

School Kindness as a Bridge between Gratitude and Subjective Happiness

Priyanka*, Ashu Dhawan, Vatika and Preeti

Department of Psychology, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

Abstract

Aim: The present study focuses on determining the mediating role of school kindness in the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness. **Methods:** A sample of 150 male and 150 female school students ($N = 300$) was selected through the quota sampling technique. Three standardized self-report measures, namely, the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 Six Item Form (GQ-6), the School Kindness Scale and the Subjective Happiness Scale, were administered for the collection of data. For analysis of the data, Pearson's Correlation Coefficient and SPSS-Hayes' macro PROCESS v4.2, Model 4, were used. **Results:** According to correlation analysis, there is a significant and positive association between school kindness and gratitude ($r = 0.234, p < 0.01$) as well as gratitude and subjective happiness ($r = 0.230, p < 0.01$). School kindness and happiness, however, were found to have a significant but negative relation ($r = -0.115, p < 0.05$). Moreover, according to the mediation analysis, gratitude and subjective happiness were found to be significantly and partially mediated by school kindness (Beta = -0.042, CI [-0.081, -0.012]). However, the results showed that the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness is negated when school kindness mediates the relationship.

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*Correspondence:

Priyanka
psy2224priyanka@kuk.
ac.in

Department of
Psychology, Kurukshetra
University, Kurukshetra

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INTRODUCTION

Schools these days have recognized the importance of mental well-being and social-emotional learning to develop well-rounded individuals. Modern-day schools focus on innovative techniques that help develop positive life attributes like kindness, gratitude, optimism, mindfulness, etc. These attributes support healthy relationships, personal growth, and overall well-being by fostering resilience, happiness, and life satisfaction. One such element that is important for students to build is the practice of remaining thankful for what one has in life, which brings satisfaction.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a feeling of thankfulness and appreciation that involves recognizing and acknowledging life's positives (Lin, 2015). While some see it as innate, others view it as cultivated through socialization. Gratitude enhances prosocial behaviors and promotes self-control by prioritizing long-term rewards over

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impulsivity (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Research based on gratitude interventions improves trust in strangers, enhances positive emotions, and boosts motivation. They are found to reduce antisocial behavior, mitigate depressive symptoms in those with childhood maltreatment and enhance well-being (Zeng *et al.*, 2020).

While much gratitude research focuses on overall well-being, its role in school-specific well-being is crucial for students' growth. Gratitude interventions enhance school happiness, relationships, and academic success by fostering prosocial behavior (Tian *et al.*, 2015). App-based gratitude interventions have also improved students' mental health and well-being (Bono *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, gratitude strengthens relationships and well-being in schools by encouraging acts of kindness and helping others such that grateful students are more likely to be kind and compassionate.

School Kindness

School kindness refers to behaviors and practices within a school community that emphasize compassion, empathy, and mutual support among students, teachers, and staff. It involves creating a positive and inclusive environment where individuals treat one another with respect and care, fostering a sense of belonging and emotional safety (Binfet *et al.*, 2019). Acts of kindness in schools can range from small gestures, like offering help to peers, to larger initiatives aimed at promoting collective well-being and reducing negative behaviors such as bullying in the school climate. School climate is crucial for student development as it helps reflect the quality of life and belonging.

Moreover, understanding how different kindness perceptions shape character strengths can enhance educational environments. Even children aged 6–8 factor cost-benefit analyses into moral judgments, influencing prosocial behaviors (Zhao & Kushnir, 2023). Kindness, a key character strength, helps students succeed and positively impact society. It is essential for school programs to improve mental health and well-being (Binfet *et al.*, 2019). School belongingness is tied to kindness perceptions, with girls showing higher traits (Lee & Huang, 2021). Engaging in acts of kindness releases endorphins,

creating a helper's high that enhances overall mood, reduces negative emotions and increases subjective happiness.

Subjective Happiness

Subjective happiness is the balance between positive and negative feelings and life satisfaction over time (Diener *et al.*, 2009). It includes both immediate pleasure and long-term contentment (Oishi & Gilbert, 2016). This dynamic experience varies by person and can be cultivated through intentional practices and lifestyle changes. Genetics, life circumstances, and personal choices influence subjective happiness. Factors like insufficient rest, stress, depression, and age negatively impact happiness (Graham *et al.*, 2017).

Additionally, happiness and other positive emotions are found to be essential for cultivating resilience, flourishing, vitality, and life satisfaction, which contribute to physical and emotional well-being (Silton *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, studies link family functioning, perceived parenting style and adverse childhood experiences to well-being (Asici & Sari, 2021). Recent research offers interventions to boost subjective well-being, combining traditional and modern techniques like gratitude, kindness, and mindfulness practices.

Rationale

In the school context, gratitude and kindness enhance student happiness and well-being. Grateful students are more likely to engage in kind actions, fostering a supportive and harmonious school climate. These acts boost students' well-being both individually and collectively, creating a positive cycle. Therefore, investigating whether school kindness acts as a mediator in the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness can provide valuable insights for developing interventions in schools.

Objectives

- To study the relationship between gratitude, school kindness and subjective happiness among school students.
- To study the mediating role of school kindness in the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness among school students.

Hypotheses

- There would be a significant positive relationship between gratitude and subjective kindness.
- There would be a significant positive relationship between school kindness and subjective happiness.
- There would be a significant positive relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness.
- School kindness will significantly mediate the relationship between gratitude and happiness.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

In this research study, three hundred students (N=300) from different schools in Haryana were selected using the quota sampling technique. The sample was divided into two groups: females (N=150) and males (N=150). Ages lie in the range of 14 to 18 years. Data was collected using three standardized measures in person, with paper-and-pencil administration, following the ethical research principles.

Tools

The Gratitude Questionnaire-6-Six Item Form (GQ-6) was developed by McCullough and Emmons (2002). It is a six-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess individual differences in the propensity to experience gratitude in daily life. Respondents endorse each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). The GQ-6 demonstrates strong psychometric properties, with high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82), good convergent and test-retest validity, and strong discriminant validity.

The School Kindness Scale is a five-item and uni-dimensional scale developed by Binfet *et al.* (2016). It is used to measure students' perceptions of the frequency of kindness in their classroom and school. Responses are given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'disagree a lot' (scored as 1) to 'agree a lot' (scored as 5). The total score ranges from 5 to 25, with higher scores reflecting a higher perception of school kindness. Convergent and discriminant validity were supported by associa-

tions with various student outcomes, with internal consistency reported as $\alpha = 0.71$ originally.

The Subjective Happiness Scale is developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) to evaluate the level of individual perception of happiness. SHS is a self-report style measurement tool that uses a 7-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate a greater level of subjective happiness. The scale consists of 4 items. It has been reported that the internal consistency of SHS varies between 0.79 and 0.94 for samples consisting of different ages, cultures, languages and professions. Also, the test-retest correlation was found to be 0.73.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics for each variable are displayed in Table 1, along with their correlations. Using Pearson's correlation analysis, a positive and significant correlation was found between gratitude and school kindness ($r = 0.234, p < 0.01$), and between gratitude and subjective happiness ($r = 0.230, p < 0.01$). Nonetheless, a negative and statistically significant connection ($r = -0.115, p < 0.05$) was established between school kindness and subjective happiness.

Using SPSS, Hayes' macro PROCESS v4.2, Model 4, the mediation model of school kindness in the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness is presented in Table 2. Using 5000 bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence interval, the indirect effect was assessed. School kindness and gratitude (path a) were found to be statistically significantly associated (Beta = 0.234, $p < 0.01$). Path b demonstrated a statistically significant connection between school kindness and subjective happiness (B = -0.179, $p < 0.01$). Path c indicated a statistically

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and intercorrelation

	N	M	SD	1	2	3
Gratitude	300	28.970	4.204	-		
School kindness	300	19.417	2.932	.234**	-	
Subjective happiness	300	4.908	1.392	.230**	-.115*	-

Note. ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Mediation analysis of school kindness in the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness.

Model	R	R ²	B	Beta	SE	F	T	P	LLCI	ULCI
1	0.234	.055				17.314		0.001**		
Gratitude			0.163	0.234	.039		4.161	0.001**	0.086	0.241
2	0.289	0.083				13.486		0.001**		
Gratitude			0.090	0.272	0.019		4.760	0.001**	0.053	0.127
School Kindness			-0.085	-0.179	0.027		-3.134	0.002**	-0.138	-0.032
3	0.230	0.053				16.656		0.001**		
Gratitude			0.076	0.230	0.019		4.081	0.001**	0.039	0.113

Note. ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$

significant association between gratitude and subjective happiness (Beta = 0.230, $p < 0.01$). Gratitude had a statistically significant direct effect on subjective happiness as shown by path c-prime in Figure 1 (B = 0.272, $p < 0.01$).

It was found that kindness partially mediates the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness in the current mediation model. In this mediation model, there is a statistically significant indirect relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness (Beta = -0.042, BootLLCI = -0.081, BootULCI = -0.012). The mediator also negates the indirect effect of gratitude on subjective happiness. Furthermore, gratitude alone accounts for 5.3% of the variance in subjective happiness in the mediation model (R square = 0.053, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, gratitude accounts for 5.5% of the mediator's variation (R square = 0.055, $p < 0.01$). However, gratitude and school kindness together accounted for 8.3% of the variance in subjective happiness in the mediation model (R square = 0.083, $p < 0.01$).

DISCUSSION

The present study found a significant positive correlation between gratitude and school kindness, supporting the first hypothesis. Gratitude fosters recognition of kindness in the school environment and motivates students to reciprocate through acts of kindness. This aligns with Shoshani *et al.* (2020), who found that gratitude increased helping behaviors, and Fryburg *et al.* (2021), who demonstrated that exposure to kindness media promoted generosity.

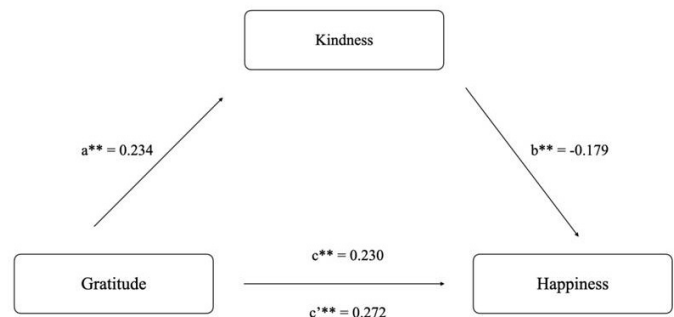


Figure 1: Standardized path coefficients for the relationship between gratitude and subjective happiness as mediated by school kindness.

The study found a significant negative correlation between school kindness and students' subjective happiness, rejecting the second hypothesis. This contradicts previous research by Jasielska (2020), which suggested that increased kindness enhances happiness and well-being.

The current study also found a significant positive correlation between gratitude and subjective happiness, supporting the third hypothesis. Gratitude enhances well-being by fostering a positive outlook and increasing awareness of life's positive aspects, leading to greater satisfaction and contentment. This aligns with findings by Nguyen & Gordon (2020) and Witvliet *et al.* (2019), who showed that gratitude interventions promoted happiness and hope in children.

The mediation analysis of the current study confirms that school kindness partially mediates the relationship between gratitude and subjective

happiness among school students, supporting the fourth hypothesis. Gratitude positively influences school kindness, which has a moderate negative effect on subjective happiness. However, gratitude still directly contributes to subjective happiness, suggesting that grateful students both experience and perform acts of kindness and derive subjective happiness directly from their gratitude.

While gratitude is positively related to both school kindness and subjective happiness, the negative correlation between school kindness and subjective happiness suggests that other factors, such as peer relations, academic climate, academic anxiety, and parent-child relationships, may influence this relationship. Partial mediators like forgiveness could also play a role. These dynamics can be further explored using parallel and/or sequential mediation models. Overall, fostering both gratitude and school kindness can enhance subjective happiness, though the relationship is complex and shaped by various contextual factors.

Similar to the results of a 1-month intervention study (Ganser, 2012), cultivating gratitude and committing acts of kindness both boost subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect, with kindness being more effective in reducing negative effects. Also, a kindness intervention study (Otake *et al.*, 2006) found that happy people are more likely to recognize and perform kind acts and feel grateful for them. Such other interventions (Datu *et al.*, 2023) also enhance connectedness, optimism, life satisfaction, and positive emotions while reducing anxiety and negative emotions.

CONCLUSION

The goal of the current study was to ascertain how school kindness functions as a mediator in the link between gratitude and subjective happiness. The findings of this study reveal that gratitude, school kindness, and subjective happiness are interrelated among school students, with school kindness serving as a partial mediator between gratitude and subjective happiness. The study found a significant positive correlation between gratitude and school kindness, as well as between gratitude and subjective happiness. However, contrary to

existing research, the correlation between school kindness and subjective happiness was found to be negative. Mediation analysis indicated that while gratitude directly influences subjective happiness, the presence of school kindness slightly mitigates this effect yet still plays a significant role.

Limitations

The sample's cultural context and the use of English may limit the generalizability and affect participants' comprehension and responses. The use of a simple mediation model undermined the complexity of other mediator or moderator variables such as peer relations, parent-child relations, teacher-student relations, etc.

Future Suggestions

Future research could explore mediating factors like peer relations and teacher-student interactions and examine the long-term effects of gratitude and kindness interventions. Expanding sample diversity and investigating neural and hormonal impacts could enhance generalizability and understanding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest associated with this research paper.

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