

## **Should I Be Grateful?: Gratitude and Teachers' Mental Health of Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

**Kristiana, I. F.**

Faculty of Psychology, Airlangga University  
Ika.f.kristiana@live.undip.ac.id

**Kustanti, E. R & Salma**

Faculty of Psychology, Diponegoro University, Semarang, Indonesia

**Abstract.** The task of the teachers who teach students with special needs; to teach, guide, even help them both physically and psychologically have the potential to create conditions that interfere with their mental health. The teachers who have a healthy mentality will feel happy, be able to manage stress, work productively, and readily contribute to a community. This experimental study aims to test the effectiveness of gratitude training in improving teacher's mental health for special educational needs. This is an experimental quasi- research design. The participants in this study were teachers from a special school in Semarang city. The control was performed by randomization and matching. The data were collected using GHQ (12 items;  $\alpha = 0.917$ ). The results showed that gratitude intervention proved to be effective to improve teacher's mental health ( $p < 0.001$ ;  $d = 0.969$ ). The effectiveness of gratitude intervention improving teacher's mental health was also shown from the teachers' GHQ scores in which the average increases about  $M = 2,234$  after the intervention was distributed.

**Keywords:** Teachers' mental health, SEN, experiment, gratitude.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every child with any conditions has the right to obtain an educational service. This is a particular concern for children with special needs to also have access to their future education. Working with children with special needs is full of challenges (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003; Yell, Katsiyannis, Drasgow & Herbst, 2003) and demands patience, empathy, and acceptance. The task of helping students with special educational needs (SEN) is often confronted with unpredictable situations such as suddenly students go berserk, oppose, have tantrums, or even become aggressive and attack the teachers while the teachers must withhold their negative emotions (Hochschild, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; Stansfeld, Rasul, Head, & Singleton, 2011). They become the reasons why the teachers who work for children with special needs tend to have high work stress and are at risks of suffering mental health problems (Dollard, Dormann, Boyd, Winefield, & Winefield, 2003; Ogi\_nska-Bulik, 2005).

Mental health is a state where every individual will be able to demonstrate his or her potential, be able to cope with any stress in his or her life, be able to work productively and happily, and can contribute to his or her community. Mental health is not just a condition where there is no illness or mental problem in a person. Mental health in the workplace can, for example, be characterized by low turnover rates, absenteeism, or low levels of violations within organizations (World Health Organization, 2003).

Studies on mental health in teachers focus on measuring 3 domains; psychological distress, burnout rate, and psychiatric problems such as depression, anxiety, and somatization (Kovess-Masfety, Rios-Seidel, & Sevilla-Dedieu, 2007). Students with special needs such as mental retardation often show behavioral problems that affect the emotional and physical conditions of the teacher, it thus affects the mental health of the teachers (Chang, 2009; Gholamitooranposhti, 2012). Teachers with mental health problems tend to show feelings of loneliness and feel unnoticed (Chang, 2009). Research conducted by Carlotto & Camara (2015) concluded that loneliness as a symptom of mental health problems in teachers is dangerous because it can create social problems with teachers. Further, Carlotto, et.al (2015) found that there is

a significant positive relationship between loneliness, anxiety and aggression.

Therefore, one of the efforts that can be done to help maintain and improve the mental health of the teachers for students with special needs is by providing effective training (Yell, Drasgow, & Lowrey, 2005; Yell et al., 2003).

Several studies on the effectiveness of training for teachers crew have been conducted. For example, research on the impact of training on education management for crews given to teachers can reduce teachers' negative attitudes towards crews and increase their motivation to provide education services to children with special needs (Buysse, Verschuere, Verachtert & Van Damme, 2009). Training and consultation for teachers who teach children with special needs are provided by related institutions, and it can also enhance teachers' positive interaction with the students (Kimberly et al, 2014). Based on the studies that have been conducted on the effect of training for teachers for students with special needs, most are examining the effect of training related to the professional competence of the crew and it is still very rare to examine what appropriate training is and how it affects in improving mental health of teachers for students with special educational needs (SEN).

This experimental study aims to test the effectiveness of interventions based on self-strengthening / personal teachers for students with special educational needs (SEN). The intervention in question is the training of gratitude to improve the mental health of the teachers. The gratified individual is associated with someone who easily grabs and understands the positive side of everything and gives it to others (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Some studies show that gratitude can prevent the emergence of negative emotions and pathological conditions and protects from the emergence of psychological problems. In particular, gratitude is considered positively related to optimism and hope, negatively related to depression and anxiety, and leads to supportive social relations. Furthermore, gratitude can increase success in one's life (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Research on gratitude in school environments shows that gratitude can increase motivation for prosocial behavior, positive social relations, and attachment to the school community (Chan, 2013). Research on gratitude has been

done in some populations as in adult individuals with clinical and nonclinical problems for example in teachers (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Chan, 2010), but there is only few gratitude studies on teachers. Until 2016, there are only 3 research that focus on this, namely, Chan's research in 2010 and 2013 that focus on the effect of gratitude on teacher's subjective well-being and Howells's research (2014) which focuses on the experience of teachers and the meaning of gratitude through qualitative study. In Indonesia itself, research on gratitude on teachers has never existed including in the teachers for students with special needs. Meanwhile, gratitude can provide a meaningful effect, among others is for the achievement of positive relationships between teachers and students, student learning motivation, and attachment to schools, and the success in schools to achieve the goals of student learning (Howells, 2014).

**METHOD**

This study applied quasi experimental method, within subject design. The treatment given to the subject was gratitude training. Measurement was conducted twice by providing subjects with pre-test and post-test using the GHQ (12 items;  $\alpha = 0.917$ ). The samples of items in GHQ were : 1) are able to concentrate in every task given; 2) sleeping disorder due to anxiety; 3) continuously feeling depressed; and nine other items which revealed the symptoms of mental disturbance in the teachers observed. The experiment and control groups consisted of 47 teachers from 3 inclusive schools in Semarang (public junior high school 5, Muhammadiyah Islamic junior high school and Hj. Isriyati junior high school). The teachers' demographic data can be seen from this table:

**Table 1. Teachers' Demographic Data**

Data	Number of group	%
Sex :		
male	23	48.9
female	24	51.1
Education background :		
Bachelor in PLB	0	0
Other bachelor degrees / NonPLB	47	100
$\Sigma$ SEN at the class	3	75
Type of SEN (physical disability)	3	100
Grade	1	100

Note: PLB (special education degree); SEN (special educational needs); M (Mean); SD (Standard Deviation)

Intervention was given in the form of gratitude training in several stages as follows:

**Session 1: Gratitude reappraisal**

In this session, the subjects were asked to identify the negative responses based on their past experiences. Then, they were trained to change their negative perspectives by searching the silver lining of every event to produce the sense of gratitude.

**Session 2: Gratitude recounting**

In this session, the subjects were trained to express their happiness according to their own subjectivity by sharing things that they were fully grateful of.

**Session 3: Gratitude reflection**

This session asked the subjects to open their eyes to all the good things that had happened to them after coping with the obstacles preventing them to feel grateful. The training provided a state of self-reflection by observing other misfortune people around them.

**Session 4: Expression of Gratitude**

In this session, the subjects were asked to practice expressing their gratitude by all means necessary. This was considered effective enough to improve their emotional welfare.

**RESULT**

**Table 2. tests of paired t-test**

Paired differences	Paired t-test	Effect size
MD = 9.170	$t = -4.910$ $p < 0.001$	$r = 0.586$ Cohen's $d = 0.645$

Note: MD (Mean difference); t (t value); df (difference group); r (correlation value); d (Cohen's d); sig (significant > .05)

Based on the table presenting the test result of paired t-test ( $t = -4.910$ ;  $p < .001$ ), it can be clearly seen that the gratitude training influences an inclusive school teacher's mental health. It improved a teacher's mental health shown by the Cohen value ( $d = .645$ ) and was considered significant. The difference in mean mental health score at the time before and after gratitude training also showed an increase of 9,710.

Being grateful is proven to improve the mental health of the teachers who teach students with special needs by reducing the symptoms of the problems which include: feeling difficult to concentrate, easy to be anxious or worried, having feelings of no use, difficult decision-making, unhappy, and feeling depressed. As the previous study found that gratitude is negatively correlated with depression and anxiety, it is positively related to optimism and hope in one's life (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Table 3 presents data on the rank order of individual symptoms of mental health problems based on items in GHQ that appear to be based on gender differences.

**Table 3. Rank order mean scores and standard deviation of the symptoms of mental health problems by gender (N=47)**

Symptoms	Rank Males (N= 23)	Females (N= 24)
Difficult to focus	1	5
Easy to worry	5	4
Feeling unimportant	4	3
Difficult to make a decision	2	6
Unhappy	6	2
Depression	3	1

The symptom of mental health problems most often felt by female teachers is the feeling of distress, whereas in male teachers it is reported that many symptoms have concentrated. The symptoms of women's perceived problems tend to lead to emotions while men are cognitively directed. This finding is in line with the findings of a study of coping strategies in teachers who teach NES, that male teacher tends to use coping strategies that lead to behavior by solving problems, while female teachers tend to use emotions in coping strategies (Antoniou & Polychroni, 2009). This coping strategy then also shows the psychological domain (cognitive or emotional) of the mental health of male or female teachers in the face of stress. Mental health and coping strategies have a close relationship where mental health conditions are also proven to be successful for educating their students (Hoffenbartala & Bocosb, 2015). Special education needs teachers who are psychological, physically and/or sensory impaired (Lecavalier, Leone & Wiltz, 2006).

Programs to improve teachers' mental health have been implemented in some countries such as China in implementing a comprehensive school health program and teachers' perceived results include: paying more attention to health, attaining better 'psychological quality' and confidence, forming friendships between teachers and students and feeling more relaxed (Aldinger, Zhang, Liu, Pan, Yu, Jones,

Kass, 2008). Gratitude training as a form of intervention on mental health of teachers from NES is effective in reducing symptoms of mental health problems of teachers. The findings of this study are supported by the results of Macaskilla & Denovan (2014) study that hope pathways and gratitude predicted mental health. Gratitude, hope agency and exploratory curiosity predicted positive affect and can predict the satisfaction of one's life. Gratitude involves appreciation and thankfulness, operating as a moral or prosocial and affecting positive emotions (Neto, 2007; Hershberger, 2005; Emmons, McCullough & Tsang, 2002). The research suggests that a grateful disposition enables flexible and facilitates to cope with stress and adversity as the individual adopts a positive outlook of the worst phenomenon (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008).

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this study that prove that effective gratitude training decreases mental health problems of teachers of NES also strengthen the results of research on gratitude as a disposition that leads to the strength of individuals in the face of stress and gave birth to positive thoughts and emotions. As an experimental study, randomized assignment should be the right strategy to be done to get a comprehensive measurement of the emotional and behavioral changes that participants exhibit as a symptom of increasing or decreasing mental health problems. This consideration also relates to gratitude as a disposition or trait that cannot be measured only in one observation.

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