

# The Role of Empathy and Gratitude in NGO Schools: A Study at Diksha School in Gurgaon

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of empathy and gratitude on educational outcomes among adolescents at Diksha School, an NGO-run institution in Gurgaon, India serving students from marginalized backgrounds. A quantitative experimental design was employed, involving 69 students from grades 7 to 12. The respondents were further divided into control and experimental groups, with students from grade 7th and 12th being control group participants (N=35) and students in grade 8th and 10th being experimental group participants (N= 34). The participants in the experimental group received a structured intervention called the “Chit system” where students would list down good deeds done by their peers, and the chits directed towards the peer were read in front of the whole class once and aimed at fostering empathy and gratitude. Pre- and post-intervention assessments utilized the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire and the Gratitude Questionnaire–Six Item Form. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired t-tests, ANOVA, and regression analysis. Results indicated significant increases in both empathy and gratitude scores from pre- to post-test across groups, with the intervention group showing greater improvements in gratitude ( $p = .007$ ) and a significant interaction between time and group ( $p = .031$ ), highlighting the effectiveness of the intervention. Empathy scores also rose significantly ( $p .001$ ), underscoring the value of targeted emotional development programs. The study concludes that integrating empathy and gratitude into educational practice can strengthen both social and emotional outcomes, offering a replicable model for other NGO schools seeking to create supportive, inclusive learning environments for disadvantaged youth.

## 1. Introduction

Education is the cornerstone of human advancement, building not only the intellectual but also the moral and emotional texture of society. Education in India, a nation characterized by vast diversity and a booming youth population, is both a reflection of Indian aspirations and a force for national development. Education's objectives today are also changing: while retaining its value in academic success, there is now a general agreement that schools need to instill empathy, gratitude, and other social-emotional competencies to equip students to deal with the challenges of contemporary life (UNESCO, 2020). The incorporation of these values is not merely a moral requirement but also a pragmatic imperative for developing inclusive, resilient, and peaceful societies.

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India's education sector is one of the world's largest, with over 1.5 million schools and 250 million students (MHRD, 2021). The sector is marked by diversity-across urban and rural areas, a multitude of languages, and a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Government schools, which cover the vast majority of children, are frequently constrained by poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and restricted access to quality resources (ASER, 2022). Private schools, even though better resourced, are not available to everybody, frequently perpetuating already established disparities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 attempts to redress these inequalities by rethinking education's structure, content, and pedagogy. The policy promotes a move away from rote learning to competency and holistic learning, emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, and the nurturing of ethical and emotional capabilities (KPMG, 2020). Teachers are identified as key drivers of change, tasked with building nurturing environments to foster academic and personal development (Nanda, 2019).

### **1.1. Context of the Study: Diksha School**

Diksha School aims to close the gap between accessibility and education and to prepare students to become empowered not just through the acquisition of academic knowledge but also through emotional intelligence that can guide them towards success in life. Part of this purpose is to instill in students values like kindness, respect, and teamwork—values that are sometimes achieved through empathy and gratitude. The staff and instructors at Diksha are extremely committed to their work, but they are confronted with the challenges that characterize poorly equipped schools. The majority of the teachers are members of the same communities they teach, and they serve as role models to students in both academic and emotional development.

Even with impressive economic gains, poverty continues to be a nagging issue in India. Millions of poor children from marginalized families continue to be denied access to adequate education, healthcare, and proper nutrition. In urban pockets such as Palam Vihar, Gurgaon—a posh neighborhood—scores of children from marginalized families can be observed idling around building sites or begging, frequently denied formal education and susceptible to finding themselves in the vicious circle of poverty and anti-social behavior.

The value of this research is the possibility it offers to inform our knowledge of the emotional dynamics that lead to academic achievement, especially within NGO schools in India. Although a lot of studies have focused on the academic success of students in poor contexts, less study has been dedicated to the emotional and psychological determinants that play an important role in students' success and individual growth. By emphasizing empathy and gratitude, this research points to the need to cultivate positive feelings in school, which has the potential to improve student-teacher relationships, academic achievement, and student well-being. In addition, the results of this research can provide practical lessons to other NGO schools and learning institutions on how they can foster a positive and nurturing learning environment. In showing how empathy and appreciation can be infused into teaching pedagogy and school culture, the research can provide a model for other organizations that are trying to maximize both the emotional and academic achievement of their students.

This study aims to investigate the functions of gratitude and empathy in determining the learning experience at Diksha School in Gurgaon. Through the process of analyzing how these feelings are manifested and affecting student participation, academic performance, and overall school environment, the research aspires to gather useful information for enhancing teaching methods and a healthy school culture. As emotional abilities gain more and more recognition as a key to success in life, understanding how their use is impacting NGO schools such as

Diksha can serve as a template for other schools to use, adding to the emotional and academic growth of students from all walks of life.

### **1.2. The Role of Empathy in Teenagers**

Empathy-the capacity to understand and share the feelings of others-is a foundation of healthy social development. It is both an inborn ability and acquired skill, influenced by individual temperament, family life, and social experience (Hoffman, 2001; Davis, 1983). Empathy development is especially important during adolescence, a time of precipitous cognitive, emotional, and social change. A grateful response to life circumstances may be an adaptive psychological strategy and an important process by which people positively interpret everyday experiences (Emmons, 2003)

Theoretical models like Hoffman's stages of empathy (Hoffman, 2001) and Bandura's social learning theory stress the significance of modeling and reinforcement in developing empathetic behavior (Bandura, 1977). Teens with well-developed empathetic skills are more competent in dealing with intricate social relationships, conflict resolution, and prosocial acts like cooperation and helping (Eisenberg et al., 2002). Empathy is also a buffer against bullying, aggression, and social exclusion, which lead to a positive school environment (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006).

Schools are instrumental in developing empathy. Instructional practices such as promoting perspective-taking, collaborative problem-solving, and open communication regarding emotions provide a fertile environment for empathy (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). There is broad agreement among educators, policy makers, and the public that educational systems should graduate students who are proficient in core academic subjects, able to work well with others from diverse backgrounds in socially and emotionally skilled ways, practice healthy behaviors, and behave responsibly and respectfully (Durlak, 2011). Facilitators and role models such as teachers can develop empathy by modeling compassionate behavior, empathizing with the feelings of students, and incorporating activities promoting empathy into the curriculum. Organisations such as DIKSHA can help to scale these efforts by giving teachers formal modules in social-emotional learning, live case studies, and interactive practices that instill empathy in students.

### **1.3. The Role of Gratitude in Teens**

Gratitude-the acknowledgment and appreciation of the good in life and the generosity of others-is another critical element of adolescent development. People can intentionally improve their happiness levels by regularly performing simple positive activities, like practicing gratitude or kindness (Layous et al., 2013). Gratitude, based on the broaden-and-build model, not only promotes individual well-being but also builds relationships and resilience in communities (Fredrickson, 2001). For teens, who typically struggle with school pressures, peer influence, and identity issues, developing gratitude can serve as an effective antidote to negative mood states and social comparison.

Research indicates that teens who engage in gratitude have greater levels of life satisfaction, reduced levels of depression and anxiety, and improved peer and adult relationships (Froh et al., 2008; Watkins et al., 2003). Gratitude promotes an abundance mentality instead of scarcity, making youth concentrate on what they possess instead of what they do not have. It also encourages prosocial actions like sharing, cooperation, and volunteering that are needed in developing cohesive and caring communities.

Gratitude can be cultivated through conscious practices like journaling, offering thanks, and engaging in acts of kindness. Schools can be agents of change by making gratitude activities part of the daily grind, rewarding acts of kindness, and offering students opportunities to help out in their communities. Teachers who embody gratitude and recognize students' efforts assist in solidifying this value as a social norm (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). Positive psychology research manages to shift the balance in the proper direction by giving great importance to positive subjective experience, positive traits, and other aspects of life and human psychology in order to improve individuals' life (Spinrad, 2014).

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Aim**

This research aims to examine the role of empathy and gratitude in fostering positive social and emotional outcomes at Diksha School.

### **2.2. Research Objectives**

- 1) To investigate the influence of empathy and gratitude on student engagement and peer relationships in an NGO school environment.
- 2) To examine how empathetic and appreciation behaviors shape classroom interaction and student relationships.
- 3) To create evidence-based guidelines for incorporating empathy and gratitude into NGO school practices to improve learning outcomes and the well-being of students.

### **2.3. Hypothesis**

H1: The pretest to post-test change in empathy scores varies between the control and experimental groups.

H2: There exists a significant difference in gratitude scores between the control and experimental groups, irrespective of time.

H3: The pretest to post-test change in gratitude scores varies between the control and experimental groups

H4: There is a large difference in gratitude scores between post-test and pre-test (time effect), and/or between the experimental group and the control group (group effect).

H5: There is a large difference in empathy scores between the experimental group and the control group at post-test.

### **2.4. Participants**

The present research was conducted on a sample of 69 students from DIKSHA School, spanning grades 7 to 12. Participants were assigned to control and experimental groups using a random allocation procedure at the class level. Specifically, students from grades 7, 9, and 12 were designated as the control group (N = 35), while students from grades 8 and 10 formed the experimental group (N = 34).

Although the group allocation was randomised across selected grades, the overall participant pool was obtained through purposive sampling. This approach was adopted to ensure that the sample comprised students who were accessible, willing to participate, and relevant to the

study's objective. The purposive selection focused on capturing a range of developmental stages within adolescence while maintaining feasibility in terms of implementation within the school setting.

The study aimed to examine whether the "chit-based" intervention produced a significant change in participants' empathy and gratitude levels. To assess this, both the control and experimental groups completed pre-test and post-test measures, allowing for a comparative analysis of the intervention's impact over time.

## **2.5. Research Design**

This study utilizes a quantitative and experimental research design to systematically examine the impact of empathy and gratitude interventions on educational outcomes at Diksha School.

1. Pre-test/Post-test Control Group Design: Both intervention and control groups will complete standardized measures of empathy and gratitude before and after the intervention period.
2. Intervention: The intervention group will participate in a structured empathy and gratitude program (Chit system) designed to nurture these emotions through specific activities and reflections.

## **2.6. Ethical considerations**

Consent was obtained from the head of institution, teachers and from students. Anonymity of responses was maintained and students were given proper instructions regarding the nature of the intervention (for the experimental group) and regarding the questionnaire (for both experimental and control groups). Teachers were also briefed about the activity in detail.

## **2.7. Instrumentation**

3. Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (Spreng, 2008): This questionnaire consists of 16 items to assess empathy among the respondents. A likert scale of 0 to 4 is used to score the responses, with 0 = Never and 4 = Always. Reverse scoring is also present for eight items in the scale.
4. The Gratitude Questionnaire – Six Item Form (GQ-6) (McCullough, 2002) : This questionnaire consists of 6 items to assess gratitude among the respondents. A likert scale of 1 to 7 is used to score the responses, with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Reverse scoring is also present for two items in the scale.

## **2.8. Data Collection Procedure**

Surveys were designed using the questionnaires above, they were distributed to grade 7 (control group) and grade 8 (experimental group) initially. Then they were also given to Grade 10 & 12. The students got the surveys in the form of a physical copy or a Google form, they had no time limit for answering and could ask any possible doubts. The follow ups were in the form of a Google form for grades 10 & 12 and a physical copy for grades 7 & 8. Both the google forms and physical copy had the same questions with the same scoring. Once the pre-test scores were acquired, the intervention was introduced to the experimental group. After a gap of minimum one month, post test responses were collected on the same questionnaires.

### 3. Results

		Frequency	Mean	S.D.
Pre Test Gratitude	Control Group	35	29.37	1.99
	Experimental Group	34	28.62	2.42
Post Test Gratitude	Control Group	35	29.54	1.65
	Experimental Group	35	29.88	1.84

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for gratitude between control and experimental group

Descriptive statistics for gratitude between control and experimental group According to Table 1 the control group (M=29.37, SD= 1.99) performed slightly better than the experimental group ( M=28.62, SD=2.42) in the pretest gratitude survey . In the post test gratitude survey the experimental group (M=29.88, SD= 1.84) performed better than the control group(M=29.54, SD=1.65)

Table 2. Mixed methods ANOVA for control and experimental group on gratitude

	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	$\eta^2$
Pre test Gratitude, Post test Gratitude	17.4	1	17.4	8.16	.006	0.03
Category	1.48	1	1.48	0.25	.616	0
RM Factor x Category	10.31	1	10.31	4.84	.031	0.02
Residuals (Between Subjects)	389.62	67	5.82			
Residuals (Within Subjects)	142.79	67	2.13			

The mixed methods ANOVA results in Table 2 reveal that there was a significant increase in gratitude scores from pretest to post-test across participants ( $F = 8.16$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ), indicating that the intervention had a positive overall effect on gratitude. However, there was no significant difference between the control and experimental groups when considered independently of time ( $F = 0.25$ ,  $p = .616$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0$ ), suggesting that group membership alone did not impact gratitude levels. Importantly, the interaction between time and group was significant ( $F = 4.84$ ,  $p = .031$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ ), which means that the change in gratitude over time differed between the control and experimental groups, highlighting the specific impact of the intervention on the experimental group compared to the control group.

Table 3. Post hoc comparison of pre test and post test Gratitude Scores

		Mean Diff	SE	t	p	95% CI lower limit	95% CI upper limit
Pre test Gratitude	Post test Gratitude	-0.71	0.255	-2.78	.007	-1.22	-0.2

The post hoc results show a significant increase in gratitude from pre-test to post-test, with a mean difference of -0.71 ( $t = -2.78$ ,  $p = .007$ ), and the confidence interval, indicating this change is statistically meaningful. In contrast, there was no significant difference in gratitude scores between the control and experimental groups overall (mean difference = -0.71  $t = 0.5$ ,  $p = .616$ ), as reflected by the confidence interval. This suggests that while gratitude improved significantly after the intervention, this improvement was not simply due to group membership but likely related to the intervention itself.

*Table 4.* Mean values of pre and post test empathy scores for control and experimental groups

	Pre Test Empathy	Post test empathy
Control Group	49.89	55.43
Experimental Group	48.21	53.44

The findings show that both the control and experimental groups experienced an increase in empathy scores from pretest to post-test. In the control group, the mean empathy score rose from 49.89 to 55.43, while in the experimental group, it increased from 48.21 to 53.44. This suggests that, over the course of the study, participants in both groups demonstrated improved empathy, with the control group showing a slightly larger increase.

*Table 5.* Mixed Methods ANOVA Results for Empathy Scores (Control and Experimental Groups)

	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	$\eta^2$
Pre test Empathy, Post test Empathy	1002.78	1	1002.78	64.89	<.001	0.23
Category	115.97	1	1035.4	3.56	.063	0.03
RM Factor x Category	0.82	1	0.82	0.05	.819	0
Residuals (Between Subjects)	2180.65	67	32.55			
Residuals (Within Subjects)	1035.4	67	15.45			

According to Table 5, results revealed a significant main effect of time,  $F(1, 67) = 64.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .23$ , indicating a statistically significant increase in empathy scores from pre-test to post-test across groups. The main effect of the group was not significant,  $F(1, 67) = 3.56$ ,  $p = .063$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ , suggesting no overall difference in empathy between the control and experimental groups. Additionally, the interaction effect between time and group was non-significant,  $F(1, 67) = 0.05$ ,  $p = .819$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.00$ , indicating that the change in empathy scores over time did not differ between groups.

*Table 6.* Post hoc comparison for pre test and post test empathy scores

		M.D.	S.E.	t	p	95% CI lower limit	95% CI upper limit
Pre test empathy	Post test empathy	-5.39	0.66	-8.112	<.001	-6.72	-4.06

The results indicate a statistically significant increase in empathy from pre-test to post-test, with a mean difference of -5.39, S.E. = 0.66,  $t = -8.112$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the 95% confidence interval ranging from -6.72 to -4.06, confirming that the intervention led to a meaningful improvement in empathy scores. This finding aligns with existing research showing that targeted interventions can significantly enhance empathy, as supported by studies where post-test empathy scores were notably higher than pre-test scores following similar programs

*Table 7. Post hoc comparison of Empathy Scores Between Control and Experimental Groups*

		<b>M.D.</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
Control Group	Experimental group	1.83	0.97	1.89	.063

Table 7 reveals that the comparison between the control and experimental groups at post-test was not statistically significant,  $t(67) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .063$ , suggesting that while both groups improved in empathy over time, the extent of improvement did not significantly differ between them as per the table.

#### **4. Discussion**

The intervention by using chits as a method of rewarding positive behaviors led to a substantially higher increase in gratitude among experimental group students compared to the control group. This finding supports the theory that routine praise and validation enhance gratitude effectively in student populations, a result congruent with Positive Psychology principles that stress the significance of developing strengths and good feelings in learners. By consistently acknowledging prosocial behavior, the intervention encourages the central tenet of Bandura's Social Learning Theory: that socially modeled and reinforced behaviors are more likely to be imitated by peers, thus working towards a positive and supportive classroom environment.

There was improvement in empathy between experimental and control groups over time, with both showing increased empathy scores from pre-test to post-test, but without a statistically higher increase in the experimental group. This suggests the effect of extraneous variables like class activities, typical social interaction, or developmental maturation in promoting empathy, as opposed to the chit-based intervention itself. This is congruent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory that posits that social growth is heavily influenced by persistent interactions and collective cultural experiences in the classroom, and with Malti & Krettenauer's (2013) research that empathy tends to increase naturally with age-correct socialization.

The chit-based intervention was designed with the students identifying and supporting positive behavior among their peers, aligning with Piaget's and Kohlberg's moral development theories, which attest that peer recognition is a key factor in moving away from egocentric to increasingly social forms of thinking. Yet, a misinterpretation of the intervention by Grade 8 students, who tended to assign chits to themselves rather than others, underlined the necessity of scaffolding activities closely to meet stages of development—a central tenet of constructivist and sociocultural perspectives. For such younger students, self-committing chits might have prompted self-awareness or self-satisfaction, unknowingly affirming the constructivist notion that learning happens through active construction based on experience, even if that experience is a departure from the initial protocol.

In contrast, Grade 10 students, better sensitized to the guidelines of the intervention, were likely to gain more from peer validation. Both groups, however, improved on empathy and gratitude



scores, confirming the natural development of such skills as posited in developmental psychology theory. Variable understanding and compliance with the intervention also indicate the value of differentiated instruction—the instructional practice of modifying pedagogical strategy to the developmental stage and individual needs of learners.

Teacher comments further demonstrated the impact of the intervention on social-emotional climate by showing that students were more willing to perform helpful actions and to notice one another's kindness—examples that reinforce the practical applications of these larger theories. The episode in which a higher-level student helped a hurt peer, for instance, is a prime example of prosocial learning in action, a process Bandura outlines as central to social and emotional development.

The absence of a differential effect on empathy between groups indicates that although targeted interventions can successfully promote gratitude, the formation of empathy may necessitate more subtle or extended approaches that respond to natural maturation and the general social context. Accordingly, continued refinements should leverage these established educational theories to enhance further the effectiveness and relevance of interventions with diverse student groups.

Overall, the efficacy of the chit-based intervention in fostering gratitude, and the pattern of results found for empathy, both closely follow and are grounded in prominent theories of education spanning from Positive Psychology and Social Learning Theory to Constructivism, Sociocultural Theory developed by Vygotsky, and developmentally informed strategies for differentiated instruction. This integration emphasizes that the development of social-emotional skills in schools is most effectively realized through planned activities, reinforcement, and skillfully designed pedagogical practices informed by an intimate grasp of the way children learn and develop.

## **5. Conclusion**

Empathy and gratitude are foundational to positive educational outcomes. They foster healthier relationships, improve classroom dynamics, and contribute to students' emotional growth. Targeted interventions can effectively nurture these emotions in an NGO school setting, leading to increased student engagement, cooperation, and well-being. Teachers play a pivotal role in modeling and reinforcing empathetic and grateful behaviors, which in turn enhances their own teaching experiences. Students at Diksha School demonstrated empathy by helping peers, listening actively, and showing understanding during group activities. Gratitude was often expressed through verbal appreciation, thank-you notes, and supportive gestures towards classmates and teachers.

Implementing strategies that promote empathy and gratitude can lead to noticeable improvements in the overall learning environment. Students are likely to show higher levels of cooperation and active participation, contributing to a more engaged classroom atmosphere. These practices also help build a stronger sense of belonging, where every learner feels valued and included, fostering a supportive and respectful community. In turn, educators benefit from a more positive and harmonious classroom climate, which can enhance their sense of professional fulfillment and satisfaction in teaching.

### **5.1. Limitations**

1. The sample was limited to approximately 70 students from a single NGO school (Diksha School), which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts or larger populations

2. The study did not include perspectives from parents or community members, which could provide a more holistic view of students' emotional development.
3. There was a lack of longitudinal follow-up to assess whether improvements in empathy and gratitude were maintained over time or translated into lasting behavioral change.
4. There was a significant irregularity in the timing of follow-up assessments between different grades. One grade experienced a very long gap between the initial intervention and follow-up, while another grade had a much shorter interval. This inconsistency may have affected the comparability of results across grades, as the retention and demonstration of empathy and gratitude could vary depending on the length of time since the intervention.

## 5.2. Future Recommendations

1. Educational institutions need to weave gratitude and empathy activities such as gratitude journals, role-playing, and kindness challenges, into subjects such as language arts, social studies, and science, so these values become a matter of everyday practice instead of sporadic events.
2. Institutions and educational bodies can create social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that are specific to various grade levels and cultures to provide all students with a sense of representation and participation.
3. By implementing recurring recognition systems (e.g., "Empathy Ambassador" certificates, gratitude boards) and organizing frequent school-wide events to promote kindness, empathy, and diversity; students can be encouraged to practice these behaviours in everyday life.
4. Schools should involve parents and the community in gratitude and empathy activities, including community service projects or school-wide gratitude challenges, to spread positive influence outside the classroom.
5. Future research can aim to follow the long-term implications of empathy and gratitude interventions with both qualitative and quantitative designs, assessing outcomes such as academic performance, behavior, and interpersonal relationships.
6. Researchers to increase studies to include diverse types of schools (NGO, government, private) and various cultural settings in order to increase the generalizability of findings.
7. Future Researchers should obtain data from parents, guardians, and the community to understand in-depth students' emotional development and the long-term effects of school-based programs

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