

Protecting the Three-Hour Work Cycle

By Maren Schmidt

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One of the key components of an authentic Montessori classroom is each child's creation of personal three-hour work cycles. A work cycle consists of choosing an activity, doing it, achieving some internal satisfaction, returning the activity to original order, followed by the selection of the next activity.

The Montessori classroom is a vibrant and dynamic learning environment, with each child selecting his or her activity, doing it, and returning the activity to the shelf. After successful completion of a task, there is a period of self-satisfaction and reflection, then the child chooses the next activity.

Montessorians call this rhythm of activity a work cycle. Stephen Covey, in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, refers to the habit of a work cycle as creating an upward spiral of growth and change. Covey describes a dynamic process of "learn-commit-do" that empowers us to move toward continuous improvement, both as children and adults. Montessori saw the three-hour work cycle as a critical vehicle for aiding normal development in the human being, a process Montessori called normalization.

Three-hour work period allows for a three-hour work cycle

A three-hour work period is a protected work time where the children in a Montessori classroom can complete multiple work cycles, eventually creating a three-hour or longer work cycle. Children, as well as adults, develop concentration in two basic ways: 1) doing a series of short activities for longer periods of time, or 2) doing one activity for successively longer durations.

The Discovery of False Fatigue.

Traditional preschools are structured around 15 to 20 minutes activity periods based on the observation that children of three, four and five years of age have a 15 to 20 minute attention span. What Montessori discovered through observation, and we can replicate this with our own note taking, is that given a consistent uninterrupted three-hour work period, young children will choose three or four familiar activities, each lasting 15 to 20 minutes each and then enter into a period

Three Key Components of Authentic Montessori Classrooms

1. Well-trained Montessori teachers, certified at age level being taught
2. Specially prepared environments for each three-year stage of development
3. Children's free choice of activity within a protected three-hour work period

of restlessness, which Montessori called false fatigue. In traditional schools this is when recess is scheduled. Dr. Montessori noticed if the adults working with the children waited out this period of false fatigue, which lasts ten to fifteen minutes, the children will select an activity that constitutes challenging work or new learning, and concentrate on that activity for an hour or more. Montessori noted that at the end of the three-hour work cycle the child experiences a period of calm and sociability.

Around age five, the child who has developed a morning three-hour work cycle will begin a second work period in the afternoon. Adults, elementary students, and teens, may have developed two, three, or even four three-hour work cycles in their day. Another later phenomenon of the work cycle is that the older child's concentration level begins at the point where false fatigue initially began and that level may be maintained over three hours. This development of concentration can be observed and charted.

Example of a child's work cycle

A four-and-a-half-year-old's three-hour work cycle might look like this:

- Work puzzle, 10 minutes.
- Build with blocks, 15 minutes.
- Water plants, 20 minutes.
- Sweep floor, 10 minutes.
- Walk up and down steps, 5 minutes (false fatigue)
- Prepare and eat snack, 15 minutes
- Visit with classmate, 10 minutes.
- Do 100 piece puzzle, 45 minutes.
- Practice tying shoes, 45 minutes.
- Help younger students put shoes on, 15 minutes (Period of sociability)

*“The reward for work well done
is the opportunity to do more.”*
— Jonas Salk

Completing a three-hour work cycle gives the child, or adult, a sense of accomplishment followed by calm composure, along with the desire to do more work. The three-hour work cycle may be a misnomer in the fact that we need to have more than three hours of time to contain the work periods. Having a safeguarded three-and-a-half to four-hour period is recommended.

Example of an adult’s work cycle

Here is an example of an adult’s three-hour work cycle on a Saturday morning.

- Check schedule. See that the morning is free until 1 pm.
- Clean kitchen, 15 minutes.
- Start laundry, 15 minutes.
- Make phone calls for appointments, 20 minutes.
- Vacuum, 20 minutes.
- Feeling of restlessness, What to do next? (False fatigue)
- Cup of coffee, 10 minutes.
- Balance bank statements, pay bills, 90 minutes.
- Fix lunch, 15 minutes. Eat with family and visit 30 minutes. (Period of sociability.)

Due to various circumstances, some Montessori schools do not offer a three-hour work period for the children. These schools may have good programs without a three-hour work cycle, with happy children and families, but I hope this article would help school administrators, teachers and others understand that protecting a three-hour work cycle for their children can help their programs go from good to great.

What keeps a school from offering three-hour work periods?

The factors that keep schools from offering a three-hour work period are numerous. Some obstacles are inherent in the structure of our schools, in the preparation of the teachers, and in the readiness of the children.

School Factors

In established schools, the three-hour work period may have been whittled away due to a variety of factors that range from having specialists come into the classroom, meeting childcare licensing requirements, trying to serve lunch to the entire school, having policies that are lenient on tardiness and absenteeism, running two or three day a week programs, or offering

morning or afternoon only programs.

Using Specialists. Special instructors for art, music, physical education, second languages and more, who come into the classroom and instruct the entire class, interrupt the work cycle. Or perhaps the entire class moves out of the classroom to art or music room, gym or language or computer lab, thus disrupting the children’s work cycles. If specialists are used, try to schedule their sessions at the beginning or the end of the three- hour work period.

Childcare Licensing

Some state’s preschool licensing requirements are such that facilities must offer a rest time and outdoor time if the children stay over three hours a day. Many childcare licensing programs require that outdoor time be offered before lunch instead of after lunch. These situations create difficulties in scheduling a three- hour work period. School administrators should visit with childcare licensing agents and explain the workings of a three-hour work cycle and request special needs in the school’s licensing requirements.

Policies on tardiness and absenteeism

Many children don’t get a three-hour work cycle because they arrive to school late, have excessive absences, or leave before the end of the school day. Private school administrators report that the average rate per student for tardiness is five times or less during a 180-day school year. The absentee rate is less than 10 days per school year and early dismissals are five or less per year.

Two and three-day programs

In response to parent requests over the years, many schools have two or three day a week programs. Children in two and three day a week programs have difficulty creating consistent three-hour work cycles, and attaining the levels of concentration and independence seen in students in five-day a week programs. If at all possible, a school’s program structure should encourage all students to attend five days a week.

Child Readiness

Even when school administration, teachers and parents work together and develop strategies to protect three-hour work periods, the children themselves can create an obstacle to success.

Obstacles for the Child

When a child is undergoing some emotional stress of which there may be many causes—personal illness, family turmoil, moving to a new house, or a new sibling, to name only a few—concentration within the child may diminish and a sort of agitation may settle over the child, preventing the child from establishing a productive work period.

The obstacles that prevent a child to be ready to tap into the success cycle of choose-commit-do are varied as the individuals that make up your school community. This is one reason that the teacher's observation of the children at work is so essential to the workings of a Montessori classroom.

Obstacles that can prevent the creation of a successful work cycle can be divided into two basic categories:

- 1.) Difficulties that are external to the child
- 2.) Internal factors, such as personality, knowledge, experience, attitude, character, etc. create other obstructions.

Preparation of the Teacher

As well as internal policies within a school structure, there are factors inside the classroom that can make it difficult to create a three-hour work period.

Teachers. If the school administration doesn't safeguard the three-hour work period and have a policy to train and help teachers create three-hour work cycles for each child, a teacher may or may not have the understanding, ability, or opportunity to create a three-hour work cycle in his or her classroom. Also, some Montessori teachers report that the importance of the three-hour work cycle was not emphasized in their training.

By not having a three-hour work cycle, a teacher may observe the children having the initial work period leading up to false fatigue. The restless period of false fatigue is noisy and chaotic. Most of us would happily send the children outdoors. Sending the class out for recess at this moment, though, destroys the second and most important part of the work cycle, where the child

WHAT YOU CAN DO HELP CREATE THREE-HOUR WORK PERIODS

School Administrators

- Create schedules and policies that support three-hour work periods
- Create open dialogue in your school community about best practices

Teachers

- Have faith in the child to construct a work cycle if given the time
- Observe the child at work
- Recognize false fatigue
- Avoid predictable daily activities, such as snack time, story time, etc.

Parents

At School

- Make sure your child arrives on time ready to choose an activity
- Make sure absences are limited and adhere to your school's policies.

At Home

- Create predictable three-hour blocks of time for your child to create a work cycle

initiates true and new learning.

A teacher or school administrator, seeing this false fatigue, may think having a recess or giving more lessons are the keys to restoring order in a classroom. If we observe the children during this period of restlessness, we should see that in less than 15 minutes the children beginning to choose personally challenging work. With our observations, we should see that the children do not need a break, or more lessons. Instead, the children need the luxury of the time in a three-hour work period to increase concentration and independent skills.

School administration should help their teachers understand and protect three-hour work periods for the children. Teachers should work with school administration to establish sustainable policies and practices for creating and maintaining three-hour work periods. Parents should encourage the establishment of policies that protect three-hour work periods for every child.

External factors

A child may be unable to create a work cycle due to allergens in the environment, illness, learning or perceptual differences, hearing, vision, diet, sleep, changes in routine, visitors in the house, family member out of town, death in the family, birth of a sibling, arguments in the family, along with excessive television viewing or playing of video/computer games.

Internal factors. A child's personality can affect his or her ability to tap into a work cycle. Being an optimist or a pessimist is a factor. Being an introvert or an extrovert contributes to the development of concentration and independence.

The point of development a child is on the human growth continuum affects his or her work cycles. Children who are not developmentally ready for a certain Montessori learning environment may flounder in the incorrect setting. For example, a two-and-a-half year old may or may not be ready to join a Montessori primary classroom, depending on language and movement development. A six-year-old may or may not have acquired the psychological characteristics of needing group work to learn, a trait necessary for success in a Montessori elementary class, in contrast with the need of the three to six-year old for individual work. At each point of development, the human being taps into a work cycle in differing ways.

Creating Solutions

How can our schools and classrooms create, maintain and protect our children's three-hour work cycles?

To protect three-hour work cycles, it is vital that all adults — school administrators, teachers and parents—work together to prepare an environment where each child can create personal activities that lead to every individual's normal and natural development of concentration and independence.

All school community members need to work together to remove the obstacles encountered in creating and safeguarding three-hour work periods for our children.

To carve out the necessary time our children need, we must continually reassess the way we schedule our school day and our specialty classes. We need to carefully observe our children at work and play in order to recognize and remove obstacles to their development.

By working together—school administration, teachers, and parents—to ensure a three-hour work period

Normal Development or Normalization

By observing human behavior, Montessori gave us a scientific method and basis for understanding positive and normal human development. When watching normal development we see these four attributes:

1. Love of work or activity
2. Concentration
3. Self-discipline
4. Sociability seen in joyful work, mutual aid and cooperation.

These four characteristics in a person's behavior provide the evidence that natural or normal process of human development, or normalization, is occurring unimpeded.

When normal development meets an obstacle, the human being's natural tendencies for work, concentration, self-discipline and sociability become misdirected, affecting mental, moral and psychological growth. This misdirection leaves the personality weakened and unstable and allows detours, or deviations, to occur in a person's character development. These diversions to normal development will be seen as behaviors that include but aren't limited to the following: timidity, need to be entertained, indolence, fantasy, laziness, passivity, lack of focus, capriciousness, disorderliness, violence, rage, possessiveness, disrespect and disobedience.

The child's work in a three-hour work cycle strengthens the child's personality and becomes the healing agent.

Joyful work is the main sign of normal development.

for every child, we can take our children, our families, our classrooms, our schools, and our world, from good to ... great.

Maren Schmidt, has worked with children for over 25 years, currently writes and concentrates on child development issue. An AMI trained elementary teacher, founded and directed a Montessori school. Maren is the author of the award winning newspaper column, Kids Talk™. Contact her at Maren@kidstalknews.com visit www.MarenSchmidt.com