

Be Happy

By Julie Bragdon

Photographs from Montessori School of Denver



I have been thinking a lot about happiness lately. This started in earnest when I watched researcher Shawn Achor's 7-minute TEDX talk, entitled "The Happy Secret to Better Work," with parents and staff. Afterward, I was compelled to buy his book to learn more. *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*, based on Achor's work at Harvard and companies worldwide, goes into detail about how we can all be happier and more fulfilled. Reading it, I was struck by how Achor's principles are embedded in Montessori philosophy and curriculum. Once again, Montessori proves to be cutting edge, even 100 years later! Here are some thoughts on a few of Achor's principles on happiness and how they relate to Montessori.

The Happiness Advantage

"Positive brains have a biological advantage over brains that are neutral or negative" (Achor, 2010, p. 17).

The children pictured above are Montessori children at the school where I work, arriving in the morning. I am lucky enough to start each weekday with this view. I watch 300 students, from 3-year-olds through sixth graders, begin their school days with faces aglow. These children are eager to be at school and, according to Achor, their brains are primed for success and learning because they feel positive. Montessori wrote often about joy in the classroom, and we see it for ourselves every day: The children in our school are happy, focused on their work, and excited to learn. Our Montessori input is a group of happy children and our outcome is deep learning and understanding.

The Fulcrum and the Lever

"Simply put, by changing our fulcrum of our mindset and lengthening our lever of possibility, we change what is possible. It's not the weight of the world that determines what we can accomplish. It is our fulcrum and lever" (Achor, 2010, p. 65).

Self-confidence and the ability to see possibility are skills Montessori children gain in spades in the classroom. They are comfortable with the learning process and the cycle of trial and error. The ability to self-assess that is rooted in Montessori's self-correcting materials sets this stage. Also embedded in the Montessori curriculum are the skills of conscious problem-solving that serve students for a lifetime of working through challenges and opportunities.

The Tetris Effect

Achor writes about what he calls "The Tetris Effect": "When our brains constantly scan for and focus on the positive, we profit from three of the most important tools available to us: happiness, gratitude, and optimism" (2010, p. 97).

Montessori education has gratitude, optimism, and service at its core. Recently our third-year students went on an overnight trip to a science center. The center counselors instructed our

students that carrying firewood was a consequence for an infraction. Much to the surprise of the center staff, our students asked to carry wood though they had not broken any rules. Montessori children want to help others. They know that you feel better about the world when you see you can make an impact and you feel even better when you are around other like-minded, positive people.

The Zorro Circle

To overcome daunting challenges, Achor suggests that we can break them into smaller tasks—drawing a metaphorical “Zorro Circle” around each task until it is complete. We see children set small goals like this every day in our classrooms and homes. Toddlers start by pouring their own water out of a small pitcher. Primary

children work on writing their own stories and elementary children master mathematical operations and friendship. Recently our upper elementary students partnered with a school in Zambia to work on the issue of infectious disease. Our students believed that they could help solve the issue of malaria and came up with a unique mosquito net for which they now hold a working patent. Learning goals change as children grow, but the work remains meaningful, maybe even life changing.

Social Investment

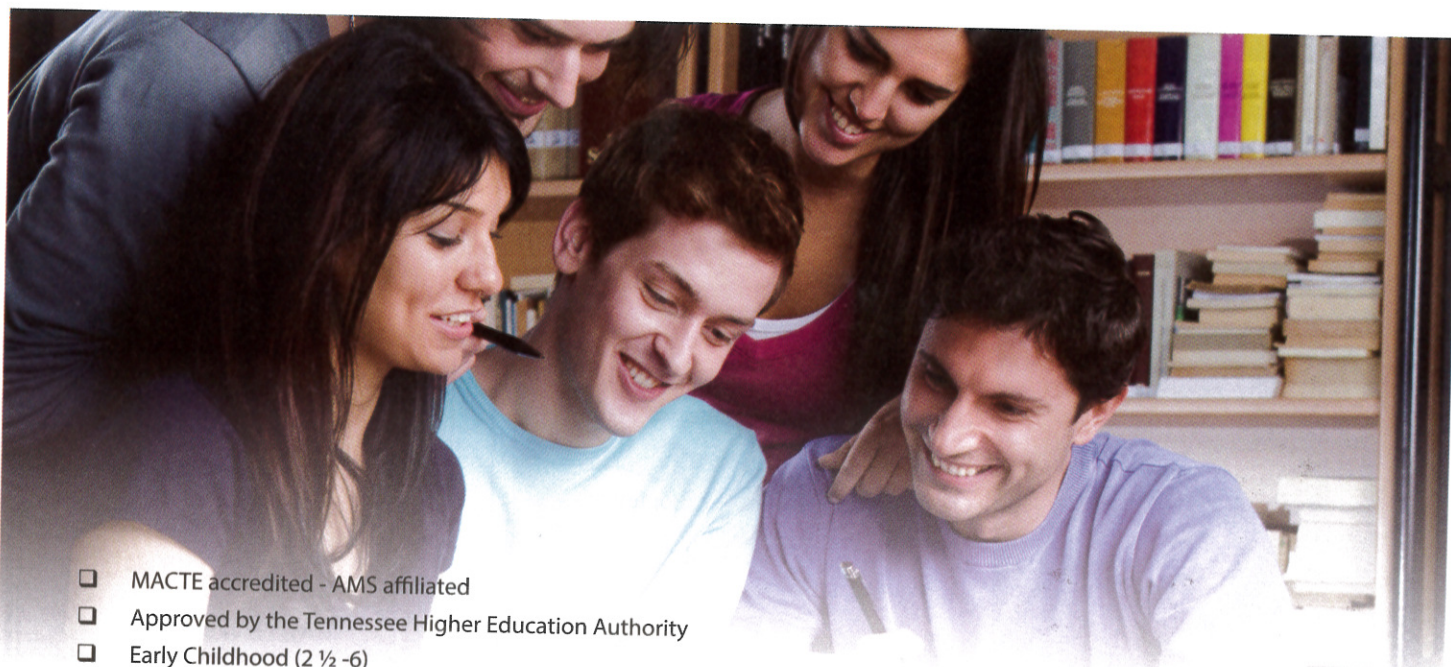
“In the midst of challenges and stress, some people choose to hunker down and retreat within themselves. But the most successful people invest in their friends, peers, and family members to propel themselves forward”

(Achor, 2010, p. 18). Our Montessori communities are their own social ecosystems, with students invested in group success and friendships. As a result, students can reach their full potential.

References

- Achor, S. (2010). *The happiness advantage: The seven principles of positive psychology that fuel success and performance at work*. New York: Crown Business.
- Achor, S. (2011). *The happy secret to better work*. Retrieved November 18, 2012, from www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work.html.

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