



THE  
JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

# GIVE THANKS – GIVE BACK

## GRATITUDE AND SERVICE IN SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY

PROGRAMME REPORT

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The University of Birmingham is a top ranking British University. Founded in 1900, it was England's first civic University and was ranked University of the Year 2013–14 by The Times and The Sunday Times.



The original Department of Education was founded in 1894 and became the School of Education in 1947. Ranked in the top 50 Schools of Education in the world today, it has a long-standing reputation as a centre of excellence for teaching and research in a wide range of areas of education practice and policy, with fields of expertise including disability, inclusion and special needs, education and social justice, and professional education.

## Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is a unique and leading centre for the examination of how character and virtues impact on individuals and society. The Centre was founded in 2012 by Professor James Arthur with a multi-million pound grant from the John Templeton Foundation. Based at the University of Birmingham, it has a dedicated team of 30 academics from a range of disciplines, including: philosophy, psychology, education, theology and sociology.

With its focus on excellence, the Centre has a robust and rigorous research and evidence-based approach that is objective and non-political. It offers world-class research on the importance of developing good character and virtues and the benefits they bring to individuals and society. As well as undertaking its own innovative research, the Centre also seeks to partner with leading academics from other universities around the world and to develop strong strategic partnerships.

A key conviction underlying the existence of the Centre is that the virtues that make up good character can be learnt and taught. The Centre believes that these have largely been neglected in schools and in the professions. It is also a key conviction that the more people exhibit good character and virtues, the healthier our society is. As such, the Centre undertakes development projects seeking to promote the practical applications of its research evidence.

# Give Thanks – Give Back

## Gratitude and service in school and the community Programme Report

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# Foreword

Helping young people to better understand themselves and develop qualities and virtues is vital for a healthy society. The test of a good education has to be whether or not our young people grow and develop their character. That's why I wholeheartedly welcome brilliant projects such as *Give Thanks – Give Back* that highlight the importance of gratitude (giving thanks) and how it can be translated into acts of service (giving back) in the local community.

My parents, both hard working public servants, taught me that we are duty bound to 'give back' what we can – because success is not a solo exercise. And do not delay, when my mum tragically died from cancer at the age of 52, it impressed on me the necessity that if you want to make a difference, now is always the time to act.

Life is full of challenges. We have our fair share in East Birmingham. However, what this report reveals is that there is much to be thankful for. Inspiring acts of kindness and service by pupils in our schools, and by our local charities and businesses, are happening around us every day.

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor James Arthur and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham for making this project possible. The research that James and the Centre have been involved in is world class and must be listened to if we are to shape a society of good character where we all give thanks, and give back.

**Rt. Hon Liam Byrne MP**

# Executive Summary

This report outlines a project that explored the relationship between gratitude (giving thanks) and service (giving back) in three schools in the cities of Birmingham and Coventry. Looking at pupils of different ages, ranging from seven to eighteen, the project explored key questions such as how well gratitude is understood, what young people are grateful for, and whether gratitude acts as a motivation for community service.

Working within the existing school curriculum known as Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, the virtue of gratitude was drawn out and reflected upon at an individual and collective level. Data was captured through the use of a questionnaire and filmed semi-structured interviews. A number of case studies involving pupils, teaching staff, and local community-based organisations were collated and produced as a brochure that has been published separately<sup>1</sup>. A documentary film was also produced about the project<sup>2</sup>.

The findings of the project highlight that young people are grateful for a number of things, even if the term 'gratitude' is not confidently understood. People rather than possessions are deemed most important and many young people would be willing to help others less fortunate than themselves. There is a link between being thankful and giving back, although the idea of community is not

conceptually well understood and its role in framing their lives not particularly clear. Those who do actively engage in their local community develop an appetite to do more.

The report makes the following recommendations:

- As the term 'gratitude' seems to have fallen out of vogue in today's youth culture, careful consideration should be given to help reacquaint young people with the language of virtue as well as finding contemporary ways to contextualise it socially.
- Those working in schools should give serious consideration as to how virtues in general, and gratitude in particular, can be drawn out and highlighted from the existing teaching curriculum.
- Special attention should be paid to assisting young people to feel confident in articulating and communicating their sense of gratitude to others, especially their peers, and in helping them to develop clearer ideas of what a more grateful world (and community) looks like.
- Young people should be actively encouraged to engage with the local community at the earliest possible opportunity. Local authorities and community organisations should seek to support young people 'giving back' in ways that are meaningful, make a demonstrable impact, and provide future pathways that allow civic service to flourish.

<sup>1</sup> See [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgiveback](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgiveback)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

# 1 Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to highlight the research and development work that the *Give Thanks – Give Back* project undertook in Shard End, Birmingham, and in Coventry. The project ran from July 2012 until February 2015. The main development focus of the project was to explore the virtue of gratitude in the lives of school pupils of various ages and the ways in which this motivated civic engagement and development within the community. In addition, the project engaged in qualitative research around young people's understanding of gratitude, what they were grateful for, and whether this affected their desire to 'give back' to others.

The research element focused on the following questions:

- how do young people understand the term 'gratitude'?
- for what are they grateful?; and
- does gratitude provide significant motivation in young people for acts of civic service?

Underpinning these questions were the following hypotheses:

- the virtue of gratitude is intuitively recognised and valued in and by young people, even if the language associated with it is not always fully understood;
- young people have a multitude of things that they are grateful for and these help shape a sense of who they are (identity) and their place in the world (belonging); and
- understanding and developing the virtue of gratitude can encourage a positive spur to civic engagement on behalf of others in the community.

To complement the research and development work, a documentary film capturing the project was also produced, along with the publication of case studies highlighting the tangible ways young people and organisations have expressed gratitude through acts of service in the community. Both the film and the case studies are available to view on the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues website [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgiveback](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgiveback)

This report focuses on outlining the project itself and the findings from the associated research.

# 2 Background

The project worked with pupils from three schools in two different cities:

- The International School (Birmingham);
- Shirestone Academy Primary School (Birmingham); and
- Blue Coat Church of England School and Music College (Coventry).

Both The International School and Shirestone Academy Primary School are located in Shard End, a ward within the district of Hodge Hill, Birmingham. It has the largest population of all the districts in Birmingham and the second highest population density<sup>3</sup>. While Hodge Hill district, when viewed as a whole, falls in the top 10% of the national indices for greatest levels of socio-economic deprivation<sup>4</sup>, Shard End is a particularly disadvantaged area with high levels of unemployment and worklessness<sup>5</sup>. Both schools draw their intake of pupils predominantly from Shard End and the wider Hodge Hill District. The International School attracts a large number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students; just over 38% of pupils attending the school have English as a second language<sup>6</sup>.

Blue Coat Church of England School is situated in the neighbourhood of Lower Stoke

in Coventry. This area covers a large portion of Coventry and contains some of its most important heritage buildings and historical sites. Lower Stoke, in terms of children under 16 living in families in receipt of Income Support and Income Based Job Seekers Allowance, is ranked the 37th most deprived area in the country<sup>7</sup>.

The school itself, a voluntary aided academy<sup>8</sup>, is a specialist Music, Maths and Science college and draws its intake of pupils from across the whole of Coventry. This explains why just 8% of its 1,424 pupils are eligible for free school meals. By way of contrast, Shirestone Academy has 53% of its 232 pupils eligible for free school meals (against a regional average of 31% and national average of 18%). Of The International School's 634 pupils, 59% are eligible for free school meals.

The schools involved vary in a number of ways (for example in the range of pupils' ages, location and socio-economic circumstances). In comparing differences between the ways in which young people from each of the schools perceive themselves (identity) and their sense of community (belonging), it is possible to assess whether the differences between the

<sup>3</sup> Richard Browne, *Hodge Hill District Profile 2013, November 2013*, Birmingham City Council Challenge Unit

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Worklessness', a relatively new term, is a government indicator that looks at the proportion of the working age population who are claiming an out-of-work benefit such as Jobseekers Allowance, Incapacity Benefits, Income Support for lone parents or other income related benefits.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*. Shard End has 7.9% of its residents classed Black and Ethnic Minority (BME)

<sup>7</sup> *Coventry Child Poverty Needs Assessment, December 2010*, produced by Coventry Partnership, [www.coventrypartnership.com/home-page](http://www.coventrypartnership.com/home-page)

<sup>8</sup> The school is faith based and independently managed in partnership with the local authority and the government Department for Children, Schools and Families

schools have any influence. It is also of interest to see whether this influences what they are grateful for and the motivation to 'give back' through acts of service.

Each school was keen to participate in the project and provided a key liaison person or persons: Hazel Smart and Karen Williamson (Shirestone), Jane Burton and David Lycett (The International) and Nigel Powell (Blue Coat). Given the busyness of the staff, and limited availability of each school's time, the project was designed to fit into the existing taught PSHE education curriculum material in the case of both Shard End schools. With respect to Blue Coat School, the pupils were a Year 13 form group and, being the final year

of schooling (aged 17–18), the project was not attached to any teaching in the classroom and was undertaken as an extra-curricular activity.

Pupil participation was entirely voluntary and, as per the terms of ethical approval from the University of Birmingham, withdrawal from the project was permitted at any time. It was initially envisaged that a total of between 30 and 45 pupils across the schools would participate in the project. In fact, at the request of The International School, the entire cohort of Year 8 (86 pupils across four classes) participated, 30 Year 3 pupils from Shirestone Academy, and 15 Year 13 pupils from Blue Coat School participated.



## 3 Exploring Gratitude and Service in School and Community

### 3.1 YEAR 3 – SHIRESTONE ACADEMY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL

**Hazel Smart**, the class teacher, helped adapt the existing PSHE curriculum material to draw out ways in which the pupils could reflect on the virtue of gratitude, both individually and collectively. For example, the original overall learning objectives identified by the curriculum's 'Going for Goals' lessons were identified as:

- 1) *to recognise their worth as individuals, by identifying positive things about themselves and their achievements, seeing their mistakes, making amends and setting personal goals;*
- 2) *to resolve differences by looking at alternatives, making decisions and explaining choices;*
- 3) *to recognise the different risks in different situations and then decide how to behave responsibly;*
- 4) *to face new challenges positively by collecting information, looking for help, making responsible choices and taking action;*
- 5) *to recognise that their actions affect themselves and others, to care about other people's feelings, and to try to see things from their points of view;*
- 6) *to talk and write about their opinions, and explain their views, on issues that affect themselves and society;*
- 7) *to reflect on spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues, using imagination to understand other people's experiences; and*

*8) to be aware of different types of relationships, including marriage, and those between friends and families, and to develop the skills to be effective in relationships.*

A number of these learning objectives naturally allowed the virtue of gratitude to be highlighted and explored. For instance, 1) *to recognise their worth as individuals by identifying positive things about themselves*, calls for self reflection that permits consideration not only of what the 'positive things' are but why they also exist. In so doing, this provides the opportunity for gratitude to be brought to the fore, experienced and expressed.

Similarly, 5) *to recognise that their actions affect themselves and others, to care about other people's feelings, and to try to see things from their points of view*, requires the ability to empathise. Empathy necessitates, among other things, an appreciation of others. We cannot easily identify with others' feelings if we do not also learn to appreciate and value them. Encouraging gratitude may help in the forming of relationships and in maintaining them<sup>9</sup>.

As one can see, this approach does not require the curriculum itself, or its learning outcomes, to be altered very much at all; rather it calls for virtues, such as gratitude, to be deliberately highlighted and more explicitly drawn out within the existing framework. The lessons, in a 12-week block, usually ran for one hour on Friday

<sup>9</sup> Algoe, Sara B., Jonathan Haidt, and Shelly L. Gable. 'Beyond Reciprocity: Gratitude and Relationships in Everyday Life.' *Emotion* (Washington, D.C.) 8.3 (2008): 425–429. PMC. Web. 14 Jan. 2015.



afternoons. They were observed and also occasionally filmed. Due to the age of the pupils (7–8 year olds), it was deemed that questionnaires would not be as effective as semi-structured interviews in capturing their thoughts. As such, a number of the children volunteered to discuss what they were grateful for, and why, on camera.

In terms of service or 'giving back' to the local community, a number of the pupils in the class and the school participate in the Young People's Forum. This is run by the Pilot Partnership, a Community Interest Company (CIC), based at The Pump, a youth and community hub, in the heart of Shard End<sup>10</sup>. A number of local primary schools in the Hodge Hill area engage in the Young People's Forum, which allows pupils to discuss and make presentations to local councillors, MPs and decision makers about issues that concern them. The Forum group meets regularly at different schools (on a rotational basis) and arranges to meet with various community organisations and individuals. It offers an excellent opportunity for young people to positively and constructively contribute to the community around them.

**Louise Edwards**, Director of the Pilot Partnership, notes that: 'Our evidence is that a majority of young people participating in the Forum will seek out and join other groups such as the Scouts or Brownies that offer further opportunities to give back to the community.'

The sessions were observed and filmed and are included in the documentary film about the project<sup>11</sup>.

### 3.2 YEAR 8 – THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

A similar approach to that taken by Hazel Smart regarding the PSHE curriculum was also adopted by Jane Burton at The International School. The school was required to focus on Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL). One of its key themes was entitled 'Learning about me.' This included the two following learning elements: 1) Feelings, moods and temperaments and 2) Our environment.

Again, through discussion and planning, the themes of gratitude and service were woven into the existing programme. This involved time to reflect inwardly on the things that engendered positive feelings and moods (things one could be thankful for), and, outwardly, in developing a positive temperament by recognising the good things one was thankful for in others.

Similarly, under 2) Our environment, the idea of 'community' was able to be introduced, which extended the outward focus on gratitude further by exploring the sense of connectedness with others that both contextualised and facilitated a personal sense of thankfulness. Community was understood in its broadest meaning as a sense of 'belonging' and, as such, one could talk about community in a number of inclusive ways, such as a community of identity (eg, ethnicity, religion), of interest (eg, hobbies, clubs) or of geography (eg, where one lives). Extending the focus in this way enabled the pupils to move from introspective reflection to reflecting on the world around them. This, in turn, laid the foundation for considering the ways in which they could make a positive contribution to their own community and beyond.

The lessons ran in a 9-week block on Wednesday afternoons across four different classes (due to the large numbers involved). The sessions were observed and occasionally filmed. During the first session, a project questionnaire was given to students to fill in on a totally voluntary basis<sup>12</sup>. This explored critical questions regarding their understanding of gratitude, the things they are grateful for and how important they consider gratitude to be. In addition, it also assessed whether they consider getting involved in the community to be important.

Additional appropriate resource material was also introduced, as a way of focusing these ideas, illustrating the concepts, and also as a means of inspiration. For example, a short film, 'No arms, No Legs, No Worries!' was shown to

students featuring Nick Vujicic, a motivational speaker to young people and schools. Vujicic was born with a rare disorder, tetra-amelia syndrome, characterised by the absence of all four limbs. He is the author of *Life Without Limits: Inspiration for a Ridiculously Good Life*. The following is a quote from the book's description: 'Often people ask how I manage to be happy despite having no arms and no legs. The quick answer is that I have a choice. I can be angry about not having limbs, or I can be thankful that I have a purpose. I chose gratitude.'<sup>13</sup>

In terms of service, the entire cohort of Year 8 pupils over the last two years has been participating in the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI), a programme that originated



<sup>10</sup> For further information about The Pump and Pilot Partnership, please see the additional Give Thanks – Give Back publication highlighting different short case studies and examples. A digital version is available on the Jubilee Centre website at [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgiveback](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgiveback)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> See online Appendices for Questionnaire and Information Sheet, available at [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgiveback](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgiveback)

<sup>13</sup> Nick Vujicic, *Life Without Limits: Inspiration for a Ridiculously Good Life* (Unabridged), Random House Audio, 2010, quote cited in the audio book description <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/audiobook/life-without-limits-inspiration/id397402662>

in Canada but has spread to the UK and now runs in 78 schools. The idea is to encourage future philanthropy by getting young people to identify and research local charities that they feel deserve the opportunity to receive £3,000. The young people meet with the charity and work together in teams to prepare a presentation of what it would do with the money, to be put before a panel of expert judges. The winning team secures the £3,000 for their charity.

The International School notes, even after the conclusion of the YPI project, that a number of students continue to work, either as volunteers

or fund raisers, with their chosen charities, irrespective of whether they were successful in securing £3,000. An example of this is students who continue to make and sell bracelets on behalf of 'Help Harry Help Others', a Birmingham based brain cancer charity.<sup>14</sup>

Filed interviews were conducted with students initially as they chose their charity and researched it, and then one year on as a follow-up to see what had happened and what they are doing now. These have been included in the publication of case studies and also in the documentary.



### 3.3 YEAR 13 – BLUE COAT CHURCH OF ENGLAND SCHOOL

The students at the school took part in the project on both a voluntary and extracurricular basis. The sessions were held during the school days, once a week, during a 40-minute class form time on Monday afternoons. Students were interviewed, some on camera.

As the students were in the final year of secondary education, many were looking to go on to University. Given their ages (most were 18 years old), they had a variety of different experiences in comparison with the students from the schools in Shard End. As previously noted, many of the students that attend Blue Coat School come from across the city and enjoy better economic circumstances than the majority of the pupils in the Birmingham schools. A significant proportion, for example, had travelled abroad and were far more conscious of the local community around them. They were able to articulate much more comprehensively and clearly the meaning of gratitude and the part that it plays in their lives. Given that Blue Coat is a faith-based school and a number of the students expressed either a personal faith or a religious awareness and upbringing, this is not surprising.

In terms of how this translated into 'giving back', many of the students discussed this in the context of their future careers. For example, two students wished to become child psychologists in order to help children who had experienced difficult or traumatic upbringings. In part, this was because they appreciated the childhood they had received and the benefits it had given to them.

One student spoke of his travelling abroad to Mexico with his family in 2012 in order to build homes for the poor. It had utterly shocked him to see the depth of poverty some people lived in, just a short distance from those living in absolute luxury and abundant affluence. It had not only been a sobering lesson which led him to express gratitude for things that he had previously taken for granted, but also made such a deep impression on him that he eventually wants to have a career that challenges such economic inequality.

Some students made short films discussing the things they were grateful for and ways in which they wished to give something back. Some of their comments are included in the published case studies.



<sup>14</sup> See <http://hhho.org.uk>

## 4 Findings

In considering the findings, there are two main sources of data. The first is questionnaires that were filled in by Year 8 pupils from The International School. The second is semi-structured interviews with Year 3 pupils from Shirestone Academy and Year 13 pupils from Blue Coat School.<sup>15</sup>

Participation in the completion of the questionnaires was entirely voluntary. A number were returned blank or substantially incomplete so as to be unusable in the data set. A total of 55 usable surveys were completed and returned, and the responses were as follows:

**Table Showing Responses to Questionnaire:  
'Investigating Young People's Understanding of Gratitude'<sup>16</sup>**

	Agree	Possibly	Undecided	Probably not	Certainly not	Left blank
I have a good understanding of what the word 'gratitude' means	15%	45%	18%	8%	11%	3%
There are a lot of things in life I am thankful for	75%	11%	6%	0%	2%	6%
I am good at showing gratitude to others	37%	40%	14%	0%	3%	6%
It is important that others show their gratitude if I do things for them	37%	29%	20%	9%	0%	5%
The world would be a better place if people were more grateful	66%	17%	6%	0%	0%	11%
Gratitude is something that has to be learned, it does not come naturally	31%	12%	32%	0%	11%	14%
I am willing to help others who are less fortunate than me	60%	17%	6%	9%	0%	8%
Getting involved in the local community is important to me	26%	26%	23%	11%	0%	14%

<sup>15</sup> The questions used in the semi-structured interviews were the same as in the questionnaire (online Appendices) but phrased as questions rather than statements to be agreed or disagreed with.

<sup>16</sup> See online Appendices available at [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgivingback](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/givethanksgivingback)

Taking into consideration the small sample size and its inherent limitations, the data from the questionnaires does permit the following observations:

Gratitude, as a term, is not confidently understood by many 12 and 13 year olds. Only 15% of respondents felt that they understood what it meant. At least 19% (leaving aside the 3% who left it blank) were confident that they did not, leaving a substantial number who were undecided or hesitant. This seems to indicate that 'gratitude' is not a word that many younger people use, or hear being used, in their everyday conversations.

While the term 'gratitude' is not confidently understood, the concept it conveys (namely feeling a sense of 'thankfulness') appears to be much more readily grasped; with 75% of respondents agreeing with the statement that they had a lot to be thankful for. This suggests that while the language associated with the virtue is unclear, the reality it conveys is not. Most young people know how to identify it in themselves and the feelings associated with it.

While the concept appears to be well understood with respect to reflecting on one's own personal feelings and experience of thankfulness however, there appears to be far less confidence that one is able to adequately communicate a sense of gratitude to others. Only 37% of respondents were confident that they were good at this, the rest were much less certain about their ability to do so. This may be why there also appears to be less concern that others whom they benefit should actively demonstrate gratitude to them in return.

It would seem that gratitude is implicitly assumed by many young people as being present even when it is not explicitly expressed.

It is therefore somewhat ironic that two thirds of respondents agreed that the world would be a better place if people were more grateful. It may be that this apparent incongruity simply indicates a lack of connection (in the minds of the respondents) between feeling and concretely expressing gratefulness; or that it hints that young people are unsure or unaware of appropriate social norms to express what they are feeling to others, and thus have limited or lower expectations of how gratitude should be reciprocated.

As the work of Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjánsson (2014) highlights, gratitude is complex and, certainly in the UK context at least, can also be associated with negative feelings such as embarrassment, awkwardness, and, at times, a sense of obligation or indebtedness<sup>17</sup>. This may help to account for the discrepancy between feeling that gratitude is a good thing and there should be more of it, and the haziness as to what it looks like in practice and how it is best shown.

When we also consider the data from the semi-structured interviews with Year 3 (Shirestone Academy) and Year 13 (Blue Coat School) pupils<sup>18</sup>, we find the following:

- Year 3 pupils (7 to 8 year olds) were not familiar with the word 'gratitude' and struggled to define it correctly. However, they did grasp the concept once it was explained and were able to articulate clearly a number of things for which they were grateful;

<sup>17</sup> Morgan, B., Gulliford, L. and Kristjánsson, K. (2014) 'Gratitude in the UK: A new prototype analysis and a cross-cultural comparison', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 281–294.

<sup>18</sup> The questions asked in the interview were the same as those on the questionnaire but allowed for a more detailed and discursive answer. Thematic analysis of the responses was undertaken using the following approach: (1) familiarisation with the data (2) generation of initial codes (3) searching for themes (4) reviewing themes (5) defining and naming themes (6) producing a report.





- Year 13 pupils (17–18 year olds) were confident as to what 'gratitude' meant and able to define it accurately. As previously noted, given the faith based nature of the school, this is not surprising. The word 'gratitude' was stated by many as being barely, if ever, used by them or their peers, however;
- in terms of how gratitude is shown, the most common answer given was that it was through verbal words of appreciation, followed by hugs, and occasionally by the giving of a small gift; though many of those in the Year 13 group did not appear to have an expectation that others should show gratitude to them in similar ways;
- and nearly all Year 3 and Year 13 pupils agreed that a greater emphasis on being grateful and showing gratitude would be a good thing. With respect to what this actually looked like, this was far less clear. In the case of Year 3 pupils it manifested itself in concrete actions, for example, playing with a lonely classmate. Year 13 pupils tended to describe a more grateful person as evidencing other virtues such as 'being kinder' or 'showing compassion and consideration' especially to the vulnerable and less well off.

It appears that any consideration of the first question posed by this research (How do young people understand gratitude?), needs to bear in mind the following points:

- what the virtue of gratitude signifies is subjectively and experientially well understood; however, the term itself is less so, especially among younger children, and its usage appears to be falling out of vogue in UK youth culture;
- a significant number of young people appear unsure if they adequately express what they feel inside to others, especially their peers;

- conversely, they appear to feel less concerned whether others, especially their friends, tangibly show gratitude to them; and
- many young people agree that the world would be a better place if people were more grateful but do not necessarily have clear ideas of what this would look like in practice or how it could best be demonstrated.

The data from the questionnaires and informal interviews looking at the second question, (For what are they grateful?), reveals that:

- family and friends were consistently the most frequently cited reasons for being grateful;
- this was followed by teachers and the school they attended (especially so for Year 3 and Year 8 pupils);
- good health, God, and having the necessities of life (such as enough to eat) were also commonly featured as reasons for gratitude; and
- although possessions (such as games consoles, toys and technology (eg, smart phones)) were frequently mentioned and appreciated, they were often considered of lesser importance.

Young people clearly differentiated and ranked, according to a personal hierarchical order of importance, the things that they were grateful for. What is interesting in many of the responses is the primary importance of relationships, often expressed in terms of the giving and receiving of love and acceptance. Broadly speaking, in assessing the positive things in their lives, people took precedence over things.<sup>19</sup>

Unsurprisingly, even across the different age ranges and different schools settings, family and friends uniformly featured as being those for whom young people were most grateful.

<sup>19</sup> See also the findings in Section 3.3.1 of Arthur, J., Kristjánsson, K., Gulliford, L., Morgan, B. (2015) *An Attitude for Gratitude: How Gratitude is Understood, Experienced and Valued by the British Public*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

These are clearly the primary agents in helping shape young people's identity and sense of belonging in the world. While teachers and their schools also featured highly, these were most commonly cited by those children of primary school age. When one considers the amount of time spent at school, this is not unsurprising.

Also of interest is the apparent uncertainty (32%) among young people in the questionnaire data as to whether gratitude has to be learnt, or if it is intuitive and therefore a naturally inherent capacity within everyone (note also that 14% left this question blank). Year 13 pupils tended to see it as both intuitive and also requiring learning. In effect, the capacity is there but gratitude has to be taught if it is to be realised. Many commented that their own awareness and reasons for gratitude were sharpest when they perceived the need of others around them in less fortunate circumstances, or when reasons to be grateful were pointed out to them. These were often framed in national or global contexts, eg, social inequality and third world poverty.

What was noticeable by its general absence, especially among Year 8 pupils, was gratitude expressed for the immediate community around them. This did not feature highly at all in the written responses given. In contrast, those pupils in Year 3 who were actively engaged in community focused projects, such as the Youth Forum, were much more conscious and appreciative of their place in the local community than those in their class who were not.

This suggests that there is scope within schools to explore this further; and, as noted earlier, this does not necessarily require huge alterations to the existing curriculum in order for it to be achievable.

It also naturally leads us to the third question: Does gratitude provide significant motivation in young people for acts of civic service?

While a significant number of respondents (60%) said they would help an individual less fortunate than themselves, and a further 17% answered 'possibly', only 26% would, or possibly would, get involved in their local community.

Although two thirds agreed the importance of gratitude in making the world a 'better place', the seeming disjunction between being willing to help unfortunate individuals, but less so in 'giving back' to the wider local community, could be an indicator that young people tend to view others around them in individualistic rather than communal terms. To help an individual is, in no small measure, also an act of service to the community of which that individual is a part. However, this connection does not appear to be readily perceived in the minds of a number of young people. Thus, virtues appear to be conceived as personal and subjective values that help define a person's character and identity, rather than as a means of equipping a person to undertake acts of service on behalf of the community to which that individual belongs.

The difficulty in making such a leap may exist for a number of reasons. 'Community' is not an easily defined term and its application is diverse. For many young people, their world is narrow: family, friends and school. As such the community context that frames these is not always within their immediate purview and thus not consciously perceived. Its significance is therefore not usually obvious until actively brought into their experience. Certainly those young people who through their school are involved in community based activities, are far more likely to seek out

additional opportunities 'to give back'. For example, as mentioned above, Louise Edwards, director of the Pilot Partnership, notes that their evidence suggests the majority of young people involved in activities, such as the Young People Forum, go on to join other community based groups (such as Cubs, Brownies and Scouts) precisely because they offer further community engagement opportunities.

Similarly, The International School's work with the YPI programme strongly suggests that the active involvement of young people in community service significantly increases their appreciation for the role of community and the likelihood that civic service will be continued in the future. This is especially true when it is deemed by them and others as meaningful, and valuable, and where it makes a demonstrable impact. Therefore young people need to actively be given the opportunities to both understand

how the wider local community works around them and also the opportunity to participate and contribute. Where these things exist, and where schools and community-based organisations are proactive in providing them, young people not only rise to the challenge but in addition gain an appetite for future civic engagement and service.

With regard to whether gratitude is a strong motivator to civic service when such connections are made, the evidence suggests that there is a link. It also seems that this is multifaceted. It is not a simplistic causal link that because I have received (a) I will do (b) for this person or on behalf of that community. Rather, cultivating gratitude may help to develop a seedbed that allows other virtues such as empathy, compassion and kindness to grow. It is these together that form compelling motivators to want to 'give back' to others.



## 5 Recommendations

While this project has a specific focus on three schools in two different cities, and its participants reflect the particular socio-economic contexts connected with those geographical environments, it is possible to form some general recommendations for those who might wish to explore further the idea of young people 'giving thanks' and 'giving back'.

- As the term 'gratitude' seems to have fallen out of vogue in today's youth culture in the UK, careful consideration should be given to help reacquaint young people with the language of virtue as well as finding contemporary ways to socially contextualise it.
- Those working in schools should give serious consideration as to how virtues in general, and gratitude in particular, can be drawn out and highlighted from the existing teaching curriculum.
- Special attention should be paid to assisting young people to feel confident in articulating and communicating their sense of gratitude to others, especially peers, and in helping them develop clearer ideas of what in practice a more grateful world (and community) looks like.
- Young people should be actively encouraged to engage with the local community at the earliest possible opportunity. Local authorities and community organisations should proactively seek to support young people 'giving back' in ways that are meaningful, make a demonstrable impact, and provide future pathways that allow civic service to flourish.



## Research Team

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Lee Rogerson is a JNC qualified youth worker and award winning documentary film-maker. He holds an MA (with Distinction) in youth and community education and in 2004 was made an MBE for services to young people in Coventry. He specialises in working with young people from the most socially and economically disadvantaged communities.





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## Street Talk Ltd

Street Talk Ltd is a youth work and community development organisation based in Coventry. Founded by Lee Rogerson MBE in 2004, it has worked in a number of economically and socially deprived neighbourhoods in both Coventry and Birmingham, and also with young people on the margins of society and mainstream education. In 2011, it won the Children and Young People Now award for youth work and its work is featured in *Engaging Practice: a good practice guide for citizenship (2011)* jointly produced by the University of Cambridge, University of Leicester and Community Service Volunteers (CSV) and funded by the Society for Educational Studies (SES).



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