

When the Work Cycle Ends

The Child's Right to Autonomy

Christine Francisco

The Montessori classroom is designed for the uninterrupted work cycle. Beautifully prepared materials invite exploration by the children each day as they peacefully move about their morning. The guide intentionally falls into the background as the child leads their own morning with joy and autonomy. Guides are trained to keep the morning work cycle sacred and protected. As the morning concludes, however, this precisely crafted, child-led environment too often shifts into an adult-led process. Children eat lunch, participate in physical activity, and then either go to rest, nap, or return to work. This transition reveals a central tension within Montessori practice, where First Plane environments carefully designed to protect autonomy and independence must also navigate the realities of rest, group care, and institutional routine.

Children often enter a gradual, and sometimes sudden, phase of nap cessation by the age of seven (Weissbluth, 1995). Some children continue to require daytime sleep, while others no longer physiologically need rest during the school day. This developmental variability makes it difficult for early childhood environments to implement uniform approaches to rest. There isn't a standard approach to naps in early childhood settings, and why would there be? Additionally, policies surrounding naptime and rest vary widely across states, schools, and classrooms, raising important questions about how institutional expectations reflect the changing developmental needs of children.

Administrators, educators, families, and children often struggle with the idea of mandatory periods of rest in the middle of the school day. Some children are still experiencing biphasic sleep, meaning they naturally need to sleep at night and during the day. The children require rest, while other children have ceased napping but are still made to rest by school staff. Oftentimes, families who struggle with bedtime each night beg the school to stop letting their child nap each day, but the accommodation will not be made for just one family. In practice, periods of rest are often shaped by the realities of group care, including staffing patterns, classroom transitions, and the need for educators to support the broader environment. In doing so, however, children may lose the freedom to respond to their own changing sleep needs. What does this say to the child? When does the child's right to independence and autonomy become negotiable?

The conflict between children's developmental sleep needs and adult-directed rest routines also connects to broader conversations surrounding children's rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasizes the child's right to express their views and the ability to have those views meaningfully considered in matters affecting them. During periods of rest, however, young children's physiological and emotional cues are often interpreted through adult expectations and institutional routines rather than through careful attention to the child's lived experience.

Freedom, Rest, and Institutional Compromise

Montessori educators focus significant time on protecting the freedom of the child during the morning work cycle. Through preparation, observation, and intentional intervention, guides carefully support the child's autonomy within the prepared environment, yet Montessori's writings suggested that this protection of freedom was never intended to end when the work cycle ends. In fact, she directly identified the tension between a child's developmental need for sleep and the risk of adult overreach.

In *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori cautioned, "an adult who forced the child to sleep more than he needs is unconsciously forcing his own will upon the child..." (1972/1936, p.73). In this discussion, Montessori's concern of adult overreach was not sleep itself, but rather that the action of the adults might override a child's inner biological development and hinder their ability to respond to their own physiological cues.

Almost a century later, contemporary research suggests that children's lived experiences during rest mirror Montessori's concern. In their analysis of children's storytelling and interviews, Anu Kuukka and colleagues (2024) found that children report feelings of limited autonomy and agency over their bodies during naptime. Despite early warnings from Montessori, it seems many early childhood educational environments continue to impose the adult's will on the child during the vulnerable time of rest, and Montessori schools are not exempt.

If children are experiencing adult control, even in environments that value autonomy, such as Montessori classrooms, then the question shifts to why this tension persists. It may come down to "institutional compromise." David Kahn brought forth this idea in the first NAMTA Journal, published in 1975: "Even though

our classrooms are individualized in their approach, they still require operational ground rules which sometimes limit individual freedom" (p.3). Kahn went on to argue that while the *casa* is a home-like prepared environment, it is still an institutional setting. Montessori classrooms in the 1st Plane must address the needs of many children of different ages, and they require adults to make compromises that are both real and necessary. Acknowledging these compromises, however, does not eliminate the responsibility adults have to examine how these actions may be experienced by the child.

Development and Routine

Montessori wrote of the child's inner drive toward independence, starting at birth, and of the adult's responsibility to support, rather than direct that development. Sleep is no exception. Children between the ages of three and five require substantial sleep to support rapid neurological growth, emotional regulation and learning, yet the need for daytime sleep during these years is far from uniform. Some children continue to experience biphasic sleep, while others gradually - and sometimes suddenly - move toward nap cessation (Weissbluth, 1995).

Ample research suggests that children do not uniformly transition away from naps. Opportunities for daytime sleep, family routines, cultural and racial differences, parental encouragement or discouragement, and the quality of nighttime sleep all appear to shape when and how children move through nap cessation (Crosby et al., 2005; El-Sheikh et al., 2013; Newton et al., 2024). In group care settings, however, the same opportunities for developmental variability do not always exist. Children whose sleep needs differ may still be asked to participate in the same routines, not because their development is the same, but because shared schedules are often essential in collective care environments.

These routines are not simply classroom choices. State licensing policies further shape how rest is implemented, yet many of these regulations are broad, infrequently updated, and at times, misaligned with contemporary sleep research (Neelon et al., 2014). As a result, schools are often left to interpret how rest should be implemented, creating practices that may range from highly flexible to mandatory periods of rest exceeding an hour (Staton et al., 2017). While these structures may support the needs of the group, they can also make it difficult for children to listen to their own bodies and respond to sleep in the way their development may be asking of them.

Listening to the Child

Sleep, including daytime naps, provides children with social-emotional benefits that directly impact their ability to learn effectively (Graziano et al., 2007). Research has shown that periods of daytime sleep help children regulate and classify their emotions (Hanron et al., 2023, Kurdziel et al., 2018; Cremone et al., 2017). For some children, however, naptime can increase anxiety or provide no emotional benefit at all (Ward et al., 2008; Thorpe et al., 2018).

When primary-aged children are asked about nap, their narratives are often charged and provide a snapshot of their perceived lack of autonomy. Mason, a five-year-old in a study from Nothard and colleagues (2015), described needing to demonstrate “resting nicely” before looking through a book at childcare. Similarly, another child described this lack of autonomy in a description of the nap room: “Nap room is an awful place, when you have to lie so long in bed, just have to” (Kuukka et al., 2024, p. 637).

These dynamic, first-hand accounts suggest that, for some children, naptime may be experienced less as

restorative and more as a time when adult expectations override their own internal cues, just as Montessori warned. While these children may be physically still, they are not emotionally at rest. Research often measures naps as isolated periods of sleep; however, children experience naptime in a routine rooted in adult control. Rest, for the child, is experienced as compliance in order to be accepted by adults. Therefore, the developmental benefits of sleep cannot be fully realized without the child's lived experience.

Reimagining Rest in Montessori

Montessori not only reflected the tension of sleep benefits versus child autonomy early on, but she envisioned a future where rest can be addressed in a way that meets the biological needs of the child but also connects to her philosophy.

In *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori wrote, “...give him a bed suited to his needs and cease making him sleep longer than necessary. A child should be permitted to go to sleep when he is tired, to wake up when he is rested, and to rise when he wishes” (p. 74). Similarly, In *The Montessori Method*, Montessori shared her vision of a more welcoming environment. “...I foresee a time, not distant, when we shall be able to have a quiet, darkened room where the children may sleep in low-slung hammocks. I should like still better to have this nap taken in the open air” (p. 120). Both of these quotes circle back to the idea of having the environment prepared for rest; as rest should never be about compliance, but rather an intentional invitation.

There can be much hesitation for the primary guide when considering a more fluid approach to napping in a Montessori classroom. Margaret Elizabeth Stephenson spoke about her observations in a Montessori classroom that cared for children until 4:15pm, where children



Photograph shows Rest Time, St. George's Montessori House, Harpenden, Herts

would rest in the classroom and return to work after. This observation left her wondering if more schools were to provide care for longer hours of the day, past 3pm, what more could the children be capable of? "I wonder if we have seen the children's real capacity for work—that capacity to form oneself if given the right environment and right condition" (1975, p. 7).

This capacity for work given the right environment is not just an ideal, but a lived reality for some all-day Montessori classrooms. Laura Morris presented on the All-Day Montessori classroom in 1996 with this observation: I had some concern that allowing the younger children to join us as they awoke would interfere with the extended day work and that the academics might suffer. I have found the opposite to be

true. The level of work in this environment surpasses that of other classes I have taught. The children have greater exposure to the work because of the length of their day. I feel less pressure in that there is plenty of time to give the lessons. I no longer wait until the afternoon to give challenging lessons. Moreover, the younger children are intrigued by the challenging lessons they see (p. 76). This change in approach is achieved by intentionally creating a prepared environment and allowing observation to take the lead. Children who no longer physiologically or developmentally need rest have the capacity and right to return to their classroom. Providing children with an environment where they are able to rest when needed and rise when they are ready places trust in the child and their ability to manage their own body.

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I caution that there is not one correct approach to rest in Montessori environments. Rather, these accounts demonstrate that rest can remain rooted in observation, flexibility, and respect for the child's developmental needs even within the realities of group care.

Reimagining rest in the Montessori classroom requires adults to reconsider not only how rest is structured, but also how autonomy and dignity are protected during vulnerable parts of the child's day. This reimagining also invites reflection on whether the environment itself allows children to meaningfully respond to their own physiological cues. Of course, individual states and institutions may have guidelines that educators are required to follow. However, small shifts in practice, such as offering quiet alternatives after rest or preparing spaces that support comfort rather than compliance, may help preserve the child's dignity and autonomy throughout the school day.

The Full Day of the Child

The Montessori classroom is not designed just for the morning work cycle, but for the full day of the child. Children should have access to beautifully prepared materials rooted in environments that honor their need for rest, movement, and changing developmental rhythms. The role of the adult is not to place their will onto the child, but to carefully observe, prepare, and support as children learn to recognize and respond to their own physiological needs. From the moment a child enters the prepared environment until the moment they leave, respect should be experienced by the child in trusting their ability to know their own body, advocate for their needs, and continue the work of constructing themselves. The rights of the child do not end when the morning work cycle concludes.

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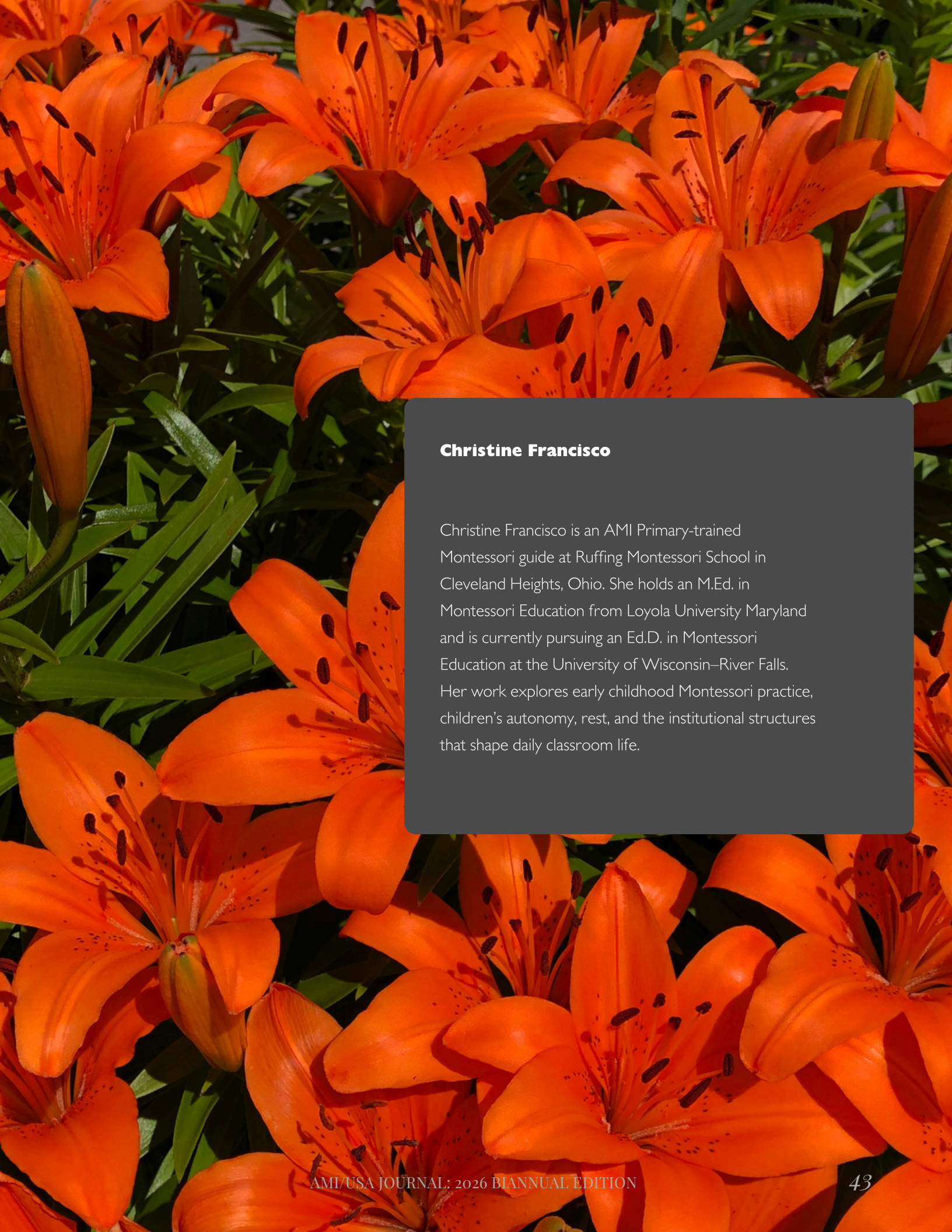
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