The Importance of the Work Cycle in Relation to Concentration and Independence
Research samples from Waterpark Montessori International

Author
Ronny Lyseggen

Workplace/position
6-9 Trainer at Waterpark Montessori International
Elementary teacher at Albatross Montessoriskole, Stockholm, Sweden

Topic
The importance of the work cycle in relation to concentration and independence

Problem statement
This research is based on a change I implemented when I took over a class of children 7-10 years. The class was used to having a fruit break while the teacher read from a book. This she did during the work-cycle period. Through observations, I could see that there were many children who, when they were interrupted, failed to return to concentration after the fruit break. I then made the following hypothesis: If I take away the fruit break and arrange a fruit table where the children can choose when to eat fruit during their work-cycle, will it result in the children being able to concentrate better during a work cycle? Change to fruit tables was received in different ways by the children, and many discussions and conversations with the children were required where they could participate in the decisions about how it would work and at the same time take on their own responsibility. At the end of my research, I discovered that the change meant that more children could concentrate better when they were not interrupted during a work cycle. I also saw that they developed more social skills and became more independent.

«The first aim of the prepared environment is, as far as it is possible, to render the growing child independent of the adult.» (Standing E.M.,1984, p. 267)

Introduction
M. Montessori observed how the children in the classroom worked in the form of a work cycle. It follows a certain pattern and it is important not to disturb the children during a work cycle. Many children do not find the concentration until the end of the work cycle. She also talks about the importance of concentration for the children to achieve normalization. A work cycle lasts for about three hours, and after about half the time the children are restless and worried. It may then be easy to think that it is time to create a break for all the
children to allow them to rest. Even the kids who work. According to M. Montessori, what we call "false fatigue".

*If in the period of false fatigue at 10 a.m. an inexperienced teacher, interpreting the phenomenon of suspension or preparation for the culminating work as disorder, intervenes, calling to her, and the subsequent work is not undertaken. The children do not become calm; they remain in an abnormal state. In other words if they are interrupted in their cycle, they lose all the characteristics connected with an internal process regularly and completely carried out.* (Montessori. M, 1995, p.77.)

Here it is important not to go in and interrupt the children by having a gathering or a common reading session, or by letting them go out and "run away".

In school, it is also important to encourage children to take responsibility for their actions and decisions.

*The Swedish curriculum states that the school will stimulate each student to form and grow with his duties. In school work, the intellectual as well as the practical, sensual and aesthetic aspects are to be noted. Health and lifestyle issues should also be noted. [https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/laroplan och-kursplaner-for-grundskolan/laroplan-lgr11-for-grundskolan-samt-for-forskoleklassen-och-fritidshemmet](https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/laroplan och-kursplaner-for-grundskolan/laroplan-lgr11-for-grundskolan-samt-for-forskoleklassen-och-fritidshemmet) Downloaded online 07.08.2018*

In the article "An uncomfortable truth – the child has responsibility in school and in life!" Pål Jansson talks about the importance of children taking their own responsibility.

*But that children would have an individual responsibility for something today is almost a taboo- blasphemy. It feels unkind and scary to formulate the statement "Even children are responsible for their lives!" Yet this truth is the basis for all sensible interactions between people. If we lose more of this, we weaken the natural force of development and this in a society where previous generations dreams of individual equal treatment and the classless education system have largely become a reality. Opportunities exist but is there your own responsibility? [http://www.skolaochsamhalle.se/flode/skola/pal-jansson-en-obekvam-sanning-barn-har-ansvar-i-skolan-och-i-livet/](http://www.skolaochsamhalle.se/flode/skola/pal-jansson-en-obekvam-sanning-barn-har-ansvar-i-skolan-och-i-livet/) Downloaded 07.08.2018*

**Background to research**

I took over a group of children 1-3 steps (7-10 years) in the fall of 2016. Some of these children used to have a common fruit time mid-morning. Then all the children gathered at
10:00 and everyone sat down on the carpet in a ring. The teacher read out loud for everyone. There was then a break in their work.

There was some turmoil as some children were unable to get going again after fruit. Of course, this is not very good when you think of Maria Montessori's philosophy that a working period will last for 3 hours.

I was in this classroom sometimes before I took over as a lead teacher. I knew there were some changes I would make with the class and classroom. What I noticed was that the children who needed time to get started were never calm. The children had difficulty finding their own rhythm and deep concentration.

Observations that lead to change:
Notes from some observations:

A girl is sitting and working on a material. She concentrates and is in her work. The clock rings and she looks up. The teacher says there is now time for fruit time. She drops her work and puts herself on the carpet. When the fruit is over, she looks around, turns and walks around the classroom for a while. The teacher reminds her what work she did before fruit break. She returns to her work, but instead of continuing she cleans it up and says she does not know what to do.

A boy has trouble concentrating and needs a break. The teacher says that he has to work for a while before it’s fruit time. He is unconcentrated and unrestricted. After a while, he leaves work and goes around the classroom instead. The teacher asks why he is not working on anything. He says he is hungry and that it is soon fruit time.

Central question
If I introduce a fruit table where children can take a break according to their own needs, will it lead to increased concentration during a work cycle?

Methods used
Change in the environment:
I decided to remove fruit time.
I arranged a nice table with two chairs, bought in drinking glasses, plates, board and sharp knife so that they can cut their own fruit.
It is good for the children to cut their own fruit. Sit down with a friend or alone if they wish. This is a great way to take a natural break. The children can sit two and two when they eat their fruit.
Results

Observations after change:
When I took over the class (group) and explain to children what my thought about fruit time was, there were many different reactions.

Someone said, "Why should we not have fruit time? That was so nice." Someone said, "Fortunately, we do not have to take a break when the teacher decides."

The kids who started in the 1st grade were used to having a fruit table that they could use when they needed a break.
At first it was difficult for the children who were used to common fruit break. There was a lot of unrest at the fruit table and as they were waiting for their turn. Then we had to sit down and make common rules for the fruit table. It was one of the new 1st grade students who explained that they were used to a fruit table and that they thought it was good.

Some of the older students thought this was difficult. They did not fully know when to take a break or when to take advantage of the opportunity. Then we agreed on a driving rule at the start. It was that I should try to remind them of taking a fruit. Something I did not do!
I talked to the students and said it's up to each other when they feel like a break. It is not me who decides.

It took a while before this came into place. Those who fixed this best were 1st grade. After a while, I noticed that this went well by itself. The children had made a list of who should eat when. It was their own initiative. It works out very well and if there are some who forget or want to wait a little, their name goes to the next on the list.

I observed a boy who had trouble concentrating because he needed a break but did not get this from his previous teacher. After the change, I observed that this boy went and took a fruit without asking me. When he had finished, he returned to his work. He managed to focus on his work.

I also observed a girl who was good at sitting down to work, but lost her focus when fruit break came. After the change she worked in a concentrated way. She went and took a fruit when she finished a job and managed to find new work without walking around the classroom.

*Independence is an important principle for the prepared environment. For the older child we may see more evidence of this in the rules and systems of the class than for the younger child. We let the 6-12 year old children make group decisions and implement these themselves, supported by the teacher.* (Healy Walls 2008, p. 30)
Discussion / a reflective summary

Conclusion:
It is always a process to introduce a change and sometimes it may take time for it to work in the classroom.

I learned to let the children take time to let changes sink in. What happened to this group was that there were too many changes at once. That is something to think about when taking over a group / class or when starting a new school.

The children need time to digest the new and learn new material at the same time. It can be too much for some children.

I talked to the children after a while and asked what they thought was the best. Everyone thought that the fruit table is the best. They said that now they can get a fruit whenever they want and feel they need a break. Some also said that they are doing more work than they had done before.

Now I have had this group for a year. There has been a lot for the children to take in since I have changed a lot. I think this has sometimes been very good. But there have been some setbacks for the fruit table. There have been discussions about the list they have made, how long to sit and someone has deleted someone from the list without permission. We have discussed this and I had to have consequences for the fruit table. What I did then was that the kids had to sit by their place to eat fruit. This did not seem to be ok, so we took a class meeting and the kids decided what they would do to get it back. Here I saw that the children took their own responsibility and settled the disagreements themselves. I was just an observer. They also became better at cleaning and washing after themselves.

My conclusion shows that my hypothesis is correct. It has created opportunity for better work when the work time is not interrupted, and more children can reach deep concentration.

I can see that the children have learned to create their own rules and procedures for how something works and that they have learned to take more responsibility for their own actions and the consequences.

Implications for Montessori practice
When the work cycle is not interrupted, children can reach deep concentration.