



Centre for Mental Health
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Gratitude and Gratefulness: A preliminary evaluation of 'My Gratitude Journal'

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SUMMARY REPORT DRAFT

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About the Authors

Sarah Smith L'Estrange is an alumnus of Maynooth University, and recently graduated with a BA (2.1 Honours) degree in Psychology. This study was conducted in part fulfilment of the requirements for this degree.

Professor Sinead McGilloway is Founder Director of the Centre for Mental Health and Community Research at Maynooth University. She was the project supervisor for this research.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an important shift towards prevention and early intervention services and practices, both in Ireland and elsewhere. These include Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs), which may be defined as programmes or treatments which attempt to create positive feelings, behaviours and cognitions (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). A large amount of research has indicated that PPIs can significantly improve psychological and subjective well-being, as well as reducing depressive symptoms and increasing positive emotions such as happiness and gratitude (Cohn, & Frederickson., 2010; Boiler et al., 2013).

A significant body of literature has also focused on improving gratitude levels and practices, as gratitude has been strongly associated with positive emotions such as contentment, pride, hope and happiness. For example, deliberate and mindful expressions of gratitude can increase subjective well-being, generating a positive outlook on life and promoting happiness, self-confidence, resilience and prosocial behaviour (Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts, 2003).

This summary report presents the key findings from an exploratory study undertaken to assess the overall perceived effectiveness of a newly developed PPI in Ireland, aimed at improving aspects of wellbeing in children. This PPI is called the 'My Gratitude Journal'. This 26-week programme was developed by Suzanne and Linda Culleton (of *Positive Vibes*) in 2018, with a view to creating a resource which would help to teach children skills to enable them to improve aspects of their overall wellbeing. Specifically, this PPI aims to increase confidence, self-esteem, happiness, resilience, empathy and wellness through various activities which are guided by the journal and implemented over a 26-week period.

2. Study aims

The principal aim of this study was to assess the extent to which children who had completed the 'My Gratitude Journal' (MGJ) over a 26-week period, were perceived by teachers and their parents/guardians to have experienced any changes in terms of their

overall levels of happiness, self-esteem/confidence, empathy, and resilience as well as in their relationships and the development of their growth mind-set.

3. How was the study conducted?

This research was conducted using a mixed methods design. Data were collected using a combination of two brief surveys as well as one group discussion and four semi-structured interviews.

Participants and settings

Participants who took part in the survey were identified and recruited using purposive sampling; that is, each participant had to be a parent/guardian or teacher of a child who had completed the Journal. An email and text invitation were sent to participants who had previously agreed to be contacted (N=52), with a link to the surveys. A total of 30 individuals responded to, and participated, in the survey, 21 of whom were parents/guardians of children who had completed the 'My Gratitude Journal'. The remaining 9 were professionals (e.g. teachers, therapists) who had used the journal in a group/classroom setting.

Four of the survey participants agreed to take part in an interview, all of whom were parents.

A group discussion was also conducted with the two intervention developers in order to better understand the intervention and its origins, and to help inform the development of the survey and the interview schedules.

Measures

Following a group discussion with the intervention developers, the key objectives of the MGJ were identified and used to inform the development of two survey questionnaires. These were used to elicit demographic and background information on all respondents and on the children who had completed the Journal, as well as respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of the MGJ in a number of key domains. Respondents were also invited to provide responses to open-ended questions (Figure 1). The survey findings were used to inform the development of the subsequent interviews with a smaller number of participants.



Figure 1: Key aspects of wellbeing and functioning mentioned by respondents in their open-ended responses

4. Summary of Key Findings

4.1. Survey findings

1. Levels of perceived improvement on each aspect of wellbeing were measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1= much worse, 2= somewhat worse, 3=about the same, 4=somewhat better, 5=much better). Overall, each one of the variables examined, indicated pre-post intervention improvements, with **growth mindset** and **confidence** showing the highest levels of perceived (moderate to strong) improvement, followed by **relationships** and **self-esteem**. The aspect which showed least improvement was antisocial behaviour, most probably because this was not identified as an issue prior to completion of the MGJ. The mean scores on each dimension are shown in Figure 2.

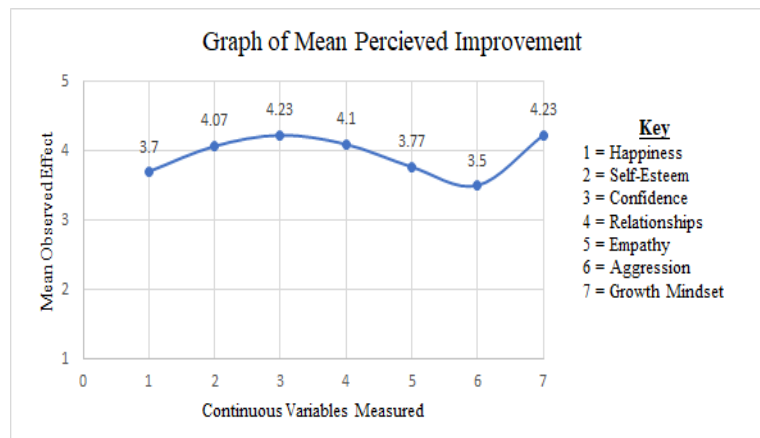


Figure 2: Mean levels of perceived improvement following completion of the MGJ

2. The **perceived effectiveness** of the MGJ was assessed using a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 being 'very effective' and 4 being 'not effective at all'. The mean score of 2.1 indicates that respondents perceived the journal to be effective overall.

3. Perceived improvements in **self-esteem** were found to be significantly and positively associated with **happiness, confidence, and relationships**.

4.2. Interview findings

The qualitative findings supported and amplified the survey data. Three key themes were identified from the interviews with stakeholders, as outlined below. A number of subthemes were identified within each.

(a) Perceived effects on aspects of wellbeing and personal functioning

- **Gratitude:** A recurring subtheme within the interviews, was the reported increases in both deliberate expressions of gratitude, such as a specific activity, or a change in perception causing the child to be more grateful. The 'gratitude jar' was specifically mentioned as an activity which had stimulated strong feelings of gratitude. This activity involves the child writing on a note, something for which they are grateful every day and then placing the note in a jar which they have decorated themselves. The gratitude jar is designed to be used as a reminder of the positive aspects in a child's life and especially when they were feeling down. One example of something of which one child was particularly appreciative, was her bed because "*some children don't have a bed*". Another parent explained that their child "*has become more grateful for the things she has in her life and she is trying to show her appreciation*".

- **Happiness:** Observed changes in happiness following use of the MGJ, were also commonly reported. For example, one parent indicated that her child was “*able to think of herself very positively and be able to point out the things that she loved about herself*”. This parent also explained that there was an increase in her daughter’s happiness levels. Another parent explained that her child was “*definitely happier*” following journal completion and that her happiness levels were especially high following the “*Buddy sessions*”. [At the beginning of the Journal, each child selects one person to act as a “Buddy” throughout the completion of the Journal to participate in activities with the child and provide ongoing support.] A third parent reported that her son’s happiness levels began to increase as the weeks progressed and that spending “*quality time together that was focused on him*” had helped in this respect.

- **Confidence and self-esteem:** Improvements in children’s levels of confidence and self-esteem were clearly identified in all stakeholder interviews. For example, interviewee one mentioned that her daughter had performed at a school assembly and she believed that the MGJ had “*really shaped her ability to do that*”. Notably, this interviewee had worked with a group of children in a therapeutic capacity in order to help build their confidence and self-esteem and as part of her work, she had utilised aspects of the MGJ and had observed positive results. Interviewee three explained that her son was “*very shy*” but following completion of the journal, he had “*come out of his shell much more*” and had “*more confidence in himself*”. Likewise, other participants alluded to similar post-intervention improvements in confidence.

On a related point, three of the interviewees specifically mentioned the positive effects of the MGJ on their child’s self-esteem. One believed that the gratitude journal was “*a great way to boost self-esteem*” and that her daughter was now “*taking ownership more of her abilities and accepting praise much easier*”. A second parent expressed a similar sentiment, indicating that the MGJ had “*definitely seemed to improve her [daughter’s] self-esteem and confidence*”.

Likewise, a third parent explained that her son had *“more confidence in himself and his self-esteem has really improved”*.

- **Resilience:** Resilience was another recurring subtheme throughout all of the interviews. Interviewee one disclosed at the beginning of the interview that her daughter was *“not the most resilient”*, but through conversations initiated through the MGJ, her ability to *“let go”* of situations that she could not change, had improved. Interviewee two indicated that the skills and tools developed through using the Journal, had resulted in the child *“handling situations a bit better and not taking the opinion of others to heart”*. A similar observation was made by interviewee four who explained that her daughter was *“definitely less affected by the little things and can focus on the bigger picture”*.

(b) Relationships/Social Skills

- **Improved Relationships:** Interviewees also alluded to changes in their relationship with their child following the child’s completion of the intervention. One parent observed how her child had become *“more independent”* and had begun to relate more effectively, and had become closer, to her siblings. A second parent described an activity which had encouraged her child to go beyond her circle of friends and find out information about new people which *“was a hard one for her but she done it”*. This activity resulted in a new peer relationship developing which had a *“really positive influence”* on the child. : *“It pushed her out of her comfort zone but in a nice way. She didn't like it, but she done it and she seen the benefit straight away which was great”*.
- **Empathy:** Changes in children’s levels of empathy and social awareness were further highlighted in the interviews. Interviewee two had observed *“a big improvement in her [daughter’s] awareness and reaction to others if they are sad or hurt”*. In a similar vein, interviewee three reported noticing an increase in empathy in her son and attributed this change to his *“being open to other perspectives”*. A third parent also indicated that her child’s levels of empathy had *“definitely improved”*. By contrast, interviewee one felt that her child was

“probably too empathetic and too understanding to a point where she might even upset herself”. This raises an interesting question about what might be considered an appropriate level of empathy for a young child.

(c) Optimism/Positivity and Growth Mindset.

- **Optimism / Positivity:** Children were also observed to have developed greater positivity in their lives. Interviewee one indicated that her daughter did not tend to *“focus on the positive very often”*, but that the Journal had provided her with the *“tools to build”* on developing alternative perspectives. Similarly, before beginning the intervention, interviewee two explained that her daughter would *“struggle to take compliments”* but that the MGJ had helped her to *“accept praise much easier”* through developing a more positive outlook both about herself and her life in general: *“I think it has made a difference to our daughter. She would be quite anxious and unsure of herself. The Journal gave her the opportunity to look for the positives in herself and her life.”*

- **Growth Mindset:** The development of a growth mind set was also specifically mentioned by two parents. The first explained that this was a concept which was being explored in her daughter’s school and, therefore, it is likely that the MGJ had helped to support the teaching of this topic within the wider school curriculum. This mother explained how a growth mind set was now more evident in her daughter's decision-making processes and that the child actively *“tries to be better”*. The second parent also indicated that the Journal had enabled her daughter to *“identify things she was good at”* and was *“able to take ownership of her abilities and good qualities more”*.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the collective findings of this, albeit preliminary, study suggest that the ‘My Gratitude Journal’ intervention was perceived to have been very helpful to children in terms of improving important aspects of their wellbeing, their outlook on life and their

family/social relationships. According to parents/guardians and teachers, the MGJ had led to particularly marked improvements in children's confidence, self-esteem, and family/social relationships, as well as moderate improvements in their resilience, growth mind set and levels of empathy. However, there was perceived to be only a slight improvement in levels of antisocial behaviour – as indicated by both the survey and interview findings - suggesting that the intervention worked least well in this respect. Furthermore, the parents/guardians and teachers of the children were satisfied overall with the utility/accessibility of the Journal and the subsequent improvements made by the children who had completed the 26-week long intervention.

This is the first research undertaken on this new schools-based gratitude intervention developed in Ireland. Key strengths of the study were its use of mixed methods and the involvement of the intervention developers from the outset; their contributions and participation were important in developing an understanding of the intervention and its origins and informing the development of the measures which were used in the study. They also helped with participant recruitment. However, the study was limited in terms of time and resources whilst fewer teachers than expected, agreed to participate in the research. Furthermore, it is possible that only those who felt more positive about the MGJ, had participated in the research. A larger sample size would have strengthened the study and facilitated greater generalisability of the findings. Both the quantitative and qualitative parts of the research could be expanded in any future evaluation to help address these gaps.

The results presented here suggest that there would be considerable merit in delivering the intervention to a larger number of schools and evaluating its outcomes and implementation on a larger-scale - and on a pre-post basis - preferably with the inclusion of a control group. This would provide greater insights into its overall effectiveness, utility and implementation, in ways that would help to inform any future development and delivery of the programme and its potential roll-out across Ireland and possibly farther afield.

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