

## **An Investigation of Happiness and Gratitude Among Music Educators**

By

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### **Abstract**

*The current study's primary purpose was to compare perceived happiness (meaning, engagement, and pleasure) and gratitude levels of music teachers by grade level taught, certification status, and teaching area. Collectively, mean scores for pleasure and gratitude were comparable to adults in previous studies. Collective mean scores for engagement were slightly lower than comparable studies but were higher for meaning.*

*Results of multivariate and univariate analyses of variance revealed that elementary school teachers reported higher levels of meaning than others. High school teachers reported higher levels of engagement than others, and middle school teachers reported lower levels of gratitude than others. While no significant differences in pleasure or engagement were reported based on certification status, early career teachers reported lower levels of meaning and gratitude than those with more experience. Regarding the teaching area, we found no significant differences regarding pleasure. However, instrumental music teachers reported higher levels of gratitude than others. Both instrumental teachers and those who teach in a combination of areas reported higher levels of meaning and engagement than those in the choral/general music category. In the end, I discuss implications for the profession and areas for further research.*

**Keywords:** meaning, engagement, pleasure, gratitude, positive Psychology, music teacher health

Researchers have documented stress and burnout among music educators for several decades (e.g., Bernhard, 2006; Hamann, 1986; Heston, Dedrick, Raschke, & Whitehead, 1996). According to Vandenberghe and Huberman (1999), burnout is "a crisis of overworked and disillusioned human service workers" (p. 1). This syndrome has been extended to members of the teaching profession and categorized into three distinct components; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). In response to these examinations of pathology, experts from the field of positive psychology have suggested that happiness (meaning, engagement, and, to some extent, pleasure) and gratitude can help teachers manage stress and prevent burnout (e.g., Emmons, 2007; Seligman, 2011).

Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) presented a three-part model of happiness, defining pleasure as an immediate, hedonistic pursuit of positive sensation, meaning as long-term life purpose, and engagement as absorption in psychological flow. More recently, Seligman (2011) added the importance of face-to-face relationships and personal accomplishments. Bono (2020), as well as Elmore and McPeak (2019), supported these models and argued that the current culture of digital consumption, social media, and information overload might present distinct challenges to pursuits of happiness.

McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) found gratitude to be positively related to optimism and life satisfaction while negatively related to depression, anxiety, materialism, and envy. Emmons (2007) further documented that gratitude can enhance willpower, improve creativity, deepen spirituality, increase self-esteem, and enhance academic performance. Algoe, Haidt, and Gable (2008) examined the effects of gift-giving and found that generosity and gratitude were helpful with forming positive personal relationships. "The ability to feel grateful

is a huge part of enjoying satisfaction in life. If we can't feel gratitude, we're locking ourselves out of one of the most important and uplifting aspects of well-being" (Wachob, 2016, p. 179).

In a four-tier model, Bass (2018) suggested that gratitude includes both personal and communal expressions and that it includes both emotional feeling and ethical response. Personal emotions of gratitude might include strong feelings of awe, delight, and joy when someone helps or offers a gift of some sort. Ethical responses from a personal perspective involve traditional reciprocation, often in the form of a spoken "thanks" or a more formal email, text message, or hand-written card. Communal emotions of gratitude often occur in places of worship or at sporting events, as large groups gather to express common thanks through prayer, music, or cheer. Finally, expressions of gratitude through communal ethics result in civic commitments to volunteerism, charity, and stewardship. "When we neglect gratitude, we are, in effect, choosing negative emotions, which in turn, foster more negativity. But when, if even for a little while, we choose gratefulness, that choice builds on itself and begins to create a spiral of appreciation" (p. 88).

While the work of these scholars is helpful in understanding and promoting practices of meaning, engagement, pleasure, and gratitude, further study seems warranted to examine these variables among teachers of music. The primary purpose of the current study was to compare perceived happiness (meaning, engagement, and pleasure) and gratitude levels of music teachers in a northeastern part of the United States by grade level taught (elementary, middle, high school, or a combination), certification status (initial or professional), and teaching area (instrumental, choral/general, or a combination). The secondary purpose was to examine relationships among perceived happiness, gratitude, and teaching/personal variables (number of hours per week of

teaching, preparing, exercising, sleeping, family obligations, socializing, and working another job).

### Survey Instruments

Gratitude was measured using McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang's (2002) *Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6)* (Table 1). All six items measure perceptions of thankfulness, both short- and long-term, on a seven-degree scale, from "strongly disagree" (one point) to "strongly agree" (seven points). Items one, two, four, and five are scored on an additive scale, while items three and six are reverse scored. For reverse scoring, "strongly disagree" is scored with seven points, "strongly agree" is scored with one point, "disagree" is scored with six points, "agree" is scored with two points, etc. Final scores for the *GQ-6* fall between a minimum of six and a maximum of forty-two points. "The *GQ-6* has good internal reliability, with alphas between .82 and .87" (p. 112).

Happiness was measured using Peterson, Park, and Seligman's (2005) *Orientation to Happiness (OH)* (Table 2). Items two, five, eleven, twelve, fourteen, and seventeen are indicators of meaning (long-term life purpose). Items three, eight, thirteen, fifteen, sixteen, and eighteen are indicators of pleasure (an immediate, hedonistic pursuit of positive sensation). Items one, four, six, seven, nine, and ten are indicators of engagement (absorption in psychological flow). All eighteen items are scored on a five-point scale from "not at all like me" (one point) to "very much like me" (five points). I added point totals for each of the three variables (meaning, pleasure, and engagement), and then divided by six (the number of items per category), resulting in average scores from one to five for each variable. The survey designers reported internal reliability alphas of .88 for meaning, .84 for pleasure, and .77 for engagement.

Academic and personal variables were measured using a researcher-constructed adaptation of Hamann's (1986) *Demographic Data Form (DDF)*. While permission was obtained from Hamann to use the *DDF* in the current study, the original version of the form was not available. The current researcher thus reconstructed and adapted Hamann's form to survey variables of interest in the current study (number of hours per week of teaching, preparing, exercising, sleeping, socializing, family obligations, and working another job) (Table 3).

### **Method**

I mailed the *OH*, *GQ-6*, and *DDF* using Google Form Survey to 500 randomly selected members of a northeastern state music association. Of these 500 potential participants, 169 returned completed surveys by the requested deadline, while another 27 surveys were returned as undeliverable or with incomplete information. I distributed a follow-up email and another 46 completed surveys were returned for 215 responses (45.45 percent of 473 potential participants). Due to the concern that nonrespondents' answers might differ from those of respondents, 20 nonrespondents were randomly contacted by phone to complete the *OH*, *GQ-6*, and *DDF*. Data of the nonrespondents did not differ significantly from the initial respondents in any question category ( $p > .05$ ). Thus nonrespondents' answers were combined with respondents' data for 235 participants (49.68 percent of 473 potential participants).

**Table 1***The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6)*


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**1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = slightly disagree 4 = neutral 5 = slightly agree  
6 = agree 7 = strongly agree**

1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.
  2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.
  3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.
  4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.
  5. As I get older, I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.
  6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.
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**Table 2***Orientation to Happiness-Meaning, Pleasure, and Engagement (OH)*


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**1 = not at all like me 2 = a little like me 3 = moderately like me 4 = quite a bit like me  
5 = very much like me**

1. Regardless of what I am doing, time passes very quickly.
  2. My life serves a higher purpose.
  3. Life is too short to postpone the pleasures it can provide.
  4. I seek out situations that challenge my skills and abilities.
  5. In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will benefit other people.
  6. Whether at work or play, I am usually "in a zone" and not conscious of myself.
  7. I am always very absorbed in what I do.
  8. I go out of my way to feel euphoric.
  9. In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether I can lose myself in it.
  10. I am rarely distracted by what is going on around me.
  11. I have a responsibility to make the world a better place.
  12. My life has a lasting meaning.
  13. In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will be pleasurable.
  14. What I do matters to society.
  15. I agree with this statement: "Life is short - eat dessert first."
  16. I love to do things that excite my senses.
  17. I have spent a lot of time thinking about what life means and how I fit into its big picture.
  18. For me, the good life is the pleasurable life.
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**Table 3**  
*Demographic Data Form (DDF)*

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1. Grade level taught (elementary, middle, high school or combination) \_\_\_\_\_
2. Certification status (initial or professional) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Primary teaching area (instrumental, choral/ general, or combination) \_\_\_\_\_
4. Average number of hours teaching per week \_\_\_\_\_
5. Average number of hours preparing for classes per week \_\_\_\_\_
6. Average number of hours of exercise per week \_\_\_\_\_
7. Average number of hours of sleep per week \_\_\_\_\_
8. Average number of hours with family obligations per week \_\_\_\_\_
9. Average number of hours relaxing or socializing per week \_\_\_\_\_
10. Average number of hours spent on another job per week \_\_\_\_\_

\* Note: "Week" = 7 days

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## Results

I computed descriptive data for all *OH* and *GQ-6* responses, including means and standard deviations for meaning, pleasure, engagement, and gratitude, by grade level taught, certification status, and teaching area (Tables 4, 5, & 6). I also calculated descriptive data for *DDF* variables, including means and standard deviations for combined subject responses (Table 7). Collectively, mean scores for pleasure and gratitude were comparable to adults in previous studies (e.g., Giacalone, Paul, & Jurkiewicz, 2005; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Collective mean scores for engagement were slightly lower than comparable studies, but were higher for meaning (e.g., Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005).

Comparisons of perceived happiness and gratitude levels were determined using a three-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with grade level taught, certification status, and teaching area serving as the independent variables and meaning, pleasure, engagement, and gratitude serving as the dependent variables. Results of the MANOVA revealed statistically significant effects for grade level taught ( $F = 4.96$ ;  $df = 12, 572$ ;  $p < .01$ ), certification status ( $F = 12.67$ ;  $df = 4, 216$ ;  $p < .01$ ), teaching area ( $F = 6.31$ ;  $df = 8, 432$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and interactions between grade and certification ( $F = 3.29$ ;  $df = 4, 216$ ;  $p < .05$ ), grade and area ( $F = 6.34$ ;  $df = 20, 717$ ;  $p < .01$ ), as well as certification and area ( $F = 11.61$ ;  $df = 4, 216$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

Post-analysis univariate ANOVAs revealed that elementary school teachers reported higher levels of meaning ( $F = 3.16$ ;  $df = 3, 219$ ;  $p < .05$ ) than others, high school teachers reported higher levels of engagement ( $F = 2.88$ ;  $df = 3, 219$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and middle school teachers reported lower levels of gratitude ( $F = 8.87$ ;  $df = 3, 219$ ;  $p < .01$ ) than others. Teachers with professional certification reported higher levels of meaning ( $F = 3.52$ ;  $df = 1, 219$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and gratitude ( $F = 34.63$ ;  $df = 1, 219$ ;  $p < .01$ ) than teachers with initial certification. Teachers who

taught choral/general music reported lower levels of meaning ( $F = 4.01$ ;  $df = 2, 219$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and engagement ( $F = 3.92$ ;  $df = 2, 219$ ;  $p < .05$ ) than all other areas, while those who taught instrumental music reported higher levels of gratitude ( $F = 10.92$ ;  $df = 2, 219$ ;  $p < .01$ ) than teachers in other areas. Statistically significant interactions were also observed for engagement between grade level taught and certification ( $F = 6.44$ ;  $df = 1, 219$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and for gratitude between grade level taught and teaching area ( $F = 2.79$ ;  $df = 5, 219$ ;  $p < .05$ ), as well as certification and teaching area ( $F = 20.59$ ;  $df = 1, 219$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

Relationships among perceived happiness, gratitude, academic, and personal variables were determined using Pearson product-moment correlation analyses, with *OH*, *GQ-6*, and *DDF* data serving as measures of the respective variables. Results of the correlation analyses revealed moderate to moderately weak positive relationships ( $p < .01$ ) between meaning and gratitude ( $r = .66$ ), meaning and engagement ( $r = .40$ ), meaning and hours of teaching ( $r = .35$ ), gratitude and hours of exercise ( $r = .33$ ), and between engagement and hours of exercise ( $r = .32$ ). Moderate to moderately weak negative relationships ( $p < .01$ ) were observed between gratitude and hours of preparation ( $r = -.44$ ) and between hours of teaching and hours of sleep ( $r = -.37$ ).

**Table 4**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Meaning, Pleasure, Engagement, and Gratitude by Grade Level Taught*

|             | N   | ME Mean/ <i>SD</i> | PL Mean/ <i>SD</i> | EN Mean/ <i>SD</i> | GR Mean/ <i>SD</i> |
|-------------|-----|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Elementary  | 35  | 4.17/.72           | 3.41/.85           | 3.40/.36           | 37.00/7.34         |
| Middle      | 30  | 3.75/1.14          | 3.33/.56           | 3.14/.46           | 34.00/8.28         |
| High        | 45  | 3.89/.82           | 3.24/.95           | 3.61/.55           | 37.22/5.58         |
| Combination | 125 | 3.86/.87           | 3.06/.87           | 3.37/.60           | 36.96/4.22         |
| Total       | 235 | 3.89/.88           | 3.18/.86           | 3.39/.56           | 36.64/5.71         |

**Table 5**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Meaning, Pleasure, Engagement, and Gratitude by Certification Status*

|              | N   | ME Mean/ <i>SD</i> | PL Mean/ <i>SD</i> | EN Mean/ <i>SD</i> | GR Mean/ <i>SD</i> |
|--------------|-----|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Initial      | 35  | 3.42/1.19          | 3.14/1.17          | 3.48/.64           | 29.86/8.74         |
| Professional | 200 | 3.97/.79           | 3.19/.79           | 3.37/.54           | 37.83/3.98         |
| Total        | 235 | 3.89/.88           | 3.18/.86           | 3.39/.56           | 36.64/5.71         |

**Table 6**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Meaning, Pleasure, Engagement, and Gratitude by Teaching Area*

|                | N   | ME Mean/ <i>SD</i> | PL Mean/ <i>SD</i> | EN Mean/ <i>SD</i> | GR Mean/ <i>SD</i> |
|----------------|-----|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Instrumental   | 130 | 3.99/.84           | 3.26/.83           | 3.47/.64           | 37.38/4.47         |
| Choral/General | 70  | 3.61/.97           | 3.12/.95           | 3.25/.42           | 35.57/6.78         |
| Combination    | 35  | 4.14/.73           | 3.00/.74           | 3.38/.39           | 36.00/7.11         |
| Total          | 235 | 3.89/.88           | 3.18/.86           | 3.39/.56           | 36.64/5.71         |

**Table 7**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Demographic Data Form (DDF) Variables (N = 235)*

|                                       | Mean  | <i>SD</i> |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-----------|
| Hours teaching per week               | 38.36 | 10.57     |
| Hours preparing per week              | 9.29  | 11.40     |
| Hours of exercise per week            | 3.38  | 2.88      |
| Hours of sleep per week               | 45.04 | 7.99      |
| Hours of socializing per week         | 12.19 | 10.59     |
| Hours of family obligations per week  | 11.81 | 11.66     |
| Hours of working another job per week | 4.41  | 6.31      |

## Discussion

While pursuits of pleasure can be initially helpful in overcoming feelings of stress and burnout, they are typically only a small part of deep happiness. Practices related to gratitude, meaning, and engagement are often more challenging and can offer better connections and positive experiences. Collectively, music teachers in this study reported relatively healthy levels of pleasure and gratitude compared to previous literature with adult participants (e.g., Giacalone, Paul, & Jurkiewicz, 2005; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Collective scores for meaning were higher than adult participants in previous studies (e.g., Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005), perhaps indicating a connection between the music teaching profession and life satisfaction.

Researches might be well-served to pursue further examination to determine why middle school teachers and those in choral/general music settings reported lower levels of happiness and gratitude than their peers. Expanding the geographical scope of the inquiry, perhaps regionally or nationally, as well as qualitative or mixed-methods data collection, would help support or refute current findings, and add better detail. Support should be offered for new teachers, who, as in previous literature (e.g., Bernhard, 2006), reported greater challenges than those with more experience. Professional development opportunities related to specific areas of music teaching (e.g., elementary general music, middle school choir, high school orchestra, etc.), as well as mentoring partnerships with seasoned music teachers in similar roles would likely be beneficial to early career educators.

Researchers should also pursue further study to determine why collective scores for engagement were lower than adult participants from previous studies (e.g., Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). One possible explanation could be related to the

current culture of digital distraction. As Jackson (2009) argues, “The way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention—the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress” (p. 13). According to Elmore and McPeak (2019), adults between the ages of 18 and 33 interact with their phones more than eighty-five times a day, spending several hours doing so. Carr (2008) further noted that, while the current culture of simply Googling answers in both scholarship and popular culture can be useful, it is likely leading to challenges engaging with full-text books and articles.

Positive correlations were observed in the current study among happiness, gratitude, and hours of exercise, while negative correlations were observed among hours of teaching and sleep, as well as hours of preparation and gratitude. While the term "exercise" is sometimes considered negative or pejorative, physical movement is a normal and essential part of the human condition (e.g., Rath, 2013; Wachob, 2016). In addition to maintaining and improving muscle function, heart health, and immune systems, movement improves brain processing and emotional health. “The neurons in the brain connect through 'leaves' on treelike branches, and exercise causes those branches to grow and bloom with new buds, thus enhancing brain function at a fundamental level” (Ratey, 2008, p. 5). Similarly, sound sleep is essential for healthy cognitive, psychomotor, and emotional function. "There does not seem to be one major organ within the body or process within the brain that is not optimally enhanced by sleep" (Walker, 2018, p. 7). Professional development opportunities related to physical movement, sleep, and other health areas would likely be beneficial in mitigating challenges associated with happiness and gratitude. Ultimately, music teachers who can pursue worthwhile challenges, successfully negotiate distraction, and appreciate the good are likely to better handle daily stressors and experience greater personal and professional life satisfaction.

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