

HAPPINESS IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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In the newspaper we read that Dutch children are very happy. It was a UNICEF survey of pupils in secondary school. But does this also apply to younger children who are still at primary school? It is useful to know that, not only as a check of the many worrying stories about children doing the rounds, but also because happiness is important for the school. Happiness is not just a goal of education, but probably also a factor in school effectiveness. Reason enough to investigate. I did that in a survey of 718 students in groups 6 to 8 (ages 10 -12) of 12 primary schools in Rotterdam.

Can it be measured?

My first question was whether happiness in children from 9 to 12 years old could be measured. In the UNICEF study this is measured with a question about their satisfaction with life in general. Probably not all younger children have a clear opinion about this. You can ask children 9 to 12 years old how comfortable they feel. Therefore, I asked them the following questions:

English version

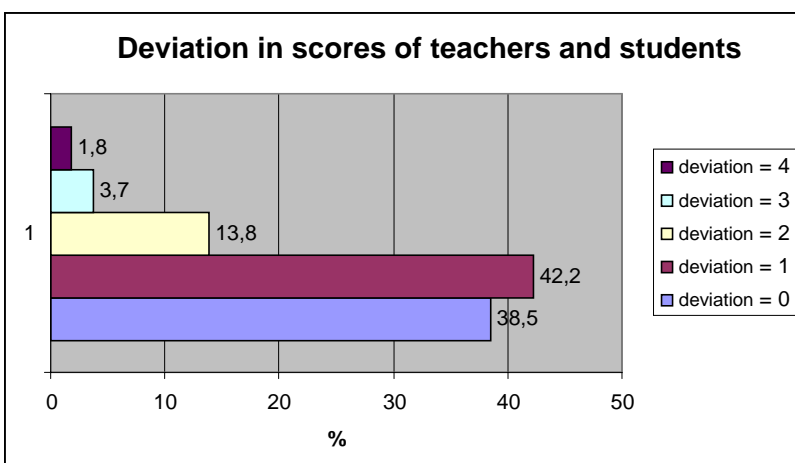
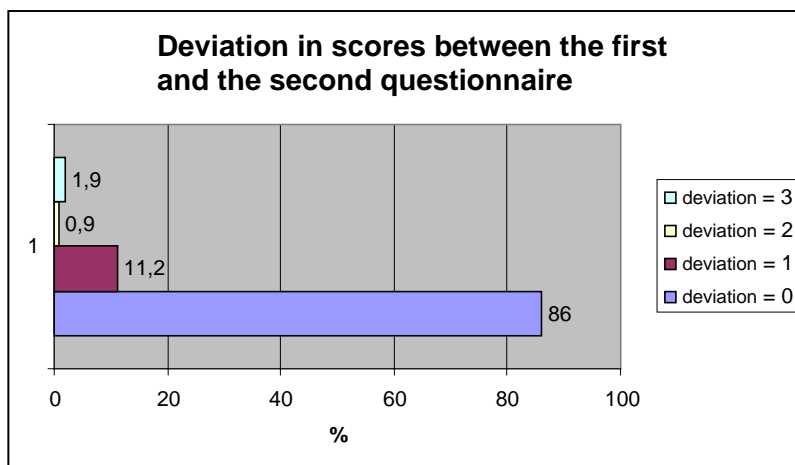
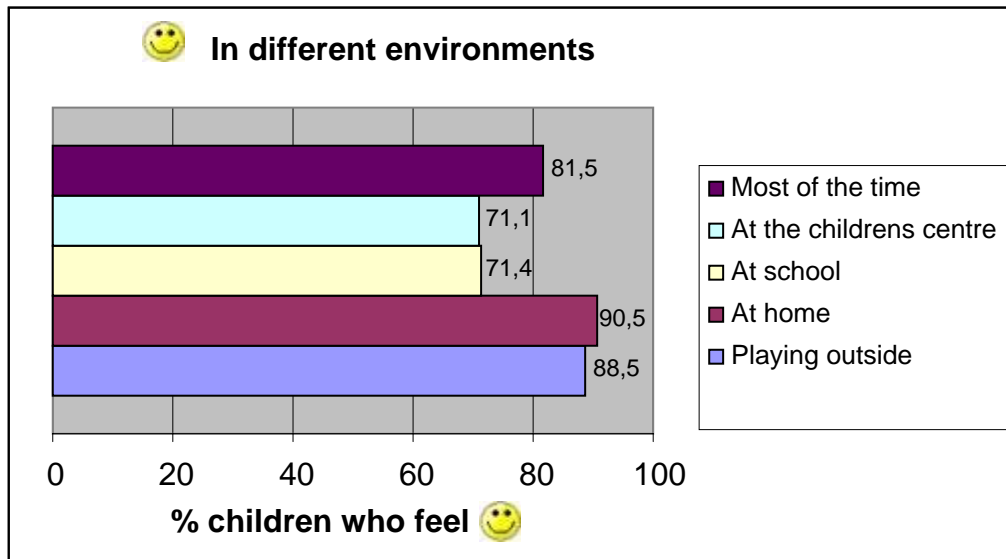
HOW DO YOU FEEL?	
How do you feel RIGHT NOW?	    
How do you feel MOST OF THE TIME?	    
How do you feel most of the time AT SCHOOL?	    
How do you feel most of the time AT HOME?	    
How do you feel most of the time PLAYING OUTSIDE?	    
How do you feel most of the time at the 'CHILDREN'S CENTRE'?	    
I am a boy <input type="checkbox"/> girl <input type="checkbox"/>	
I am _____ years old	

Did the children understand the questions? Apparently so, because they had no trouble answering the questions and their replies were consistent they answered easily. Their responses also appeared fairly seamless. Their answer to the question "How do you feel in general?" correlated with their answers to the questions about how they felt in specific situations. After one week the same questionnaire was again submitted to a class. The responses were about the same. Further analysis revealed that the responses of the children

matched with an estimate of the teacher. Happiness is therefore best measured in the 9 – 12 age group.

How happy are they?

The responses are summarized in the diagram below. It appears that most children tend to feel comfortable. Less than three percent of the children circled the very sad/ the saddest smiley. That is good news.



Happier in primary school than in secondary school?

I also wanted to know how older children would respond to these questions. Could satisfaction which was also found in the UNESCO study be associated with feeling good? Through an acquaintance I could also submit this questionnaire to 146 children in secondary education. In this age group, children seem a little less happy and the dispersion also increased.

Where do children feel most comfortable?

School is a chore and happiness only begins when the bell rings? That is too bad, but children still feel the best at home and when they play outside. Just as school hours the children's centre scores a little less. This is something you cannot ignore as a professional.

In secondary schools the school hours are not the most pleasant, but the mood rises during breaks and free hours. At that age, contact with peers becomes more important.

Feeling in primary school	most – very comfortable	Feeling secondary school	most – very comfortable
School	71.4%	school	71.3%
Home	90.5%	home	85.6%
Playing outside	88.5%	break	91.1%
Bso	71.1%	between hours	90.4%

At all school levels as happy?

Schools differ and I want to know at what school children feel happy. There appears to be quite some variation, at least among the 12 schools in my research. I first checked if children feel happier in small schools. That was not the case, the vote was just better at the bigger schools. I also looked at whether children are happier at 'white' schools and saw rather the opposite. I then looked at whether children are happier in 'innovative schools' like Dalton, Jenaplan and Montessori. This was indeed the case. This may be related to the particular nature of those schools, because schools with a special approach to teaching have happy children. Surprisingly the analysis shows that students feel more comfortable at a school with a high failure rate than at a school where pupils are more inclined to study. These are exciting results; however there is not much value to be attached. Only twelve schools participated in the survey, not a real sample. This is something to further investigate further.

In short, the happiness of children in school can be properly measured. Much is to be learned from such research.

This paper is a summary of my master thesis *Geluk(kig) op school?*, which is available on request by e-mail.