



Three Gratitude Lessons for K-8 Classrooms

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Social-emotional learning (SEL) uses an “outside-in” approach, teaching students skills that help them to work with their emotions in healthy ways and to build positive relationships.

Mindfulness, on the other hand, uses an “inside-out” approach, helping students to become aware of and then embody the connection between their emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations.

Woven together, SEL and mindfulness make a powerful recipe for helping students cultivate positive outcomes, such as increased academic achievement and well-being, less risky behavior, and better relationships with peers and teachers. The Inner Resilience Program (IRP) is one program that integrates SEL and contemplative practice in order to nurture the wellness and inner lives of educators and students.

Now, with a grant from the John Templeton Foundation awarded through the Greater Good Science Center, the IRP has incorporated lessons on gratitude into their work with students. By adding a contemplative layer to standard gratitude lessons such as keeping a gratitude journal, writing a gratitude letter, or holding a gratitude circle, students are able to experience the impact of gratitude in their lives more deeply.

We are grateful to Linda Lantieri, founder of the IRP, for letting us share three of these new lessons, all of which beautifully incorporate a contemplative moment where students can link the idea of gratitude with the feeling of gratitude.

1. Acts of kindness (Grades K-2)*Learning objective:* Students will identify ways that they have acted with kindness and caring toward others.

Gratitude concept: When we choose to do something that benefits others, we often benefit ourselves emotionally.

SEL competencies: Self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills

Materials: Drawing/writing materials

Activity:

- Explain to students that we often feel grateful when others do things for us that show kindness, caring, and helpfulness.
- But there are also times when the students themselves have done things that are kind, caring, and helpful to someone.

- Ask students to close their eyes, and take a few deep breaths. Then, ask them to visualize a time they showed kindness to someone else, using these prompts:

Think of someone that you have been kind to...or someone you helped...Maybe it is someone who said "Thank you" to you recently...Try to see a picture of that person in your mind...Silently raise your hand when you have thought of someone... (Be sure each student has raised their hand before continuing.)

Now remember what you did for that person that was kind or caring or helpful...See yourself doing it...How do you feel inside?...What is the other person saying or doing when you are kind to them?...How does that feel to you?

- Invite the class to open their eyes. Ask for a few volunteers to share:
- Who did you show kindness to?
- What did you do?
- Why did you want to do this?
- Did the other person show gratitude in some way? How?
- If that person showed gratitude, how did it make you feel?
- Ask students to draw a picture of what they visualized, and write a caption for it. Or write a short paragraph about it, using the following format:
- I showed kindness to _____
- This is what I did: _____
- I did this because _____
- This is how _____ showed gratitude to me: _____
- I felt _____

Extensions:

- Encourage older students to [keep a journal](#) about times when they show kindness to others, the reasons they do this, and their feelings about it.
- Discuss with the class an act of kindness that they could do for someone in the school. Help them carry it out. Afterwards, have students describe how that person reacted, and how the students felt when they did the act of kindness.

2. Food gratitude (Grades 3-5)*Learning objective:* Students will demonstrate awareness that behind tangible things that they may feel grateful for, there are many people whose efforts have created those things.

Gratitude concept: Our lives are interconnected with those of many people we have never met, who provide us with the goods and services we rely on daily. Our gratitude can extend to these people, as well as those we know.

SEL competencies: Social awareness

Materials: Large sheets of flip chart paper; drawing/writing materials; fruit for each student (sensitive to any food allergies)

Activity:

- Ask class to think of how many different kinds of fruit they can name. List the different fruits that are mentioned on the board. Then take a “vote” by show of hands to see which fruit is the favorite of the most people in the class.
- Explain that they are going to do a short visualization about all the people who made it possible for them to enjoy this delicious fruit. Ask everyone to sit comfortably, close their eyes, and take a few deep breaths.
- Use the sample script below, which uses the example of strawberries, and adapt it as needed (for example, some fruit, like bananas, may have traveled on a boat and a truck):

Let’s imagine fresh strawberries. Think about what they look like, how they smell, and how they taste. Where do they grow? Imagine someone planting strawberry seeds in the soil on a farm...Imagine the sun shining on the small plants as they grow...Imagine the rain that falls on them, or maybe a person who waters them...maybe there is someone who pulls out the weeds so the strawberries can grow...

Now imagine the strawberries are ripe...Who comes to pick them?...Think about how hard that person works, bending over to pick lots of strawberries...Now imagine someone putting those strawberries into containers...

How do the strawberries get to a store near you?...Imagine the person who put the strawberry containers onto a truck...the person who drove the truck to your store...the person who brought the strawberries from the truck into the store...the person who put the strawberries on the shelf at the store...

Who sells you the strawberries?...See if you can imagine yourself paying that person...thanking them...and then bringing home the delicious strawberries to eat...

- Ask the students to take a few deep breaths and bring their attention back into the room.

- Have students form groups of four; give each group a large sheet of paper and drawing materials. Ask them to:
- Discuss what you visualized for a few minutes.
- Now draw a picture that includes all of the people, tools, and natural elements necessary to produce the strawberries that you enjoy.
- As students complete their drawings, point out that there are many people involved in making it possible for them to enjoy strawberries. Ask them to:
- Imagine how you would express gratitude to the many people if you could.
- Add these expressions of gratitude to your drawings.
- Save the drawings for the next day and, if possible, buy a container of strawberries (or whatever fruit the students selected) to bring to class the next day.
- Post the drawings around the room and give students the chance to circulate and see each other's work.
- Ask: What have you learned about gratitude from this activity?
- Then, give each student a strawberry, instructing them to hold it in their hands and not to eat it yet. (If you plan to bring fruit, be sure to choose one that no one is allergic to.) Ask them to silently reflect on the following questions:
- Notice the weight, texture, and temperature of the fruit. What is it like?
- Do you remember all of the people we discussed yesterday, whose work helped produce the strawberries?
- Let's remember that without the sun and water and soil, there would be no strawberries.
- Recall the messages of gratitude you wrote on your drawings, and feel that gratitude.
- Now, slowly take a small bite of the strawberry. Taste it and enjoy!

3. People who made a difference (Grades 6-8)*Learning objective:* Students will develop an understanding that they can feel gratitude toward people whose actions benefitted society as a whole, and that these benefits may be felt years or even centuries later.

Gratitude concepts: Understanding the ideas of intention and cost in the actions that ultimately benefit others. We can be grateful to people we have never met.

SEL competencies: Social awareness and responsible decision-making

Materials: Library or Internet access for research; writing materials

Activity:

- Ask students to identify a historical figure who did something they feel grateful for. Have them research the person they chose. This may be done over multiple days.
- When students have completed their research, bring the class together for a short guided visualization:

Close your eyes, and take five deep, slow breaths, in and out. Bring to mind an image of the person you have researched. Hold that image while breathing deeply...try to feel what it would actually be like to be in the presence of that person. Focus on the feeling of gratitude you have for this person while you take five more deep breaths, in and out. Now, slowly open your eyes and bring your focus back into the room.

- Following the visualization, have the class write an essay that covers these questions:
- What did this person do that makes you feel grateful?
- Why did this person do these things? What was the intention behind this person's actions?
- What was the cost of these actions for the person you reached?
- Explain to students that one way to think about "cost" is to understand what this person might have given, sacrificed, or lost in order to do the things she or he did. Think of costs not only in terms of money, but also in terms of time spent, physical health or strength required, safety that might have been risked, opportunities that might have been lost, impacts on relationships with family or others, etc. Ask:
- How have you benefited from this person's actions? How has society as a whole benefited?
- Have students make a brief presentation to the class about the historical figure that they researched.

Nurturing gratitude in our students by combining the "outside-in" approach of SEL with the "inside-out" method of contemplative practice allows students to really feel the benefits of gratitude—a sure way to help them develop an "attitude of gratitude" for life.