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## **Lucky to be happy: A study of happiness in Australian primary students**

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You must be my Lucky Star  
'Cause you shine on me wherever you are  
I just think of you and I start to glow  
And I need your light  
And baby you know (Madonna, 1982)

### **ABSTRACT**

Providing a curriculum that promotes personal growth and wellbeing is an overarching learning outcome of the Western Australian Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Framework, 1998). However, little is known about what constitutes and causes wellbeing of students in our primary schools. In the study reported in this paper the happiness of 312 primary-aged students was measured using various instruments and viewpoints, along with demographic information provided by their parents. The findings, which were compared with Holder and Coleman (2008) and research into adult happiness, indicate that a sense of friendship, belonging and optimism are strong indicators of children’s happiness.

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Seligman (1995), the roots of our happiness as adults are developed in our childhood. He asserts that teaching ten-year-old children optimistic thinking skills would halve the rate of depression that occurs to them during puberty and thereafter (Seligman, 2002). If Seligman’s prognosis has credence, perhaps as educators we need to learn more about what constitutes childhood happiness and to consider ways and means of enhancing it.

What constitutes happiness for adults has been under scrutiny for some time. Lyubomirsky (2007) claims that researchers have lifted the exploration of happiness from ‘a fad’ to a ‘serious, legitimate and worthy aim’ (p.2), and have established a ‘theory of the determinants of happiness’ (p.3). The personal characteristics associated with higher levels of adult happiness are those that we would traditionally identify as belonging to positive and valued members of our community. For example, happiness and satisfaction are enhanced when individuals engage in personal goals that are concerned with community contribution (Kasser & Ryan, 1996), valued by one’s culture (Diener & Diener, 1995), and are feasible and realistic (Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999). Furthermore, those individuals who frame their life circumstances in positive ways (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998) feel control over their personal circumstances (Bandura, 1997), feel confident in their own abilities (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), do not dwell excessively on problems (Lyubomirsky, Caldwell, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998), and are involved in meaningful activities that both challenge and engage (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and tend to be happy and satisfied individuals. Moreover, individuals who

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use humour, and are outgoing and optimistic have higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995). Finally, those who engage in meaningful relationships (Myers & Diener, 1995) and have a well-developed sense of spirituality (Myers, 2000) tend to be happier. Recent research into the happiness and wellbeing of adults also supports the notion that individuals who are happier have longer life expectancy, are more active, and are less likely to have conditions associated with stress and anxiety (Post, 2005; Veenhoven, 2008).

In a recent study, Diener and Lucas (2004) surveyed 10,175 university students of varying adult ages across 48 countries, asking them to rate their desire for various emotional eventualities for their children. One of the statements read “If I had a daughter, I hope my daughter will be happy!” The university students were asked to rate their response using a 9-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Consistent across all 48 nations, respondents desired high levels of happiness for their children.

However, little is known about what makes children happy, or about the personality types of those who are happy, other than a recent study by Holder and Coleman (2008) who explored demographic and personality variables associated with children’s happiness in British Columbia, Canada. Holder and Coleman (2008) point out that happiness in young children may be of a different order from those in adolescents and adults because children do not have cognitive maturity and have not experienced some of the life circumstances that influence the happiness of adults. Consequently, a deeper appreciation of the factors associated with childhood happiness and knowledge is needed.

The study reported here is the first of its kind in Australia. It explored the self-rated happiness levels of 312 students in Year 4 and Year 6 in Perth, Western Australia. The happiness of individual students was also rated by their parents and teachers, and parents provided demographic details. Comparisons were made between the different year groups to establish if there was a change in happiness levels from the younger to the older group. In addition, the research made comparisons between the students’ happiness levels and personality traits. It was hoped that this study would provide an indication of how happy students in Western Australian primary schools were, and what contributed to their happiness. Ultimately such research may be a resource for developing strategies to enhance the wellbeing of school children.

### *Conceptual understanding of happiness*

Defining happiness has been a long-held Western philosophical tradition (White, 2006). Lyubomirsky, Tkachik and Dimatteo (2006), in their exploration of the differences between happiness and self-esteem, cite the Pulitzer Prize winner Howard Mumford Jones’ view that “happiness belongs to that category of words, the meaning of which everyone knows but the definition of which no one can give”. Veenhoven (cited in Diener and Shu, 2000) asserts that the term happiness can have different meanings depending on whether we are exploring the objective or subjective meaning. One’s objective form of happiness might be to have “material prosperity, peace and freedom” (p. 267). But subjectively one’s happiness may be described as “the degree to which someone evaluates positively the overall quality of his or her life as a whole” (p. 267).

The exploration and measurement of happiness is not without critics. Cromby, Diamond, Kelly, Maloney, Priest and Smail (2007) regard happiness research as a “current preoccupation”. They suggest that the notion that we can improve our world through “wishful thinking” is delusory. They argue that unhappiness is not a psychological matter; rather its source is the social and material world we live in. For many individuals their life experience leads to “unprecedented levels of dissatisfaction, mistrust of others, anxiety, low mood and even clinical levels of depression” (Cromby et al., 2007, p. 423). One cannot deny there is much in adults’ life experiences that cause pain. One might also reasonably expect that children have not experienced the depth of anguish that the social and material world can deliver. Children’s way of perceiving happiness may differ markedly from those of the adult population. Children may not “articulate a vision of the good life” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5) in the same way adults do.

Regardless of what counts as happiness for children, schools have a role to play in its production. In recent times Seligman (2008) and colleagues have engaged in happiness research in a large private secondary school in the state of Victoria, Australia. Their program, known as “positive education”, includes a specific curriculum for the development of positive emotions, training for all staff, and

ongoing parent forums delivered by experts in the field. Before embarking on such programs it is important to have a clear sense of what it means for students to be happy and what are the attributes of happiness. Furthermore, it would be useful to see whether demographic variables and psychological and physical traits influence students’ happiness levels.

### *Literature on child happiness*

Dockery (2005) explored the happiness of young Australians using longitudinal surveys of Australian youth. His focus was on the school-to-work transition experience of 5,368 Year 9 students from 1997 to 2002. He measured the students’ self-reported levels of happiness when they were making their initial contact with the labour market. From 1997 onwards, students were asked to respond to the question: “How happy are you with life as a whole?” using a four point Likert scale of ‘very unhappy,’ ‘fairly unhappy,’ ‘fairly happy,’ or ‘very happy’. A number of background variables, including gender, ethnicity, language background, mother’s and father’s socio-economic status (as derived from occupation), family wealth, family structure, disability, school achievement and personality traits (such as extroversion and having an easy-going nature) were also measured. Those individuals who described themselves as outgoing, confident, popular and open to new experiences, along with those self-described as calm, agreeable and hard working, tended to report higher levels of happiness. The analysis also revealed that young Australian males had lower levels of happiness than females.

It would appear that both demographic and personality variables impact on individual youth happiness, but which of these is more influential with younger Australians is unknown. In British Columbia, Canada, Holder and Coleman (2008) recently explored the correlation between demographic factors, personality type, physical appearance, and popularity with happiness for 432 students aged from 9 to 12 years. Four measures were used: child self-perception, parent and teacher rating, and the sub-scale of the Piers-Harris 2 Self Concept scale. They found that all these factors were relevant to children’s happiness.

Other research has found that extraversion and neuroticism account for significant variance in the happiness of adults (Hayes & Joseph, 2003), and while personality factors may not fully develop until young adulthood, the underpinnings of these personality types were associated with children’s happiness in Holder and Coleman (2008). Other findings included, demographic items such as parental wealth and the sex of the child were significant but not with all measures. Popularity was related to personal happiness, but physical appearance was only modestly connected.

The findings of Holder and Coleman (2008) provide an interesting and unique platform for comparing and exploring the same age cohort in Australia. Using similar methodologies to Holder and Coleman, the researchers in the Australian study made comparisons between Year 4 and Year 6 students to determine if there were differences in happiness levels between the two groups, and examined the impact of demographic and personality variables on overall happiness levels. The research analysis was based on collected data on happiness from individual students (self-appraisal of happiness), parents (view of their child’s happiness), and classroom teachers (view of each individual students’ happiness).

## **METHOD**

In the study being reported in this paper, a sample of 871 students in Years 4 and 6, in both the public and private school systems, were given information letters, consent forms and survey forms to be viewed by their parents/guardians/caregivers, of which 325 consented (37.3%). A further 13 students (4%) were excluded from the research either because their forms were uncompleted or they were away at the time of data collection. So the final number of students involved in the study was 312.

Since the data collection took place at a time of industrial unrest, parents may have been less responsive to the request for personal information, contributing to the low returns. Of the parents who consented to participate in the research, 79% were female (age range 28-56,  $M = 41.17$   $SD = 5.19$ )

and 21% male (age range 26-66,  $M = 45.06$   $SD = 6.10$ ). The gender breakdown of students was 56.6% girls and 43.4% boys; they were drawn from 15 schools and over 40 classrooms. The students ranged in age from 9 years through to 11 years 10 months. The mean age of the Year 4 cohort was  $M = 9.58$   $SD = 0.413$  and the Year 6 cohort was  $M = 11.15$   $SD = 0.418$ . To ensure a broad sample, the researchers selected schools with a wide range of socio-economic levels, with 13% within the 0-40k gross income range, and 15% > 150 K.

Seventy per cent of parents within this research were married, 8% were in *de facto* relationships, 3% were separated, 7% were single, 7% were divorced and 1% widowed. Four per cent did not provide marital detail.

### *Survey materials*

Students completed four questionnaires to indicate their happiness levels and provided detail on factors associated with happiness: the Piers-Harris 2 Children’s Self-Concept (Piers & Hertzberg, 2002), the Faces Scale, the Children’s Questionnaire, and the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Three scales used were replicated from those in the Holder and Coleman (2008) study, but the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky, 2007) was unique for this group of students. Parents completed a questionnaire focussed on demographic and lifestyle factors, with questions presented in a Likert-style format similar to the children’s questionnaire. Each of these measures will be presented below.

a) *Piers-Harris 2 Children’s Self-Concept Scale 2* (Piers & Hertzberg, 2002) is a 60 item self-reporting questionnaire, sub-titled “the way I feel about myself” (Piers & Herzberg, 2002, p.3). It is designed for students who are older than seven and requires a primary reading level of 7-8 years. The scale was administered to whole groups made up of Year 4 and Year 6 students at the schools and, because of the younger cohort; the researchers read the contents to the group. Students responded with a yes or no.

b) *The Piers-Harris 2 (PH2)* is made up of six sub-scales designed to assess components of self-concept. In line with Holder and Coleman (2008), only four sub-scales were used: happiness and satisfaction, physical appearance and attributes, popularity, and freedom from anxiety sub-scales. The ‘happiness and satisfaction’ sub-scale aims to elicit indications of happiness, with items such as ‘I am easy to get along with’ and ‘I am a happy person’. The ‘freedom from anxiety’ sub-scale is focussed on aspects of anxiety such as nervousness, shyness and sadness, containing items such as ‘I wish I was different’, ‘I get nervous when the teacher calls on me’ and ‘I am often sad’. The ‘popularity’ sub-scale is focussed on social functioning. It contains items such as ‘my classmates in school think I have good ideas’ and ‘I have many friends’. Finally, the ‘physical appearance and attributes’ sub-scale is focussed on the individuals’ perception of their physical appearance, and has items such as ‘my looks bother me’ and ‘I have a pleasant face’. The PH2 has been used in many settings and with varied groups of students. It consistently demonstrates high internal reliability, with the total scale averaging an alpha of 0.91 and the subscales ranging from 0.82 to 0.74 (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). In this present study the total scale alpha was 0.88 and the subscales ranged from 0.72 to 0.82.

c) *Faces scale* comprised a seven-item Likert type scale (see Table 1) using a progression of faces from ‘very happy’ to ‘very sad’ to address the question ‘How happy are you most of the time’? Parents rated their child’s happiness using the same scale and addressing the question ‘How happy is your child most of the time’? In line with the approach taken in Holder and Coleman’s (2008) research, the teachers rated students who participated in the study using the same faces scale. However, their evaluation was based on two questions: ‘How happy is (student’s name) when she/he is doing normal work in your classroom?’ and ‘How happy is (student’s name) when she/he is doing fun activities’? An average of the two responses was taken as the teacher’s measure of individual student happiness. Table 1 shows the data from the Faces scale in this research and Table 2 shows the findings of the Holder and Coleman (2008) study.

d) *Children’s questionnaire* contained demographic and lifestyle questions similar to those used in adult research. Sample questions are as follows: “How rich do you think your family is?” “How often do you visit friends?” and “How lucky am I?” Students addressed these questions using a Likert scale (see table 5).

e) *Parent questionnaire* presented questions about their children such as “How many hours does your child watch tv?” “What is your family household income?”, and “Who does your child predominantly live with?”

f) *Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)* has been used in a wide variety of studies focussed on adult happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The scale was developed and validated in 14 separate studies involving 2,732 participants and has shown high internal consistency. The main author of this research (S. Lyubomirsky) granted permission for the main researcher to alter the language of the scale for a primary age group. The SHS has four 7 point Likert type questions on the individuals’ perceptions of their subjective happiness: “Most of the time I am a very happy person (through to - not a very happy person); “Some people are always happy – does this describe you?” “Some people enjoy life whatever is going on. Does this describe you?”; and “Some people are never as happy as they could be. Does this describe you?” As this was the first time these questions were used for a group of this age, an internal reliability was established for this current study. The Cronbach’s alpha for the total scale within this current research was 0.7, establishing reasonable reliability.

### *Procedure*

The school principals were initially approached via a posted package describing the research and aspects of current happiness research. This was followed up with a phone call to the principals approximately 10 days later. Those principals who were receptive were interviewed (face to face) by the main researcher. Once the school principals and the designated Year 4 and Year 6 classroom teachers had agreed to participate, a letter was sent home to the students’ parents requesting consent and completion of the parent questionnaire. Students identified as having depression (or receiving medication for this condition) were excluded from the study.

When these forms were returned, the main researcher visited the school and coded the participants against the class lists for later data analysis to ensure confidentiality. During this visit the researcher met with individual classroom teachers to discuss aspects of the research and to organise a time to collect data. Data collection generally occurred within one week of parent returns, depending on the school program. In all instances teachers had completed their evaluation of the students’ happiness (teachers’ faces scale) by the time the researcher collected the data.

In schools where there were fewer students participating, data collection was conducted with both Year 4 and Year 6 students together, typically in a spacious and quiet environment such as the library. A set description of the goals of the research was used for all students. Additionally, the concept that the rating was to be on how students felt ‘most of the time’ was discussed. Each data collection session took approximately 30 minutes and the main researcher conducted this without the assistance of teachers or support staff.

## **RESULTS**

A total of 312 questionnaires were entered into an SPSS spreadsheet for data analyses. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference on any of the five happiness scores between groups of Year 4 ( $n = 195$ ) and Year 6 ( $n = 117$ ) primary school children (see Table 1).

### *Happiness ratings*

Using the Face Scales, children were rated happy by themselves (i.e., ChildOwnFace), their parents (i.e., ParentChildFace), and their teachers (i.e., TeacherChildFace). At least 88% of the child

responses, and above 90% of the parent and teacher responses, were within the three happiest categories (see Table 1).

The Australian results are similar to Holder and Coleman’s (2008), although 36% of Canadian students placed themselves in the highest happiness self-rating position, whereas only 22% of Australian students did so. The Canadian research had 79% of students in the highest happiness positions, whereas in Australia this was 67%. The ratings of Australian students by their teachers and parents were very similar to the ratings by Canadian parents and teachers.

**Table 1:** Percentage of respondents within each category of the Faces Scale

| Respondent Group | Score  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|                  | 1<br> | 2<br> | 3<br> | 4<br> | 5<br> | 6<br> | 7<br> |
| ChildOwnFace     | 0.3  | 0.3  | 3.2  | 7.7  | 21.5   | 44.6   | 22.4   |
| ParentChildFace  | 0.3  | 0.0  | 0.6  | 2.6  | 16.3   | 53.5   | 26.6   |
| TeacherChildFace | 0.0  | 0.6  | 0.0  | 8.7  | 27.3   | 45.2   | 18.3   |

*Note.* Percentage of children’s self-ratings (ChildOwnFace), parents’ rating of their children (ParentChildFace), and teachers’ ratings of the children (TeacherChildFace), in each of the seven response options on the Face Scale

**Table 2:** Percentage of respondents within each category of the Faces Scale in Holder and Coleman, (2008)

| Respondent Group | Score  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|                  | 1<br> | 2<br> | 3<br> | 4<br> | 5<br> | 6<br> | 7<br> |
| ChildOwnFace     | 1  | 0  | 1  | 8  | 11   | 43   | 36   |
| ParentChildFace  | 0  | 0  | 1  | 3  | 21   | 58   | 17   |
| TeacherChildFace | 0  | 0  | 1  | 9  | 27   | 47   | 16   |

As mentioned, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted to determine if there were any differences between the Year 4 and 6 students on the happiness measures used in this current research. No significant differences were found between these groups for the *child’s own faces scale*, the *SHS*, *parent faces scale*, or *teacher faces scale*.

The *happiness and satisfaction sub-scale* score was calculated from students yes/no responses to the 10 items on the PH 2 relating to this aspect of self-concept. The *Total Domain* scores for Year 4 students ( $M = 8.37$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ) were lower than Year 6 students ( $M = 8.63$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ); however, this result was not statistically significant  $F(1,310) = 6.08$ ,  $p > .05$ . But the result indicates that students from both Year 4 and Year 6 were in the very high average range on this measure of the PH 2.

When gender was compared and self-reported happiness (i.e., Child’s own face scale score) was combined for Year 4 and 6 girls (mean 5.93 SD 0.94) compared to Year 4 and 6 boys (mean 5.34, SD 1.13), a highly significant result was evident ( $f(1,310) = 0.00$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

As can be seen in Table 3, each of the five measures of happiness was significantly correlated with the other ratings of happiness. That is, the happiness and satisfaction sub-scale was significantly correlated to the results of the children’s faces scale, the parents’ faces scale, and the teachers’ faces scale and the SHS.

As there appeared to be little difference between the happiness ratings of Year 4 and 6 students, their combined data were used in all further analyses. As with the findings of Holder and Coleman (2008), demographic details did not correlate highly with measurements of happiness. Table 4 displays the demographic items measured in both the children’s and parents’ questionnaires. Initial analysis revealed no significant difference between the various bands of self-reported parent income

and any measure of children’s happiness, nor were there any significant correlations between with whom the child lived and happiness.

**Table 3:** Pearson product-moment correlations between the four measures of happiness

|     | HapPH2 | COF   | PCF   | TCF   | SHS |
|-----|--------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| COF | 0.41*  | 1     |       |       |     |
| PFS | 0.34*  | 0.33* | 1     |       |     |
| TFS | 0.28*  | 0.28* | 0.28* | 1     |     |
| SHS | 0.43*  | 0.55* | 0.35* | 0.22* | 1   |

\* $p = .01$  (two-tailed)

*HapPH2* = Happiness/satisfaction ratings on Piers-Harris 2 sub-scale; *COF* = ChildOwnFace scale ratings; *PCF* = Parent Child Face scale ratings; *TCF* = Teacher Child Face scale ratings; *SHS* = Subjective Happiness Scale

Further analyses compared the means of those students in the extreme of each category within each variable to determine whether there were any significant differences between specific groups within the sample (see Table 5). This analysis revealed significant differences as indicated by the asterisked average happiness scores in Table 5 (blank columns indicate there was no statistically significant difference). For example, looking at the first row of Table 5, when the extremes were examined (0-10 and 20 or more friends) in the response to ‘How many friends’, there were statistically significant differences between the mean happiness scores for students from these two groups for the ChildOwnFace, ParentFace, and Subjective Happiness Scales. The pairs of numbers are the mean happiness scores of the students in each category for the relevant scale. These findings were not consistent across all happiness scales.

There was a significant difference between children living with both parents and those with a single parent. However, this difference was only significant for the child’s SHS scale and PH2 happiness and satisfaction sub-scale. When parent income was compared between those within the 0-40K and those in the 150+K range, there was a significant difference, but again this was only revealed in the child’s SHS scale and PH2 happiness and satisfaction sub-scale.

The variables where there were significant differences were most consistently identified as those relating to social factors. For example, there was a significant difference on three happiness measures (including the child faces scale) for those who had ‘lots of friends’ compared to ‘those who had fewer friends’. Likewise, there was a significant difference between the parent item ‘child gets visits’ for those who were ‘visited often’ and those who had ‘few or no visitors’ on three measures of happiness (again including the child faces scale). The most consistent significant difference on the *children’s questionnaire* was for the item ‘Are you lucky?’ This difference was evident in four out of the five measures of happiness. The finding that students who are popular and optimistic tend to be happier is consistent with previous research with children (Hubbard, 2001; Holder & Coleman, 2008).

It is noteworthy that an item about luck should be a significant indicator of happiness. The nature of luck is that it is transient, not under personal control. Do these children always expect to be lucky? Children who indicated that they were lucky tended to be those who were happier on most measures of happiness used in the study. This fits with adult studies that show being optimistic and having a bright outlook on life are correlated with happiness. Myers and Diener (1997) describe happy people as ‘positive thinking optimists.’ Given that the present study involved children, it was considered better to phrase the question as ‘Are you lucky?’ rather than ‘Do good things appear to happen for you in your life?’

#### *Freedom from anxiety, popularity and physical appearance as predictors of happiness*

Multivariate regression analyses, in line with the analysis conducted by Holder and Coleman (2008), were used to investigate the relationships between the two self-reported measures of happiness (COF & SHS) and the individual items from the PH2 subscales Freedom from Anxiety, Physical Appearance and Popularity. The results of these investigations showed that the items from the PH2 subscales under consideration predicted variance in both the COF and SHS happiness

**Table 4:** Averages and standard deviations (SD) of demographic items

| Questionnaire | Item name       | Question/statement  | Scale                     | Average           | SD   |
|---------------|-----------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------|------|
| <i>Child</i>  | Child TV        | How many hours do you watch the TV each day?  | 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5+      | 3 <sup>b</sup>    | 1.4  |
|               | Family Wealth   | In terms of money, how rich do you think your family is?                                | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5             | 3 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.5  |
|               | Friends visit   | How many times do you visit your friends’ houses outside school during the school term? | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5             | 3 <sup>b</sup>    | 1.1  |
|               | Decisions       | I make good decisions and choices   | 1, 2, 3                   | 2 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.4  |
|               | Friends         | How many friends do you have?   | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8    | 7 <sup>b</sup>    | 1.3  |
|               | Talk            | I love to give talks in front of my class   | 1, 2, 3                   | 2 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.6  |
|               | Sing            | I love to sing and dance  | 1, 2, 3                   | 2 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.7  |
|               | Lucky           | I’m usually pretty lucky.   | 1, 2, 3                   | 2 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.5  |
|               | Do Well         | I think I will do well at school this year.   | 1, 2                      | 1 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.2  |
| <i>Parent</i> | Gross Income    | What is the gross income of your child’s primary residence?                             | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7       | 4.8 <sup>a</sup>  | 1.9  |
|               | Mother’s age    | How old is your child’s mother?   |                           | 41.2 <sup>a</sup> | 5.2  |
|               | Father’s age    | How old is your child’s father?   |                           | 43.9 <sup>a</sup> | 5.9  |
|               | Parent-child TV | On average, how many hours does your child watch the TV (per day)?                      | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6          | 3.0 <sup>b</sup>  | 1.1  |
|               | Child sex       | What is the gender of your child?   | 1, 2                      | 2 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.5  |
|               | Parent sex      | Your gender (person completing the form)?   | 1, 2                      | 2 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.4  |
|               | Child live      | With whom does your child mostly live with?   | 1, 2, 3, 4                | 3 <sup>b</sup>    | 0.5  |
|               | Parent marital  | What is the marital status of your child’s primary caregiver?                           | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 | 3 <sup>b</sup>    | 1.39 |

<sup>a</sup> Mean, <sup>b</sup> Mode*Family wealth:* 1 = Very poor; 2 = Poor; 3 = Average; 4 = Rich; 5 = Very rich*Friends visit:* 1 = Very often; 2 = Often; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Not Often; 5 = Never*Decisions:* 1 = Always; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Never*Friends:* 1 = 0; 2 = 1; 3 = 2; 4 = 3-5; 5 = 5-10; 6 = 10-15; 7 = 15-20; 8 = >20*Talk:* 1 = Always; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Never*Sing:* 1 = Always; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Never*Lucky:* 1 = Always; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Never*Do well:* 1 = Yes; 2 = No*Gross Income:* 1 = \$0-\$20,000; 2 = \$21,000-\$40,000; 3 = \$41,000-\$60,000; 4 = \$61,000-\$80,000; 5 = \$81,000-\$100,000; 6 = \$101,000-\$150,000; 7 = > \$150,000*Parent-child TV:* 1 = 0-30mins; 2 = 31mins – 1 hr; 3 = 1-2hr; 4 = 1-3hr; 5 = 3-4hr; 6 = >4hr*Child, Parent Sex:* 1 = Male; 2 = Female*Child live:* 1 = Mum; 2 = Dad; 3 = Both; 4 = Neither*Parent marital status:* 1 =Single; 2 = Defacto; 3 = Married; 4 = Separated; 5 = Divorced; 6 = Widowed; 7 = Single and divorced; 8 = Defacto with someone else and divorced; 9 = Divorced and married to someone else

measures. These results, along with the most significant individual items contributing to the variance from the PH2 subscales are illustrated in Table 6 (note Item 6 and 32 are in both the ‘freedom from anxiety’ and ‘popularity’ sub-scales).

**Table 5:** Significant mean differences on happiness measures between demographic items

| Quest.        | Item   | HapPH2         |                | COFS           |                | TFS            |                | PFS            |                | SHS            |                |
|---------------|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|               |  | x <sub>1</sub> | x <sub>2</sub> |
| <i>Child</i>  |  |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
|               | How many friends<br>(x <sub>1</sub> = 0-10, x <sub>2</sub> = 20+)                              |                |                | 5.21           | 5.78*          |                |                | 5.76           | 6.08*          | 17.76          | 20.35**        |
|               | Like giving talks in class<br>(x <sub>1</sub> = always, x <sub>2</sub> = never)                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                | 21.22          | 18.85**        |
|               | Like to sing and dance<br>(x <sub>1</sub> = always, x <sub>2</sub> = never)                    |                |                | 5.90           | 5.24**         | 6.00           | 5.62**         |                |                |                |                |
|               | I am lucky<br>(x <sub>1</sub> = always, x <sub>2</sub> = never)                                | 9.09           | 7.12**         | 6.02           | 4.76**         |                |                | 6.16           | 5.65**         | 21.82          | 16.76**        |
| <i>Parent</i> |  |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
|               | Child lives with<br>(x <sub>1</sub> = single parent, x <sub>2</sub> = both<br>parents)         | 8.01           | 8.63*          |                |                |                |                |                |                | 19.15          | 20.52*         |
|               | Parents are married<br>(x <sub>1</sub> = no, x <sub>2</sub> = yes)                             |                |                |                |                | 5.80           | 6.00*          |                |                |                |                |
|               | Parent income<br>(x <sub>1</sub> = 0-40k, x <sub>2</sub> = >150k)                              | 7.42           | 9.00**         |                |                | 5.81           | 6.21*          |                |                |                |                |
|               | Friends visit child<br>(x <sub>1</sub> = very often/often x <sub>2</sub> = not<br>often/never) | 8.64           | 8.05**         | 5.92           | 5.51**         |                |                |                |                | 21.28          | 18.80**        |

Note: \*Anova p<0.05, \*\*Anova p<0.01

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to develop a better appreciation of the happiness levels of students in Year 4 and 6 and to determine the correlates between student happiness and associated factors identified within the literature. By using five different measures of happiness, including perceptions of the participants’ teachers and parents, a sense of these individuals’ happiness level was identified. In making comparisons between these measurements of happiness and data from a parent questionnaire (which focussed on demographic information), a children’s questionnaire and the PH2 self-concept scale, this study begins to identify children who are happy and what their lives outside the classroom may be like. This is the first time specific data on happiness have been obtained from Western Australian primary school students and therefore constitutes a provisional conception of what it is to be a happy child.

There was no significant difference in happiness (on the child’s own faces scale) between the Year 4 and 6 students within this study, although the Year 4 parents felt their children were happier than the Year 6 parents did. Within the sample girls were significantly happier than boys in terms of self-reported happiness. This is consistent with findings in other studies including the recent ‘Kids life and times survey’ (2009) completed in Northern Ireland at the Queen’s University. What this means in the context of classroom practice is speculative, but at a time when the nature of boys’ education is questioned (Hiatt, 2010) this finding may be of interest.

**Table 6:** Variance in ChildOwnFace and Subjective happiness scales predicted by the Piers-Harris 2 subscales.

| Piers-Harris Sub-scale | Variance in happiness predicted by scale |       | COF scale – significant items  | SHS – significant items  |
|------------------------|--|-------|--|--|
|                        | COFC                                     | SHS   |  |  |
| Phys App. & Attributes | 15.1%                                    | 18.1% | Item 39: My classmates in school think I have good ideas<br>Item 15: I am strong<br>Item 44: I am good looking<br>Item 46: I am popular with boys<br>Item 54: I am popular with girls. | Item 15: I am strong.<br>Item 39: My classmates in school think I have good ideas  |
| Freedom from Anxiety   | 25.5%                                    | 30.0% | Item 4: I am often sad<br>Item 6: I am shy<br>Item 32: I feel left out of things<br>Item 10: I get worried when we have tests at school.   | Item 4: I am often sad<br>Item 6: I am shy<br>Item 32: I feel left out of things<br>Item 10: I get worried when we have tests at school.   |
| Popularity             | 26.4%                                    | 27.7% | Item 6: I am shy<br>Item 32: I feel left out of things<br>Item 41: I have many friends<br>Item 47: People pick on me<br>Item 54: I am popular with girls.                              | Item 6: I am shy<br>Item 41: I have many friends<br>Item 1: My classmates make fun of me<br>Item 37: I am among the last chosen for games and sports.<br>Item 51: In games and sports I watch instead of play. |

COFS – Child’s own faces scale

SHS – Subjective Happiness scale

A comparison of the findings from this study and those of Holder and Coleman (2008) reveals interesting similarities and differences. Most notable is the difference between the self-rated happiness of students on the children’s faces scale. Students from British Columbia, Canada were 27% more likely to rate their happiness at the highest or second highest positions compared to the Australian students. It is difficult to say what this means, but for the time being it might be attributed to a slight cultural difference. Further consideration needs to be given to why only one in five Australian students placed their name on the highest point of the Likert-scale, and why teachers and parents rated the students happier than the students rated themselves.

Diener and Lucas (2004) claim that Australians desire greater levels of happiness for their children than people in countries who are less inclined to pursue individualistic goals. Given this, the findings that 88.5% of students interviewed placed themselves towards the positive end of the scale may be reassuring for many parents. The average self-reported happiness score of students in this study was 5.75 out of a possible 7.0 (or an aggregated 8.2 out of 10). On the other hand, Myers and Diener (1997), who aggregated 916 surveys from 45 countries, found the average adult response was 6.75 out of 10. The data from this study and from Holder and Coleman (2008) indicate that students in primary schools may be happier than adults but with such a small sample this is only a tentative proposition.

*Do we know it when we see it?*

Over 50% of students who rated themselves at the top end of the faces scale for happiness were likewise rated by either a parent or teacher (46% of these students were rated at only one point below). Myers (2000) argues that this is not surprising. Within the adult literature there is evidence that those who report as happy are also perceived to be happy to close others (Sandvik, Diener & Seidlitz, 1993). One can assume that ‘happy’ individuals tend to display the types of positive personality traits that others recognise (Diener, 2000). Lyubomirsky, King and Diener (2005) suggest that happy people of all ages appear to be more likeable and appealing. That parents and teachers identify happy individuals is not unexpected. As to whether this in turn results in a spiral of more positive experiences for these children (e.g., happy students engage in positive behaviours in the classroom, teachers enjoy working with these types of students (Gail & Strain, 2004) and in turn interact in a positive manner) is a factor worthy of more exploration.

Conversely, of the 37 students who rated themselves 4 or below (in the neutral or unhappy range) only 5% were rated at similar levels by parents or teachers. This initial analysis suggests that parents and teachers close to happy individuals are more aware of the children’s positive wellbeing, but less aware of students who self-report as unhappy.

*Demographic and lifestyle factors and happiness*

The current research corresponded with Holder and Coleman’s (2008) in that demographic factors appeared to have limited impact on student happiness or others’ perceptions of these students’ happiness. Aspects such as with whom the child lives, household income, and number of hours spent watching TV appeared to have minimal impact on happiness. Within the parent and child questionnaires, it was items that related to social aspects (i.e., number of friends), personality traits (i.e., enjoyment of singing and dancing), and life outcomes (am I lucky) that were more highly correlated with happiness.

The finding that household income was not a significant indicator of student happiness on any of the five measures is important. This is not to say there was no difference between the mean happiness of students in different brackets of household income (the highest being the 60-80K range). Significant differences were identified on two happiness measures when those in the highest and lowest bracket were compared. However, the inconsistent patterns indicated that the impact of household income was limited and, as with Holder and Coleman (2008), seem to account for minimal variance in self-reported happiness. At a time when household income impacts considerably on life choices for families (Dockery, 2005), these findings suggest that, if children’s happiness is a goal, large salaries do not guarantee this goal is achieved.

More consistent significant differences in self-reported happiness occurred when comparing those children who had few friends with those who were popular (by self-reported number of friends). Additionally for parents, it appeared that friendships outside school for their children (i.e., number of visits their child receives) were strong indicators of whether they perceive their child to be happy or not. These findings on face value appear understandable and support previous research with children (Holder & Coleman, 2008; Hubbard, 2001). Myers (2000) goes further to argue that individuals who have close social connections are not only happier but also cope better with stresses.

Students within this study were also asked general questions about factors associated with happiness in the adult literature, such as whether they enjoyed giving presentations in class, or singing and dancing, or whether they felt they were lucky. Within the adult literature positive affirmations to questions such as these suggest outgoing, confident people tend to be happier than more introverted individuals (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In this study the simple question, “Are you lucky”?, appeared to be the most positive indicator of happiness. On all scales, with the exception of the “teacher child faces” scale, this resulted in a highly significant difference in happiness of individuals who said they were always lucky and those who said they were never lucky. This result is telling and reconfirms the connection between optimism and positive mental health currently being pursued within Western Australian schools (Aussie Optimism, 2009) and espoused by leaders in the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

### *Self concept and happiness*

The findings from this research identified that personality variables account for children’s happiness in different ways. For example, physical attractiveness appeared to be a modest indicator of happiness. Though several items within the ‘physical appearance and attributes’ sub-scale were significantly correlated with measures of happiness, the variance was not great. Items within the sub-scale that tended to be focussed clearly on the individual’s sense of physical attractiveness such as ‘I am good looking’ or ‘I have a pleasant face’ were modest predictors of happiness. Holder and Coleman (2008) point out that within this sub-scale, items associated with leadership and ability to express ideas appeared to be more closely connected with happiness. The item “My classmates at school think I have good ideas” was the question that best predicted variance in the student’s self-reported happiness. Self-rated attractiveness is related to happiness but in this research questions related to feelings of self-worth were better indicators.

The findings additionally reveal that items from the ‘freedom from anxiety’ sub-scale are strong indicators of individual happiness. Items such as “I am often sad”, “I am shy”, “I feel left out of things” and “I get worried when we have tests” present a picture of a student many teachers would recognise. That temperament and disposition were identified as significant indicators of children’s happiness (on the COFS and SHS) and that the PH2 ‘freedom from anxiety’ sub-scale accounted for significant variance in happiness should give teachers food for thought.

Holder and Coleman (2008) asked parents if their child was very shy, a little shy, a little outgoing, or very outgoing. When the children rated in the ‘shy’ group were compared against the ‘not shy’ group, significant differences were found on all measures of happiness. Higher happiness scores were associated with lower estimates of neuroticism by the parents. Holder and Coleman’s (2008) findings, along with this research, suggest that freedom from anxiety, extraversion, and optimism are indicators of happy children.

Finally, the PH2 popularity sub-scale revealed what many assume: belonging and happiness are closely connected. Mother Theresa once said in response to the desperation of poverty ‘that loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty’. This study identifies that friendships and conversely social alienation are key indicators of happiness. Items from the PH2 popularity sub-scale such as ‘I have many friends’, ‘People pick on me’, ‘I feel left out of things’, ‘My classmates make fun of me’, ‘I am among the last to be chosen for games and sports’, ‘In games and sports, I watch instead of play’ were strong indicators of children’s self-reported happiness. It is not difficult to conjure up images of students who respond positively and negatively on these items. The PH2 popularity sub-scale results (such as the significant differences in happiness between those with and without friends) that were identified on the child and parent questionnaire within this study are aligned to the responses of children (Holder & Coleman, 2008) and adolescents (Gilman & Huebner, 2006) in earlier research.

### *Conclusion*

While the current research provides a glimpse of the happiness of primary age students in schools in Perth, Western Australia, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the participants were included on the basis of parental consent and this skews towards people who are inclined to assist others and be more involved in school life in general. The influence of these caregivers on the student participants is worthy of consideration (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Second, while there were students from a range of socio-economic groups within the study, as with Holder and Coleman (2008), the sample was essentially mono-cultural Anglo-Celtic Australians. The methods employed in this research (i.e., parents consenting and completing demographic detail) quite possibly excluded some parents, and a more inclusive approach may have yielded a more diverse sample. Finally, it is worth considering whether there is wide agreement about the meaning of ‘happiness’ even within the same age cohort.

On the positive side, by using several measures and replicating most of the methods employed by Holder and Coleman (2008), the researchers were able to explore the happiness and wellbeing of Australian students in primary schools. Future research could examine a wider sample and explore how teachers’ classroom practices and interventions affect the happiness of their students. For now, the data provides a tentative picture of our happier students: popular, included, and optimistic. This

provides classroom teachers with an understanding of what constitutes happiness and the beginnings of a model for interventions in primary classrooms.

In closing, Lyubomirsky’s (2007) assertion that 40% of our happiness is determined by **what we do** is food for thought for classroom practitioners. Do teachers have a responsibility to ensure that **what their students do at school** is conducive to their happiness and wellbeing? This invocation would seem to fit with “developing a sense of community” – a fundamental component of the Western Australian Curriculum Framework. In future research the authors hope to explore ways and means for teachers to create positive and caring classrooms that enhance individual student happiness.

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