

Episode 22 | Gratitude Changes Us on the Inside

Ruth Ayres (00:02.553)

Becca, I got to witness gratitude circle in your classroom on the day that I was visiting. So this was a day I was recording. I was there most of the day. And Rex was, it was just a day where his behavior was tricky all day long. And so we talk about it. We share about this day. It's in the sticky hope kit. If you haven't gotten the sticky hope kit,

Becca (00:21.058)

Thanks.

Ruth Ayres (00:30.703)

I just hope that you do. So, Rex, you have Mabel, the elephant, and she's going around the circle. So, it's just this concrete way that people, that your students know it's my turn. And it gets to Rex, and he just, like he holds Mabel. He's so gentle, and he looks at her. He's like, Mabel, today I'm grateful for playing with, and he names his two friends. And he passes on Mabel.

Now for anybody else, we're like, isn't that a sweet way for us to end the day? But here's the deal.

Who Rex was grateful for 20 minutes earlier at the end of the day recess, he had thrown rocks at them. it was this very dysregulated recess situation. What's going on?

Becca (01:20.104)

Yeah, well he sure did.

Becca (01:30.67)

And then he comes inside. And that's what he's thankful for. And to you, this is something you brought up to me, like, as soon as the kids left that day, you were like, you hear who he was thankful for? And I was like, yeah, like, this is this is who we are and what we do. But in stopping to think about the power of that, right, like he had this really dysregulated situation out at recess, his game, his

dinosaur egg cracking game got way out of control. And, and he ended up hurting two of his friends throw literally throwing rocks like huge problem, right. And I had worked through it with him. And my brain was so tired at the end of that day, because it had just been a day of working alongside Rex to help him stay regulated so that he could be learning that he could be positioned to learn. And

at the end of the day, for him to be able to step back and be grateful for the very friends that he had accidentally hurt. He wasn't trying to hurt them, right? But he had accidentally hurt, just shows the power of what this gratitude circle means in our classroom. And like possibly even more beautiful is as Mabel went around the circle to those friends, they were thankful for Rex, right? It wasn't just that he was thankful for them, like they still let them.

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him play with them, they were thankful for the game that they played with Rex and that they got to have that fun time together. And they weren't stuck on what Rex did to them, right? They weren't stuck on the pain point of Rex threw a rock at us because we had already processed that we had dealt with it, off they went and they got to keep playing in a regulated way. And so to see that gratitude circle come full circle and

for them to be thankful and say that about each other just shows the importance of taking the time to sit around and talk about what we're thankful for at the end of each day.

Ruth Ayres (03:41.643)

And you say taking the time, and I think it was maybe three minutes. Like, it wasn't very long, but it is a routine, a consistent practice that you have happening in your classroom. It's closure to the day. Some days you get to... don't get to it, a literal lack of closure. But most days, it's this consistent routine. And I think that's important when we're thinking about gratitude.

And what the research is telling us about gratitude is it, when it's consistently happening and we're carving space, then we're seeing a lot of really delightful results that come just from the practice of gratitude.

Becca (04:25.102)

for sure. When I started doing this gratitude circle, it was way back. I say way back, it was when I started teaching kindergarten and I had learned some about the importance of gratitude as a foundation of empathy. And I knew some of that research then. But there wasn't a whole lot of research then. And as I was preparing for this episode, I dug back into the research, I think for the first time since

I've started a gratitude circle and like I had what I called a hippocampus moment because like during the, when I was learning about the hippocampus, I just got so excited in this neuroscience and I kind of nerd out a little bit. And so I dug into all of these scholarly articles and I, one, was amazed at how much research there has been in the last decade.

on the importance of gratitude and the impact of gratitude on the brain is just fascinating to me. And one of the things that was so exciting to me is that gratitude changes your brain on a neurochemical level. So in the practice of gratitude, when it's repeated and in a routine, it literally changes your neural pathways to position you to see the world differently.

And I just wonder and am excited to watch the power of teaching four, five and six year olds this act of gratitude.

Ruth Ayres (06:03.471)

Yeah, it truly is, again, what we're paying attention to. And that research is, just the body of research around gratitude has exploded. And we see it in all different kinds of places. It's cropping up. But I think what makes it a powerful practice in the classroom is the consistency and the routine of it. I could almost label it a ritual in your classroom.

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Becca (06:32.718)

It really is. It's something that the kids rely on and by the end of the year, it's their favorite part of the day. It has this really beautiful evolution that I've watched happen over and over again. Like at the beginning of the year, it's usually that they're grateful for tangible things. They're grateful for backpacks and sneakers and new toys and snacks that got packed for them. And as time goes on,

they start to be grateful for each other and for experiences and it goes from tangible to abstract and you watch it develop into this like true appreciation for this community that we are together and you start to see how that impacts their interactions and their understanding of how we function as a community. And my older students that come back to visit they'll

they'll ask to come back to gratitude circle because it's something that means something to them. It feels good for them to sit down and talk about something that they're grateful for that day. And it grounds them in the positive.

Ruth Ayres (07:46.575)

It does. And here's the thing. This is not a kindergarten practice. So this is a practice that will one, they can do their whole lives, but also that can come into play in many different classrooms or situations. So my son, Jordan was a football player and his coach before, like they had the meeting, the pre-practice meeting, and they always had to write down three things they were grateful for. The whole team.

All these football players, had a little tiny notebook that was just for writing down what they were grateful for. And in that situation, just like you were talking, they might be like, I'm grateful for my family, for food, for football. And he was like, no, we have to be more specific. So what is it about your family? And it was so interesting because during Jordan's

One of the years, it was a really tricky year. It was a rough year for us to maintain a healthy connection, a strong, positive connection with him. He was just sorting through a lot of things. And the football coach was like, hey, I want you to see this. He just brought that journal to me. every day, was like, I'm really glad that my mom made me eggs for breakfast. I'm glad that my mom washed my jersey. I forgot my cleats and my mom brought it in. It was like, he's like,

almost every day Jordan is grateful for something that you've done for him. And it's just, it's not like a little kid practice. It's something that matters for humans. And I think that's what the research is showing us. It changes us on the inside.

Becca (09:33.794)

And it's not just a, you feel different, right? Like for some people, feeling different is enough, but my brain is always like, but why? Why does it make you feel different? What's the part of it that is making you feel different? And so that's when I like dig into my neuroscience and to understand that when you're practicing gratitude, you're activating parts of your brain.

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in a different way. when I won't go too like nerdy on you, but when you're activating the the central part of your prefrontal cortex, which is the front part of your brain that helps you with decision making, activating that specific part helps you to change your worldview. So instead of thinking about like, all of the hard and tricky things that

are happening around you, you find the good things and are grateful for the things that bring you joy. And that can shift like the chemicals in your brain in a positive way, it can build the level of serotonin in your brain. It can decrease the cortisol levels in your brain and reduce the amount of stress that you're feeling. And that's why you're feeling better, right? Like your stress levels are going down and you're

your happy brain chemicals are increasing. And that is the why of like, when you're in these practices of gratitude, you feel better, you see more happy things. And by giving this as a tool to our students, it's giving them yet another way to build healthy regulation.

Ruth Ayres (11:25.155)

Right, and it's good for us too. So during gratitude circle, you're there, you're sharing a gratitude. And so I think like at the end of the day, we know that there are a jillion things that we have to get right. Maybe like the end of the day procedure, somebody's now riding the bus when they were supposed to be a parent pickup or somebody's leaving early or there's a count you have to turn into the office. And it's so tempting.

Becca (11:28.302)

Yes.

Ruth Ayres (11:54.915)

Because when you have this procedure that just works without you, it's so tempting to set the kids in a circle and go off and take care of all those little things. And I think we're missing this opportunity to lower our stress levels at the end of the day too. And so when as educators, we sit in that gratitude circle, well, yes, we're doing all the great things of modeling and making it more specific.

But we're also lowering our stress levels, which is important, right, to be able to do that just as part of the practice of the day. So did it take long? Do you feel like it took long to set this routine in motion?

Becca (12:39.51)

No, it's something I start on the first day of school. And it's something we do almost daily. And once they understand what I mean by gratitude, which is like, that's an abstract concept, but I describe it as like, when your heart felt happy today, they get it. like, in a class with 18 kids, it takes five minutes at the end of the day. And I

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I for sure get trapped in the like I start gratitude circle and I walk away habit. But it's so much better when I sit down. It's so much better for me. They do a great job. But it's better for me and my stress levels when I sit down and have that intentional time with them.