Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

PEOPLE WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

"Showing gratitude is one of the simplest yet most powerful things humans can do for each other."

–Randy Pausch

OVERVIEW

Students research, present to the class, and express gratitude to an historical figure whose actions have benefited society.

LEVELS

- Middle School

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year to help students understand how what they're learning in a particular subject area can be used to make the world a better place

TIME REQUIRED

- Several days

MATERIALS

- Library or Internet access for research
- Writing materials

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Develop an understanding that they can feel gratitude toward people whose actions benefited society as a whole, and that these benefits may be felt years or even centuries later

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- Making Practices Culturally Responsive
- Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs

- Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on an historical or present-day person from the subject area you teach (e.g., science, arts, language arts) who did something for which you are grateful. Consider the intention behind this person's actions, along with what they might have sacrificed in order to carry out their actions. How have you and perhaps society as a whole benefited from this person's actions?
- You might visualize this person and mentally thank them. Notice how you feel after expressing your gratitude.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Ask students to identify a historical figure who did something they feel grateful for. Have them research the person they choose. 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 this 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.

CLOSURE

- Ask students to reflect on how they might use their strengths to make the world a better place.

SOURCE

"*Nurturing Gratitude From the Inside Out: 30 Activities for Grades K–8*" was originally developed by *The Inner Resilience Program*, in partnership with the Greater Good Science Center and the John Templeton Foundation.

For the entire curriculum, click here.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Are students noticing how historical or current persons are contributing to society after doing this practice? Do they talk more often about how a person could make a difference in the world?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A study of mainly affluent white students who were taught "benefit appraisal"—or a thinking process that helps them consider why a person did a kind act for them, what the cost to the person was, and what benefits the students received from it—found that students experienced more positive emotions and showed more grateful attitudes and behaviors than other students, both immediately and months later.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Learning about historical persons who have contributed to society is a ubiquitous school experience; however taking the time to think deeply about these persons' motivations and sacrifices is a unique way to deepen students' understanding and appreciation for the difference these people made. Indeed, students themselves may be inspired by the process to use their own strengths—and ultimately their lives—to make the world a better place.

TERMS OF USE