

## JOYFUL ENGAGEMENT: MONTESSORI'S COMMON CORE STANDARD

by Sarah Werner Andrews

*Linking joy and engagement together, Sarah Werner Andrews points out how happiness is a factor of real imaginary work possibilities and not just coercion. Choice and expression of work are central to the child when work is self-motivated but does not always succeed. Practice alongside risk is a factor for all real work, mistakes are important, and a growth mindset justifies making mistakes from time to time. The social, emotional, cognitive, and physical wellness contribute to a positive approach for developing the self, and joyful engagement can become the common core for Montessori schools as they guide the child through human development and into the world around us.*

At the heart of any educational reform is the debate about what is most important for children, and the current raging passions about the Common Core Standards, both for and against, are indicators of how seriously this country is examining the means by which we provide a high standard of achievement for all children. The mission statement for the Common Core State Standards Initiative reads as follows:

The Common Core Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.

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There is nothing wrong with this mission statement; it is a good thing to have a consistent, clear understanding of expectations. It is also good for parents and teachers to know what they need to do to help children. The standards should be robust and relevant to the real world, and it is good that they reflect knowledge and skills that our children need for success. There is nothing wrong with having a *common core standard*, Montessori educators *should* have standards, but what *is* our standard?

I would like to propose that the common core standard of Montessori education be *Joyful Engagement*. Let's explore the idea of joyful engagement so that we can have a consistent, clear understanding of joyful engagement, so that parents and teachers know what they need to do to help children achieve and maintain joyful engagement. Let's show how joyful engagement is robust and relevant in the real world and helps children develop the knowledge and skills they need for lifelong success.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF HAPPINESS

Let's begin with "joyfulness." Joy, or happiness, is commonly thought of as a mental state of well-being and contentment. We are probably in this state more as children than at any other time in our lives. There is also a physical component to happiness, which involves neurochemicals such as endorphins, oxytocin, and serotonin. Endorphins give us that rush of good feelings after exercise or laughter, oxytocin is associated with feelings of trust and security, and all of this "feeling good" elevates our levels of serotonin and decreases levels of cortisol, protecting our bodies and minds from the damage caused by stress. But not all happiness is created equal.

A recent article in *The New York Times Magazine* reported a UCLA study that found that different forms of happiness exhibit different gene-expression profiles. In this study, volunteers who reported their happiness was based more upon consumption, such as possessions and desires, had unhealthy gene-expression profiles, and volunteers whose happiness was based more upon a sense of higher purpose and service to others had healthier gene-expression profiles. Steven Cole, the author of the study, concludes, "Our genes can tell the difference between a purpose-driven life and a shallower one, even when our conscious mind cannot" (Reynolds).



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## **Happiness Contributes to Engagement**

Happiness and positive emotions contribute to learning and engagement. Dr. Christine Carter, author of the book, *Raising Happiness*, believes that happiness makes us more creative, better problem solvers, and more open to new ideas. Dr. David Rock, cofounder of the NeuroLeadership Institute echoes this connection between happiness and engagement: “Engagement is a state of being willing to do difficult things, to take risks, to think deeply about issues and develop new solutions. ...Interest, happiness, joy, and desire are ‘approach emotions’. This state is one of increased dopamine levels, important for interest and learning” (Alber).

Let's look at this quotation from a Montessori perspective. "Willingness to do difficult things" speaks to the development of self-discipline and perseverance. "To take risks" directly relates to our attitude of friendliness with error and not being afraid to make mistakes. "To think deeply and develop

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new solutions" is what we aim for when we support creativity and exploration of materials and ideas. Finally, "approach emotions" is a state of being open and interested and following one's ideas and passions. This speaks to independence, ability, and free choice, but also to interdependence and community.

The simple idea of joyful engagement now becomes a positive approach to developing self-discipline and perseverance, accompanied by friendliness with error, and building creativity and independence through exploring individual interests and ideas. If our Montessori common core standard is that we expect children to learn with joyful engagement, what then become our "best practices" for facilitating such learning?

### MONTESSORI BEST PRACTICES

Let's begin by examining the development of self-discipline. Dr. Christine Carter posits that a great way for children to develop self-discipline is to offer plenty of unstructured time for children to play, because it is during this open, imaginative play time that children are making their own rules and listening to the "little voice inside their head" that directs their activity. She compares imaginative play to structured play, such as soccer practice, when the coach is directing the activity by telling the children what to practice, what drills to run, and what positions to play.

In Montessori education, we have plenty of unstructured time for children to play; we call it a *three-hour work period*. Within that block of time, we offer the keys to the world, and what could be more open-ended and imaginative than that? During this time, children are free to choose what they want to do, where to do it,

with whom, and they can do it as long as time and interest allow. However, we also have aspects to our day that are more like soccer practice. Some presentations are very teacher-directed, such as three-period lessons and “bring me” games, and generally our meal times and transitions are very adult-directed.

There is nothing inherently wrong with directed activities; we do these activities to help children build up the skills and tools they need for learning, and they can be fun as well. The problem comes when we try to make the imaginary play too much like soccer practice. What does that mean? Well, when we create too many arbitrary rules, such as, “You have to do one math and one language before you do any art,” or, “If you write a story with the moveable alphabet, you have to write it down on paper,” or, “Only one person at a time can be outside/in the reading corner/at the snack table...” etc.

Another way our imaginary play becomes too much like soccer practice is when our presentations become prescriptions. We often invite children to a presentation with the words, “I’m going to show you how to build the pink tower!” But consider this, what if we said instead, “This is the pink tower. I’m going to show you something we can do with this.” The first invitation invites the child to build the pink tower just as we did; it implies there is one way, and we are going to show the child how to do it. The second invitation is more open-ended and offers the idea that there also may be something else we can do with the pink tower. Perhaps there is another way to explore dimensional change.

In regards to the manner of presentation, E.M. Standing credits Dr. Montessori with saying,

Our task is to show how an action is done, and at the same time destroy the possibility of imitation. What we have to consider is how we can present this action to the small child and at the same time disturb as little as possible the creative impulse. We do not want the child to do this action because we are doing it, or as we do it, or because we have commanded it to be done. (Standing 216)

Montessori is challenging us to think about our presentations as an objective introduction to what is possible, so that when the child

does the activity, it is an expression of his own creative impulses, not ours. Let's take this idea one step further. What if, when we invited the child, we said, "This is the pink tower. I wonder what could we do with this?" Well, some researchers out of MIT and UC Berkley asked a similar question, "How does the way we teach affect the way children learn?"

Alison Gopnik, at UC Berkley, and author of *The Philosophical Baby*, designed a test to examine if the way a teacher approached a lesson affected the way children learned. She used two groups of children and a clever little toy with many little features. With the first group of children, the teacher used a direct instruction model and said, "I'm going to show you how this toy works. Watch this!" With the second group of children, the teacher acted a little surprised, "Hmm... Look at this toy. I wonder how it works? Oh!" Both groups of children played with the toy, and were able to make it do what the teacher made it do. However, the children in the second group played with the toy longer and discovered more of its clever hidden features. Gopnik concluded that direct instruction made the children less curious and less likely to discover new information.

Now, there is no question that children need structure. Limits are helpful. But if we make too many rules, and create too much structure, we remove all opportunity for self-regulation from children. If the adult generally decides how long, how many, how much, and which ones, the little voice inside their heads becomes ours, not theirs.

### **Work Is Play**

There is another element in our Montessori prepared environments that links our activities to the research on play, and that element is *free choice*. For many children, play time is the only time they get to choose what they want to do, but in a Montessori setting, all throughout the day, children should be free to choose what they want to do, where they want to do it, with whom, and for how long. Stuart Brown, in his book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, describes the voluntary nature of play as the essence of freedom. He explains that when children voluntarily choose an activity they do so because of an inherent, personal interest. He observes that during play, children become

fully engaged, are fully in the moment, and experience what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly calls *flow*.

In Brown's book, Scott Eberle, the self-described "Intellectual Historian of Play and Vice-President for Interpretation at the Strong National Museum of Play," describes a wheel-shaped framework of play: anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise. This framework is strikingly similar to the cycle of activity that children experience within any Montessori material.

**Anticipation** occurs at the start of a presentation, as the children are wondering what will happen: "Have you ever peeked inside of this box?"

**Surprise** is a discovery or change in perspective: "Oh my! Look at all the tarnish on this cloth!"

**Pleasure** is a good feeling: "Ha, ha, ha! This chain has 108 *and* 180!"

**Understanding** is acquiring new knowledge or the synthesis of ideas: "Teacher! Did you know that (insert Meaningful Discovery here)!"

**Strength** is the mastery that comes from experience or practice: "I can help you build that map of Asia!"

**Poise** is shown by grace, contentment, and a sense of balance: Think of the care that children take when they finish a project and "make it ready for the next person," or of the deep satisfaction that occurs after working and the child takes that calm centeredness into their next activity.

Both Brown and Eberle describe the elements of play in a way remarkably similar to the "normalizing" effects of a Montessori activity, freely chosen, done by the hands, with real objects, accompanied by mental concentration.<sup>1</sup> Angeline Lillard, in *The Science Behind the Genius*, describes Montessori environments as featuring activities that are of individual interest, with intrinsic rewards, taking place within a social community of peers. These are the features of

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<sup>1</sup>Brown, however, also describes the first quality of play is its apparent purposelessness. I don't interpret this to mean he is saying only purposeless activities are considered play, but that he, like others, is baffled that play doesn't appear to have any survival value. Montessori found, by contrast, that very similar results could be obtained through using activities that do have a specific value.

play that are important to cognitive and social development, and are incorporated into any quality Montessori setting.

### **The Importance of Failure**

Returning to our Montessori common core mission statement, there is one more piece to discuss: the importance of failure. We want to provide our children with lots of little opportunities to fail. Why would this be such an essential ingredient? How could failure support joyful engagement? Making mistakes supports learning because learning occurs when we encounter something that does not fit our present understanding. “Oh! This is different! This is new! I did not know that!” The Montessori “control of error” is built into many of the activities that the children do, and gives children the opportunity to encounter a little challenge, or a little “stressor,” and decide if they are going to accept or decline the invitation to try again. Perseverance and resilience are developed through encountering and resolving those daily little stressors. Children learn through experience that it is alright to make a mistake, they can fix it or work it out, and they take that success with them into their next encounter. These continued opportunities for failures build friendliness with error.

If parents and teachers constantly protect children from failure, we rob them of the experience of overcoming adversity. We know that if we present a material or activity to a child and she does it perfectly, we have presented it too late and it was a missed opportunity. We look for and expect mistakes. No one should ever feel that they are entitled to a life that is free from struggle or even want it. It is better to persist through challenges, to learn, and move on. Friendliness with error is the path to creativity and is necessary for innovation and achieving deep engagement.

People with perseverance have two core beliefs: success comes from practice, and we have to take risks and make mistakes in order to grow. Carol Dweck, a psychologist at Stanford, has been researching the difference between a *growth mindset* and a *fixed mindset*. People who have a fixed mindset believe that they are as smart as they will ever be, and nothing will change that. They tend to avoid challenges, are threatened by others’ success, and because their goal

is to look smart, they avoid risks that might lead to failure. Her research shows that people with a growth mindset believe that they learn through practice, and so it is better to try, even if the result is failure. They persist through obstacles and are inspired by others' successes. People with a growth mindset generally lead less stressful and happier lives, and continue to work hard despite setbacks.

### **Practicing Compassion**

There is another way to reduce stress and lead a happier life, and that is by practicing compassion. As the Dalai Lama advises, "If you want *others* to be happy, practice compassion. If *you* want to be happy, practice compassion " (Dalai Lama xi). Children and families seem to be under more stress than ever before, and one of the best ways we can reduce that stress is by practicing compassion, gratitude, and kindness. Helping others is a core stress relief management skill, and we have opportunities for compassion, gratitude, and kindness embedded into our Montessori curriculum: our lessons of Grace and Courtesy.



Courtesy of Lynn Jessen

Joyful engagement is our Montessori common core. It is our standard for improving school outcomes. It is a positive approach to developing self-discipline and perseverance through friendliness with error.

Grace and Courtesy lessons offer children the opportunity to learn and practice the social and emotional skills they need in order to successfully navigate life in a community and, at the same time, develop essential core ex-

ecutive functions. These core executive functions of inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility are exercised through the lessons of Grace and Courtesy. Through practicing walking around someone else's work rug, or waiting for a material to be available, children develop their will and self-discipline, practicing inhibitory control. Working memory is strengthened by practicing what to say, what to do, and even when remembering that what happened last time didn't work out so well. Cognitive flexibility is another way to think about problem solving.

Strong core executive functions have been linked to overall high general happiness and greater life satisfaction. Terry Moffit's now famous study of the long-term effects of strong executive functions in young children showed that thirty years later, as adults, they reported higher levels of happiness and less stress. In a 2011 paper, Adele Diamond and Kathleen Lee wrote that programs with the best approaches to supporting executive functions are "those which engage student's passionate interests; bring them joy and pride; help alleviate stress and assist children with calmer, healthier responses; and give a sense of belonging and social acceptance."

School standards, like today's common core standards, are all about improving outcomes. Dr. Adele Diamond's 2010 paper examined the evidence base for improving school outcomes:

It all comes back to the importance of action for learning and the fundamental interrelatedness of the different parts of the human being (the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical parts) and of all human beings to one another. Academic achievement, social-emotional competence, and physical and mental health are fundamentally and multiply interrelated. The best and most efficient way to

foster any one of those (such as academic achievement) is to foster all of them.

How do we “foster all of them” as Dr. Diamond advises? How do we support academic achievement, social and emotional competence, as well as physical and mental health? The answer is *joyful engagement*. Joyful engagement is our Montessori common core. It is our standard for improving school outcomes. It is a positive approach to developing self-discipline and perseverance through friendliness with error. Joyful engagement builds creativity and independence through exploring individual interests and ideas. It is robust, relevant, and helps children develop the knowledge and skills they need for lifelong success, and that is a standard I can get behind.

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