

A MONTESSORI MORNING:

by Punum Bhatia, PhD

The Three-Hour Uninterrupted Work Cycle

“The first essential for the child’s development is concentration. It lays the whole basis for his character and social behavior.” (*Montessori, 1988, p.202*).

Dr. Maria Montessori believed that children have an inner directive for their optimum self-construction and that concentration was the key to their natural development. This was perhaps one of her major contributions to the world: that if protected and nurtured, the child’s Inner Guide will lead to the development of the child’s full potential. She asked those working in her schools for close observations of the children’s behavior and it was Signorina Maccheroni in Rome that first provided specific information concerning the way in which the children were working:

“The child keeps still for a while, and then chooses some task he finds easy, such as arranging the colors in gradation; he continues working at this for a time, but not for very long; he passes on to some more complicated task, such as that of composing words with the moveable letters, and perseveres with this for a long time (about half an hour). At this stage he ceases working, walks about the room, and appears calm; to a superficial observer he would seem to show signs of fatigue. But after a few minutes he undertakes some much more difficult work, and becomes so deeply absorbed in this that he shows us that he has reached the acme of his activity. When this work is finished, his activity comes to an end in all serenity;

he contemplates his handiwork for a long time, then approaches the teacher, and begins to confide in her. The appearance of the child is that of a person who is rested, satisfied, and uplifted.” (*Montessori, 1917/1965, p. 97*).

Many years of observation convinced Montessori that the work of the child and the formation of the personality occur during periods of intense concentration, which she called “polarization of attention” (*Montessori, 1917/1965, p. 68*).

She observed that children deeply engaged and fully concentrating on a task at hand were transformed and “showed extraordinary spiritual qualities, recalling the phenomena of a higher consciousness” (*Montessori, 1917/1965, p. 68*). After completing a cycle of activity, children seemed refreshed, calm and satisfied. This is similar to what Csikszentmihalyi (1997) termed “flow” and can be understood as an ability to focus on an interesting activity, which leads not only to quality performance, but most of all to maximum effort and intensity of concentration.

Dr. Montessori envisioned a prepared environment where children could develop unhindered, allowing them to reach their maximum potential. In the process, the true nature of the child emerges, giving the world a glimpse of the potential of all of humanity. The core of the Montessori prepared environment, and the key for concentration and optimal experience, is the three-hour uninterrupted work cycle. Mon-

tessori believed that “children need sufficient time to delve into work, to concentrate and to develop their inner guides” (*Lillard, 2005, p. 108*). She considered that this required amount of time allows for a child to progress into the most in-depth concentration and intellectual exploration, resulting in the most significant growth. She noted: “Each time a polarization of attention took place, the child began to be completely transformed, to become calmer, more intelligent and more expansive” (*Montessori, 1917/1965, p.68*). Montessori came to understand that children, when uninterrupted and left in freedom to choose work, displayed a distinct work cycle that was so predictable it could even be graphed. This cycle, with two peaks and one valley, lasted approximately, three hours.

At Montessori Casa International, children have three hours of open, uninterrupted time to choose independent work, become deeply engaged, and repeat to their own satisfaction. There are no bells here or morning recess. The day is not cut up into time segments (music, art, snack, etc.) the way it is in a traditional school. The children and the teachers work in unison during the morning: sometimes individually and at other times in groups. Sometimes they receive lessons and at other times they give them. When they need a break, they have a snack that they have prepared earlier in the morning. The three hours gives the children plenty of time to move in and out of extended periods

of concentration at their own pace. They follow their own inclinations and engage in activities that expand their cognitive, social and motor skills.

A work cycle of three hours allows the child adequate time to become involved in his/her work, to observe and then become significantly engaged in an activity. "There is a vital urge to completeness of action, and if the cycle of this urge is broken, it shows in deviations from normality and lack of purpose." (Montessori, 1948/1967, p. 57). This is part of what makes Montessori unique and as much as possible this work cycle should be respected. An interruption, no matter how beneficial an adult may consider it to be, disturbs the growing development of the child's concentration and focus. In fact, if children are aware that they may be interrupted during the course of the morning, they will choose not to work at all. I often explain this to my teacher trainees with a personal question: if you knew you had only 15 minutes to work on your essay, would you even start? The answer inevitably is a no. How can you even begin to concentrate knowing that you do not have an uninterrupted period of time to work? It is no different with the child. A pure, authentic Montessori school will not allow any interruptions during the work cycle. Our Chinese teacher does not come into the classroom mid-morning and give all the children a 30-minute lesson. She is with the children for the full day, speaking to them in Mandarin, giving them the Montessori presentations in Mandarin and taking care of them just as the English speaking teacher does. We have no art instructor pulling out a group of children and disturbing the whole class

whilst doing so. We have a very rich art appreciation program that is one of the curriculum areas of the classroom, and the children can choose to work with those materials just as much and often as they work in Sensorial or Literacy. We believe that if the work cycle is interrupted, the child will never reach that deep concentration Montessori speaks about, and that if the work cycle is shorter than

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The adults in Montessori settings facilitate children's learning by preparing a favorable environment that meets the needs of the children and challenges them as well. They use observation as a vital tool for understanding and nurturing the individual potential within each child by offering plenty of opportunities for spontaneous engagement in activities. Expectations for behavior to ensure the well being and safety of everyone are laid down by the teacher at the beginning of the school year and gentle reminders given whenever needed.

Many children enter the classroom and for the first few minutes choose to socialize with each other. The classroom is busy and noisy as greetings are exchanged and stories shared. This is usually followed by a period when children choose relatively simple tasks and stay with them for a short period of time.

These are familiar tasks that they have done several times before. They may repeat these tasks over and over again and in doing so gain a sense of competence and empowerment. This prepares them for the more challenging tasks that lie ahead. Once they are ready, they will choose a slightly more difficult task and stay with it for a longer period. This may be followed by a period of "false fatigue"

(Montessori, 1917/1965) when they are often seen wandering around the classroom, almost looking for inspiration. An observer in the classroom will find the children restless and will think the morning work period has come to an end. The trained teacher, however, recognizes false fatigue and does not interrupt, knowing fully well that if she were to step in at this point when it seems that the child needs guidance to choose an activity, the great work will never happen. Left to themselves, the children will choose their most difficult work of the morning and stay with it for the longest time. It is during this period that the deepest concentration and the greatest strides in the development of skills and acquisition of knowledge are seen. Some children will work with other children, others may work diligently on their own, and some might accept an offer for a more challenging presentation by the teacher. After the completion of this work, the child is never seen as exhausted or tired. On the other hand,

s/he seems refreshed with a desire to do even more work. Montessori writes:

“In the first period of the morning, up to about 10am, the occupation chosen is generally an easy and familiar task.”

At 10 o'clock there is a general commotion; the children are restless, they neither work nor go in quest of materials. The onlooker gets an impression of a tired class, about to become disorderly. After a few minutes the most perfect order reigns once more; the children are promptly absorbed in work again; they have chosen new and more difficult occupations. When this work ceases, the children are gentle, calm and happy.” (Montessori, 1917/1965, p. 98-99).


When the time available is less than three hours, the child is unable to accomplish this feeling of satisfaction. Hence, it is crucial that all Montessori schools respect the three-hour uninterrupted work cycle knowing that it is the foundation for the child to achieve lengthened periods of concentration, discipline and normalization. Montessori writes:

“Only normalized children, aided by their environment, show in their subsequent development those wonderful powers that we describe: spontaneous discipline, continuous and happy work, social sentiments of help and sympathy for others.” (Montessori, 1988, p.188).

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