



# RSI Research Study on Happiness at Eton College



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# Introduction

Eton College is deeply committed to supporting pupils' happiness. While most schools regularly track pupils' academic outcomes, it is less common for a school to collect data on pupils' happiness. The Tony Little Centre for Innovation and Research in Learning recognized that collecting data on pupils' happiness could yield important insights that could be used to inform Eton's well-being initiatives. As such, they bravely opened up Eton to an independent study on pupils' happiness. Research Schools International (RSI) carried out a mixed methods study to explore patterns in happiness at Eton as well as pupils' perspectives on what contributes to their happiness at school.

The study's results reveal that there is a positive trend in pupils' happiness<sup>i</sup> across the year levels. This positive trend in happiness is a remarkable finding as previous research suggests that pupils typically exhibit a decline in well-being throughout their adolescence.<sup>1</sup> Given this intriguing result, we conducted a second phase of research to explore what might contribute to pupils' happiness at Eton. This phase of research revealed four key factors that pupils identify as contributing to their happiness at Eton: social support, autonomy, competence, and gratitude.

These findings are consistent with previous academic research on happiness, which also identifies social support, autonomy, competence, and gratitude as underlying factors that support happiness.<sup>2</sup> A vast body of research has shown that, overwhelmingly, social connections are the key to happiness.<sup>3</sup> Previous studies have shown again and again that social relationships – and specifically, the quality of those relationships – is the best predictor of happiness. As happiness researcher Daniel Gilbert (2017) put it, “If I wanted to predict your happiness, and I could know only one thing about you, I wouldn't want to know your gender, religion, health, or income. I'd want to know about your social network – about your friends and family and the strength of the bonds with them.”<sup>4</sup> Deep connections with others enrich our lives and form a foundation for happiness across the lifespan.

Previous research has shown that autonomy and competence are important predictors of happiness as well.<sup>5</sup> Autonomy involves feeling agency over various aspects of one's life. Research suggests that having ownership over one's decisions leads to feeling a deeper sense of meaning and fulfillment.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, feeling competent has also been found to be a predictor of well-being. Individuals who have greater confidence in their abilities tend to have a greater sense of meaning in their lives as well.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> We used a previously validated scale to measure happiness that evaluates subjective assessments of whether or not a participant considers themselves to be happy or unhappy. See the Methods section for further details.

Finally, a vast body of research has shown a strong link between gratitude and happiness. Gratitude involves feeling a sense of appreciation in response to beneficial experiences. Individuals who cultivate a habit of gratitude are more likely to feel happy and fulfilled throughout life.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, this link between gratitude and happiness is found across many different cultures.<sup>9</sup>

## RSI Study Overview

In this study, we examined patterns in happiness, gratitude, and academic achievement among Eton pupils. In addition, we explored pupils' perspectives on the factors that underlie their happiness at the school. First, we delivered a survey comprised of scales measuring happiness and gratitude as well as additional multiple-choice questions to the full student body.<sup>10</sup> In addition, we collected trials results from the full student body. We analyzed these data to explore developmental trends as well as relationships among happiness, gratitude, and academic achievement. We then administered a second survey comprised of open-ended questions to a random selection of 30 boys from each year group to further explore interesting trends and results uncovered in our first round of analyses. We analyzed these data using qualitative methods, which allowed us to identify the most salient themes among Eton pupils' responses and integrate those themes with academic literature. For more details about our methodology, please see the methods box below.

## Methods

### ***Participants***

#### *Survey I*

Researchers received survey data from a total of 1041 pupils, spanning all five year groups at Eton. Of this group, 1005 pupils were part of the final analysis due to missing data for 36 participants. Pupils in our sample ranged in age from 13 – 18 years old and the average age of the participants was 15.2 years. All participants were male.

#### *Survey II*

A random selection of 30 pupils from each of the five year groups was asked to complete the second survey. To generate the random selection, Eton first provided researchers with a complete list of the student body (in order to maintain anonymity of pupils among the researchers, pupils were not identified by name on the list, but by their trials ID). Researchers then randomly selected 30 pupils from each of the five year groups using a random selection generator, and shared this random selection with Eton school leaders who then facilitated data collection with these specific pupils. Our final sample for this survey consisted of 109 pupils spread fairly evenly across the five year groups.

## ***Instruments***

### ***Survey I***

RSI researchers developed a survey that included previously validated scales for happiness and gratitude, as well as additional multiple-choice questions related to these topics. Each scale consisted of a number of multiple-choice items used to measure the construct. The Subjective Happiness Scale<sup>11</sup> is a four-item measure used to evaluate levels of global subjective happiness. This scale provides an indication of whether one is subjectively a happy person or an unhappy person. The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test<sup>12</sup> (GRAT)-short form is a sixteen-item instrument used to measure gratitude. This scale targets gratitude and addresses additional constructs of appreciation and resentment. Researchers developed additional multiple-choice and short answer questions to collect further data on pupils' demographics, including their trials ID.

### ***Academic Achievement Measures***

Academic achievement was measured using pupils' trials results from Michaelmas 2016.

### ***Survey II***

The second survey consisted of open-ended response questions related to happiness, gratitude, and pupils' experiences at Eton. The questions, written by the research team and informed by previous research on these topics, were designed to gather a deeper understanding of the relationships that were uncovered from analyzing the data from the first survey.

## ***Data Collection***

### ***Survey I***

The first survey was administered in Autumn 2016. Eton school leaders scheduled all pupils to take part in the study at the same time. Pupils completed the online survey individually and in one sitting, which took about 20 minutes. All surveys were administered using the Qualtrics online survey platform. RSI researchers retrieved the survey data directly from Qualtrics.

### ***Academic Achievement Measures***

In January 2017, Eton school leaders coordinated with RSI researchers on delivery of pupils' trials results using a secure method for online transfer. Trials results were shared with RSI researchers in a single encrypted file that was password protected. The file contained trials results from Michaelmas 2016. To ensure anonymity of pupils among the researchers, pupils were not identified by name in the file, but rather by their trials ID.

### ***Survey II***

The second survey was administered in Spring 2017. Eton school leaders facilitated data collection with the boys. Each participant received an email containing a link to the online survey. Pupils were instructed to take the survey independently in one continuous sitting. Pupils spent about 15-

20 minutes responding to the survey. RSI researchers retrieved the survey data directly from Qualtrics.

### ***Data Analysis***

#### ***Survey I and Academic Achievement Measures***

Data from the first survey as well as the trials results were analyzed using quantitative methods. Initially, scores were calculated for each pupil for happiness, gratitude, and academic achievement. Happiness scores were computed as an average of the responses to four items that make up the Subjective Happiness Scale<sup>13</sup>. The response structure of each item on this scale has a Likert range of 1-7, with the lowest possible happiness score being 4 and a highest possible score of 28 (See Table 1). Gratitude scores were computed as a sum of the scores on the 16-item GRAT<sup>14</sup> scale, each of which had a Likert range of 1-9, with the lowest possible gratitude score being 43 and a highest possible score of 144 (See Table 1). Academic achievement was measured using the Michaelmas 2016 trials results. Trials results for each pupil from M2016 were averaged, providing a single score of academic achievement for each pupil. These initial analyses yielded 4 variables for each pupil: a happiness score, a gratitude score, an academic achievement score, and year level.

A bivariate correlation analysis using Pearson correlations was conducted to establish relationships between happiness and year level, gratitude and year level, happiness and gratitude, and academic achievement and year level. Additionally, multiple regression analyses were conducted to explore whether happiness and related constructs had predictive power with relation to academic achievement. All statistical analyses were done employing version 20 of the SPSS statistical software package.

#### ***Survey II***

Data from the second survey were analyzed using qualitative methods adapted from Grounded Theory Analysis. We coded the data both emically and etically. Emic coding involves a “bottom-up” coding in which we allow themes to emerge organically from the participants’ responses. Etic coding involves a “top-down” approach in which we use concepts from the literature to guide our coding. With this process, we search for recurring language and themes that appear in the pupils’ written responses.<sup>15</sup> The qualitative coding was carried-out independently by two researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability.

## **Results and Discussion**

Our results suggest that there is a positive trend in happiness across the year levels. Additionally, our research reveals that pupils believe that the following four factors are central to their happiness at Eton: a system of robust social support, autonomy for pursuing individual interests, competence through achievements in diverse domains, and gratitude for the vast opportunities that the school

offers. A discussion of the trend in happiness and the four factors that pupils' identify as supporting their happiness is presented below.

## Trend in Happiness

Across the five year levels at Eton, there is a positive trend in happiness. Our results show a statistically significant positive relationship between pupils' year level and their happiness score ( $r = 0.163, p < .01$ ) (See Figure 1). That is, pupils in higher year levels tend to score higher in happiness. Additionally, the happiness scores collected for this study suggest that Eton pupils are overall rather happy. While we observe a positive trend in happiness across the year levels, pupils in all five year levels, on average, score above the mid-point on the happiness scale, suggesting that they are more happy than not.

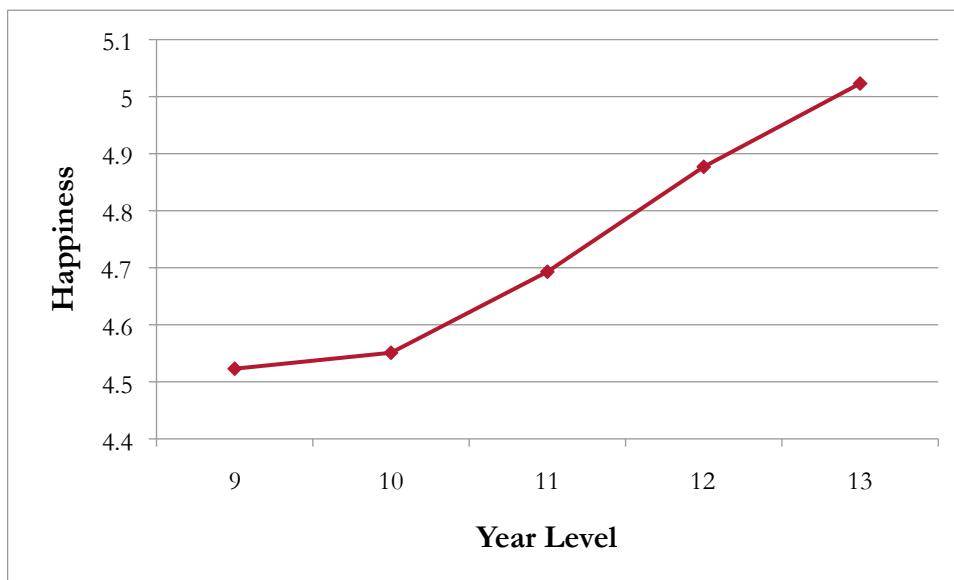


Figure 1. Year Level and Happiness Scores

We explored the relationship between happiness and trials results, but we did not find a statistically significant relationship between the two in this study. Previous research suggests that there is a relationship between happiness and some measures of academic achievement. Several studies have yielded statistically significant correlations between measures of happiness and aspects of academic achievement among adolescent pupils.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, research has shown that happiness is a predictor of other constructs that are related to academic achievement such as school engagement<sup>17</sup> and self-efficacy.<sup>18</sup> Further research is needed to explore the relationship between happiness and measures of academic achievement in various contexts.

The developmental trend in happiness found in this study is noteworthy as it is an unanticipated characteristic for this age group. Research shows that as pupils progress through their schooling in their adolescent years, their happiness typically declines,<sup>19</sup> which makes the positive trend in pupils'

happiness at Eton particularly notable. This surprising result led us to conduct a second phase of research to investigate pupils' perspectives on which aspects of the Eton experience support their happiness. Eton pupils identified four key factors that bring them happiness, which are discussed below.

## Eton Supports Happiness Through Social Support, Autonomy, Competence, and Gratitude

### **Social support promotes pupils' happiness**

In their responses to open-ended questions, pupils emphasize that the Eton community supports their happiness by offering robust social support. This finding is in line with previous academic literature on happiness, which has established social relationships as fundamental to happiness.<sup>20</sup> As one pupil at Eton comments, "Eton has taught me the importance of community, and being able to fully appreciate it has made me happier." According to pupils, Eton provides opportunities to build strong relationships in a close-knit community environment that is built on encouragement, respect, and inclusivity. Furthermore, pupils explain that Eton provides opportunities to develop the prosocial and intrapersonal skills that help boys thrive socially in the community. Finally, boys credit the house and tutor system as providing a platform that encourages social support.

#### *Social support is characterized by encouragement, respect, inclusivity*

Overwhelmingly, pupils mention "friends" as a key source of their happiness. At the heart of pupils' comments is an appreciation for the encouragement and support they feel from one another, with one pupil noting, "You are able to rely on friends to help you with problems that you are struggling with." Another boy shares, "I struggled with homesickness and now I don't thanks to the people around me." Yet another explained, "I think this is done in a subtle way with boys helping and encouraging others to go and do more activities and distract themselves from being unhappy...Boys tend to speak to each other and get support from each other."

Survey comments also indicate that these supportive relationships are characterized by respect and inclusivity. One pupil believes that his happiness comes from "feeling that I am valued or appreciated – feeling that my peers respect or like me...being noticed." Another boy remarks that he has experienced "a growth in respect from other members of the community." Other responses described an accepting environment where "the community is mainly supportive of whatever choice one may make," which "keeps the atmosphere healthy." The inclusivity of the Eton community is acknowledged across our sample, with another boy noting, "the community on the whole is very accepting and supportive."

#### *Developing prosocial and intrapersonal skills helps boys thrive*

Pupils describe the ways in which living in this supportive community environment has helped them develop prosocial capacities that contribute to their happiness. Many boys mention learning how to

relate better to others by, for example, “taking criticism better and being nicer to other people,” learning “life skills and how to talk to people,” and how to “cope with arguments with relative ease.” They connect these skills for making friends more easily with improved happiness. As one pupil comments, “I have picked up many social skills which have made me a happier and better person.” Another explains, “We have all adapted to do what brings each other happiness when we are sad.”

In addition to these prosocial skills, many boys also note changes in their intrapersonal development that have improved their happiness. For example, one pupil explains, “I have experienced a lot more freedom and this allowed me to get to know myself better as a person. Thus making me happier with myself now that I know what I like and what I can do.” Other boys echo this sense of self-actualization, with one noting, “[I’ve learned] to be more independent and more confident in myself and certain abilities,” and another sharing, “understanding and working with myself has made me happier.” A few pupils mention improvements in how they personally respond to challenges. One boy explains, “[I’ve learned] to stay active and when you have a problem, talk about it, don’t keep it bottled up,” while another notes, “I try to not compete with others and be content with who I am.”

#### *House and tutor systems provide a structure for social support to flourish*

Several boys assert that the house and tutor system provide a platform that supports their relationships. As one pupil explains, “the system of tutors allows pupils to voice their questions and anxieties, making it easier to solve difficult problems in your school life.” He adds, “I have also found that many members of the Eton community are often helpful, and offer advice, making your everyday life easier.” Another boy asserts that the consistency of interaction is important, noting that, “regular meetings with tutors provide an outlet to chat and discuss our interests, which also helps pupils become happier.”

Boys are aware of the supports available to them and are well informed on where to go to seek support. A pupil articulates this understanding in his comment, “I have learned that if you are sad or struggling, there are lots of people, specifically in the house and your tutor who will try to make you happier permanently.” Another pupil confirms, “The housemaster looks out for the boys, and is on their side to help out if work gets too much or if there are any other problems. We are repeatedly told who to seek for help if necessary.”

Several responses highlight the house environments as a core feature of the community support they experience at Eton. As one pupil remarks, “The close community of a house means that nobody is left out and so friendships make them happier.” Echoing this sentiment, another pupil comments that, “The sense of community when taking part in house events” brings him happiness. Another boy remarks that the “large sense of community in the houses” helps people to “feel safe and therefore a lot happier.” These survey trends offer useful insight into how the social support systems at Eton contribute to pupils’ overall happiness.



## **Pupils' sense of autonomy underlies their happiness, particularly for older pupils**

Pupils report that their happiness is also rooted in having a sense of autonomy at Eton. This link between autonomy and happiness is consistent with previous research that has also shown that having a sense of autonomy in one's life helps one feel a deeper sense of meaning.<sup>21</sup> When discussing aspects about the Eton experience that brings them happiness, pupils specifically cite their independence, freedom, and responsibility. One boy explains, "I have experienced independent life, which helps me to become happier while away from my parents."

Interestingly, many older pupils note that they have an increasing sense of autonomy as they progress through the year levels. For example, boys note an "increased independence" that comes with placement in the older years, emphasizing that they have "a greater deal of independence and ability to choose how to distribute [their] own time." Many responses describe the freedom that pupils have to explore their own interests in an environment where "boys are allowed to discover their passions for themselves." Pupils appreciate "being able to do the things that [they] love, such as playing the cello" and "being able to facilitate any interest [they] may have." As one boy reports, "I have experienced a lot more freedom and this allowed me to get to know myself better as a person, thus making me happier with myself now that I know what I like and what I can do." Pupils discuss the increase in "autonomy and freedom in subjects, sports, societies, free time" repeatedly as a major contributor to their happiness.

In addition, several pupils cite "the amount of responsibility that the school provides" as a source of happiness, and note that the responsibility they are given at school increases over time. Boys comment that the school trusts them to "make a conscious choice about how you choose to do things." One pupil explains how the increased responsibility might lead to an increase in happiness: "By the time you're a specialist it's easier to be happier because you're in a more comfortable environment, you've been given a modicum of trust by authority, and you're more mature." Clearly, Eton's sensitivity to the need for autonomy in adolescence contributes to pupils' happiness, particularly in the upper year levels.

## **Feelings of competence bring pupils happiness**

Another pillar of support for pupil happiness that pupils identify in this study is the sense of competence pupils experience through achievements they acquire at school. This is consistent with previous research that has shown that feeling a sense of competence is associated with having a greater sense of meaning in one's life.<sup>22</sup> The feeling of competence generated from school-related accomplishments provides pupils with a level of satisfaction that they explain nurtures their overall happiness. As one pupil explains, "I guess happiness comes from the knowledge that whatever you have to do you are capable of doing because you have done it so many times before." Another pupil echoes a similar sentiment, stating that "achieving what I and others around me think I'm capable of" helps further his happiness at school.

Pupils continually express that “getting good results in academics” and “doing well academically” brings them happiness at school. While mention of academic success permeated many of the responses, pupils also cite the importance of success in other areas of school life such as “socially,” “extra-curricularly,” or “succeeding in a particular sport.”

Pupils also note that hard work gives them a sense of competence. Many pupils describe the satisfaction they experience when accomplishing something they have put hard work into. For example, one pupil explains that “completing long or hard work assignments” brings him happiness, while another pupil shares, “I have learned to work harder and that has made my net happiness increase.” Likewise, one boy states, “Having a productive and busy day and feeling that I have accomplished a lot.”

### Gratitude for the opportunities at Eton nurtures pupils’ happiness

#### *Gratitude is linked to happiness*

Our findings show that gratitude and happiness among Eton pupils are significantly positively related ( $r = 0.453, p < .01$ ) (See Figure 2). That is, pupils who have higher levels of gratitude tend to have higher levels of happiness. This finding is consistent with previous research showing a strong connection between gratitude and happiness.<sup>23</sup> In our study, this finding also emerges as a prominent theme in the pupils’ responses to the open-ended questions. Throughout pupils’ responses to what brings them happiness at Eton, pupils express a clear recognition of the vast opportunities Eton offers and a feeling of gratitude for those opportunities. As one boy notes, “Eton supports pupils to become happier by providing an endless array of opportunities.”

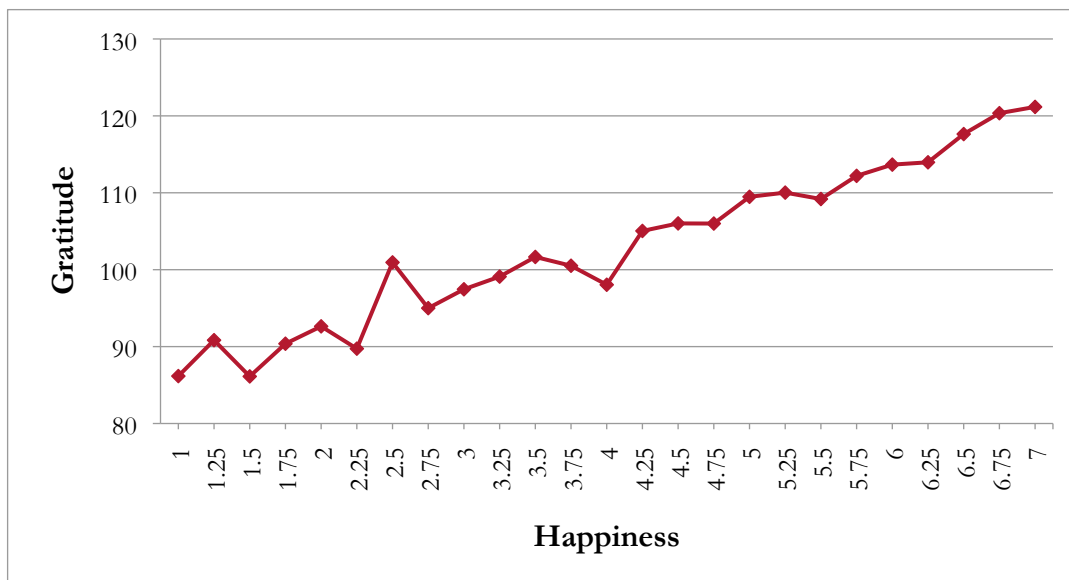


Figure 2. Happiness Scores and Gratitude Scores

Many pupils write explicitly about the appreciation they have developed for the experiences Eton offers them. One pupil remarks, “There are opportunities for everyone to grow in whatever way they choose. Etonians are very privileged.” A sense of gratitude is also reflected in this boy’s comment, “I have come to appreciate how lucky I am and how much of a privileged position I’m in.” Other pupils mention specific aspects of the Eton experience they have come to appreciate. One boy cites his appreciation for teachers, “I’ve become increasingly grateful for the quality and enthusiasm of teachers.” Another pupil shows gratitude for the Eton community, “Eton has taught me the importance of community, and being able to fully appreciate it has made me happier.” Some pupils show an appreciation for what others in the Eton community do for them. For example, this pupil shares, “Essentially I’d say it’s being able to appreciate the sheer amount of work others do for me.” Another pupil speaks at length in this vein, “The strong sense of independence at Eton and the attitude of doing things for yourself makes you grateful for the work of other people who do those things in your daily life. Also, as you have so many things to enjoy, when you think about not having them, it makes you grateful that you have them at all.”

Several pupils describe a desire to make the most of the opportunities during their time at the school. The following comment illustrates this sentiment, “I have realised that there are so many people who aren’t privileged with such a high-standard of education, and some even have never had education. Therefore, I always try my best and utilize everything the school has to offer.” Likewise, another boy states, “[I’ve learned] to appreciate it more as I’ve grown through the school trying to get to do as much as I can.”

Pupils also discuss developing a balanced perspective on what they have and don’t have, and how doing so is important for their happiness. One pupil explains, “I have learned to be happy with what I have, and not envy what I don’t have. This applies not only to wealth but to more, for example, not getting into top choice universities. There are always opportunities to be jealous in life but I have learned through Eton and individually that jealousy never helps. Once you can rid yourself of jealousy, happiness is easier to find.” Another boy shares, “I have seen the enormous opportunities and benefits we have and take for granted here at Eton, and I have learnt to appreciate them more.”

#### *Older pupils tend to express greater gratitude*

The pupils’ sense of gratitude seems to deepen across the year levels. This study reveals that, like happiness, there is a statistically significant positive relationship between pupils’ year level and gratitude ( $r = 0.101$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (See Figure 3). That is, pupils in higher year levels tend to score higher on measures of gratitude. In the boys’ survey responses, they reflect on this trend from time to time as well. For example, the following quote from a pupil describes this progression, “Being more aware of other schools and comparing Eton to them, I have begun to realise how much Eton has to offer and the unique opportunities it provides. It was hard for me to be grateful in younger years as I was focused on academics and sport and I didn’t have the time or the awareness to realise how important it is for me to make the most of my time here and be grateful for the experiences.”

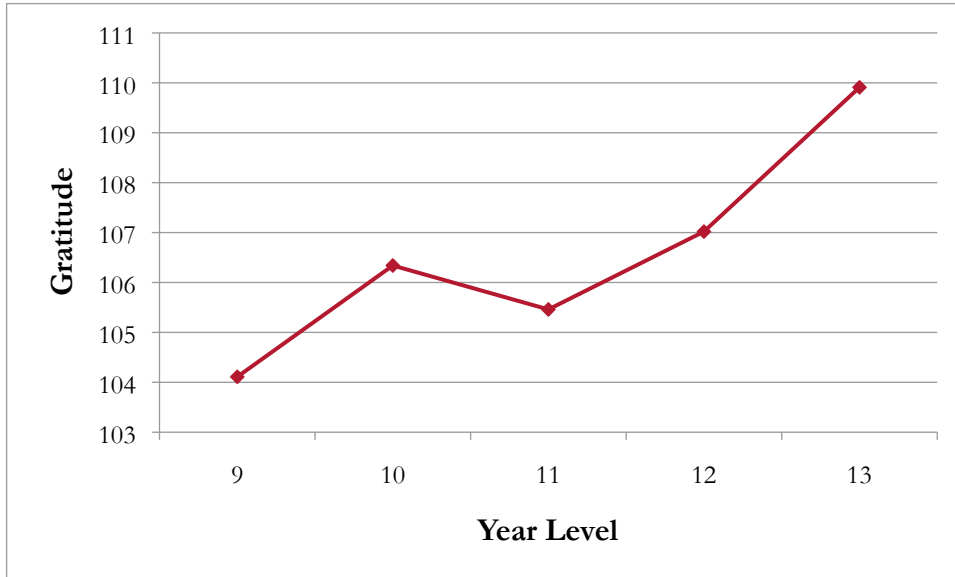


Figure 3. Year Level and Gratitude Scores

## Conclusion

Eton aims to support pupils' happiness. In this study, Eton collected data on pupils' happiness that can inform their efforts to further support pupils' well-being. With this study's results, Eton can be confident that there is a positive trend in pupils' happiness across the year levels. Moreover, the study offers Eton an understanding of pupils' views on what brings them happiness at school – robust social support, autonomy in pursuing their interests, opportunities to feel a sense of competence through their work, and a wide array of opportunities that promote gratitude. With this knowledge, the school can more deliberately target those factors in its well-being initiatives. RSI looks forward to continuing to work with the The Tony Little Centre for Innovation and Research in Learning to support Eton to prepare their young pupils for happiness and success in school and beyond.

## Afterward

This report was prepared by Research Schools International (RSI). RSI Director of Research, Catherine Glennon, and RSI Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Christina Hinton, were responsible for this report, along with RSI Researchers Ilya Lyashevsky, Brianna Cullen Wilson, and Qianru Yang.

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## Appendix

Table 1  
Summary statistics of measures for all participants.

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Subjective Happiness Scale	4	28	19.07	5.18
GRAT	43	144	106.89	15.66

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas & Watkins, 2003, April.

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