

Mastery – Why grades mean nothing in Montessori.
Edward Fidellow
www.crossmountainpress.com

While most pre-schools don't assign grades neither do Montessori elementary programs. The concept of grades is to measure accumulation of knowledge at a given point in time. Grades then become an artificial standard for excellence of teaching (and maybe learning.)

The idealism of not giving grades, however, is a very practical real-life construct. In place of grades is the concept of mastery – you work at something until you master it. In traditional education time is the constant and learning is the variable. We teach for an hour. We then test. If you make a sixty or an eighty or a hundred we move on. In Montessori time is the variable and learning is the constant. If you can master it in an hour great, if it takes you two hours ok, if it takes you all day fine but what you have is solid learning and understanding.

The giving of grades can also have a negative impact on character. How often does the concept of “passing” short circuit the drive for excellence? Good enough is just good enough. Whereas in Montessori good enough is only good enough when it is good enough – which is mastery. To exert ourselves to the highest level possible gives rise to great feelings of accomplishment, confidence and satisfaction. Getting by never gives you a feeling of accomplishment.

Not focusing on grades allows the student to focus on achievement and excellence. Our children's success in life will not come from mediocrity. And mediocrity will never engender the happiness you want for your children. Mastery, excellence has a cost to it. Most often it is a cost of time and that is what our children have if we allow them to use it. Excellence comes from dedication and dedication takes time. Time is the great gift we give our children in Montessori but we have to be careful we don't squander that gift by focusing on grades which often is a short hand for achievement.

In real life, do you want a brain surgeon who is successful seventy percent of the time? Do you want a pilot who lands safely seventy percent of the time? Excellence is a character virtue that is fostered young and encouraged daily. That is what you get in a Montessori setting where learning is not superficial – learned for the test – but deep and long, often hard, but accompanied by great joy and satisfaction while taking all the time it takes to become excellent.