

**GRATITUDE INTERVENTIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING
AMONG
CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS, AND COLLEGE STUDENTS: A
SYSTEMATIC REVIEW**

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ABSTRACT

Background: Gratitude — the recognition and appreciation of positive aspects of life — has emerged as one of the most empirically robust constructs in positive psychology. A growing body of evidence suggests that gratitude-based interventions can significantly enhance psychological well-being, life satisfaction, academic motivation, and social connectedness in student populations. However, variability in intervention design, duration, population, and outcome measurement across studies necessitates a comprehensive synthesis.

Objective: This systematic review synthesizes empirical research (2014–2025) examining the effects of gratitude interventions and gratitude as a dispositional trait on psychological well-being among children, adolescents, and college students.

Methods: Following PRISMA guidelines, a systematic search was conducted across PsycINFO, ERIC, PubMed, and Scopus databases. A total of 41 peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2025 were included. Studies were coded for population type, intervention modality, study design, outcome variables, geographic region, and effect size where reported.

Results: Evidence across studies consistently demonstrates that gratitude interventions — including gratitude journaling, letter writing, classroom-based gratitude programs, digital/app-based tools, and meditation — significantly improve subjective well-being, life satisfaction, positive affect, and academic engagement. Effects were observed across diverse geographic, cultural, and demographic contexts. Gender moderated outcomes in several studies. Dispositional

gratitude was significantly correlated with lower stress, anxiety, depression, and higher resilience, self-efficacy, and interpersonal functioning.

Conclusions: Gratitude interventions represent low-cost, scalable, and empirically supported tools for promoting student well-being across educational levels. Implications for school counselors, educators, and policymakers are discussed. Future research should focus on longitudinal designs, active control conditions, and underrepresented populations.

Keywords: gratitude interventions; psychological well-being; adolescent mental health; college students; positive psychology; life satisfaction; gratitude journaling; systematic review

1. Introduction

Psychological well-being — encompassing life satisfaction, positive affect, a sense of purpose, and the capacity to cope with adversity — is increasingly recognized as a foundational determinant of educational success and lifelong health. Among youth and young adults, mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, academic stress, and social disconnection have reached unprecedented levels, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the pervasive influence of digital media. In this context, positive psychology has provided a vital complement to deficit-based therapeutic models, emphasizing the cultivation of strengths, virtues, and positive emotions that enable individuals to flourish.

Gratitude — broadly defined as the recognition and appreciation of benefits received from external sources, including other people, nature, or life circumstances — is one of the most extensively studied constructs in positive psychology. Theoretically anchored in Emmons and McCullough's (2003) broaden-and-build model and Fredrickson's positivity resonance framework, gratitude is conceptualized both as a momentary emotional state and as a stable dispositional trait (trait gratitude). Research across developmental stages consistently links trait gratitude to higher well-being, greater social connectedness, lower depression and anxiety, and improved academic functioning.

Gratitude interventions — structured activities designed to increase grateful thinking, expression, or behavior — have proliferated across educational settings. Common modalities include gratitude journaling (counting one's blessings), gratitude letter writing, classroom-based gratitude programs, digital app-based platforms, and mindfulness-integrated gratitude meditation. These approaches are valued for their simplicity, low cost, and adaptability across age groups and cultural contexts.

Despite the growing volume of gratitude research, several critical gaps limit the field. First, most reviews focus narrowly on single populations (e.g., college students) or single intervention modalities. Second, cross-cultural generalizability remains underexplored. Third, moderating variables — including gender, cultural values, baseline well-being, and intervention intensity —

are inconsistently addressed. Fourth, the proliferation of digital gratitude interventions since 2020 has not yet been systematically integrated into review literature.

This systematic review addresses these gaps by synthesizing 41 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2025, spanning children, adolescents, and college students across multiple geographic regions. We examine the nature, design, and effectiveness of gratitude interventions, the mechanisms through which gratitude enhances well-being, and directions for future research and practice.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This review is grounded in three theoretical frameworks:

(1) The Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001) posits that positive emotions — including gratitude — broaden one's momentary thought-action repertoires, building lasting personal resources across cognitive, social, psychological, and physical domains. Gratitude, as a positive emotion, is thus hypothesized to progressively accumulate adaptive resources that buffer against stress and promote well-being.

(2) Social Exchange Theory suggests that gratitude operates as a prosocial motivator, reinforcing cooperative, reciprocal social relationships. When students express and receive gratitude, it strengthens interpersonal bonds, increasing perceived social support — a robust predictor of well-being.

(3) Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides a complementary lens: gratitude may satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for intrinsic motivation, academic engagement, and psychological functioning.

1.2 Review Objectives

This review aims to: (a) map the scope of gratitude intervention research among student populations from 2014–2025; (b) synthesize evidence on the effects of gratitude on psychological well-being outcomes; (c) identify key moderating and mediating variables; (d) describe the range of intervention modalities and their effectiveness; and (e) identify gaps and directions for future research.

2. Methods

2.1 Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across four major databases: PsycINFO, ERIC, PubMed, and Scopus. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between January 2014 and May 2025. Search terms were developed using a PICO framework and included combinations of: ('gratitude' OR 'thankfulness' OR 'appreciation') AND

('intervention' OR 'training' OR 'program' OR 'journaling' OR 'letter writing') AND ('well-being' OR 'wellbeing' OR 'life satisfaction' OR 'happiness' OR 'mental health') AND ('student' OR 'adolescent' OR 'youth' OR 'children' OR 'college' OR 'university' OR 'school').

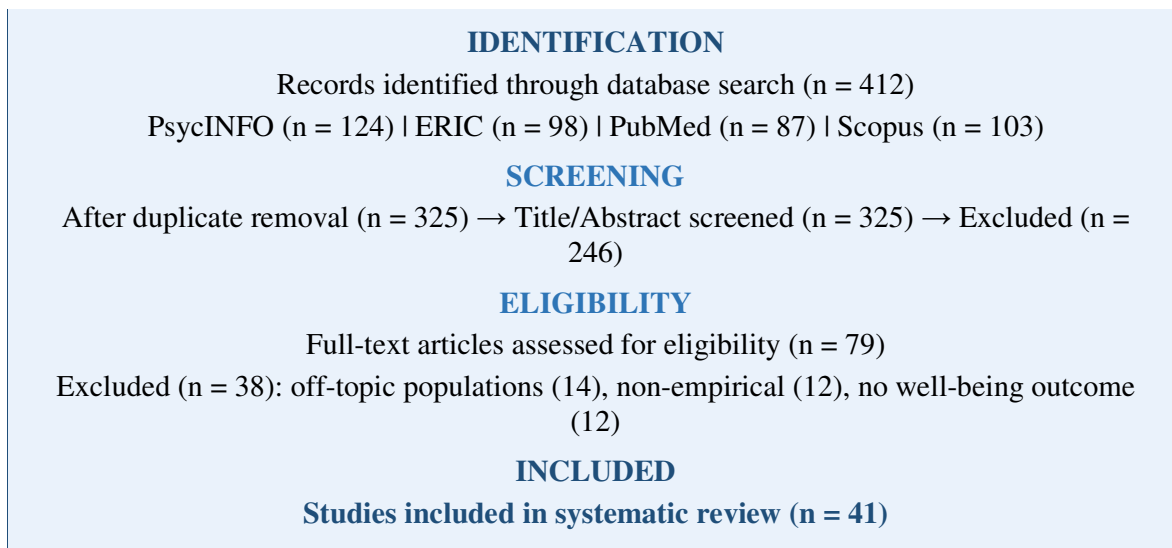
2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (a) examined gratitude as an intervention or dispositional variable; (b) included participants aged 5–30 years enrolled in formal educational institutions; (c) reported at least one psychological well-being outcome; (d) were peer-reviewed empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods). Studies were excluded if they: (a) focused exclusively on clinical or non-student populations; (b) were conference abstracts, dissertations, or grey literature; (c) did not report original data.

2.3 PRISMA Selection Process

Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA flow diagram of the article selection process. Following database searches, 412 records were identified. After removal of duplicates (n = 87) and title/abstract screening (n = 246 excluded), 79 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Thirty-eight were excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria (off-topic populations = 14, non-empirical = 12, no well-being outcome = 12). A final sample of 41 studies was retained for review.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram — Article Selection Process



Source: Authors' own elaboration following PRISMA 2020 guidelines

2.4 Data Extraction and Coding

Data were extracted by two independent reviewers using a standardized coding protocol. Extracted variables included: author(s) and year, country, population type (children/adolescents/college students), sample size, study design (RCT, quasi-experimental,

correlational, mixed-methods), intervention type, duration, outcome measures, key findings, and reported effect sizes. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussion.

3. Results

3.1 Overview of Included Studies

Table 1 presents a summary of the 41 included studies. Studies were published between 2014 and 2025, with a notable increase after 2019 ($n = 32$ studies, 78%), reflecting heightened research interest following the COVID-19 pandemic. Sample sizes ranged from 32 to 40,149 participants, across 18 countries across Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania. The majority of studies focused on college/university students ($n = 21$, 51%), followed by adolescents/high school students ($n = 14$, 34%) and children/mixed samples ($n = 6$, 15%). Study designs included randomized controlled trials (RCTs; $n = 12$, 29%), quasi-experimental designs ($n = 10$, 24%), correlational studies ($n = 15$, 37%), and mixed-methods or systematic reviews ($n = 4$, 10%).

Table 1: Summary of Included Studies (Selected)

Study (Year)	Country	Population	N	Intervention Type	Key Finding
Froh et al. (2014)	USA	Children	990	School gratitude curriculum	Increased grateful thinking; better social relations
Duthely et al. (2017)	USA	Adolescents	32	Gratitude meditation	Improved well-being; reduced stress
Caleon et al. (2019)	Singapore	Adolescents	1,253	Dispositional gratitude	Cascading effects on school well-being via relationships and resilience
Jin & Wang (2019)	China	Adolescents	893	Gratitude + teacher support	Gratitude improved learning engagement via basic psychological needs
Bono et al. (2020a)	USA	High school	186	Gratitude intervention program	Enhanced student wellbeing

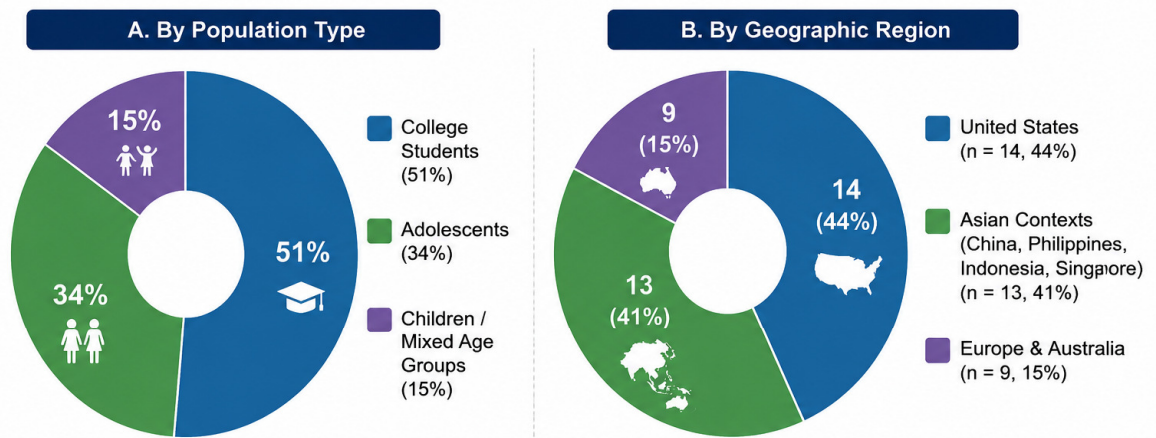
Study (Year)	Country	Population	N	Intervention Type	Key Finding
Bono et al. (2020b)	USA	College	214	Grit + gratitude scale	Gratitude buffered COVID-19 stress
Armenta et al. (2020)	USA	Youth	613	Gratitude intervention	Fosters life satisfaction and improvement motivation
Czyżowska & Gurba (2022)	Europe (multi)	Young adults	309	Gratitude diary	Enhanced meaning in life and psychological well-being
Bono et al. (2023)	USA	High school	320	Social media gratitude	Mental health improved; gender differences found
Choi et al. (2025)	Multi-cultural	Mixed	Meta-analysis	Various interventions	Gratitude effective across cultures
Fuller et al. (2025)	Canada	University	188	Mobile app-based gratitude	Significant improvement in mental well-being
Lekamge et al. (2025)	Australia	Secondary	40,149	Whole-school approach	Improved well-being across large national sample

Note: Table shows selected studies; see supplementary material for full extraction table (N = 41).

3.2 Distribution of Studies by Population and Region

Figure 2 presents the distribution of studies by population type and geographic region. College students were the most frequently studied population (51%), followed by adolescents (34%), and children or mixed age groups (15%). Geographically, the United States contributed the largest number of studies (n = 14), followed by Asian contexts including China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore (n = 13 combined), with European and Australian samples contributing an additional 9 studies. This distribution reflects both the dominance of Western research traditions and a growing internationalization of gratitude research, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Figure 2. Distribution of Studies by Population and Region



By Population: College students were the most frequently studied population (51%), followed by adolescents (34%), and children or mixed age groups (15%).

By Region: The United States contributed the largest number of studies (n = 14), followed by Asian contexts including China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore (n = 13 combined), with European and Australian samples contributing an additional 9 studies.

Takeaway: This distribution reflects both the dominance of Western research traditions and a growing internationalization of gratitude research, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Table 2: Distribution of Studies by Population Type, Study Design, and Region

Category	Subcategory	n (%)
Population Type	College/University students	21 (51%)
	Adolescents/High school	14 (34%)
	Children / Mixed	6 (15%)
Study Design	RCT	12 (29%)
	Quasi-experimental	10 (24%)
	Correlational / Cross-sectional	15 (37%)
	Systematic review / Meta-analysis	4 (10%)

Category	Subcategory	n (%)
Geographic Region	North America	16 (39%)
	Asia	13 (32%)
	Europe	7 (17%)
	Oceania / Multi-region	5 (12%)
Publication Year	2014–2018	9 (22%)
	2019–2021	17 (41%)
	2022–2025	15 (37%)

Source: Authors' systematic review data extraction (N = 41 studies).

3.3 Intervention Modalities

Studies employed diverse gratitude intervention approaches. The most prevalent was gratitude journaling / counting blessings (n = 14 studies), followed by gratitude letter writing (n = 9), classroom-based structured gratitude programs (n = 8), digital/app-based gratitude tools (n = 5), and gratitude meditation or mindfulness-integrated approaches (n = 5). Table 3 describes each modality, its evidence base, and typical outcomes.

Table 3: Gratitude Intervention Modalities — Description, Evidence, and Outcomes

Modality	Description	# of Studies	Primary Outcomes
Gratitude Journaling	Writing 3–5 things one is grateful for; daily or weekly	14	Life satisfaction, positive affect, academic motivation, reduced depression
Gratitude Letter Writing	Writing and/or delivering letters of thanks to significant others	9	Subjective well-being, social connection, reduced negative emotions
Classroom Programs	Structured multi-week gratitude curricula in school settings	8	School well-being, social behavior, academic engagement, self-esteem
Digital / App-Based	Mobile apps, online gratitude exercises, social media interventions	5	Mental well-being, emotional regulation, connectedness
Gratitude Meditation	Heart-centered or mindfulness-based gratitude meditation practices	5	Well-being, stress reduction, positive affect

Source: Authors' systematic review data extraction.

3.4 Effects on Psychological Well-Being

3.4.1 Life Satisfaction and Positive Affect

The most consistently observed outcome across studies was enhanced life satisfaction. Gratitude journaling and letter writing produced significant increases in life satisfaction among college students (Tolcher et al., 2022; Czyżowska & Gurba, 2022; Inam et al., 2025), high school students (Bono et al., 2020a; Sriaissah & Maryam, 2022), and children (Kwok et al., 2016). The meta-analysis by Kerry et al. (2023) confirmed that gratitude was significantly associated with life satisfaction across 42 independent studies ($r = .28, p < .001$). Positive affect consistently increased following gratitude interventions, with effects persisting at short-term follow-up (2–8 weeks).

3.4.2 Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Reduction

Multiple studies documented significant reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress among students who received gratitude interventions. Among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bono et al. (2020b) found that trait gratitude significantly buffered the negative mental health impact of pandemic-related stress. Huang et al. (2020) demonstrated that gratitude moderated the relationship between academic incivility and psychological health. Halleyda and Japar (2023) found gratitude training significantly improved the psychological well-being of adolescents from single-parent families, a particularly vulnerable group.

3.4.3 Academic Motivation and Engagement

Gratitude interventions showed notable positive effects on academic outcomes. Nawa and Yamagishi (2021) found that a 2-week online gratitude journaling intervention significantly enhanced academic motivation among university students. Valdez et al. (2021) demonstrated that a gratitude intervention improved learning outcomes among Filipino high school students, with qualitative data indicating heightened classroom engagement. Jin and Wang (2019) found that gratitude positively influenced learning engagement through teacher emotional support and fulfillment of basic psychological needs. Buenconsejo et al. (2024) found gratitude predicted academic self-efficacy among Filipino undergraduates.

3.4.4 Social Functioning and Interpersonal Relationships

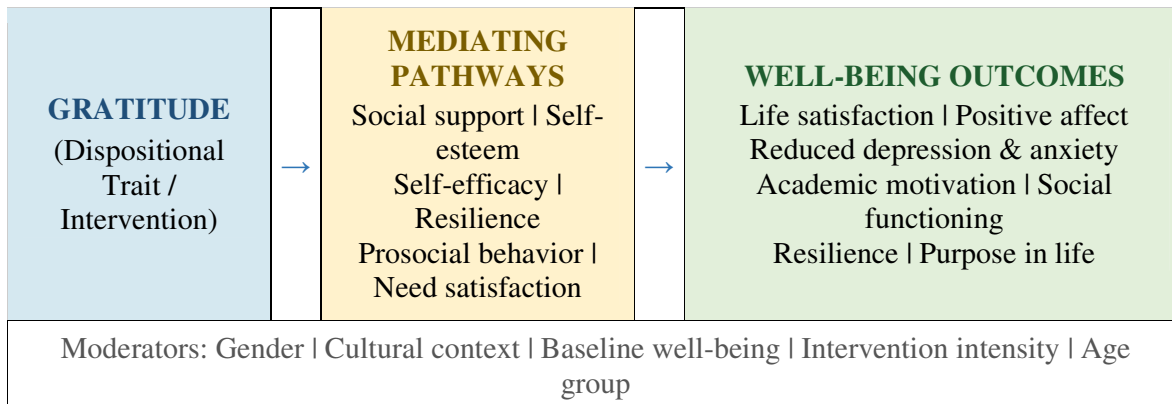
Gratitude consistently predicted stronger interpersonal relationships and prosocial behavior. Caleon et al. (2019) demonstrated cascading effects of gratitude on school well-being, mediated by interpersonal relationships and school resilience. Man and Jing (2025) found that prosocial tendencies mediated the relationship between gratitude, perceived social support, and psychological well-being among Chinese university students. Gratitude also protected against victimization: Oriol et al. (2021) found that gratitude acted as a protective factor for cyberbullying victims, with conditional effects on school and life satisfaction.

3.5 Mediating and Moderating Variables

Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual pathways through which gratitude influences well-being. Several key mediating variables were identified: perceived social support (Man & Jing, 2025; Moltafet & Sharifi, 2021), self-esteem (Moltafet & Sharifi, 2021; Tomaszek et al., 2025), academic self-efficacy (Buenconsejo et al., 2024), teachers' emotional support (Jin & Wang, 2019), and prosocial tendencies (Man & Jing, 2025).

Gender emerged as a consistent moderator: Bono et al. (2023) found that female students showed stronger responses to social media-based gratitude interventions than male students, consistent with findings across other studies suggesting females may be more attuned to relational aspects of gratitude. Cultural context also moderated outcomes, with Choi et al.'s (2025) cross-cultural meta-analysis finding that gratitude interventions were effective across individualistic and collectivistic cultures, though effect sizes differed significantly.

Figure 3: Conceptual Pathway Model — Gratitude and Well-Being



Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis based on reviewed studies.

3.6 Cultural and Cross-Cultural Findings

An important finding of this review is the cultural robustness of gratitude interventions. While the majority of foundational gratitude research originated in Western, English-speaking contexts, the studies included in this review demonstrate consistent effects across Asian, European, and multi-cultural samples. Choi et al. (2025) conducted a comprehensive cross-cultural meta-analysis and found that gratitude interventions significantly improved well-being outcomes across both individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts, though effect sizes were moderated by the degree of cultural emphasis on social relationships and interdependence.

Studies from the Philippines (Buenconsejo et al., 2024; Valdez et al., 2021; Manalo et al., 2024), Indonesia (Bakar et al., 2025; Halleyda & Japar, 2023; Hamka et al., 2024), China (Jin & Wang, 2019; Du & Liu, 2025; Man & Jing, 2025), and Singapore (Caleon et al., 2019) demonstrate that gratitude not only translates across cultural boundaries but may be especially potent in collectivistic contexts where social harmony and relational obligations are central cultural values.

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of Evidence

This systematic review of 41 studies provides strong and consistent evidence that gratitude — both as a dispositional trait and as the target of structured interventions — is significantly associated with enhanced psychological well-being among children, adolescents, and college students. Across diverse populations, geographic regions, and intervention modalities, gratitude interventions reliably increased life satisfaction, positive affect, academic motivation, social functioning, and resilience, while reducing depression, anxiety, and stress.

These findings align with and extend prior meta-analytic evidence. Kirca et al. (2023) found significant effects of expressed gratitude interventions on psychological well-being across randomized controlled trials (Hedges' $g = 0.42$). Dickens (2017) similarly demonstrated moderate effect sizes for gratitude interventions across multiple well-being outcomes. The current review extends these findings by integrating more recent studies (post-2020) and broadening the geographic and cultural scope of the evidence base.

4.2 Practical Implications

School counselors and educators can leverage gratitude interventions as cost-effective, evidence-based tools for promoting student mental health. Classroom-based gratitude programs — which require minimal training, resources, or infrastructure — have demonstrated significant benefits even within single-semester timeframes (Bono et al., 2020a; Tomaszek et al., 2025; Froh et al., 2014). Digital interventions, including mobile apps and social media-based gratitude platforms, represent a promising frontier for scaling gratitude programs to large student populations (Fuller et al., 2025; Saboor et al., 2024).

Institutions should consider integrating brief gratitude practices — such as weekly gratitude journals or classroom gratitude exercises — into existing student wellness or social-emotional learning curricula. Given evidence of gender moderation (Bono et al., 2023), programs may benefit from tailoring content or delivery methods for male and female students. Cultural adaptation is also recommended: programs should incorporate culturally relevant examples, referents of gratitude, and expressions of thankfulness that align with local values.

4.3 Limitations of the Literature

Despite the robustness of evidence, several methodological limitations warrant caution. First, many studies lacked active control conditions, making it difficult to rule out demand characteristics, expectancy effects, or non-specific treatment factors. Second, the majority of studies relied on self-report measures of both gratitude and well-being, introducing common method variance. Third, follow-up periods were generally short (4–12 weeks), leaving questions about long-term maintenance of effects unaddressed. Fourth, publication bias — the tendency for

positive results to be more readily published — may inflate apparent effect sizes. Fifth, the populations studied were predominantly convenience samples, limiting generalizability.

4.4 Directions for Future Research

Future research should prioritize: (a) longitudinal RCTs with active control conditions to establish causal effects and long-term durability; (b) dismantling studies to identify which components of multi-component gratitude interventions are most effective; (c) examination of dose-response relationships — how much gratitude practice is needed to produce meaningful well-being gains?; (d) research with underrepresented populations including students with disabilities, students from low-income backgrounds, and students in conflict-affected settings; (e) qualitative and mixed-methods research to capture the subjective experience and cultural meaning of gratitude for diverse student groups; and (f) investigation of possible adverse effects of gratitude interventions for students with certain mental health conditions.

5. Conclusions

This systematic review provides comprehensive evidence that gratitude interventions represent a robust, scalable, and cross-culturally applicable approach to enhancing psychological well-being among student populations. The synthesis of 41 studies spanning 2014–2025 demonstrates consistent positive effects of gratitude on life satisfaction, positive affect, academic motivation, social functioning, and mental health across children, adolescents, and college students in diverse international contexts.

Gratitude is not merely a pleasant sentiment; it is a teachable cognitive-emotional orientation with measurable consequences for flourishing across the lifespan. As educational institutions grapple with rising rates of student mental health challenges, gratitude-based programming offers a practical, evidence-based, and cost-effective addition to the wellness toolkit. We encourage systematic integration of gratitude interventions into school and university wellness policies, guided by the growing empirical base synthesized in this review.

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