

## Why Don't We Have Grades?

By: John Long

That was a question asked by an upper elementary student during a class meeting last week. "Why don't we have grades at Post Oak?" The spirit of the question, and the interested looks from the questioner's classmates suggested that this was more of a "Tell us about Dr. Montessori" kind of question rather than an appeal for a missing entrée at the banquet of life.

On the one hand, Dr. Montessori emphasized the significance of internal, intrinsic motivation as the power behind learning – as opposed to external, extrinsic rewards. Young people are hard-wired for learning. Their brains are still in formation for years after they are born, and during this period they are uniquely receptive to learning. Coupled with this is a spirit, and inner voice, which directs them to learn. We don't need to manipulate them into learning. We don't need to reward them, or to punish them, to make them learn. Come and watch the children in our classes learning for the sheer joy of it.

But why not give them grades? Isn't that the way the world works? Before answering that question, let me ask, "What is the purpose of grades?"

Is it to make students work? Our students work already. They do not need to be coerced into working.

Is it to make students work harder? What a Montessori student asks, "How much do I have to do?" she will typically be asked in response, "How much can you do?" Consequently, students do far more than teachers could ever require. They will set goals for themselves that are monumental in scope – and then work and work and work to achieve them.

Is it to make students competitive? If by this you mean, "possessing the skills that enable them to compete," they develop those skills. If you mean "willing and able to strive for excellence," they are and they do. Our graduates' performance in high school tells us that consistently.

On the other hand, academic competition, as it is structured in schools, where one student's relative success is every other student's relative failure, where there are individual winners and loser, leads to results in the character of the individual and consequently in the construction of society that Dr. Montessori was trying to help us escape. She said, "Education, as it is commonly regarded, encourages individuals to go their own way and pursue their own personal interests. School children are taught not to help one another, not to prompt their classmates who don't know the answers, but to concern themselves only with getting promoted at the end of the year and to win prizes in competition with fellow pupils. And these poor, selfish little creatures find themselves in later life like separate grains of sand in the desert; each one is isolated from his neighbor, and all of them are barren. If a storm comes up, these little human particles possessed of no life-giving spirituality are caught up in the gusts and form a deadly whirlwind."

Furthermore, grading and academic competition lead to some results that are in the long run antithetical to a truly competitive stance. It has been shown that when students know they are being graded, their creativity declines. If a student knows he is being graded, and if he still cares, he will make choices that are safe choices. He will not take risks. He will not choose a project, or an answer, that could result in failure. He will do what he already knows how to do, he will do what he knows will result in a predictable, positive result. In contrast, Thomas Edison said that if you want to increase your

creativity, increase your rate of failure. Which individual has a more competitive edge, the one who makes safe, predictable choices, or the one willing to take creative risk?

At The Post Oak School, we don't give grades. We want students to learn because of their own intrinsic desire to do so. We want them to be internally motivated, not externally motivated. We want them to become self-confident, creative risk-takers. And we want them to develop the sensibility that each and every person has value; that each person can succeed; that the success of others is to be celebrated – not that another's success means my failure; that it is desirable to help others, and to take the time to do so.

Ultimately, our success as individuals is not best measure by our relative standing in society, but in the society itself that we help to create. What did it mean to rise to the top in Nazi Germany?