A LANDSCAPE OF GRATITUDE

_The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes._
– Marcel Proust

In this chapter I use a school workshop on gratitude as a backdrop that sets the scene for the various dilemmas and complexities that will be investigated in the book. As the responses from these primary school teachers show, for many people their notion of gratitude is inseparable from other notions, or can even be comfortably replaced by them. Through the enthusiasm of some and the reservations of others, I hope to pave the way to a deeper appreciation of the depths of gratitude that reflect its cultural and historical richness, and also its ambiguity.

Leaders first?

For many weeks I had been anticipating the prospect of introducing a gratitude workshop to twenty-five teaching staff at Eastgates Primary School. The nearer the time for the workshop, the more excited I became. Eastgates is situated within a large Australian metropolis, in a district where there is a distinct socio-economic advantage and wide multicultural representation amongst the people who live and work there. Eastgates’ students represent many different ethnic backgrounds. Some of their teachers come from South-East Asian, Indian and Maori cultures. As in many other schools, a few teachers are nearing retirement, some have been teaching at the school for over a decade, and others are at the very beginning of their careers. Two or three have just started teaching there.

Claire, the school principal, came to Eastgates less than a year ago from a school she described as amongst the most disadvantaged of the schools in the city. She was already growing tired of the complaints of some Eastgates’ staff and what she perceived as their petty behaviour, and so she was excited about the prospect of teachers practising gratitude and hopefully “waking them up to how lucky they are to teach in this school!” I was optimistic and pleasantly nervous because this was the first primary school where I had had a chance to introduce my workshop, called _Gratitude in Education: Worthy pedagogy or prosaic hopefulness?_
Over more than a decade of introducing a pedagogy of gratitude in high schools and universities, I had learned to modify the ways I was leading educators in workshops. When teachers see leaders practise gratitude, and see others benefit from their practice, it is likely that they would follow those leaders. Similarly, when a teacher practises gratitude, students are more likely to follow their teacher’s example. I will rarely accept invitations to introduce gratitude as a learning strategy for students, without first offering it to school leaders and then after that, to teachers and parents.

With this idea in mind, I had visited Eastgates Primary a few months before to introduce my gratitude research to a group of six school leaders, including Claire. My inquiry into the effects of other school leaders practising gratitude had revealed some positive effects. They reported enhanced wellbeing, better relationships with colleagues and students, increased self-awareness, and improved student learning outcomes. As one of these leaders wrote:

> I made the effort to think about the students (and) be grateful for this environment with so many delightful cooperative intelligent students and even those who may not have met my expectations – and thought about how good it was to be here working and interacting with students.

After discussing the potential of gratitude to be an antidote to a culture of complaint, and to enhance student learning, all the leaders enthusiastically resolved to include the rest of the Eastgates’ staff in a forthcoming gratitude workshop. They could also see that first the leaders must practise gratitude. They knew this, although they wanted to jump right in and find a place for gratitude in the curricula for all students. All six leaders were keen to join what I called a ‘gratitude project’, which invited them to consciously focus on a gratitude practice and deliberately note the effects and challenges of their individual efforts. However, within the first week of practice, two members emailed me to apologise that they had too much on their plate and that they felt that it was too hard to be conscious of gratitude all the time. Two months later, only one of the school leaders had stayed on board with me. This was Julie, the assistant principal.

Claire agreed wholeheartedly with the idea of promoting more gratitude, but she said she would like to sit the year out and watch how the project progressed with the rest of the school, and let her staff get to know her first. As I had already sensed that all eyes were on Claire’s performance as a newcomer to the school, I could understand her dilemma. However, as an outsider and relative stranger, I did not feel that I was in a position to advise Claire that it was likely that the other staff would not benefit from the project as much as they would if she were involved.

Voluntary participation is an important ingredient for any gratitude initiative in a school. Unfortunately the principal was so eager to make an impact on what she