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ABSTRACT

The study aims at exploring Indonesian children's preferences in the choice of play companions that lead to their happiness. In total, 381 boys and 396 girls (aged 4–6 years old) participated in the study. We conducted a story-telling test to determine which play companions that lead to children's happiness and by using content analysis to interpret the qualitative data. The majority of boys and girls nominated their friends as their most preferred play companions. However, when feeling unhappy with their friends, boys tended to turn inward to themselves, $\chi(1) = 31.447$, $p = .001$, while girls tended to prioritize family as their play companions. A Kruskal–Wallis test revealed that the happiest child is the one who experiences play activity at school with teachers and friends there, $\chi^2(2) = 13.712$, $p = .008$ especially for girls, $\chi^2(2) = 10.869$, $p = .028$. It is necessary to develop a parenting programme to educate parents about the importance of play (particularly with partners) in promoting children's happiness.

Introduction

Over the last decade, happiness has become a topic worth exploring (Huebner, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2007; Koopmans, Geleijnse, & Zitman, 2010; Brockmann & Delhey, 2010; Ye, Ng, & Lian, 2015). However, there is a gap in the area of research into children's happiness. Park and Peterson (2006) indicate that studies on children's happiness have been neglected, a point on which Thoilliez (2011) concurs, outlining the need for conceptual clarity in understanding what makes children happy. Chaplin (2009) and Thoilliez (2011) responded to this gap by exploring children's *own* perspective of happiness. Because of their unique cognitive abilities and experiences, the happiness of children can be viewed as different from that of adults.

A study by Pranoto and Hong (2018, unpublished manuscript) clearly shows that in terms of happiness, playing is most mentioned as the source of happiness among Indonesian children. It is stated that playing contributes to happiness at all age levels in the group (Tobin, 2014; Dupree, Bertram, & Pascal, 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2005). Thus, it is clearly emphasized that playing contributes to the children's happiness. Other studies prove that social interaction contributes to children's happiness (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Holder & Coleman, 2008; Ofsted, 2012).

Previous literature regarding children's happiness has revealed that one of the factors that contribute to children's happiness is the experience of social interaction that they have during their playtime. It is supported by the statement that playing is defined as a fun, natural characteristic and an instinct of children and that it serves as a strong context to facilitate the learning and development of children (Kernan, 2007; Wilkinson, 2008).

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The findings show that the factors that most contribute to children's happiness are a social interaction (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Holder & Coleman, 2008; Ofsted, 2012) and playing (Dupree et al., 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2005; Tobin, 2014; Pranoto & Hong, 2018). Parten (1932) finds that for children, especially those under 6 years old, playing and interacting are a part of the integrated experience. Starting at 2 years old, children play by acting out a certain role while interacting with their surroundings through play activities. Therefore, this current study focuses on analysing children's play companions. While playing, children will explore themselves and their environment, as well as learn about social roles when interacting with their playing partners (with their peers or adults).

Play is a completely universal practice which allows children to explore themselves and their environment, to examine and try out different social roles, and to learn to interact both with other children and older people. During their early childhood, children start to learn to identify their gender, which determines and develops their knowledge of the pattern of playing (i.e. with whom they will play/play companions). The need to explore which play companions make children happy was also strengthened by the fact that they tend to provide responses within their *own* realms (self, school acquaintances, family, and peers/friends) within their surroundings when they are asked about their personal experience in everyday lives (Jover & Thoilliez, 2010). However, less attention has been given to eastern studies focusing on children's happiness, particularly on the play companions children prefer.

The study conducted by Pranoto and Hong (2018) shows that the way Indonesian children explore themselves and their environment, namely, to examine and try out different social roles, and learn to interact with their peers and adults, is a strong predictor of happiness. It was found that a warm interaction among peers is the main indicator of children's happiness in many cultures (Ofsted, 2012). Icelandic children have a sense of choosing and enjoying what to play and with whom (Einarsdóttir, 2005). In line with those results, Liberman, Larsson, Altuzarra, Öst, and Ollendick (2015) found that Swedish children enjoy interaction among peers. In contrast, some previous studies have shown different results, namely, that interaction with family is the strongest predictor for children's happiness (Diener, 2009; Thoilliez, 2011). Further to that result, another study by Liberman et al. (2015) found that Chilean children reported greater happiness when they are around their siblings and in school. Based on these studies, it can be concluded that there is a gap concerning the notion of how the choice of children's play partners/companions leads to happiness in different cultural backgrounds. Some previous studies have indicated that the way a child plays and interacts with different partners/companions is culture-specific while others may indicate the opposite.

Concerning children's play companions, previous study results indicate gender preferences. As Maccoby (1990) has observed, by the age of 4.5 years old, children spend most of their time with their same-gender-peers. Further, based on previous studies, whether children will spend their time playing with peers or not depend on individual factors (Howes, 1988; Howes & Matheson, 1992) such as emotion and regulation (Fabes, Hanish, Martin, & Eisenberg, 2002), childcare experiences (Howes, 1987), or even cognitive and linguistic competence (Rubin & Daniels-Beirness, 1983).

Regarding the emotions experienced by children, previous studies show that there are gender differences in response to negative affections. Further, Kret and De Gelder (2012) suggest it isimportant to consider the type of affection in identifying gender differences in emotional responses. Previous studies study showed more on the sensitivity of men and women in responding to negative emotions. These results still show non-gender-specific differences. A number of other studies indicate that, when compared to males, females tend to be sensitive to negative stimuli (Fernández et al., 2012; Bradley, Codispoti, Sabatinell, & Lang, 2001) while other studies show the opposite, that males tend to show more intense emotional reaction than females, especially if they feel threatened (Kret & De Gelder, 2012). Those previous studies indicate inconclusive results. It is necessary to explore in more detail the gender difference in response to different types of emotions.

Having considered the previous literature on this topic, this study aims to enrich the study gap regarding how gender preferences in the choice of children's play companions influence children's happiness. As this study was conducted in Indonesia, it has also enriched the gap regarding the socio-cultural differences in the choice of children's play companions. In order to find out the answer, the researcher conducted a story-telling test to explore the responses from children about which play companion lead to happiness. Identifying play companions that contribute to children's happiness can help parents, teachers and researchers to build strategies to promote their happiness. Once these are identified, we can start to understand children's happiness and the factors that lead to it.

Aim and research questions

The purpose of this study is to describe the perceptions of Indonesian children on the companions that make them happy. The research questions addressed are as follows:

- Who are children's most preferred play companions?
- How do children describe the play companions that make them happy?

Theoretical framework

Psychologists have defined happiness as a psychological well-being or subjective well-being (Argyle, 1987; Eysenck, 1990). Without ignoring the methods of data collection and quantitative analyses, Ryff and Singer (2008) state that the results of studies on happiness using the eudemonistic approach tend to be more humanistic and focus on an individual's values and lifestyle by directing narrative approaches (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008). In addition, they also result in conclusions and recommendations that are normative in nature (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Similar to the eudemonistic approach, this research aims at enabling the voices of Indonesian children to be heard and considered. In order to answer the questions on what play companions make them happy and sad in daily life as well as how to use those facts for their educational welfare, this research proposes a research design based on the theoretical concept of happiness from the eudemonistic point of view, and also uses some other international frameworks focusing on children.

This perspective serves as the foundation for quantitative and qualitative approaches to be applied to gain a concrete narrative on children's happiness from children's perspectives. This perspective also encouraged the researcher to involve teachers as the evaluators of the instruments used.

Based on the previous theoretical framework, the subjective well-being that is known as children's happiness needs to be understood as the average satisfaction at a certain period with certain frequencies of positive and negative effects. It is reported that Indonesian children (aged 4–6 years old) find that their play companions (self, school acquaintances, family members, and peers/friends at neighbourhood) make them happy in their everyday lives.

Play companions and happiness

Previous studies show that the factors which contribute to children's happiness are a social interaction (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Holder & Coleman, 2008; Ofsted, 2012) and playing (Dupree et al., 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2005; Tobin, 2014; Pranoto & Hong, 2018). While playing, children explore themselves and their environment, and also learn social roles by interacting with others as their play companions/partners (peers or adults). In fact, playing and social interaction are part of the same experience (Parten, 1932).

Previous studies indicate that fathers become pre-school playing partners (Power & Parke, 1982: Roopnarine & Mounts, 1985). A father, it seems, contributes and participates more than mother

especially when doing physical play activities. International comparative studies show a difference in results. A study by Parmar, Harkness, and Super (2008) showed that Euro-American fathers tend to contribute and participate especially when doing physical play activities, while immigrant parents from Asia tend to spend more time in academic activities with their children such as teaching them the alphabet and numbers, playing mathematical games, and working with the computer. In this case, parents do not act as playmates but rather as teachers. Even so, records of daily activities indicate that both group of parents spend the same amount of time with their children though Euro-American parents tend to do 'pretend play' and Asian parents prefer to have more constructed games. The socio-cultural differences are more evident in the certain aspect such as the participation pattern of the relatives, friends, and way of parenting.

The study above revealed the variety of involvement in playing activities between parents in Euro-America and Asia. Yet, both of the previous studies above never tried to convey play companions directly based on the perspectives of the children. Further, both studies did not come to any conclusion on how the child's perspective on the quality of the interaction was built. It is important to ascertain whether they feel happier when interacting with their friends or with their parents. It is essential to study which playing partner contributes to greater happiness based on the children' perspective.

Methods

This study was designed from the perspective of children on play companions that make them happy, responding to a previous study by Sugiyo Pranoto and Hong (2018) that the best practice in measuring children's happiness is by involving children as active respondents due to different responses between children's and parent's reports of happiness experienced by children.

Participants

The study involved 777 children from several kindergartens. Children, who had informed consent from their parents, were involved. The participants were aged 4–6 years old ($M = 5.14$, SD = .694 years of age). Table 1 presents data regarding the respondents.

The age of 4 was chosen to complement the studies conducted by Hill, Layburn, and Borland (1996), and Thoilliez (2011) that involved young children aged 5–12 years old. This study involved younger children, from 4–6 years old, as these are the ages when children are said to have the verbal and memory ability not only to retell past events but also to make predictions for the future. Previous literature studies have shown that starting from the age of 3, children are capable of describing their concrete experiences when they feel happy (Harter, 1982). Children are, in general, good at retelling personal events they went through. From the age of 3, children can describe in detail both negative and positive events they have experienced (Fivush, Hazzard, Sales, Sarfati, & Brown, 2003; Pezdek & Taylor, 2001).

Table 1. Children's distribution at different ages.

Participant	N
All	777
Gender	
Boy	381
Girl	396
Age	
4 year old	139
5 year old	390
6 year old	248

Data collection

Pre-testing

The research implemented a pilot study that required external validation of the questionnaire of the story-telling test before it was distributed to the intended children. The pilot study involved 60 children who are representing a range of social groups in Indonesian. Kindergarten teachers were involved as professional experts in checking the story-telling test. This external validation was meant to identify any possible problems the children might have while giving a response to the questions asked. Teachers were deemed as the best people to provide input as they were the experts who worked and were actively involved in the children's day-to-day life. Once the test was administered to some children, a discussion with the teachers was conducted.

The results of the pilot study showed that children in kindergarten (aged 4 years old) were a little uncomfortable in answering the following question; '"Who are your preferred play companions that make you happiest (*sangat senang*) in your daily life?' or in Bahasa, 'Siapakah diantara teman bermain ini yang paling membuat kamu senang?'. A non-familiar interviewer might be the cause. Therefore, pictures were provided as stimuli to ease the difficulties children had in delivering proper responses. In cases where the pictures did not really help, the children were excluded from the list of respondents.

The pilot study included a reliability test for face scale. Since the face scale used a single item measurement, test-retest was needed to evaluate the reliability of its instrument. After the children filled out the face scale, the reliability of the face scale was examined. The reliability was proven to be acceptable with Cronbach's Alpha at 0.833. Both displayed the degree to which the responses were consistent or stable over time (Pranoto & Hong, 2018, unpublished manuscript).

Timing, recording, and field notes

Before interviewing the children, the researcher conducted observations at the school a few days in advance. Other than to gain a better picture of the children's daily life, it was also meant to habituate the children with the presence of the researchers. It took around 15–30 min to interview a child. In some cases, however, children needed a longer interview time. Therefore, the policy was to set 60 min/child. In some extreme cases, some children needed an even longer time and had to be accompanied by their friends. This research only managed to have one interview session per child with repeated questions to ensure the child's response. This helped to ensure that no answer or response was altered. As for further relevant data, the researchers had made field notes. These notes were very important for the process of analysis.

Settings

In this study, data collection was carried out in many settings but still within the school vicinity. Interview settings varied from an unused classroom, a public hall for special events, the teachers' room, a gazebo, or a hallway to a school playground. These settings were made as comfortable and as least intimidating as possible. They were designed to be as natural and easy as possible.

Story-telling test – children's self-report

For a qualitative purpose, this study interviewed children individually. This study emphasized the qualitative approach in which the researcher probed deeper to explore the responses from children about which play companions make them happy. Based on the structure of the Indonesian emotion lexicon, happiness (*senang*) has an equivalent meaning to *asik, sukacita, sukaria, bahagia, senang, girang, gembira, ceria, riang* (Shaver, Murdaya, & Fraley, 2001).

Principals from different public kindergartens in Indonesia were asked for their permission for the collection of data from children in their schools. Once this was secured, the research procedures and purposes were described to teachers. Next, each child was given a packet to take home. It contained a cover letter seeking the parent's consent. Once it was agreed and sent back to the school, each child was asked to join an interview session. In the interview session, each child was briefed with a standardized explanation of the study.

The study used single open-ended questions for children aged 4–6. Once their names and ages were confirmed, they were asked the following question: 'Who are your preferred play companions that make you happiest (*sangat senang*) in your daily life?' or in Bahasa, '*Siapakah diantara teman bermain ini yang paling membuat kamu senang*?' A specialized technique using a different set of pictures was employed to explore which play companions make them happiest. Each picture depicted different situations, identified as (A, B, C and D), along with its caption. Those pictures focused on children's play companions: themselves, family, school acquaintances, and peers (Thoilliez, 2011). This study expected children to pinpoint the happiest moment they spent with someone, and explain why.

The pictures depicted children's playing activities. Children were triggered to imagine which situation, a boy or a girl, they would be the happiest in. As was noticed, a child could easily be happy with any one and in any of the four areas. What was the important thing was that the chosen picture would focus the children's attention (Table 2).

The study was continued by presenting four pictures that represented children's preference for the play companions they valued the most. The pictures were shown to the children, the selection of pictures being given according to their gender. For boys, there were four pictures of male figures. And the girls would see a series of picture (4 pictures) with the image of females. Each of them was required to answer the questions based on their experiences.

The story behind the chosen picture was analysed to answer questions about it. The children were given the instruction prior to telling the story,

> I will show you some pictures. You can call this X (for boy) or Y (for girl). You now see him (for boy) or her (for girl) in four pictures and in different situations. Now, it is time for you to imagine that you were in all situations. After that, you can tell me, in which of these situations do you think you would feel happiest? You should choose only one, the situation and who are your play companions that would make you feel the happiest and tell me why you are happy.

This study gained qualitative data in the form of narrations. Children were asked to give responses to a question and tell stories of what they had seen in the pictures they chose. For statistical analysis, the data from the study was transformed into quantitative data. The chi-square was applied to test the following hypotheses: There is a difference in the children's report on play companions related to happiness.

The face scale – children's self-report.

A face scale was modified to look more real, considering that the participants were as young as 4. Adjustments were made by reducing the number of pictures (from 7 to 6). This was in line with a previous clinical study that also used the face scale to identify pain in children. The Faces Pain Rating Scale by Wong-Baker is the dominant method used nowadays to measure pain intensity in children. This scale was depicted in Figure 1. Six faces are shown to children aged 3 or over; 0 is very happy because he does not feel hurt at all; (1) hurts a little bit; (2) hurts a little more; (3) hurts even more; (4) hurts a whole lot; and (5) hurts the worst (Wong & Baker, 1988). This face scale has been widely applied to children as respondents, as a graphical representation of emotions that could be recognized by children (MacDonald, Kirkpatrick, & Sullivan, 1996).

The face scale is used to measure one's perception of happiness (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Holder, Coleman, & Wallace, 2010; Angner, 2013). It has been widely used due to its validity and reliability

Table 2. Description of the story-telling test.

Number	Picture	Descriptions
1	Figure A1	A boy is happy to play alone with his toys
	Figure A2	A girl is happy to play alone with her toys
2	Figure B	A boy is happy playing with teacher and friends at school. A girl is happy playing with teacher and friends at school.
3	Figure C	A boy is happy playing with his parents and or siblings at home. A girl is happy playing with her parents and or siblings at home
4	Figure D1	A boy is happy playing with his friends in the park.

Table 2. Continued.

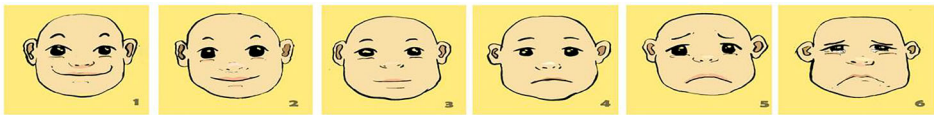| Number	Picture	Descriptions
		A girl is happy playing with her friends in the park.
	Figure D2	

Figure 1. A Modified Face Scale, depicted varied mouth expressions, from very upturned (indicating great happiness) to the very downturned shape (indicating unhappiness). It used Likert type scale with six simple pictures positioned parallel to the horizontal line.

(Abdel-Khalek, 2006). In an Indonesian setting, a validity and reliability test for Face Scale was conducted with the children (Pranoto & Hong, 2018, unpublished manuscript).

Once children's names and ages were confirmed, they underwent the face scale test to address the area of their happiness. This scale used a Likert type scale with six simple pictures positioned parallel to the horizontal line. These pictures depicted various mouth expressions, from very upturned (indicating great happiness) to the very downturned shape (indicating unhappiness) (Figure 1). Researchers asked children to value the happiness they experienced 'most of the time'.

Results

Children preference of play companions

Based on Table 3 and Figure 2, Indonesian children viewed 'friends' as their preference of play companions. As many as 328 (42.2%) children stated that they were happy when conducting playing activities with their friends. The next 188 children (24.2%) mentioned they were happy having activities with their family members. Around 2.5% children (175) stated that they were happy being alone in their activities. Some other children mentioned being at school, doing activities with school friends

Table 3. Distribution of children's self-report on their play companions.

		Children's play companion					
Participant	N	Family f [%]	Friend f [%]	School f [%]	Self f [%]	None f [%]	χ(1); p
All	777	188 [24.2]	328 [42.2]	83 [10.7]	175 [22.5]	3 [.4]	–
Boy	381	73 [19.2]	169 [44.4]	27 [7.1]	110 [28.9]	2 [.5]	31.447; p = .000
Girl	396	115[29]	159 [40.2]	56 [14.1]	65 [16.4]	1 [.3]	
4 year olds	139	43 [30.9]	48 [34.5]	17 [12.2]	30 [21.6]	1 [.7]	n.s
5 year olds	390	92 [23.6]	153 [39.2]	42 [10.8]	101 [25.9]	2 [.5]	
6 year olds	248	53 [21.4]	127 [51.2]	24 [9.7]	44 [17.7]	-	

Note: Chi-square is applied, significant p-value < .05. In each cell, the first number is the frequency of play companions chosen followed by percentage in the bracket.
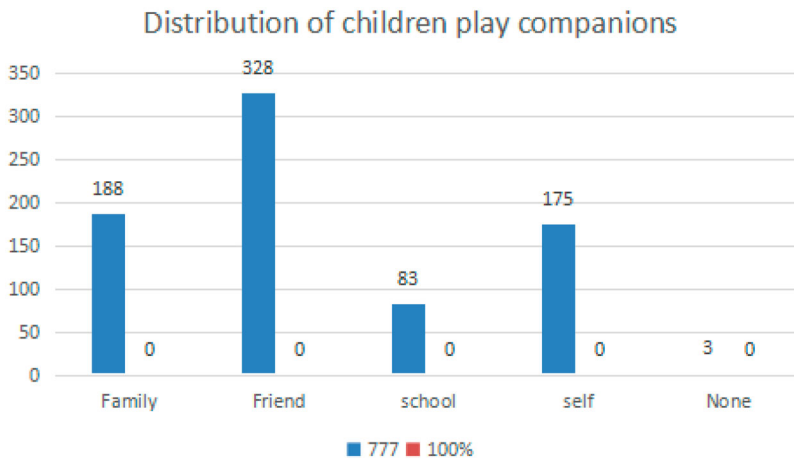
Figure 2. Distribution of Indonesian children play companions. Children viewed friends as their preference of play companions, followed by family member, play at school with teacher and friends, her/his self, and none.

and teachers, and playing with the teachers at school made them happy. There were only three children (0.4%) that failed to give any reason for the four pictures shown as stimuli.

The result of study in the Pearson Chi-Square test showed that $\chi(1) = 17.618$, $p = .024$ meant that there was no statistically significant association between age and play companions (see Table 3) while, another result of the Pearson Chi-Square showing $\chi(1) = 31.447$, $p = .000$ told us that there was a statistically significant association between gender and play companions. Further details in play companions chosen by children of different genders are displayed in Table 3. Friends as play companions were the option chosen most by both boys and girls. As many as 169 of 381 boys (44.4%) chose this, compared to 159 of 396 girls (40.2%).

Children's play companions leading to happiness

Even though 'friends' was the most chosen option as play companions, children also equally preferred other play companions. Hence, it was necessary for further analysis to ascertain with whom (which play companions) children would be happiest.

A Kruskal–Wallis H test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in children's levels of happiness between the different play companions, $\chi^2(2) = 13.712$, $p = .008$, with a mean rank level of happiness of 355.85 for school friends and teachers as play companions, 373.56 for friends and 402.70 for self, 413.91 for family, and 576 for none of these (Table 4).

For all demographic variables (age, gender, and ethnic background), a Kruskal–Wallis H test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in children's levels of happiness between the types of play companion, except in groups of mixed ethnicity and groups of girls.

Second, in terms of gender differences, a Kruskal–Wallis H test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in boys' levels of happiness among the types of play companions $\chi^2(2) = 5.445$ [$p = .245$], with a mean rank level of happiness of 176.50 for school friends and teachers as play companions, 184.03 for friends, 197.23 for self, 201.34 for family, and 255.50 for none of these. Moreover, a Kruskal–Wallis H test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in girls' levels of happiness between the type of play companion $\chi^2(2) = 10.869$ [$p = .028$], with the highest mean rank level of happiness of 174.76 for school friends and teachers as play companions, followed by a mean rank level of happiness of 191.19 for friends, 208.73 for family, 216.22 for self, and 363 for none of these.

In terms of age differences, a Kruskal–Wallis H-test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in children's levels of happiness among 4 year olds among the types of play

Table 4. Happiness and play companions.

Factor	Happiness											
Play companions	Mean rank	$\chi^2(2)$ [p]	Mean rank	$\chi^2(2)$ [p]	Mean rank	$\chi^2(2)$ [p]	Mean rank	$\chi^2(2)$ [p]	Mean rank	$\chi^2(2)$ [p]	Mean rank	$\chi^2(2)$ [p]
	All		Boy		Girl		Aged 4		Aged 5		Aged 6	
Friends	373.56	13.712 [0.008]	184.03	n.s	191.19	10.869 [0.028]	70.03	n.s	188.04	n.s	116.80	n.s
Family	413.91		201.34		208.73		73.13		211.31		130.52	
School	355.85		176.50		174.76		56.74		177.37		125.15	
Self	402.70		197.23		216.22		71.08		198.76		139.14	
None	576		255.50		363		127		255.25		–	

Note: A Kruskal–Wallis *H* test is applied, significant *p* value < .05. In each cell, indicates the mean rank of happiness of play companions chosen.

companion $\chi^2(2) = 6.416$ [$p = .170$], with a mean rank level of happiness of 56.74 for school friends and teachers as play companions, 70.03 for friends, 71.08 for self, 73.13 for family, and 127 for none of these categories. Next, a Kruskal–Wallis H test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in children's levels of happiness among 5 year olds among the types of play companions $\chi^2(2) = 7.217$ [$p = .125$], with a mean rank level of happiness of 177.37 for school friends and teachers as play companions, 188.04 for friends, 198.76 for self, 211.31 for family, and 255.25 for none of these.

The last, a Kruskal–Wallis H test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in children's levels of happiness among 6 year olds among the types of play companions $\chi^2(2) = 5.558$ [$p = .135$], with a higher mean rank level of happiness of 116.80 for friends as play companions, followed by a mean rank life satisfaction of 125.15 for school friends and teachers, 130.52 for family, and 139.14 for self.

Discussion

This study has shown that Indonesian children aged 4–6 have their different preferences in play companions in order to reach the same levels of happiness. It showed that friends were the most mentioned option as children's play companions. Further, the results showed that the happiest child, especially for girls, is the one who experiences play activity at school with teachers and friends there. It showed that schools managed to conduct a meaningful learning experience for the students (especially the females) since it was perceived as a fun playing activity that made them happy. Not only classmates, but teachers could also be play companions who contribute to the students' happiness.

These findings strengthen the statement that social interactions experienced by children during playtime contribute to the children's happiness. Based on the findings, children who gain positive social interaction while playing with teachers and friends at the school reported that they feel happier, and they are not concerned about the gender differences.

Nevertheless, this study also found some gender-based playing preferences. Particularly, when children do not have positive experiences from teachers and friends, boys tend to play individually to explore themselves and their environment, while girls prefer to play with their family.

Methodology approach

It should be noted once again the importance of these findings regarding research into children's happiness in Indonesia. Chaplin (2009) emphasized the need for more research that identifies 'what makes children happy'. Uusitalo-Malmivaara (2012) stressed that up to 2012 there had not been any research that directly asked children about the things that boost their happiness. This was where the gap existed. Children's happiness is a topic of the utmost importance, but it has been left uninvestigated. The information gained in this study should help children to identify what is meaningful for themselves.

The analysis and results reported in this study have offered ways of thinking about how happiness might be explored with children and thoughts on what to notice when looking for clues about children's happiness. Interviewing children about what was important to them in terms of happiness provides a baseline for longitudinal studies as well as comparative studies. Children's education practitioners and researchers in the field of children's development should be more optimistic to explore happiness involving children as active respondents.

The results of this study have provided an understanding about the happiness of children in a more complete and comprehensive way, including the issue of differences in gender and ethnicity. The discussion on children's happiness and developmental issues, however, is not yet comprehensive. This was due to the limited age range of the children involved. As children progress through the life cycle, their perspectives might change. What is of concern and what is of greatest importance

might change over time. It would be a challenge for further researchers to explore the issue of developmental changes in the wider age range. As this study used interviews to explore the children's sources of positive and negative affection, it has provided a significant impact on that researchers could simultaneously observe changes in children's ability to express their emotions with age, as had been reported by Shipman, Zeman, Nesin, and Fitzgerald (2003).

The findings in this research have enriched the psychological theories on child development, not only as regards play companions providing happiness but also as far as self-concept and happiness are concerned. According to children's developmental theory, especially as far as self-concept is concerned, pre-school children start to develop psychological self-concept by gaining knowledge and understanding of certain preferences, patterns of emotional expression, and how to react to certain people and in certain situations (Welch-Ross, Fasig, & Farrar, 1999). Those findings have supported the theory of the early social construction of self-concept, and in turn, have affected the model of autobiographical memory. Autobiographical recall which develops when children are aged from 3 to 8 years old, consists of memories that connect children to their past. At the same time, these memories tell children stories of themselves (Nelson, 1993).

This theory was supported by the reality in this research in which young children – aged 4 – were already able to report their preferences in play companions that made them happy or sad and describe their emotional condition. The difference with research findings in the West was that children who had already developed psychological self-concept were younger – aged about 3. According to Kurniawati and Hong (2014), in Indonesia, children aged 3 were still unable to properly describe the sources of their happiness or sadness. This difference was perhaps because Western parents were used to talking about emotions to their children from a very early age (around 2) (Beeghley, Bretherton, & Mervis, 1986; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987).

The habit of discussing emotional feelings with parents (mothers) predicts how many references children have about their emotions and how much they understand their own emotions (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991). As mothers discuss the experiences of their children, they stress their children's emotions and label, as well as interpret those experiences and the emotions that follow. Therefore, children learn to describe their emotional meanings in the past (Fivush & Kuebli, 1997; Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995). Children with this type of mother would have the proper ability to respond to people and react to the situations around them (Fivush, 1993). According to Pezdek and Taylor (2001) and Fivush et al. (2003) from the age of 3, children are able to describe in detail both the negative and positive events they experience.

These abilities are made possible as during the dialogue with their parents (mothers), children learn to construct meaningful representations of themselves. Children with these abilities understand their emotions better, and the probable utterance they came up with would include statements such as; 'I am a sad person as I can't play with mom, she is always angry', or 'I am a happy person because I have lots of friends to play with.'

The role of gender on play companions who make them happy

Indonesian children aged 4–6 (boys and girls) preferred friends as play companions that make them happy, similar to Swedish children (Liberman et al., 2015), but different from Chilean children. These findings also confirm the study that stated that the relationship with peers and adults is a strong predictor of happiness (Holder & Coleman, 2008). A close relationship and interaction with friends during play activities with their peers seems to be the main indicator of happiness. Social relationships have been proven to be a significant factor of children's happiness in many cultures (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Ofsted, 2012). According to Parke and Ladd (1992), children at pre-school age (aged 3 years old) have already started to socialize with their peers. This is the moment when friendship is built, and peers have an enormous impact on them. As children reach kindergarten age, they spend more time doing activities in peer groups, compared to their pre-school years (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

The scope and stage of playing for children differ between their infancy years to their childhood years. As Parten (1932) states, children's playing stages vary from non-social to social play. Parten stressed that as children grow older, they gradually enter a social play stage, as they spend more time in peer groups (Ladd, 2005; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006).

Despite the fact that the stage of play has changed, this change is not sequential and is actually very complex. Farran and Son-Yarbrough (2001) found that social play is found mostly in childhood, but it is also common to find a non-social play that is not replaced by social play (Rubin & Coplan, 1998; Smith, 1978). There are individual factors that make children either spend their play time with their peers or not (Howes, 1988; Howes & Matheson, 1992). Some of those individual factors are emotion and regulation (Fabes et al., 2002), childcare experiences (Howes, 1987), or even cognitive and linguistic competence (Rubin & Daniels-Beirness, 1983).

In the Indonesian setting, further analysis found a gender preference difference in those results. When boys and girls are dissatisfied with friends, boys tend to play by themselves, while girls tend to play with family (especially mothers). A child's dissatisfaction with his playing partner is very possible.

Numerous studies have indicated that pre-school and secondary school children tend to show more aggression towards each other compared to children in higher grades (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Vitaro, Tremblay, & Gagnon, 1992). Younger children have less emotional regulation so that they consequently choose to be alone rather than having a conflict with their peers. That is compounded by the inadequate linguistic ability that hampers their capability to say no or prevent bad deeds against them.

Previous studies have shown that there are gender differences in response to negative affections. Further, Kret and De Gelder (2012) suggest considering the type of affection in identifying gender differences in emotional responses. Previous studies have emphasized the sensitivity of men and women in responding to negative emotions. These results still show non-specific differences. A number of other studies indicate that, when compared to males, females tend to be sensitive to negative stimulus (Fernández et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2001). While other studies have shown the opposite, males tend to show more intense emotional reactions than females, especially if they feel threatened (Kret & De Gelder, 2012).

This study has not differentiated the intensity of children's emotional reactions to negative stimuli experienced, yet it shows that when children experience negative stimulation such as unpleasant treatment from friends while playing, boys and girls decide to choose a different playing partner. This discrepancy was perhaps because boys tend to be more involved in interactive, associative, cooperative and successful peer play than girls are (Provost & LaFreniere, 1991; Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000).

According to Maccoby (1990), by the age of 4.5 years old, children spend most of their time with their same-gender-peers. Martin, Eisenbud, and Rose (1995) added that children, at this age, start to segregate themselves based on gender; boys love to play actively while girls tend to be calmer. Boys are likely to engage in interactive and cooperative games with friends. This condition is also apparently prone to conflict. And apparently, a bad experience becomes one of the reasons for the boy to choose to play alone.

In Indonesia, as the setting of this study, boys do not prefer their father (as the same gender) to have physical and interactive playing activities. Boys prefer to play by themselves due to the lack of time a busy father has to play. It seems normal for this to happen in Indonesia since Indonesia is recognized as the third fatherless country (lacking father involvement) in the world. In contrast to girls, they choose family (mother) to keep playing with them. Unlike girls, 4–18-year-old boys prefer physical activities. Certainly, children cannot have physical activities/games with their mothers or with their family members (Hallal et al., 2012; Pearce et al., 2012; Trost et al., 2002). Boys feel uncomfortable playing with the intervention of their mother who acts more dominantly than the children, even when the mother only tries to show the way to play a certain game or to correct their way of playing. Possibly, boys tend not to feel any happiness (or even anger) when the mother intervenes (Ispa, Cook, Harmeyer, & Rudy, 2015).

Boys tended to monopolize play space and materials and to use a confrontational and physical style intended to ensure that they achieve what they want. Their rough play style, as they wrestle and chase, is not so congenial to girls. Same-sex playmates appear to be more compatible in the pacing and flow of their play. Meanwhile, girls seek a smooth-flowing style of play and interaction (Martin et al., 1995; Edwards, Knoche, & Kumru, 2001). Such types of game are mostly found by girls when they have family members (mother or younger siblings) as their playmates.

The negative experience concerning friendship for boys is commonly related to being treated badly by friends such as being pinched, hit, mocked, or experiencing angry responses. The other types of negative behavio include physically quarrelling with friends, being hit by rocks, and being pushed into a river. An interview with En (four years old) revealed:

'I am so sad when my friends are treating me badly, I am pushed into the river, hit by rocks, and beaten.'

Another statement by Hyd (five years old):

'I am really sad when my friends make fun of me, I am made fun of and scolded.' Another boy, Ar (five years old) said:

'I am very sad being pushed into the river and hit by my friends.'

This fact was supported by some research carried out considerably before the current research which found that pre-school and secondary school children tend to have more aggression toward each other compared to children in higher grades (Coie et al., 1990; Vitaro et al., 1992). Younger children have less emotional regulation with the result that they consequently choose to be alone rather than having a conflict with their peers. That was compounded by the inadequate linguistic ability that hampered their capability to say no or to prevent bad deeds against them.

Additionally, this study has also found that friends were the playmates most nominated by children. In addition, boys preferred the playmates most nominated by children themselves as play companions while girls chose their family as play companions after friends. Nonetheless, it was reported that the highest happiness level was indicated by girls who selected 'school friends and teachers' as their play companions.

Differences in the level of happiness were observed when children received social reinforcement in a relationship in the form or 'praise' or 'blame' that affected their overall happiness (Singh, Sidana, & Saluja, 1978). It is very likely that school acquaintance was nominated as play companions that made children happy because they did many activities with their teacher and friends there, particularly the girls. Teachers and friends offered praise, company, safety, and protection. These made girls happy.

It might be believed that family set rules, punishment, and discipline (obligations) or that the family is where children learn negative emotions and even frustration. On the contrary, a group of friends was where children learnt to dare and have adventures with freedom and emancipation.

Conclusion

Based on the children's self-report, friends were the play companions that made them happy. Friends were nominated more by boys compared to girls. However, when they are unhappy with friends, boys prefer to play alone rather than play with others, while girls prefer to play with their mother. Even so, the highest level of happiness was indicated by girls who chose 'friends and teachers at school' as their play companions.

Implications and recommendation for future research

Consideration of the play companions that lead to happiness from a children's perspective provided a fresh and unique perspective to researchers when assessing children's happiness. This unique

perspective could not be captured if we were asking them to select items on an existing scale that might not reflect the uniqueness of their gender group. Furthermore, as children progress through their life cycle, their perspectives might change. What is of concern and what is of greatest importance might change over time. It would be a challenge for further research to explore the issue of developmental changes in a wider age range.

Practically, the findings of this study can help parents, social workers, and education professionals and researchers in the field of educational and children's development to understand the voices of children about their happiness and be able to use it for promoting children's happiness, for example, understanding that boys tend to play with friends as their most commonly mentioned source of happiness, instead of family. Hence, a parenting programme and seminar needs to be developed to educate parents and teachers on how parents can build a good relationship with their children, especially with boys.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human (children) participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Indonesian institutional and/or national research committee and its later amendments or comparable ethical standard.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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