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Original Article

School Experiences and Happiness Levels of School-Age Children: A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Background: Happiness is a measure of school-age children's well-being. Many factors have been identified as the source of school-age children's happiness, among which school experiences are particularly significant. This study aimed to investigate school-age children's happiness and school experiences in various contexts.

Methods: In total, 3282 Thai school-age children (first- and sixth-grade students) across the country were randomly selected in 2019. The exploratory research design was used for quantitative and qualitative data collection. The selected samples were administered self-reported questionnaires, interviewed, and observed in their school settings for five days a week. The collected quantitative data were analyzed with mean scores, standard deviations (SD), and the *t* test, while qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis.

Results: The mean score (±SD) of the first- and sixth-grade students were 2.290 (±0.32) and 2.220 (±0.30), respectively, which was interpreted as a moderate level of happiness. Factors such as grade levels, school types, food consumption, class hours, learning activities, and play activities had a statistically significant impact on school-age children's happiness ($P \leq 0.05$). A qualitative examination of their routines and schedules on weekdays demonstrated that these children lost out on personal time and could not make decisions to spend time on the activities of their own interest and preference.

Conclusion: School-age children are burdened with required schoolwork and barely have the time for any recreation and rest. Thus, children's happiness is reduced with lower recess time.

Keywords: Happiness, Primary Schools, Children, Play, School Burnout

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Introduction

Happiness is one of the indicators of an individual's well-being and mental health (1-3). The philosophical beliefs of early childhood education affirm that education for young children should be holistic in order to ensure that every aspect of child development is addressed adequately (4). This concept also includes children's happiness. Children's development theories assert that the first eight years of a child's life are crucial for their social and emotional development (5). Children have the right to happiness, thus their happiness should be viewed as a preeminent life goal and the aim of education (6,7). Happy children would not only be more physically healthy, experience greater personal growth, and build more interpersonal relationships than unhappy ones, but also they are more likely to engage in active learning and creativity, excel professionally, and live longer (7-10). With correlation analyses in previous research (6), children's happiness was found to be significantly associated with their parents' happiness ($r=0.566$, $P<0.001$). Although children's happiness has become a major concern, it has been taken for granted by caregivers, teachers, families, and policymakers (11,12). Thus, further research is necessary to understand children's happiness.

Happiness is defined as a person's active experience of positive emotions (13,14). A happy person lives a good and fulfilling life (10). Children's happiness, in particular, can be viewed from the perspective of the fulfillment of desires and the presence of a self-expressed balance between pleasure, pain, and personal development. Children's happiness could be derived from many sources.

According to evidence (15), although an inferential analysis of happiness exposes the geographical and socio-economic aspects significantly related to happiness ($P=0.00$), it is imperative that more studies evaluate children's happiness and focus on the other sources of their happiness.

A previous study (11) revealed significant correlations between children's happiness and worry (0.18), as well as happiness and anger (0.29). Another study represented a

statistical correlation between children's happiness and their prosocial behavior ($P=0.04$), especially their giving or sharing behaviors (8). Children's happiness at school is shaped not only by their personal traits (e.g., temperament, self-esteem, self-control, and self-improvement) but also by their adaptation to the school environment and school experiences (i.e., academic achievement, satisfaction from their classmates, learning, and relationships with teachers). Some studies have confirmed significant positive correlations ($P<0.05$) between children's happiness and their school experiences (9,16-20). Based on statistical tests, a growing body of literature has identified several other sources of children's happiness ($P\leq0.05$), including religiosity (19,21,22), parenting styles (6,23), social interactions and relationships with teachers and peers (8,18-20,24-29), and activities and time spent with the family (17,28,30). Other related sources were arts, entertainment, and recreation activities (31,32), family socioeconomic status (24), reading activity (23), consumption of material goods or food (9,33,34), and Internet use (35). These prior studies have shown that many sources of children's happiness lie in school, where children spend a significant part of their day. However, further study is required to explore these sources at school.

School-going children, between the ages of 6 and 12 years, are known as primary school students in many countries. This group of children is usually at school during the day. Studies have investigated this group of children's happiness levels at school, but the findings are contradictory. Children's happiness has been found to be negatively correlated with age ($P=0.002$), and younger children have reported higher levels of happiness than older ones (12). Another study (9) demonstrated that older children seemingly report attaining experiences with happiness more than young children ($P<0.001$). Accordingly, further research seems necessary to clarify this issue.

Although it can be inferred from previous studies that the sources of school-age children's happiness are related to their school experiences in general, no specific study has so far explored their routines and activities at school or compared their happiness levels. Therefore, this study sought to explore school-age children's happiness levels and their school experiences, including their daily routines, classroom activities, and time for playing (9,10,18). To comprehend children's school experiences and happiness, children are considered to differently obtain experiences from various contexts, including the grade level, school location, and school types. By addressing these research aims, this study can help stakeholders understand how these sources of happiness affect school-age children and how to raise their happiness levels at school. Such stakeholders, particularly teachers, could provide more appropriate school experiences to ensure that children are happy at school.

Materials and Methods

For the exploratory research design, the researcher used quantitative and qualitative data to analyze the happiness levels of school-age children and their school experiences. They consist of variables such as daily routines (i.e., well-being and classroom activities) and playtime.

Sample Selection and Respondents

To obtain data that explain the phenomenon and sources of happiness in different school contexts, the researcher divided the research population of school-age children into grade level (first- and sixth-grade students), school location (urban and suburban areas), and school type (public and private schools) groups. To select samples and respondents, who are primary school students in Thailand, the researcher employed the stratified sampling method and divided the country into seven regions (Table 1). Two provinces were selected from each region using a random sampling method, and each of these was further grouped into urban and suburban areas. Two types of schools (a public and a private school) were selected from each area through a random sampling method. Each of the students from the chosen first- and sixth-grade classrooms of the schools was eventually included in the sample. With this selection criterion, 56 schools were included in this research.

As the research targeted children aged under the age of 18 years, the researcher needed to obtain ethical approval and consent from their parents. With respect to students' participation in the study, the parents of all subjects were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, the children could discontinue at any time during the study, and the research results would be anonymous. The details of questionnaires, interview questions, and observational protocol were also explained to the parents. After receiving approval from their parents, first- and sixth-grade students completed the questionnaires over 1 hour in the presence of the teacher and the researcher. Overall, 3282 students were included in the research, comprising 1580 and 1,702 first- and sixth-grade students, respectively. The researcher collected qualitative data by interviewing the students of 56 schools and observing the

Table 1. The Idea Behind Sample Selection

Strata 1	Region															
	Province 1								Province 2							
Strata 2	Urban				Suburban				Urban				Suburban			
Strata 3	Public School		Private School		Public School		Private School		Public School		Private School		Public School		Private School	
Strata 4	G.1	G. 6	G.1	G. 6	G.1	G. 6	G.1	G. 6	G.1	G. 6	G.1	G. 6	G.1	G. 6	G.1	G. 6

daily routines of first- and sixth-grade students.

Research Tools and Data Collection Methods

The data were collected during 2019. For collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, various data collection methods and research tools were adopted. For collecting qualitative data, the researcher conducted interviews with students from each designated grade and observed their daily routines for one week. The observation protocol focused on the children's daily routines and playtime activities during the day. The interview questions emphasized time schedules for weekday daily routines (e.g., what time do you wake up and go to bed, what activities do you complete at school, and how long you spend on homework in the day?) and playtime (e.g., when do you have time to play at school and home on weekdays, who plays with you at school and home, and what do you do during your playtime at school and home?).

For quantitative data collection, the researcher employed the happiness questionnaire for school-age children and a survey on the daily routines of the school-age children. The happiness questionnaire for school-age children, adapted from the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (36) and Happiness Indicators (37), consists of two parts. Part 1 contains four questions to assess the students' levels of happiness based on their personality traits, each of which features three scales, including facial scales to help students answer the questions more easily. Examples of such statements are *"In general, I think I am…"* (Unhappy at all, not sure, or very happy), *"Many people are unhappy, although I did not experience anything that hurts my feelings"*, and *"I think I am one of them"* (not at all, not sure, or absolutely yes). Part 2 contains 14 questions to evaluate the experience of positive and negative emotions. It includes both positive emotions such as being interested in the surrounding environment, excitement, pride, fun, comfort, happiness, and hopefulness, as well as negative emotions such as sadness, anger, fear, shame, guilt, isolation, and discomfort. Participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire for two periods, namely, the present and over the past week. The survey on the daily routines of the school-age children consists of 39 questions concerning daily routines, classroom activities, and the play activities of students on weekdays at school.

Using the above research tools, it was found that first- and sixth-grade students individually answered the questions and provided information, corroborating the claims of previous literature that elementary school students are capable of assessing their own feelings (12,19). Therefore, they were capable of completing the questionnaire using self-reporting tools. To validate both instruments, the researcher employed content validity index analysis, reliability analysis, and internal consistency analysis based on Cronbach's alpha coefficient by conducting a pilot test with 474 first- and sixth-grade students in a context different from the one used in this study. The value of the reliability analysis of the happiness questionnaire for school-age children was .739, indicating a high level of reliability. Accordingly, the confirmatory factor analysis was applied to investigate the construct validity of the happiness questionnaire. The analyzed value was greater than 0.80, and thus the items were considered to be valid happiness measures.

To analyze the data, this study employed mean analysis, the standard deviation of happiness levels, and factors affecting the happiness of Thai school-age children by calculating the average of the total scores of the two parts of the questionnaire. Subsequently, the researcher considered the results based on the criteria employed to interpret the average of the factor variables that affect the happiness of Thai school-age children. Scores in the range of 1.00-1.67, 1.68-2.34, and 2.35-3.00 indicate low, moderate, and high, respectively. For the comparative analysis of students' average happiness levels based on the source of happiness (i.e., grade level, school location, school type, daily routines, and play activities of the students at school), the researcher used an independent sample *t* test to compare the average value between the groups.

Results

School-age children's daily routines in Thailand can be classified into daily routines of children in general and daily routines of academic-oriented children. The latter group can be further categorized into three subgroups (Table 2). The third subgroup was more involved with academic daily routines than the other two groups, had the least playtime, and had less free time. It is evident that there are several daily routines to be performed by school-age children during the school day. Therefore, children's personal time at school is spent on these activities. For example, on average, the number of lessons in Thai primary schools ranges between five and eight classes (excluding after-school classes), each lasting approximately 50-60 minutes. Hence, children are not allowed enough personal or free time each day, and the actual level of personal or free time is based on the nature of the group. Meanwhile, children who are not academically inclined have personal time and free time. These independent or free periods provide children with free time that they can choose how to spend. Considering the daily routines of academically oriented children, it was found that the majority of their activities, whether regular or extra classes, were academic in nature, particularly in the third subgroup. It was discovered that certain children in this subgroup spent extra time studying until 6:00 PM and had little time to attend to their own needs. It was clear that this group barely had time for play. It can be concluded that the more academic activities these children are assigned each day, the less time they have for playing and indulging in other well-being activities (e.g., sleeping, enjoying recess, exercising, and eating without haste).

Based on data in Table 3, when comparing the mean score of happiness levels and gauging the well-being of

Table 2. Comparison of Daily Routines of Thai School-age Children

Schedule	Daily Routines of Children in General	Daily Routines of Academic-Oriented Children		
		Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
05:00 – 06:00 06:00 –07:00	Waking up, taking a shower getting dressed, attending to personal matters, and having breakfast	Waking up, taking a shower, getting dressed, attending to personal matters, and having breakfast		
07:00 – 08:00	Arriving at school and enjoying the free time	Arriving at school and engaging in required school-related activities		
08:00 – 08:30	Paying respect to the flag, doing morning activities, and having a homeroom session	Paying respect to the flag, doing morning activities, and having a homeroom session		
08:30 – 11:30	Having 3-4 morning classes each lasting 50-60 minutes with breaks of 10-15 minutes in between	Having 3-4 morning classes each lasting 50-60 minutes with breaks of 10-15 minutes in between		
11:30 – 12:30	Having lunch break, having free time, brushing teeth, and doing meditation	Having lunch break, having free time, brushing teeth, and doing meditation		
12:30 – 15:30	Having 2-4 afternoon classes each lasting 50-60 minutes with breaks of 10-15 minutes in between	Having 3-4 afternoon classes each lasting 50-60 minutes with breaks of 10-15 minutes in between		
15:30 – 16:00	Returning home, having dinner, taking a shower, and having homework/free time	Having after-school classes at the school	Having after-school classes at and outside school	Having after-school classes at and outside school
16:00 – 17:00		Returning home, having dinner, taking a shower, and doing homework/ having free time	Returning home, having dinner, taking a shower, and doing homework/ having free time	Returning home, having dinner, taking a shower. doing homework/having free time
17:00 – 18:00				
18:00 – 19:00				
19:00 – 20:00				
20:00 – 21:00	Going to bed	Going to bed		
21:00 – 22:00			Going to bed	
22:00 – 05:00				Going to bed

Table 3. Comparison Between Happiness Levels and Daily Routines Using Independent Sample *t*-tests

Variables	N	M	SD	t	*P* Value
Daily routines					
Breakfast					
Sufficient breakfast	2805	2.260	0.310	5.323	0.000*
Not enough breakfast	477	2.140	0.330		
Having complete meals per day					
Three meals per day	2748	2.268	0.305	-6.402	0.000*
Less than three meals per day	534	2.170	0.326		
Class hours per day					
≥6 hours	2124	2.235	0.310	2.330	0.020*
<6 hours	1158	2.261	0.261		
Lecture class					
Yes	1005	2.225	0.301	-5.791	0.000*
No	2277	2.289	0.320		
Shared reading					
Yes	2033	2.282	0.326	3.657	0.000*
No	1249	2.238	0.303		
Practice through exercises or tests					
Yes	347	2.240	0.303	-2.916	0.004*
No	2935	2.273	0.323		
Project-based learning					
Yes	938	2.258	0.305	-2.987	0.003*
No	2344	2.207	0.311		
After-school classes					
No after-school classes	1454	2.262	0.302	1.654	0.098
After-school classes	1828	2.244	0.318		
Time spent on homework in the evening					
≥2 hours	3091	2.166	0.337	3.654	0.000*
<2 hours	191	2.258	0.308		

Note. N: Number; M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation. *$P \leq 0.05$

school-age children engaged in different daily routines and activities during weekdays, children who stated that they ate breakfast and claimed to have three meals a day had significantly higher happiness levels ($P = 0.000$) than those who did not. Regarding classroom learning activities, it was found that the number of class hours each day affected the happiness level of school-age children. Children who studied more than or equal to six classes per day had a statistically significantly lower level of happiness ($P = 0.020$) than those who studied less than six classes per day. Furthermore, the results revealed that classroom learning activities that promoted the children's hands-on learning also had an impact on children's happiness. Children who learned through shared reading activities with teachers and classmates ($P = 0.000$) and project-based learning ($P = 0.003$) had a statistically significantly higher level of happiness compared to those who stated otherwise. In contrast, those who learned mainly through teacher-led activities, including lectures in class sessions ($P = 0.000$) or were continuously assigned worksheets or tests ($P = 0.004$), had a statistically significant lower level of happiness than the children who did not.

After-school classes, which are optional for students, normally aim to provide intensive reviews of school course materials and extensive testing. The happiness levels of children who attended and did not attend after-school classes were not statistically significantly different ($P = .098$); however, when considering the time children spent on homework in the evenings, children who reported spending more than or equal to 2 hours daily on their homework in the evenings had a statistically significant lower level of happiness than those who spent less than 2 hours on homework ($P = 0.000$). Thus, several variables reflecting children's daily routines related

to well-being, and fewer academic-oriented activities, positively affected school-age children's happiness levels. Play-related factors affected school-age children's happiness based on comparisons between the mean scores of each variable (Table 4). School-age children who indicated that they had more than 30 minutes of playtime each evening had a statistically significant higher level of happiness ($P=0.033$) than children who mentioned that they did not play or played for less than 30 minutes each evening.

As presented in Table 5, the happiness level of first-grade students was significantly higher ($P=0.000$) than that of sixth-grade ones, implying that as children move into higher grades, their happiness begins to represent a decline. When comparing happiness levels with school locations, it was revealed that the happiness level of school-age children living in urban areas was not significantly different ($P=0.335$) from those living in suburban areas. Based on the comparison of the happiness levels of school-age children in public and private schools, children in public schools had significantly higher levels of happiness ($P=0.017$) than those in private schools.

Table 4. Comparison Between Happiness Levels and Playing Activities Using Independent Sample *t* tests

Variables	N	M	SD	t	*P* Value
Playing activities					
Playtime before morning classes					
Either no or less than 30 minutes of play	2456	2.254	0.310	0.463	0.644
More than 30 minutes of play	826	2.248	0.314		
Playtime after morning class during lunch break					
Either no or less than 30 minutes of play	1485	2.252	0.317	-0.003	0.997
More than 30 minutes of play	1797	2.252	0.305		
Playtime after school					
Either no or less than 30 minutes of play	1687	2.241	0.312	-2.134	0.033*
More than 30 minutes of play	1595	2.264	0.309		

Note. N: Number; M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation.
*$P\leq0.05$

Table 5. Comparison of Children's Happiness Levels Between Grade Levels, School Locations, and School Types Using an Independent Sample *t* test

Variables	N	M	SD	*t*	*P* value
Grade levels					
First grade	1580	2.290	0.320	6.4	0.000*
Sixth grade	1702	2.220	0.300		
School locations					
Urban	1660	2.270	0.320	0.965	0.335
Suburban	1622	2.250	0.300		
School types					
Public	1448	2.267	0.323	2.391	0.017*
Private	1834	2.241	0.300		

Note. N: Number; M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation.
*$P\leq0.05$

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated that the analyzed factors (grade level, school type, daily routines, learning activities, and playing) significantly affected school-age children's happiness. The findings provide a key body of knowledge for practitioners who engage with school-age children, especially primary school teachers.

In terms of children's daily routines, the qualitative results showed that several groups of primary school children identified their daily routines as academic-oriented activities. As a result, these children had less time for playing and doing other well-being activities. Classroom schedules for this age group should not exceed 6 classes per day to ensure a balance between promoting academic knowledge and other necessary skills. In addition, children should not be forced to attend intensive academic classes after school or made to spend an excessive amount of time doing homework each day. The findings reflect that these school-age children were deprived of personal time. This age range is indeed important and considered quality time, as children can make decisions and choose to spend time on activities based on their interests and preferences. However, the findings revealed that primary school children spent large parts of their days on activities determined by adults. Primary school children are required to learn basic skills. Literacy and numeracy, for instance, are highly recommended skills for such children. The key responsibilities of school-going children are to follow and attend classes structured by the school. Correspondingly, another study has confirmed that too much engagement in academic-oriented activities significantly predicts children's burnout (38). Thus, teachers, who spend much time with children at school and play an important direct role in the happiness of children, need to adequately reconsider class schedules, daily school routines, and the quantity of homework assigned to ensure that children have more free time to play every day. This practice would increase the likelihood of school-age children being happier at school, which is aligned with a holistic approach to education (4).

Schools typically schedule 5-6 classes per day for children. In addition to the in-class study, children should spend time outside of class independently, enjoying activities they are interested in or prefer doing with their peers. However, children tend to spend most of their time engaging in academic activities at school. After school, some children need to take extra classes or prepare for tests. It was observed that children did not independently choose which activities to engage in during their free time at school. These activities were decided by adults based on their understanding of what would be beneficial for the children. However, adults do not always consider the children's needs and their inclination toward those activities. Therefore, reducing academic activities to allow children to have personal time and engage in preferred activities with their friends would be a way to further increase these children's desire

to attend school. Activities involving physical movements, especially playing, naturally promote maximum learning development among children, but these activities seem to be missing from daily routine, despite being correlated with school-age children's happiness (5). Those engaging with school-age children need to focus on providing them with opportunities to play freely and in a manner that reflects their natural needs, as playing directly affects children's happiness.

The findings indicated that classroom learning activities that could engage students to participate in hands-on learning had an impact on children's happiness. Our research findings suggest that different teaching practices and styles could contribute more to school-age children's happiness, including varied teaching styles, and fewer lectures and exercise- or test-based activities. This would include allowing children to participate in interactive activities (e.g., shared reading and project-based learning). Positive teacher-child interactions always make children happier (19). A previous study found that engaging students to learn through direct experience, including activity of outdoor exploration time, could boost students' enjoyment and happiness (39).

When compared between the mean scores of the happiness level and grade levels, the results represented that first-grade students reported a significantly higher happiness level than sixth-grade students. This finding reveals the phenomenon whereby a child who studies at a higher grade level tends to have lower happiness levels. This is in line with the findings of another study, implying that children's happiness was negatively correlated with age, and younger children reported higher levels of valuing happiness than older ones (12). To deal with this phenomenon, it is highly recommended that teachers and practitioners include activities engaging students' learning through hands-on experiences.

Although the findings of this study suggest practices for teachers and practitioners to ensure that children are happy at school, parents and families are key stakeholders in the happiness of school-going children. The family of school-age children should also be encouraged to integrate the findings into home life. Children require time to be with their family members and want to feel a sense of belonging (17,27). The family should create a positive environment and understand the aptitudes, interests, and learning potential of children. Realizing the learning potential of children leads to their lower pressure or expectations, especially in the context of an education system that emphasizes excessive competition and educational tests. If the family can create such an atmosphere, it would reduce the high pressure on school-age children and ensure that they are not forced to participate in needless academic activities. This would allow them time to play and engage in various activities that affect their well-being.

This study has some limitations. Self-reported questionnaires, as the research tools of the study, were completed by the first- and sixth-grade students. The level of happiness was reported only from the perspective of the respondents or students. The other assessment methods of children's happiness levels, including questionnaires completed by their teachers, classmates, and parents, could triangulate the results for greater reliability. This study also focused on the happiness of school-age children over a specific time period. Although many studies have confirmed the factors and sources of happiness for this group of school-age children, a longitudinal study on the happiness levels of these children is needed to analyze the influence of these factors and determine changes as children grow older. This would deepen an understanding of school-age children's happiness.

Conclusion

This study presented different happiness levels of school-age children in various contexts. Factors related to school experiences were found to be a source of happiness among this group of children. School-age children should be unburdened with obligations or responsibilities. Childhood should be a period of happiness and lay the basis for good memories. The findings of this study assert the importance of making school-age children happy at school. The phenomenon revealed by this study, namely, children's happiness declines as they move to higher grades, should be minimized at school. As an implication of this study, stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, school administrators, and teachers) should ensure that all primary school children at any grade level have satisfactory school experiences. During school hours, the children should not be over-burdened with schoolwork and should have time for recreation, play, and rest. Children's happy moments and happiness levels would increase with more recess time. Therefore, it is imperative that all stakeholders involved with children should be aware of the importance of their happiness and strive to make them happy in an age-appropriate way. This study reinforces the core of school-age children's development, namely, to encourage and help children to learn and grow happily and healthily, as these years are the foundation years in life.

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Conflict of Interests

The author has no conflict of interests to declare.

Ethical Permissions

The Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects: The Second Allied Academic Group in Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts at Chulalongkorn University, based on the Declaration of Helsinki, the Belmont Report, CIOMS guidelines, and the principle of the international conference on harmonization; good clinical practice (ICH-GCP) has approved the execution of the aforementioned research project (COA No. 061/2562).

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