being voiced. 9 participants out of the 35 (26%) of participants chose to answer this question, with 4 saying “no.” The other participants contributed the following answers: “I find incorporating it into a curriculum disables teachers ability to be creative,” “Hard to incorporate a full/partial lesson spec on gratitude into my lessons due to curriculum demand,” “My school focuses on sel. There are some lessons built in,” “We use class champ to discuss gratitude for taking their education seriously. Flip grid is great,” and “I think gratitude is an important topic and students of all ages should think and reflect about it.” I was very grateful myself to receive these answers from participants, as they contributed to the overall insight I developed and ideas for additional research. Additional information on the breakdown of answers from this question can be found below in Figure 11.

<p>Participant ID 5</p> <p>I find incorporating it into a curriculum disables teachers ability to be creative.</p>	<p>Participant ID 7</p> <p>Hard to incorporate a full/partial lesson spec on gratitude into my lessons due to curriculum demand</p>	<p>Participant ID 9</p> <p>My school focuses on sel. There are some lessons built in,</p>
<p>Participant ID 10</p> <p>No</p>	<p>Participant ID 12</p> <p>We use class champ to discuss gratitude for taking their education serious. Flip grid is great</p>	<p>Participant ID 19</p> <p>No.</p>
<p>Participant ID 20</p> <p>I think gratitude is an important topic and students of all ages should think and reflect about it</p>	<p>Participant ID 21</p> <p>No. Good luck with your research</p>	<p>Participant ID 28</p> <p>No</p>

In-Depth Interview Results and Analysis

After the survey, I was able to conduct a total of 1 in-depth interview. Although I would have preferred to have interviewed 1-5 educators, I understand that people are busy. An in-depth discussion of limitations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic on this research, is discussed in the “limitations” section of this thesis. Although I only ended up getting to interview one individual, the qualitative data I gained was immensely rich. Prior to conducting the interview, I predicted that the respondent’s answers would be similar to those casted by the 35 participants in the survey, except with more examples and rationale for answers. As mentioned previously, the in-depth interview participant’s identity will not be disclosed at any time while sharing an analysis of these findings; this individual will be referred to as “Participant A” with the pronouns

“she/her/hers.” Please note that any identifying information has been removed and replaced with spaces to protect the identity of the individual.

Before inquiring about the topic at hand, I first asked Participant A to share a brief overview of the school/community she teaches at, specifically regarding information about the location, socioeconomic background, diversity, grade range, student population, teacher population, etc. According to PublicSchoolReview.com, “The average public middle school in New Jersey has approximately 548 students (2021).” This means that Participant A’s school is a bit larger than that size, but nowhere near the largest middle school in the state which has “4,866 students.” More information would be needed to know about the school’s budget and other factors to determine how progressive the school is, and what some typical reforms in the schools are. One aspect that was important to learn from Participant A’s response is that the school she teaches at is “very diverse;” this information could have an impact on the type of programs introduced at the school. Participant A shared the following response:

“I teach at _____ in New Jersey. It’s very diverse because there’s a high Asian-American population. There are African Americans, Cuacasians, and Hispanic people, so it’s very diverse. There are about 700-800 students in the school and 70-80 teachers. The school has 6th, 7th, and 8th grade.”

After that, I asked Participant A to provide a brief overview of her background and a description of her role at the school she teaches at. Specifically, the subject, grade, years as a teacher, years in the position, professional educational background, race, age. Participant A shared that she is a

science teacher who has taught in multiple grades at the school. The answer leads me to believe she enjoys her subject material very much and is willing to switch grade levels in order to continue teaching it. According to Teach.com, all public middle school teachers must have at least a Bachelor's degree in order to teach. Participant A's response tells us that not only does she meet this requirement, but she also has a Master's degree. At this point in the interview I felt that Participant A's credibility was high and I was confident in her answers moving forward.

Participant A shared the following response:

“6th-grade science teacher. ___ years teaching. I have always been a teacher at this school. Has a bachelor's degree from _____, it's a combination of _____. I have a Master's degree in Geology from the _____. I'm certified in K-12. I prefer _____ Science, so whatever grade _____ Science is, that's where I'll be. That's why when _____ Science was for 8th grade, I taught 8th grade. When it switched to 6th grade, I taught 6th grade.”

Next, Participant A was asked to describe any other topics she teaches in the classroom that are more related to SEL and soft skills, specifically, leadership, creativity, teamwork, adaptability, professionalism, responsibility, etc. If she taught these topics, were they part of her curriculum, or was it a personal choice to teach them? I was not surprised by Participant A's response when she began to tell me that the topics I listed come up naturally in her classroom. I was surprised, however, to learn that when her school attempted to integrate another SEL topic, mindfulness, in each classroom, it was a “fail.” She detailed the reason for this was because it was “rushed” and

“hard to do an activity in that short amount of time.” Participant A even shared that she and other teachers ended up feeling “resentful” from the way the activity was integrated into her teaching routine. She went on to explain that if the topic had been introduced more naturally, it probably would have been more successful. It began to make sense as she was speaking that introducing a topic such as gratitude into all classrooms in the same manner doesn’t necessarily make sense; Participant A is a science teacher, not an English teacher. Additionally, not all educators are responsible for teaching the same number of classes each day. Participant A continued with her response by sharing that “Stuff such as teamwork or creativity” does get built into their lessons. Additionally, there are certain special occasions such as “Domestic Violence Week” where the educators are able to do “Social-Emotional Learning activities.” Participant A circled back and disclosed that it’s a bit harder for her to incorporate these activities into her lesson plans, as her scheduled teaching period is a shorter amount of time than that of other educators in her school. Participant A’s full response can be found below:

“These topics come up in a general way when they’re doing projects in groups and they have to lead in something or present. Also, if we give them choices on projects and they have to be creative in that way. About 3-4 years ago, they tried to build mindfulness once a week during homeroom. That was a fail. I love mindfulness but it was rushed to do in the homeroom when kids were trying to eat breakfast, go to other places, and get stuff done. So it was hard to do an activity in that short amount of time.”

It would have had more success if it were more natural. It was a great idea and everyone needed it, but it wound up having some teachers feeling resentful, like me, having to do it because we were told to do it and it felt rushed. The kids wound up not taking it so seriously. In my opinion, if they wanted to do mindfulness on their own one day, they weren't introduced to it in a way that was great. There were some people, such as English teachers, who liked it because they could go into their first-period class because their class lasted two periods. For me, I teach five science classes a day and I have so much to get done, so if it went over, it just wasn't good.

Stuff such as teamwork or creativity gets built into our lessons. When kids are working cooperatively and in science with labs and activities, I mean with COVID there is not a lot of that, but pre-COVID, kids are working together all the time and talking together. I've tried to do breakout rooms with them and stuff. Some kids will want to talk to each other, but a lot of kids will keep their cameras off and shy. They haven't met each other in person.

We also used to have stuff for Domestic Violence Awareness Week, where we would do a bit of a Social-Emotional Learning activity. We would do things like that for other weeks such as the Week of Respect, where we would do things in our lessons. We're supposed to do SEL (Social Emotional Learning) with them, which some teachers are better at than me. For me, I have like 11 or 12 fewer minutes to teach what I'm doing, so I often forget to do some of those things. Before the break, we did a scavenger hunt on our Google

Meet and that was a lot of fun. We had them get something with the letters, 'C-H-E-E-R' and then we cheered for winter break."

After transitioning into the holistic topic of SEL, I then went on to ask Participant A about her familiarity with the topic of gratitude. She noted that she is familiar with the topic and she and her students talk about things that they're grateful for from time to time. It was interesting to see that Participant A brought up the idea of the COVID-19 pandemic before I even prompted the question; this helped me to understand just how impactful the COVID-19 pandemic is to this profession. Participant A shared the following response:

"I'm pretty familiar with gratitude and I do practice it. We don't do any formal lessons like that at school, but informally we'll talk about things that we're grateful for from time to time. I try to get them to put things in perspective ever since COVID. For instance, you're stuck at home but someone else might have lost a relative or something."

Similarly to the format of the survey, I next asked Participant A if the topic of gratitude has ever been included in the soft skills she teaches in her classroom. If yes, why did she choose to include it in her classroom teachings? I asked her to provide a few examples of how this has been incorporated into her lesson plans and if she's noticed a difference in her students as a result. Participant A noted a specific example of how every month her class does an activity called "Shout Out Boards." This activity allows anyone to give a shout-out for either a teacher or student. She listed how students gave shout-outs for one another, and teachers gave shout-outs

for students, and even students gave shout-outs for teachers. It was interesting to see how this activity appeared to be an ongoing success due to the fact that it was an idea that “teachers come up with on their own to discuss and interact with the students.” Participant A’s full response can be found below:

“We do these things every month called ‘Shout Out Boards’ for the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades where anyone can post a shout-out for teachers or for students. So I’ve had a student who gave me a shout out for meeting him for extra help and helping him. Or I had a student who I shouted out for always being there to check something for me or working well. Without using the word gratitude, that’s kind of what that is. They also do it for their friends. For instance, ‘I want to shout out to my friend who’s always been there for me since 1st grade.’ These ideas are ones that teachers come up with on their own to discuss and interact with the students.”

Next, I wanted to obtain Participant A’s professional opinion on whether she thought gratitude is a topic that should be taught in classrooms. If so, did she think teachers would prefer that this be outlined in the school’s curriculum, or encouraged through seminars and workshops. If no, did she think this topic should be addressed by a different professional in her school, such as a guidance counselor. The overall insight I gained from Participant A’s response was that it’s possible to incorporate gratitude into each educator’s lesson plans, but it needs to be done in a way that complements the teaching style, comfort, and time availability of each individual. Participant A disclosed that for her, she “makes a point of saying hi to every kid who comes into

(her) class everyday because at home, some kids don't even hear their names said during the day." She went on to say that this could be different for other educators. A big thing Participant A said that really stood out is that "to formally put (gratitude teachings) into a lesson in science would be hard to do." It's understandable how an English teacher might have an easier time introducing the topic into writing prompts, reading assignments, and more. Participant A shared that although this topic wouldn't necessarily get written into her specific curriculum as it's not related to science, it could have a place in a "professional development day." She then cited an example of a recent professional development day that the educators at her school had and how each person had the opportunity to be inspired by what was shown, and then possibly integrate the topic into their own classroom lessons if they chose to do so. She suggested that if someone could present "a webinar or something like that and then give a couple of examples of ways it could be implemented real quickly in a class so teacher didn't have to think that up on their own, (she) could see someone saying, 'oh that might work for me, I'll try that.' This was very insightful information. Participant A's full response can be found below:

"I kind of look at it as mindfulness, it would be great to be able to incorporate it, but it also depends on the teacher. For me, I make a point of saying hi to every kid who comes into my class everyday because at home, some kids don't even hear their names said during the day. Then you could have another teacher who doesn't do that, so some of it depends on your personality. I might naturally gravitate to something like that, and someone else might not. To formally put it into a lesson in science would be hard to do. I could see how in english it could be easier to do because you could have a writing

prompt that could reflect something that's going on. For instance, if it's Women's History Month, Women's Rights, or New Year's Resolutions. I could see in English if they did it in a writing prompt, it could come more naturally. I could do something like that if I wanted, but it wouldn't reflect my class material at all.

It wouldn't get written into our curriculum, because it's not science-based. We had a professional development day last week to learn about a teacher in Brooklyn, Cornealious Minor, and he's an African American teacher. Because of COVID, he's been doing all sorts of Social Emotional Learning with students and we had a workshop on that. We were asked to reflect and think about how we could use some of the things that he talked about, in our lessons. That would be the way that it would be integrated. However, there's no way to monitor how many people do that, but it would be a way for people to take something from the topic to use in their classrooms similarly to how I took something from the person who taught us to say everyone's names, etc.

If someone presented a webinar or something like that and then they gave a couple of examples of ways it could be implemented real quickly in a class and the teacher didn't have to think that up on their own, I could see someone saying, 'oh that might work for me, I'll try that.'"

After getting Participant A's main thoughts on the topic of gratitude, I asked her if the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced any of her thoughts about this topic. Similarly to the

survey responses, I was surprised by what Participant A had to say about this question. She noted that “this topic is almost more important right now,” and gave support as to why this is and how one might proceed to integrate gratitude into their own classroom. Participant A shared the following response:

“This topic is almost more important right now because so many kids are stuck at home and they’re not engaging socially the way that they might in school. Therefore, pointing out to them things that are positive or things that they have to feel grateful for in their own lives now helps. We talk about it all the time because the longer this goes on for the kids not being in the classrooms, the harder it gets for so many of them. I think it’s even more important right now.”

Finally, I made sure to ask Participant A if she had any other thoughts to share about the topic of gratitude, or something we discussed during the interview. It was really interesting to learn how Participant A’s supervisor made it a point to tell the educators not to rush through lessons and “really take time to talk to the kids because a lot of the kids are just sitting by themselves in their rooms all day.” This response already highlights a change in the statistic highlighted at the beginning of this paper on the initial importance of testing and benchmarks in the classroom setting. Participant A’s full response can be found below:

“The only thing now is that we’re being encouraged now by our supervisors that if it takes you longer, it takes you longer. Supervisors send us weekly feedback forms and

they're telling all of us to not rush through our lessons and really take time to talk to the kids because a lot of the kids are just sitting by themselves in their rooms all day."

Overall, seeing survey responses is important, but being able to speak with someone about their own thoughts and opinion on a topic is so eye-opening. Learning Participant A's experience, background, and current thoughts on education was so vital in developing empathy and a greater understanding of how the topic of gratitude would need to be introduced in a classroom setting. One insight I gained from doing this in-depth interview is that educators each have their own individual time availability and teaching style, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only made their workloads more difficult to execute. Another additional insight I learned is that the COVID-19 pandemic has also made the introduction of topics such as gratitude more vital than ever for students and educators.

Discussion of Research & Conclusion

Discussion of Research Findings

In order to better understand the presence of gratitude teachings in New Jersey elementary classrooms, I analyzed relevant pieces of secondary literature, as well as conducted an original online survey and virtual in-depth interview. The major finding obtained from completing this research is that gratitude is a valued tool that teachers support and want to introduce in their classrooms, but want to do so at their own pace and style, free from standardization or embedment in curriculum. Analyzing literature on the topic of gratitude allowed me to have a better understanding of just how new the topic really is in so many settings, despite its historic origins. I was also able to learn that practicing gratitude can bless one with a myriad of mental and physical benefits, ranging from “better subjective sleep quality and duration” (Sansone, 2010) to reported higher levels of “happiness, optimism, and satisfaction with their lives, greater progress in attaining important life goals, higher frequency of feeling loved” (Critical Care Nurse), among many others. Whether it be workplaces, homes, or now as we’ve read, in the classroom setting, gratitude has really made its way into many aspects of people’s lives. In learning about the presence of gratitude in youth and the educational setting, I was better able to understand that it would be beneficial to implement gratitude teachings in elementary-aged students because “such interventions teach strategies and perspectives that not only aid in times of need, but also help prevent future difficulties” (Kirschman et al. 2009). As noted in the literature review, educators spend a large portion of the day with students, which is why the classroom setting was ultimately introduced as the place of intervention for gratitude teachings in this study. A study referenced by Froh et al. revealed that when tested on children

ages 11-13, there was a “notable increase in school satisfaction” (Diebel et al., 2016). All of this research, in tandem with the speculation of the changing educational climate, acted as the basis for this study.

Prior to conducting primary research, I obtained additional information about the topics of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the educational climate in New Jersey. Research on SEL helped in understanding that topics with SEL that are very similar to gratitude are already being introduced in the classroom setting. In a study by Denham et. al, the authors asserted that, “it is becoming ever clearer that SEL must be given the attention required to maximize not only children’s success in social relations and personal well-being but also their broader school/classroom adjustment and academic” (Denham et al., 2010). This, along with other information in the SEL literature review section aided in informing the fact that SEL does in fact have a beneficial effect on students. I learned that gratitude is part of the category of SEL, therefore similar introductions can be done. When evaluating the educational climate in New Jersey, one of the main things learned is that New Jersey’s socioeconomic and educational climate is progressive compared to other states in the U.S. Specifically, according to the *U.S. News & World Report*, New Jersey is ranked number 2 in education out of all 50 states. I also learned that parts of the official state education website in New Jersey were dedicated to informing educators about programs on mindfulness and SEL. I now confirmed predicted knowledge that New Jersey already had progressive educational reforms, and the topic of my study would probably be in the realm of what educators in the state were including in classroom settings. Conducting all of this secondary research helped me to become more well-versed on the specific key topics of “gratitude,” “New Jersey education,” “gratitude in youth,” and “SEL,” and

ultimately come to the conclusion that the identified location of the New Jersey elementary classrooms is appropriate for the basis of further primary research in this study.

The next part of my research journey included conducting primary research, specifically a survey and in-depth interview. At first, I was discouraged by the fact that only 35 individuals participated in my survey, but I realized how grateful I was to those educators for taking time out of their day to do so. I had forgotten that not only was I interacting with educators, but also parents to children, possibly individuals who could be working more than one job, husbands/wives to their own spouses, and really just people. I wanted to make sure when recruiting participants to thank any and all educators for their role in shaping children and for being pioneers in education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although I didn't realize it at the time, interacting with educators during this project on means of social media helped to shape some of my overall insights. Specifically the fact that although educators teach what is in their curriculum, so much of what they teach students is really based on their own personal belief systems. Therefore, it makes sense that the introduction of gratitude in classrooms be a *choice* for the educator, rather than a *mandate* that is embedded with one's curriculum.

Main statistical information gathered from the conducted survey, "Gratitude and K-8 Education," asked participants about relevant demographic information, and then transitioned further into the larger topic at hand, gratitude practices in elementary education. One major takeaway recognized in reviewing survey results was that "awareness," "importance," and "support" of gratitude was very high among participants. In reviewing "awareness," 83% of participants shared that they were either "extremely familiar" or "very familiar" with gratitude. Next, in reviewing the idea of "importance," 88% of participants expressed that they feel it is

either “extremely important” or “very important” that gratitude be introduced in elementary education settings. Finally, in evaluating “support,” 74% of participants claimed that if the time and resources permitted, they would integrate gratitude into their own classrooms. These few data points, out of many, that were pulled from the survey help to inform the idea that overall, educators surveyed know about, support, and would teach gratitude. One important idea this survey also revealed, which builds on the previous insight about implementation of gratitude teachings, is that 83% of participants claim to teach gratitude to their students due to personal motivation, rather than mandate from their curriculum. Not only did the secondary research reveal this idea, but so did primary research.

The final part of this research journey was to conduct an in-depth interview. Multiple, rather than the sole interview would have helped to diversify results, but I’m grateful to have gotten even one during this process. I found the in-depth interview to be the most meaningful part of this research journey, as it aided in adding “color” to the results. The key insight I gained from my experience of interviewing Participant A was that educators each have their own individual time availability and teaching style, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only made their workloads more difficult to execute. Additionally, I learned that the COVID-19 pandemic has made the introduction of topics such as gratitude more vital than ever for students and educators. Participant A emphasized ideas that I hadn’t previously thought of when analyzing the survey such as the fact that not all educators teach the same subject and have the same allotted time during the day with students. She provided more realistic examples of how gratitude tends to be integrated into her own classroom, adding that it is different for each educator depending on their own beliefs and backgrounds. Participant A went on to provide insight as to how topics such as

gratitude would realistically be introduced to educators, citing examples of professional workshops. She was in full agreement with this idea that this topic should be suggested, rather than mandated for educators, specifically noting that when something similar was done in her school previously, it failed, leaving educators “resentful.” These details truly helped to confirm that gratitude needs to be presented to educators as a suggestion, rather than a mandate. There are different methodologies this can be executed in, but I agree with Participant A’s suggestion to utilize workshops and professional days as a means to impress the importance of the topic to educators.

One last topic to surface when understanding the messaging of this thesis paper is the role of the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated earlier, this topic was originally chosen prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic has made such an influential impact that it would be difficult to ignore the effects it had on this topic. Although it wasn’t part of my research question, I chose to include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic within both the survey and in-depth interview. I originally predicted that educators would feel that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic would deter them from introducing gratitude to their students. However, it was quite the opposite; 94% of participants agreed that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic would encourage them to discuss this topic with their students. Participant A added to this data point when she shared that, “This topic is almost more important right now because so many kids are stuck at home and they’re not engaging socially the way that they might in school. Therefore, pointing out to them things that are positive or things that they have to feel grateful for in their own lives now helps. We talk about it all the time because the longer this goes on for the kids not being in the classrooms, the harder it gets for so many of them. I think it’s even more

important right now.” Although there might not be something as extreme as a COVID-19 pandemic in the future, there is always something detrimental that impacts the lives of people around us. Whether this be a natural disaster, a sickness, a family emergency, and so on, people have tough things going on in their lives. Support of the introduction of gratitude teachings during a time of distress or toughness in life may help to inform further research.

Limitations

As with any research, there are bound to be limitations. Although I was able to obtain meaningful insights from both analyzing the literature of secondary research and conducting my own primary survey and in-depth interview, there are still limitations to be recognized. This research topic was developed prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the intention to host interviews in-person, as well as possibly conduct a set of observational activities. With “nearly 93% of households with school-age children reporting some form of distance learning during COVID-19” (US Census, 2020) it makes sense why research would need to be limited to Zoom conferencing. This aspect didn’t impact the research in any major way, but it would have been beneficial to have been provided with the chance to conduct further research activities.

A major limitation identified that specifically concerned methodical issues was the insufficient sample size for statistical measurement. When conducting research, it’s preferred to have a wide survey sample as it helps “to deliver data that truly reflect the target population” (The Balance, 2020). I was able to gain a total of 35 survey responses and 1 in-depth interview. Although these results helped to inform insights, more survey responses and in-depth interviews would aid in making the data more statistically valid. According to EdTech.com, evidence now

shows that educators can work anywhere from up to “12-16 hours per day” (Murray, 2017). In a “normal” year, it might be hard to ask an educator for time to help with a research project. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic only heightened this concern, making it extremely difficult to get educators to participate in an in-depth interview, yet alone answer survey questions.

A limitation that needs to be addressed is the lack of sufficient information on the specific topic of gratitude. Based on identified research from the literature review, the introduction of gratitude in the educational setting is a relatively new topic. Although research has been done to identify the benefits of gratitude and how one would practice it, there isn’t enough data available on the benefits for the specific age group of elementary students, and interventions in the educational setting. There is information available on the topic of SEL and it’s integration in school curricula and classrooms. However, gratitude, and other SEL subcategories are not specifically detailed; it is one large, overriding category.

Finally, the scope of my discussions is greatly limited. Although I am an avid researcher and have come to understand more about the educational climate, I am not an educator, nor am I studying to be one. I am also not studying to be a psychologist, which is an important factor considering the psychological benefits of gratitude practices are noted in this paper. Additionally, I do not have vast experience writing major papers or studies; this is my first one. Therefore, the scope and depth of discussions found in this paper are compromised and should be evaluated by an experienced educator or psychologist to validate findings and conclusions.

Future Research Suggestions

Although research on the introduction of gratitude in elementary classrooms is limited, I believe that it is growing. As stated earlier, we are at a time in the state of education where priorities are shifting. Standardized testing, which was long the hallmark of measuring success, is now becoming less relevant in the grand scheme of a student's educational journey. In its place are more "holistic aspects of schooling, arguing for whole-child education, attention to noncognitive factors, and other related reforms" (PACE, 2020). In contributing to this progressively growing educational landscape, I recommend that this research be used as the conceptual framework for future studies. Additional states in the country need to be examined to understand where gratitude interventions in elementary education are occurring. International studies should also be included in further research to discern if people from different countries are benefiting from international forms of education that include the topic of gratitude. Is the socioeconomic status of an area correlated to if a school is integrating gratitude teachings in lesson plans? Future studies need to be done to understand if this is the case, and if so, which areas require the beneficial impacts of gratitude teachings the most? Additionally, elementary aged students were identified as the best option for gratitude interventions, but it would be beneficial for an individual with a psychological background to examine whether a different age group, such as middle school aged children (ages 11-14), is more opportunistic for this topic to be introduced to.

In learning how relative this topic was to the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be helpful for a future longitudinal study to take place, specifically done during both "pandemic time" and "post-pandemic time." This longitudinal study could aid in understanding the impact of gratitude interventions on students during different times in life, and the impact presented. Studies need to

be done to help better understand if consistent gratitude interventions in education have the ability to help students during times of distress or need. If this habit is introduced early on, can it help students to problem-solve and thrive in both the near and far future? I am confident that future studies can aid in making this topic a reality in the future.

Conclusion

“Acknowledging the good that you already have in your life is the foundation for all abundance.” As Eckhart Tolle stated, “acknowledging gratitude can help to provide so much abundance in life” (Tolle, 2017). Now, medical professionals and psychologists have helped to confirm that this abundance can mean a myriad of health benefits.

The main purpose of this study was to better understand if elementary school teachers in New Jersey are implementing the concept of gratitude within their classroom lessons. Although many unanswered questions still remain, this research brought together different studies and created one main idea to help lead the future of education. Reading countless pieces of literature surrounding this topic, analyzing survey responses from participants, and listening to experiences and words of wisdom from Participant A all helped to inform this research in different ways. The overall insight produced after completing all of these different steps is that gratitude is a valued tool that teachers support and want to introduce in their classrooms, but want to do so at their own pace and style, free from standardization or embedment in curriculum. Therefore, the key recommendation is that individuals with authority in school systems need to reflect on the best methodology to introduce this topic to their educators and be lenient with how educators choose to integrate it into classrooms. Additional research needs to be done prior to this step to identify

more information, but I am hopeful that we as a community will begin to see the integration of gratitude teachings in elementary classrooms in New Jersey in the near future.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Survey

Gratitude and K-8 Education

* Required Information

The purpose of this research project is to determine if the concept of gratitude is being taught in Kindergarten through Grade 8 classrooms across New Jersey in an effort to understand what effect the teachings have on students, if any.

You are invited to participate in this research project because you are an educator in the state of New Jersey.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research survey, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalized.

The procedure involves filling an online survey that will take approximately 5-7 minutes. Your responses will be confidential and identifying information such as your name, email address, and phone number will not be taken.

All data from the survey is stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the surveys will not contain information that will personally identify you. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only. If you have any questions about the research study, please contact gratitudeinedu@gmail.com. This research has been reviewed according to Johnson & Wales University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

* 1. Clicking on the "agree" button below indicates that:

- you have read the above information
- you voluntarily agree to participate
- you are at least 18 years of age

If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "disagree" button.

- Agree
- Disagree

* 2. What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

* 3. What grade do you currently teach?

- Kindergarten
- Grade 1
- Grade 2
- Grade 3
- Grade 4
- Grade 5
- Grade 6
- Grade 7
- Grade 8
- Other (Please specify)

* 4. How familiar are you with the concept of gratitude?

- Extremely familiar
- Very familiar
- Somewhat familiar
- Slightly familiar
- Not familiar at all

* 5. Please select the statement that best describes the frequency of which you have spoken about the topic of gratitude with your students.

- I always speak about the topic of gratitude with my students
- I usually speak about the topic of gratitude with my students
- I sometimes speak about the topic of gratitude with my students
- I rarely speak about the topic of gratitude with my students
- I never speak about the topic of gratitude with my students

6. Please select which of the following best describes your reasoning for teaching your students about the subject of gratitude.

- The subject of gratitude is included within the curriculum for my students, therefore I teach it to them
- The subject of gratitude is something that I think my students should learn about, therefore I teach it to them
- All of the above
- None of the above
- Other (Please specify)

7. Please select any activities/mechanisms that have been used to teach your students about gratitude.

- Gratitude journal
- Gratitude collage
- Classroom gratitude jar
- Gratitude paper chain
- Alphabet gratitude
- Gratitude artwork
- Random acts of kindness
- Gratitude notes
- Gratitude tree
- None of the above
- Other (Please specify)

8. I have noticed a positive difference in my students and their actions after having been taught about the topic of gratitude.



9. How important do you think it is that the topic of gratitude be introduced and taught to students in K-8 schools?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not important at all

10. If the time and resources allowed, would you be interested in integrating the topic of gratitude into your classroom lesson plans?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

11. Is the presence of COVID-19 something that would deter or encourage you to speak about this topic with your students?

- Deter
- Encourage
- Other (Please specify)

12. Is there anything else you would like to share in regard to this topic?

Characters Remaining: 100

Thank you for your participation in this survey! Please email gratitudeinedu@gmail.com if you would be interested in participating in an in-depth interview on this topic.

Appendix B: Survey Recruitment Posts**Rebecca Stillman**

September 20, 2020 · 🌐



Hello, Facebook friends. As a student in the Honors Program at my University, I was asked to develop a thesis paper on a topic of my choosing. Something that interests me is gratitude and its presence in Kindergarten through Grade 8 classrooms. I would like to understand if teachers in New Jersey are implementing the concept of gratitude within their classroom lessons. If so, what are these practices, and what effect are they having on students?

If you are someone seeing this post who fits the description of a K-8 (or even high school) educator in New Jersey, I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study. If you are someone who knows people of that description, I would greatly appreciate it if this post could be shared with them. Thank you in advance to anyone who participates or helps.

There is a section containing information on confidentiality and protection of information prior to the start of the survey. This research has been reviewed according to Johnson & Wales University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

The link to the survey can be found here: <https://survey.sogosurvey.com/r/sjjQye>

Thank you again. Best, Rebecca.

**Rebecca Stillman**

Assistant Account Executive at Makovsky

5mo •



Hello, LinkedIn friends. As a student in the Honors Program at my University, I was asked to develop a thesis paper on a topic of my choosing. Something that interests me is gratitude and its presence in Kindergarten through Grade 8 classrooms. I would like to understand if teachers in New Jersey are implementing the concept of gratitude within their classroom lessons. If so, what are these practices, and how are they being measured and analyzed?

Being said, if you are someone seeing this post who fits the description of a K-8 (or even high school) educator in New Jersey, I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study. If you are someone who knows people of that description, I would greatly appreciate it if this post could be shared with them. Thank you in advance to anyone who participates or helps.

There is a section containing information on confidentiality and protection of information prior to the start of the survey. This research has been reviewed according to Johnson & Wales University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

The link to the survey can be found here: <https://lnkd.in/gM437gm>

Thank you again. Best, Rebecca.

[#research](#) [#thesispaper](#) [#gratitude](#) [#k8edu](#)

Survey Participation

survey.sogosurvey.com



Like Comment Share Send



543 views of your post in the feed

Appendix C: In-Depth Interview Questions

Honors Thesis Paper
In-Depth Interview Questions

Forward

The purpose of this research project is to determine if the concept of gratitude is being taught in Kindergarten through Grade 8 classrooms across New Jersey in an effort to understand what effect the teachings have on students if any.

You are invited to participate in this research project because you are an educator in the state of New Jersey.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research survey, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalized.

The procedure involves answering a set of 5-7 questions, that will take approximately 30-45 minutes. Your responses will be confidential and identifying information such as your name, email address, and phone number will not be taken.

All data from the survey is stored in a password-protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the surveys will not contain information that will personally identify you. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only. If you have any questions about the research study, please contact gratitudeinedu@gmail.com. This research has been reviewed according to Johnson & Wales University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

Questions

1. Can you provide a brief overview of the school/community you teach at? I.e. location, socioeconomic background, diversity, grade range, student population, teacher population, etc.
2. Can you provide a brief overview of you and your role/job description at the school you teach at? I.e. subject, grade, years as a teacher, years in the position, professional educational background, race, age.
3. Besides the subject matter you cover, are there other topics that you teach in your classroom that are more related to soft skills? I.e leadership, creativity, teamwork, adaptability, professionalism, responsibility, etc.
 - a. If so, were these topics part of your curriculum, or was it a personal choice to include them?
4. How familiar are you with the topic of gratitude?
5. Has this topic ever been included in the soft skills you teach in your classroom?
 - a. If yes, why did you choose to include it in your classroom teachings? Can you provide a few examples of how this has been incorporated into your lesson plans? Have you noticed a difference in your students as a result?
 - b. If no, can you explain why? Was this your choice, or your administrator's? If the time and resources allowed, would you be interested in integrating the topic of gratitude into your classroom lesson plans?
6. In your professional opinion, do you think this is a topic that should be taught in classrooms? If so, do you think teachers would prefer that this be outlined in the school's curriculum, or encouraged through seminars and workshops?
 - a. (If no to the curriculum) Do you think this topic should be addressed by a different professional in your school?
7. Has the presence of COVID influenced any of your thoughts about this topic?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to share that is relevant to this topic?