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## Gratitude for teachers as a psychological resource for early adolescents: A mixed-methods study

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### ABSTRACT

In this mixed-methods study, we examine students' gratitude for their teachers and the implications of that gratitude for their psychological adaptation. We report findings that gratitude for teachers (GT) is, in fact, a resource for students facing difficult circumstances outside school. More specifically, our hierarchical multiple regression models demonstrate that this form of gratitude decreases the negative association between adverse life events and students' life satisfaction. GT also decreases the positive association between negative life events and students' perceived stress. Then, we use coded material from student interviews to illustrate how they understand the ways that their GT helps them manage challenges in their personal lives. We conclude that students' GT buffers the negative impact of adverse life events, because it helps students attend to the positive interactions and mentorship they have with their teachers and maintain focus on their future-oriented goals.

### KEYWORDS

Gratitude; teachers; negative life events; early adolescents; coping

## Introduction

There is now substantial literature on the positive associations between negative, stressful life events that occur during adolescence (e.g., family financial problems, absence of parents at home, illness or death of family members) and adverse outcomes, such as psychological distress (Compas, Orosan, & Grant, 1993), impaired self-control (Duckworth, Kim, & Tsukayama, 2013), depressive symptoms (Kraaij et al., 2003), and, when coupled with daily stressors, cumulative emotional and behavioral problems (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000; Wagner, Compas, & Howell, 1988). Hence, it is especially important to identify ways that will help children and adolescents who are facing such challenges, because the adverse psychological impacts of these stressful events appear to be more pervasive when they occur earlier in life than when they take place in adulthood (for review see Compas, 1987). While gratitude has been shown to be an important psychological resource for college students and adults who are experiencing adversity (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Tugade, Fredrickson, & Feldman Barrett, 2004; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008), no studies have yet

examined whether gratitude has similar protective properties for adolescents experiencing negative life events. We believe it is important to extend this research by studying whether and how gratitude can be a psychological resource for early adolescents who are facing negative life events.

The study reported here investigates a specific form of gratitude that we know is important for adolescents—students' sense of gratitude for their teachers (Gordon, Musher-Eizenman, Holub, & Dalrymple, 2004). Using a mixed-methods approach, we studied this sense of gratitude with two research objectives: First, we examined the prevalence of gratitude toward teachers in our sample of early adolescent students and the nature and function of that gratitude for students who did and did not report that they were dealing with adverse life circumstances at the time of the study. Second, we sought to understand the *psychological processes* through which students' gratitude for teachers (GT) arises and affects their experience of difficult life events. We believe this research sheds light on the means by which gratitude functions as a psychological resource. The theoretical foundations of this study are developed below in four sections. First, we review studies of gratitude as a psychological resource. Second, we briefly summarize relevant literature on negative life events in adolescence. Third, we turn to literature on the importance of caring teachers and students' feelings of gratitude toward teachers. Finally, we describe our own approach to the study of students' gratitude for their teachers, which uses both qualitative and quantitative methods.

### ***Protective properties of gratitude***

Gratitude is a well-researched construct in positive psychology and, depending on the foci of empirical investigations, has been defined in different ways (for review, see Gulliford, Morgan, & Kristjánsson, 2013). A common definition of gratitude in the literature is that it is a moral affect relevant to people's cognitions and behaviors in contexts involving beneficiaries, benefactors and prosocial behaviors (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001).

In recent years, a number of studies have found that having a sense of gratitude could serve as an important psychological resource for college students and adults who are dealing with psychological effects of trauma and sustained stressors. Lies et al. (2014) found that dispositional gratitude and positive coping strategies (such as planning and positive reframing) are unique protective factors against physiological and psychological distress, as well as posttraumatic stress symptoms, for adult participants eight months after a major earthquake disaster. Interestingly, while participants reported a decrease in the use of positive coping strategies over time, their self-reported gratitude remained unchanged. In a study of resilience in college students and recent graduates following the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, Frederickson et al. (2003) found that gratitude was the most frequently experienced positive emotion to co-occur with negative emotions such as anger and fear. In this study, gratitude, along with other positive emotions, mediated the relation between pre-crisis resilience, post-crisis depression and well-being. In other words, the study found that positive emotions protected resilient people against depression and helped them recover after the crisis.

Gratitude has also been found to have protective effects for adults in situations with sustained stressors. Krause (2006) found that having a sense of gratitude toward God buffered the negative impact of stress on self-rated health for older women. Specifically, this

sense of gratitude helped the women cope with the noxious effects of living in rundown neighborhoods. While the author did not investigate this, he suggested that it may have been the social support networks at church that helped these women maintain their feelings of gratitude toward God, which in turn helped them cope with their living conditions. Wood et al. (2008) found that, even after controlling for the Big Five personality traits, dispositional gratitude led to higher levels of perceived social support and lower levels of stress and depression in freshmen in their first semester at university. In sum, these quantitative studies provide evidence that gratitude, either on its own or jointly with other constructs, buffers against adverse outcomes associated with traumatic events and sustained adverse conditions. However, while these studies allude to the relations between gratitude, coping and social support, none of them investigated the processes through which gratitude arose and functions to yield its protective properties.

While no study has yet examined the protective properties of gratitude for adolescents facing adversity, studies of gratitude in adolescents have found that youth with higher dispositional gratitude scores also tend to report higher life satisfaction and social integration scores and lower scores on depression (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009). Additionally, studies that have examined the relations between gratitude and coping style in college students suggest that those who report to be grateful are especially likely to use adaptive approaches to coping. Wood et al. (2007) found that college students with higher self-report dispositional gratitude scores were more likely to manage stress by employing approach coping strategies such as seeking out emotional and instrumental social support, positive reinterpretation, active coping and planning. These students were less likely to use withdrawal coping strategies such as behavioral disengagement, self-blame, substance use and denial. Likewise, Lambert et al. (2009) found that college students who were higher in self-reported dispositional gratitude were more likely to use positive reframing (also known as positive reinterpretation or benefit-finding) to interpret negative events, which helped them view life as more manageable, meaningful and comprehensible. Although these studies did not focus on adolescents dealing with negative life events, the findings overall raise the question of whether and how gratitude may be a psychological resource for young people who are coping with negative life events, which is the central question of the research we present here.

### ***Negative life events in adolescence***

Negative or stressful life events are widely recognized as an environmental risk factor for psychological problems in children and adolescents. A review of 60 studies found evidence that stressful life experiences predicted increases in psychological problems in children and adolescents over time (Grant, Compas, Thurm, McMahon, & Gipson, 2004). However, research also indicates that stressful life events can sometimes be followed by positive growth. This highlights the importance of mediating factors (such as the individual's coping efforts, his or her resources available for coping, and the meaning the events hold for the individual) as influences on the complex relationships of stressful events to positive growth and to dysfunction (Compas, 1987). Based on studies of gratitude as a psychological resource for adults, we sought to learn whether gratitude would be related to the ways that adolescents cope with adversity.

### ***Importance of teachers to students and gratitude toward teachers***

In the field of education, there has been significant research on the importance of supportive teachers on students' academic achievement and well-being. Students described supportive teachers as those who had open and honest interaction styles, who recognized students' individuality in their academic and non-academic interests, gave constructive feedback and cared about the quality of their teaching (Wentzel, 1997). Additionally, teachers also play an important role in creating conducive classroom environments that relate to students' positive interactions with peers, motivation, engagement and learning in school (Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Teven & McCroskey, 1996). Besides helping with students' academics, teachers also act as their confidants and positive role models (Werner & Smith, 1992). Specifically, for students who were at risk of dropping out of high school, Muller (2001) found that students were more likely to be protected against the negative effects of stigmatization if they had teachers who cared about their progress in school. These students also performed better on math proficiency tests compared to students who did not report their teachers as caring.

How then do students feel in response to the care they receive from their teachers—do they feel a sense of gratitude toward their teachers? To our knowledge, only one previous study has addressed this question, even tangentially. Gordon et al. (2004) analyzed essays written by children aged four- to 12-years-old in November of 2000 and 2001 (i.e., prior to and after the September 11, 2001 attack). In the essays, students were asked to describe the things and people they were grateful for. In both years, teachers/schools was the fourth most often mentioned item (after family, basic needs and friends), and an average of 23.3% of the essays, across both years, included this theme. While this study provides evidence that GT features prominently in the everyday life of students and is important to them, it did not investigate the impact of this kind of gratitude on students' well-being.

### ***The present study***

The available research literature reveals that gratitude can be a psychological resource for adults in adverse situations, but we know little about how gratitude arises and functions to yield these positive outcomes. And, to our knowledge, there are no studies that have examined gratitude among adolescents who are experiencing negative life events. Thus, in this study, we have attempted to fill these empirical gaps by focusing directly on teacher-related gratitude for adolescents facing adversity. Most early adolescents spend more time in school, with fellow students, teachers and other adults than in any other context except the home. Teachers are highly salient adult figures in the lives of most early adolescents and play influential roles for many young people.

Taken together, our interview and survey data allowed for a close examination of how frequent expressions of GT are, what this kind of gratitude means to students who are or are not dealing with adverse life events, and the relationship of this type of gratitude to other well-being outcomes for students who are facing negative life events. Specifically, we investigated whether students' sense of GT may be a protective factor for those who are facing adversity. In doing so, we aimed to bridge two areas of previous research: the impact of having supportive, caring teachers, which has received significant research attention and the less-researched phenomenon of GT.

## Methods

### *Participants and sampling procedure*

This study is part of a two-year longitudinal investigation of character development in adolescence. For this current set of analyses, our sample consists of 90 eighth-grade students recruited from six schools: two public and two charter schools in the Northeast and one charter and one private school on the West coast. The participating students were nominated by teachers and administrators in each school to be representative of the school's student body in demographic characteristics, academic achievement and classroom behavior. Our participant sample was demographically and socioeconomically diverse. According to school records, 52% were female, 51% were African American, 20% were Caucasian, 16% were Asian, 10% were Hispanic and 3% were Multi-racial/Other. About 57% of the participants qualified for free or reduced priced lunch.

### *Mixed-methods data collection and analyses*

We collected both interview and survey data from our participants, after having obtained parental consent and student assent for their participation. The interviews were conducted at the end of the fall semester of their eighth-grade year; surveys were administered in the spring semester of that year.

### *Interviews*

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted by trained interviewers in private spaces during class time. Interview participants received a \$10 gift card for their time. Interviews averaged 60 minutes and were audio-recorded, transcribed and de-identified. For the interview analyses, two coders first coded 10 interviews to determine if they could identify interviewees who spontaneously mentioned that they were grateful to their teachers. Inter-rater agreement was attained at 100% for this code. The two coders then proceeded to code the full set of 90 interviews. Subsequently, they read and theme-coded the interviews that expressed GT to understand how students describe their sense of gratitude for their teachers.

### *Self-report questionnaire*

Participants also completed a battery of measures as an electronic self-report questionnaire on their school computers during class time. The average completion time was 45 minutes. Five interviewees across the six schools were absent from school on the day of survey administration. A number of students did not respond to some of the measures of interests in the analyses. These cases were excluded from the analyses on a test-by-test basis.

### *Mixed-methods analyses*

For the analyses presented here, we first used the interviews to identify which students shared that they felt grateful to their teachers and which did not. Then, we used the survey data from these students to test our hypotheses that GT buffers against adverse psychological outcomes associated with negative life events. The three hypotheses in our quantitative analysis are: (1) Negative life events are associated with lower life satisfaction and higher

perceived stress; (2) GT is a moderator that decreases the negative association between negative life events and life satisfaction; and (3) GT is a moderator that decreases the positive association between negative life events and perceived stress. Lastly, we turned back to the interview material to take a more in-depth look at how students articulated their gratitude toward their teachers and whether these articulations were different in adolescents with and without negative life events.

## Quantitative analyses

We use the following interview code and survey measures in the statistical analyses.

### Measures

#### *Gratitude for teachers*

We included in the quantitative analyses a dummy code from the interviews to indicate the presence or absence of spontaneously expressed GT. In the interview, participants were asked to whom or what they felt especially thankful or grateful. Students who spontaneously mentioned, in response to that question or at any point in the interview, that they were grateful to their teachers were dummy coded '1' and assigned to the GT group ( $n = 19$ ). The rest of the interviewees were dummy coded '0' and assigned to the Did Not Mention (DNM) group ( $n = 71$ ).

#### *Negative life events*

We used a 14-item measure that was adapted from the Life Events Checklist (Johnson & McCutcheon, 1980) and has been used in previous studies with early adolescents (Duckworth et al., 2013). Each item details a type of negative life event (e.g., increased arguments or fights between parents, death of a close family friend, family financial troubles). Participants were asked to indicate whether they had experienced these negative life events in the past six months. Total scores for negative life events were calculated by adding the number of negative life events reported by each participant.

#### *Life satisfaction*

We used a single-item measure adapted from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) from Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). Single-item life satisfaction items are used in many panel studies and have good reliability estimates (e.g.,  $r = .61-.70$  in Lucas & Brent Donnellan, 2012). In our study, we asked participants 'During the past month, how satisfied or unsatisfied were you with your life?' Responses were indicated using a 6-point scale that ranged from 1 = strongly unsatisfied to 6 = strongly satisfied.

#### *Perceived stress*

Participants responded to a five-item measure adapted from the Perceived Stress Scale (Herrero & Meneses, 2006). Items included things like, 'In the past month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life' and 'In the past month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling so high that you could not overcome them.' Participants rated their experiences on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. The internal reliability of this scale was  $\alpha = .65$ .



### Support for goals at school

This four-item measure asked students to indicate whether they felt that they received support at school for goals that are most important to them and that they want to accomplish. Items include, ‘At least one teacher is interested in one or more of my top ranked goals’ and ‘At least one adult in my school is a role model for one or more of my top ranked goals.’ Responses were indicated on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. The internal reliability of the scale was  $\alpha = .77$ .

### Analysis plan

First, we examined the descriptive statistics and distributions of the variables of interest. Then, given the non-normal distributions of the variables between the two groups, we conducted Mann-Whitney U tests to determine if there were significant differences in these variables between the GT and DNM groups. Next, we fitted hierarchical multiple regression models to test our hypotheses. Because we wanted to examine whether GT would moderate the associations between negative life events and a positive outcome (i.e., life satisfaction) and between negative life events and a negative outcome (i.e., perceived stress), we had two dependent variables. In our initial models, we found that schools were not significant predictors and that removing them from the models did not change the significance of the other independent variables. Thus, in our final regression models, we controlled for gender, as well as students’ ratings of the support they received at school. The continuous independent variables (i.e., negative life events and support received at school) were standardized for easier interpretation of the results (Dawson, 2014). The categorical moderator—GT—was a dummy variable, with ‘1’ for the GT group and ‘0’ for the DNM group. The interaction term (i.e., between the standardized negative life events score and GT) was added in the second level of the hierarchical multiple regressions. Lastly, we plotted interaction graphs with standardized negative life events scale on the x-axes to interpret the two-way interaction effects, followed by simple slope analyses to examine if the slopes of the two groups were different.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations, median, range, skewness and kurtosis of the variables of interest are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Actual range	Skewness	<i>S.E.</i>	Kurtosis	<i>S.E.</i>
Life Satisfaction	4.33	1.05	4.00	2–6	–.48	.27	–.10	.53
Perceived Stress	2.82	.69	2.80	1.2–4.8	.26	.27	.61	.53
Support at school	3.41	.94	3.50	1–5	–.51	.26	.15	.52
Negative life events	2.03	2.13	1.50	0–11	1.38	.27	2.95	.53

\* $p > 0.5$ ; \*\* $p > 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p > 0.001$ .



## Descriptive statistics

### Mann-Whitney U tests

Given the non-normal distributions of our variables of interest in the two groups, we ran Mann-Whitney tests to determine if there were differences in life satisfaction, perceived stress, support received at school, negative life events and grades between the GT and DNM groups. Except for the support received at school, there were no significant differences in the other variables between the two groups (see Table 2). Thus, in the regression models, we made sure to control for the support received at school variable as a covariate.

### Mann-Whitney U tests of differences in variables by group

#### Hierarchical multiple regression models

In the models where life satisfaction was the dependent variable, the model with the interaction term significantly improved the adjusted  $R^2$  and explained an additional 6% of the total variance,  $F(5, 72) = 6.77$ ,  $p = .000$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.22$  to  $0.27$ ,  $p = .01$ . The interaction term significantly predicted life satisfaction scores ( $B = .83$ ,  $SE = .32$ ,  $p = .01$ ). In the models where perceived stress was the dependent variable, the model with the interaction term significantly improved the adjusted  $R^2$  and explains an additional 4.6% of the total variance,  $F(5, 72) = 7.44$ ,  $p = .000$ , adjusted  $R^2$  from  $0.26$  to  $0.30$ ,  $p = .03$ . The interaction term significantly predicted perceived stress ( $B = -.48$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p = .03$ ). For the full results of the models, see Table 3. Given the significant interactions in the models, we conducted simple slope analyses next to examine whether the slopes of the two groups, GT and DNM, were different.

### Hierarchical multiple regressions of negative life events, GT and their interaction terms predicting life satisfaction and perceived stress

#### Simple slopes analyses

For life satisfaction, the simple slope analyses revealed that for DNM group, the slope between life satisfaction and negative life events was significant and negative ( $B = -.41$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p = .001$ ). However, for the GT group, the slope was in the opposite direction and not significant ( $B = 0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.30$ ,  $p = .192$ ). See Figure 1 for the two-way interaction graph.

For perceived stress, simple slopes analysis indicates that for DNM group, the slope between perceived stress and negative life events was significant and positive ( $B = .49$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $p = .00$ ). For the GT group, the slope was smaller in magnitude and not significant ( $B = .01$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $p = .95$ ). See Figure 2 for the two-way interaction graph.

**Table 2.** Mann-Whitney U tests of differences in variables of interest by group.

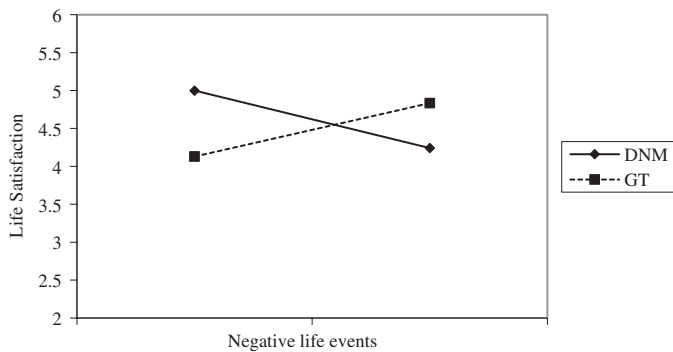
Variables	DNM Group			GT Group			Mann-Whitney U		
	Median	Range	<i>n</i>	Median	Range	<i>n</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Life Satisfaction	4.00	4.00	63	4.00	4.00	17	579.5	.54	.587
Perceived Stress	2.80	3.60	63	2.80	1.60	17	485	−.60	.550
Support received at school	3.50	4.00	64	4.00	4.00	17	722	2.07	.038
Negative life events	2.00	8.00	61	1.00	4.00	17	425	−1.16	.245

**Table 3.** Hierarchical multiple regressions of negative life events, gratitude for teachers and their interaction terms predicting life satisfaction and perceived stress.

	Life Satisfaction				Perceived Stress			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Female	-.46*	.22	-.46*	.21	.03	.14	.04	.14
Support at school	.36**	.11	.36**	.10	-.10	.07	-.10	.07
Gratitude for Teachers	-.12	.26	.08	.27	.07	.17	-.04	.17
Negative life events	-.39*	.13	-.43**	.13	.42***	.08	.49***	.09
Interaction Term(GT*z-NLE)			.83*	.33			-.48*	.21
Adj. R2	.22		.28		.26		.30	
F	6.40***		6.77***		7.63***		7.44***	

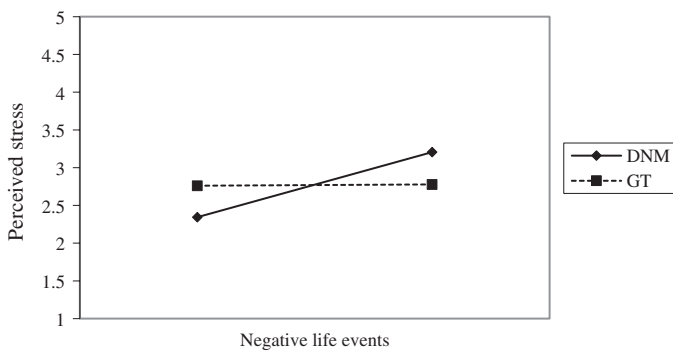
Note: The term (GT\*z-NLE) is the interaction between gratitude for teacher and the standardized negative life events score. Support at school and negative life events are standardized.

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.



**Figure 1.** Two-way interaction graph for life satisfaction.

Note: DNM group did not mention feeling grateful to their teachers and GT group did. Negative life events on the x-axis was standardized.



**Figure 2.** Two-way interaction graph for perceived stress.

Note: DNM group did not mention feeling grateful to their teachers and GT group did. Negative life events on the x-axis was standardized.

### Discussion: quantitative analyses

All three of our hypotheses were supported. In our hierarchical multiple regression models, negative life events negatively predicted life satisfaction and positively predicted perceived

stress. The statistical significance of the interaction term in the models, i.e., GT and negative life events, showed that for students with negative life events, GT was a significant moderator in the relationships between negative life events and life satisfaction and between negative life events and perceived stress. Additionally, GT was a unique moderator above and beyond the amount of support students received at school for their goals.

More specifically, GT was a moderator that appeared to buffer the adverse outcomes of negative life events. In the simple slope analyses where life satisfaction was the dependent variable, the slope of the DNM group showed a statistically significant negative relationship between life satisfaction and negative life events. This relationship was not evident for the GT group. The insignificant positive slope of the GT group indicated that the relationship between life satisfaction and negative life events had more unexplained variance and the positive slope suggested that having GT buffered against the negative association between life satisfaction and negative life events that was evident in the DNM group. In the simple slope analyses where perceived stress was the dependent variable, the slope of the DNM group showed a statistically significant positive relationship between perceived stress and negative life events. This relationship was not evident for the GT group. The insignificant positive slope for the GT group indicated that the relationship between perceived stress and negative life events had more unexplained variance and the smaller magnitude of the slope suggested that GT buffered against the positive association between perceived stress and negative life events that was evident in the DNM group.

In sum, students for whom GT is salient appeared to be protected against lowered sense of life satisfaction associated with more negative life events and from higher levels of stress typically associated with more negative life events. Next, we turn to the interviews for a closer examination of the ways the students discussed the negative life events they faced and their GT.

## Qualitative analyses

### Results

#### *Relationship between gratitude for teachers and negative life events*

Within our group of 90 interviewees, 19 (21.11%) spontaneously identified teachers as objects of their gratitude. Of these 19, 10 (52.63%) reported on their surveys having negative life events in the past six months and six (31.58%) reported having none. The negative life events that were most frequently reported were: 'Family financial troubles or worries about money' (18.18%), 'Close friend had problems' (11.36%) and 'Increased arguments or fights between parents' (11.36%). As shown in Table 2, there were no significant differences in the number of negative life events between the GT and DNM groups.

#### *Interview themes on gratitude for teachers*

Three themes emerged from our coding of the 19 interviews in which students said they were grateful to their teachers: (*Theme 1*) GT who care about students' interests and achievements and help them to pursue their goals; (*Theme 2*) GT who are down-to-earth and accessible to students as well as being skilled at teaching; and (*Theme 3*) GT who provide particular kinds of learning content and environments that are valued by students. These themes capture recurring patterns that cut across the interviews in each category. We provide the following interview excerpts to illustrate each theme. Pseudonyms are used.

*Theme 1: Gratitude for teachers who care about their students' interests and achievements and help them to pursue their goals*

Maddy aspires to be a writer—she wants her writing to help ‘speak up for and support people’ who have less than she does. She said that writing allows her to express thoughts and feelings that she would otherwise be reluctant to share. Her family members, particularly her mother, are recovering from the death of her stepfather. They also have financial worries. For Maddy, good grades are especially important because she hopes to make her mother happy by doing well in school and going to college.

INTERVIEWER: HOW OFTEN DO YOU FEEL THANKFUL OR GRATEFUL?

I think about twice a week. There's always something I'm thankful for.

WHAT KINDS OF THINGS ARE THOSE?

My teachers help me throughout the week, my siblings and just everyone that I can see around me as being happy.

WHY ARE YOU THANKFUL FOR YOUR TEACHERS?

Because my teachers are—some of my teachers are there and they can realize that I need help. They'll help me throughout the day, [name] especially. She realizes that my writing means something and she'll help me with my writing.

WHY DO YOU THINK [TEACHER] DOES THAT?

I think because she sees deeper into students. She doesn't just see a number with her students. Some of my teachers use that number against their students, and they'll see a different student with a number, but she doesn't see a number on a kid's face. She washes that number away and she looks deeper into the kid and realizes what the kid is inside.

*Theme 2: Gratitude for teachers who are down-to-earth and accessible to students as well as being skilled at teaching*

Kevin wants to make his parents proud and be the first in his family to go to college. He is especially mindful of the fact that his parents ‘work really hard’ and ‘never get breaks.’ They have multiple jobs, have financial worries and have been fighting a lot. School is especially important to him because he aspires to attend a good college, have a bright future and help support his parents.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT SORT OF BIGGER THINGS ARE YOU THANKFUL FOR—SOMETHING RECENTLY THAT YOU CAN THINK, THAT YOU FELT THANKFUL FOR?

My math test. I got 100 on it—40 out of 40 points. It's graphing X and Y intercepts.

WHAT WERE YOU THANKFUL FOR REGARDING THESE MATH TESTS?

That my teacher ... did a really good job that I copied down notes and studied. Because if I didn't, I probably wouldn't have done that well.

TELL ME A LITTLE MORE ABOUT BEING THANKFUL FOR YOUR TEACHER

My teacher, he's a really good teacher. He's not really strict. He's funny. He helps out students. He's not a mean teacher—pretty cool guy.

*Theme 3: Gratitude for teachers who provide particular kinds of learning content and environments that students value*

Kira cares deeply about the environment. She is also on an athletic team at school and has developed close friendships with her teammates.

INTERVIEWER: SO WHAT KIND OF OTHER THINGS DO YOU FEEL THANKFUL FOR?

I started to feel really thankful that I had gone to [school] and I had learned all these skills, I guess. Everyone scoffs at ... a lot of students here scoff at social emotional learning (SEL), but they—but [school] kids actually do end up using it. They have learned a lot from that class. Our school is a lot more SEL than any other school I've looked at. People are friendly to everyone. They don't form their own groups. If you want to be in a group with someone else, you can. We learn things like that passive aggressive confronting people. We talk about different scenarios. The most useful thing is called open session, where people write anonymous cards. They can put their name on it, but [name], our teacher, won't read it. She'll just know who has the problem. ... We have a group discussion about what we would do in that circumstance, what advice we have, what support we have.

### **Prevalence of themes**

There was a notable difference in the prevalence of the themes in the accounts of students who reported negative life events ( $n = 10$ ) compared with those who did not report negative life events ( $n = 6$ ). In the group with negative life events, their descriptions of feeling grateful for their teachers referred to teachers who were supportive of their academic or personal goals and helped them to achieve these goals (*Theme 1*) and to teachers who were accessible to them (i.e., *Theme 2*). In contrast, for the group with no negative life events, the students referred to feeling grateful to their teachers for providing the learning content and environments that students value (i.e., *Theme 3*). There were no overlaps in themes between the two groups.

### **Discussion: qualitative analyses**

We reported here three findings from our qualitative analyses. First, we note that, although GT was expressed by a minority of study participants (21.1%), it was particularly salient for those who expressed it. These students spontaneously brought up their gratitude for their teachers during the interview without being asked about their feelings toward their schools or teachers. As indicated by the Mann-Whitney U test (Table 2), we found no significant association between having GT and the number of negative life events.

Second, students referred to having GT who went out of their way to support them in their goal pursuits; teachers who were down-to-earth and accessible; and those who provided valued learning content and environments. A comparison of the prevalence of these themes expressed by students with and without negative life events showed distinct differences between these two groups. For students who reported negative life events, they attended to the efforts their teachers made to help and support them in their pursuit of academic or personal goals, including attending good colleges, being successful in life, or having good jobs to help support their parents. In contrast, students who reported no negative life events attended primarily to the learning content and environments their teachers provided for them rather than the individual support or help they were receiving from their teachers. It seems likely that the difference in the prevalence of these themes is indicative of the differences in the social and financial resources available to the two groups of students outside their school environments. Negative life events reported by students in our study often involved financial worries and familial conflict or problems. This suggests that the students who were experiencing adverse life circumstances had fewer or less stable resources and social support at home and thus were particularly grateful to

teachers who cared about their interests and future-oriented aspirations, as well as helping them pursue these goals.

Taking the quantitative and qualitative findings together, we have shown that for students with negative life events, having GT lessens the adverse outcomes of those negative events. We believe that this is because this type of highly salient gratitude helps these students focus on the positive interactions and mentorship they have at school and maintain their efforts to achieve academic and personal goals. In this sense, these students' gratitude for their teachers reflects the extent to which they pay attention to the ways their teachers provide valuable resources that help them pursue their goals despite the familial and personal challenges they are facing. It is understandable, then, that these psychological processes of attending to positive interactions with teachers, and focusing on efforts toward their future-oriented goals as well as their own gratitude, would lift the students' life satisfaction and help them better manage the stresses in their lives.

## Discussion

Our quantitative findings demonstrated that, for students with adverse life circumstances, feeling grateful to their teachers decreased the negative association between negative life events and life satisfaction and the positive association between negative life events and students' perceived stress. Our analyses show that, even after controlling for the sense of support they received at school, this specific sense of gratitude made a unique contribution to students' psychological well-being. From our qualitative analyses of interviews with these students, we suggest that their GT helps mitigate the adverse outcomes of negative life events, because this sense of gratitude helps them attend to the positive interactions and mentorship they have at school and maintain a focus on their future-oriented academic or personal goals.

Our findings extend the literature on gratitude as a psychological resource for adults to show how gratitude serves the same function for early adolescents. We found the same protective effect of gratitude against adverse outcomes in our adolescent sample who had adverse life circumstances as others have shown with adult samples (e.g., Krause, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Our analyses show that this highly salient sense of gratitude contributed to these students' psychological well-being and helped them to stay focused on their academic and personal goals without being deterred by their familial and personal challenges. Notably, we showed that for this group of students, their GT explained unique variance in our dependent variables after we had controlled for support received at school.

Our findings also extend earlier scholarship on the relation between gratitude and adaptive coping, which has been reported in adults (Lambert et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2007). The literature on adolescents' coping (e.g., Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Kraaij et al., 2003) generally categorizes coping responses into two types: adaptive coping modes (e.g., problem- and/or emotion-focused coping, such as situation control, positive self-instructions, social support and minimization) and maladaptive coping modes (e.g., passive avoidance, rumination and aggression). We believe that it is appropriate to interpret our adolescents' capacity to draw on their gratitude for their teachers to deal with adversity as a variant of adaptive, problem- and emotion-focused coping behavior. These students sought and seemed to gain strength from their relationships with their teachers, which helped them maintain their focus and efforts toward future-oriented academic and personal goals despite

the difficult challenges in their lives. In other words, similar to adults, there is a positive association between gratitude and adaptive coping in adolescents.

Our participants' focus on future-oriented aspirations and goals is another theme in our study that has been under-explored previously in the literature on adolescent coping (for review, see Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Early adolescents who are looking to improve their life circumstances in a sustained manner, maintain a focus on pathways to successful futures, and obtain support to pursue those pathways may also acquire a sense of hope. Hope has been defined as a cognitive-motivational construct that involves having personally valued goals, the ability to generate strategies and pathways to achieve these goals and the agency to pursue these goals (Shorey, Little, Snyder, Kluck, & Robitschek, 2007). Studies that have examined hope as a psychological strength have found that it predicts successful goal attainment and psychological adjustment (Snyder, 2002). We believe that our study points to the value of examining the relationship of hopefulness to teacher support and gratitude for that support. For the students in our study who combined negative life events with GT, future goals that would lead them out of their current adverse life situations appear to play an important role. This suggests that models of early adolescents' ability to cope with adversity should investigate the full range of resources that help them cope and pursue their goals, including gratitude for caring and supportive educators. The relationships between these young people and their teachers seem to help them maintain a sense of hope and their gratitude constitutes for them a positive emotional response in often-difficult situations.

More broadly, we think it is important to consider the contexts and interactions in which *interpersonal forms of gratitude* arise and function in early adolescents. In our study, we were able to do so by employing mixed methodologies. The quantitative analyses first alerted us to the fact that this sense of gratitude toward teachers is a unique moderator that buffers the adverse outcomes associated with negative life events for some adolescents. Then, our interviews allowed us to trace how this sense of gratitude arose from teachers' mentorship and concern for these students and how students responded to and benefitted from these positive teacher–student interactions. While studies that focus on the quantitative associations between gratitude, well-being, and resilience provide useful insights on these relationships, there has been little articulation of how interpersonal gratitude comes about or is fostered. More often than not, gratitude appears to exist in a vacuum, void of actors and interactions. In this study, our interviews allowed us to contextualize our findings; to better capture and understand the role of these psychological constructs; and, hence, more accurately report on the conditions under which they arise and operate for these youth. In addition to contributing to theoretical knowledge, we believe the insights from our investigation can provide useful guidance to educators and professionals who work with these adolescents.

### ***Strengths, limitations and future directions***

While our findings are consistent with those of previous studies on the buffering effects of gratitude against traumatic events and daily stressors, a key strength of this study is the capacity of our mixed methodologies. The quantitative analyses provided evidence that having a sense of GT is a moderator against adversity experienced by students outside the school-context. The in-depth interviews illustrate the specific nature of students' sense of



gratitude for their teachers and how it arises and functions within the teacher–student interactions. These findings go beyond previous research on the importance of caring teachers to explore student emotional responses toward their teachers as well as students’ own articulations of the sources of those emotional responses.

Given our research objectives, the necessarily narrow focus on GT in our study limits our ability to look at the role of other supportive adult figures present in the lives of our participants and how this relates to their coping. Drawing from the literature on the significance of caring adults outside the immediate family as protective factors in the lives of at-risk youth (e.g., Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992) as well as findings from our study, we believe that these positive interactions and the gratitude these youth feel for their mentors have similar buffering effects against the negative outcomes of adversity. We encourage future research to explore this. Additionally, the sample size in our study is relatively small. Our findings and hypotheses should be tested in future studies with larger samples. Future research may wish to test our hypotheses using mediational models that include measures of gratitude, hope, coping strategies and coping resources such as social support and mentorship. Lastly, our study indicated that our participants’ sense of gratitude was highly salient for them and future research may wish to pursue further the question of why GT is particularly salient for some students and not others.

To conclude, given the protective effects of gratitude, research in this area is highly consequential for students, especially those facing difficult life circumstances. Likewise, psychological mechanisms through which specific variants of interpersonal gratitude lead to positive psychological outcomes warrants further study. Such investigations should include attention to the *resources* that support young people’s goal pursuits, as well as young people’s *appreciation* of those resources. Our research suggests that this would be a promising area of study, with important implications for parents, educators and other practitioners.

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