

THE MONTESSORI WORK CYCLE: HOW TO MAKE IT WORK

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Our topic this afternoon is an interesting one. As Montessorians, we know that work is the key to the normalization of the child. We strive toward a model wherein all children work with deep concentration for an extended period of time. We believe that the collaboration of the prepared environment and the sensitive periods of the child are sufficient to create these magnificent work cycles in and of themselves. These are fundamental beliefs and very important, but they can carry a sentiment that it is all “**just magic.**”

Dr. Montessori understood the gap between theory and reality. She wrote in “The Absorbent Mind” regarding the confusion that this gap can create. I quote “the inexperienced teacher, filled with enthusiasm and faith in this inner discipline which she expects to appear in our little community, finds herself faced by no light problems. She understands and believes that the children must be free to choose their own occupations, just as they must never be interrupted in their spontaneous activities. The teacher must be quiet and passive, waiting patiently and almost withdrawing herself from the scene, so as to efface her own personality and thus allow the spirit of the child to expand. She has put out a great deal of the apparatus, almost all of it, but this increases the disorder alarmingly. Are the principles she has learned mistaken? No, between her theories and the results to which they lead, something is missing. It is the teacher’s practical experience” (p. 263)

Many of you are now thinking that you made a mistake coming to this session. You are already an experienced teacher and don’t have the same challenges as the inexperienced teacher. I would suggest, that we all face challenges in understanding how to facilitate normalization for all children. Even if it is only one child in your class! So we will look at the role of the teacher as facilitator and the evolution of the child as the implementer of work, for **truly this is a collaboration!!**

The role of the teacher can be summarized quite readily in terms of its practical aspects.

- Prepare the environment mindfully and appropriately
- Create an atmosphere within which concentration is possible
- Link the child to purposeful activity that is a response to a developmental need (connects with Sensitive Periods)
- Protect work once it is initiated

That’s a great list, but exactly how to accomplish each task and to gauge how the nature of the task changes over time is the art of this work. As we look at the evolution of the child and how we can impact this change, we will begin to see how our part of the “dance” changes as well.

I, myself, have said many times, that I think it is a greater challenge to engage children in work in today’s society than it was 30 years ago when I began this work. Certainly, the pressures of a fast life style are difficult for the child. Certainly, growing up in a “techno” world has an impact. But it is incorrect to think that children in Dr. Montessori’s time just naturally fell into the normalized state of discipline. Let me read a bit from one of my favorite chapters in all of Dr. Montessori’s writings- Experimental Science as found in “**Spontaneous Activity in Education**”. (“**Adv. Montessori Methods**”, for those of you with more recent editions.)

(Read the marked sections on pg. 88 as described in letters from Ms. George and Ms. Dufresne.)

Does this description remind you of any past or recent days with the children? Don’t despair, you see, it was this chaotic even in Dr. Montessori’s days. Let’s look at how this might look if it was graphed as a “work cycle.”

The first graph is of a child who really can't even find something in the classroom that sustains interest. The times he is attentive, he is actually just watching lessons given to other children and then goes outside to play. This child has not yet found a connection to any occupation that brings a semblance of calm or order.

The second graph represents a child who has had presentations. It appears more chaotic than the first and yet is not. This child is engaged with the geometric insets and some frames. While engaged this child is able to attend to the work, but upon its completion, he drops back into a stage of disorder – is disruptive and at loose ends.

Let's look at how, we can facilitate for the child, leading toward the potential for a more normalized experience. There are nine (9) keys to helping the child move from disorder to order.

Key initial key is the connection to an interesting activity. Dr. Montessori wrote "the important factor is not the external object, but the internal action of the soul, responding to a stimulus, and arrested by it." Dr. Montessori goes on to say "when once the initiation has taken place, it leads to progression which goes on steadily and develops of its own accord." (Ibid, pg. 89)

Let's look at the Advance Toward Order

The graph at the top looks at the work cycle from an objective point of view – what activities is the child engaging with, for how long and what happens in between?

We see a child who has calmed significantly. He works on a variety of activities, but has peaks and valleys along the way and he can't quite sustain the energy all the way through the full three hours.

The second graph looks at the subjective, or emotional parts of the work cycle. This is interesting to consider in light of the insights shared through Dr. Czischemihalyi's work. The emotions are an important factor in the evolution of the work cycle itself and definitely, in relation to the development of self-discipline that results from purposeful work. Note that when the child is engaged, the positive applications of energy are evident, but when he is at loose ends, we see the behaviors of the frustrated child.

Let's look at the elements that have allowed the child to progress to this point.

There is many a Montessori teacher who feels that her job is done when the child begins to work and as a consequence, is less disruptive to the others in the class. But this is only a movement toward normalization; it is not the full integration of hand and mind, body and soul!

The individual worker has a far greater capacity for purposeful activity. The solidification of knowledge comes when the energies can be sustained and the child truly becomes the master of his own work cycle.

Let's look at the work cycle graphs for a child who is well on the way to normalization.

In the top graph, we still see evidence of "false fatigue". This is the child, who is choosing work, staying with it, but quite possibly the level of challenge is not adequate. The child is **"getting the engine warmed, but hasn't arrived at full revs yet"**. The work cycle is sustained around its peak, but wanes as the child completes the work. The period of contemplation (dark room, integration time!) leads to a sharing with the teacher and the end of the cycle.

What we really desire to see as the teacher looks more akin to the bottom two graphs. Here the worker starts out at a high level of engaging and builds it throughout the cycle. At first, the escalation is gradual and as we see, the contemplation ends the whole. In the last graph, the child starts out fully engaged, sustains this throughout and the short contemplation is a period of self-satisfaction, contentment and benevolence as he observes others, but does not disrupt.

The child, at this point, is characterized in several ways:

Dr. Montessori wrote, “A phenomenon of constant occurrence when the children begin to be interested in the work and to develop themselves is the lively joy which seems to possess them...the children themselves seem to have the ‘sensation’ of their spiritual growth, a consciousness of the acquisitions they are making by thus amplifying their own personalities; they demonstrate with joyous effusion the higher process which is beginning within them.” (Pg. 93)

Do you remember the description of the “wild” children offered by Ms. George at the beginning? Listen now to her description of the change she observed “All the children show pride we ourselves experience when we have really produced something novel. They skip round me, and throw their arms about my neck, when they have learned to do some simple thing, saying ‘I did it all alone, you did not think I could have done that; I did it better today than yesterday.’” (Pg. 93)

While we have looked at the evolution of the individual worker, I would like to end with a look at the impact this has on the social cohesion of the group.

Let’s look at the last set of graphs, which are read from bottom to top this time.

The same pattern we observed regarding the individual is replicated in the evolution of the work cycle of the group. The children start out quite disorderly. We despair that we will ever be able to do individual presentations. We feel that we spend our days constantly gathering small groups (or large ones!) and seemingly do nothing more than head off the brewing trouble. **We can’t despair!! But we also cannot sit back and wait for magic to happen!!**

We must be active. We must present, both to small groups and to individuals. We must be vigilant in setting the basic grace and courtesies that create and protect the working atmosphere.

Let’s look at the characteristics of the normalized group.

This is a point of arrival for the group. It does not mean that there won’t still be some chaotic days, but overall the work atmosphere sustains itself, the level of challenge in the work escalates and above and beyond all, the children are happy and fulfilled as their energies are focused upon activities that are in harmony with their spontaneous nature – the sensitive periods and the human tendencies!

This is not “pie in the sky”. It can be a reality, but it will only change as we, the adult understands our role in facilitating that change. We must believe!! - Believe in the beautiful Montessori materials and activities found in your albums. These are the keys to meeting the needs manifested by the Sensitive Periods and Human Tendencies. Believe in those basic Montessori principles – they are true, they are universal and they are important in supporting and nurturing the fullest development of the child. Believe in the child who is endowed with all the tools necessary to learn and needs only to be unleashed. His potential is boundless, his present is fundamental and his future is unknown. We can trust in his readiness for whatever the future brings, when we know that the foundation is strong!