

An Evening With Elizabeth Johnston Coe

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1995 Maine Teacher of the Year

One Friday evening during March in the gray drizzle of the mid-coast. I met a friend for supper and afterward attended a lecture held at the beautiful Camden Public Library. Since both of us are middle level educators we were intrigued by what we had read and heard about the speaker and were anxious to hear her insights on middle level education and the young adolescent. We were not disappointed.

Dr. Elizabeth Johnston Coe, a developmental psychologist and founder-director of the School of the Woods, a nationally recognized developmentally responsive Montessori middle school in Houston, Texas was the guest speaker. Rockport's Children House Montessori School sponsored her visit to the area. The Children's House Montessori School has plans to expand their program to include middle school in the fall of 2000. They are learning as much as possible to help them in the design of their middle school.

Dr. Coe's presentation was entitled: *Empowering the Adolescent*. She eloquently shared her knowledge of adolescents and intertwined these facts with information about her program, The School of the Woods, which she founded in 1985. Her middle school program provides a holistic, empowering environment for seventh and eighth graders. Among other things, she provided answers to the following questions:

What developmental changes do children go through that make their lives so challenging at this age?

What makes a middle-school student want to learn?

What characterizes a developmentally responsive middle school program?

Many of us have asked these questions over and over and most middle level educators strive to meet the needs of our students by finding the answers. These points are some of our daily keys when we come in contact with our middle level students. I quickly learned that Dr. Coe's School of the Woods certainly does address the developmental, social, and academic needs of young adolescents. These needs are addressed in an ongoing manner through a carefully planned program that appears to be in place for all students at the school.

The most intriguing part of the program occurs during every sixth week of school. At this point, they depart from downtown Houston to a twenty-four acre piece of land they call their "land lab" located about an hour and a half drive out of the city. When they started the trek some five years ago, the land was undeveloped. The only existing building was barn. Each year they have planned and executed changes. The first year they camped in tents and worked out of the barn. During the next

five years they farmed the land, built a 5000 square foot building to live in while there, and designed and built gardens. This year they are planning an economic model for the property. Economics, business, and real-world enterprise become meaningful as the young people focus on their place in the broader social structure. Dr. Coe's model employs the young people in a business of their own. Indigenous plants that will attract butterflies will be carefully placed on the land so the butterflies can be sold for weddings. Chicken pens are being built and the chickens are on order. A group of students are building bee hives and learning about the habits of bees while waiting for the arrival of their bees. The learning that goes along with each of these activities takes place simultaneously in an integrated fashion.

Dr. Coe has creatively planned every aspect of her program. Every component is backed by research and what is most practical for young adolescents. In her lecture, she addressed the educational goals for young adolescents and the environments we set up to achieve them. Many of the components that make an outstanding middle school environment are in place including: student-led conferences, morning meeting, personal reflection time, portfolios, community service, student-centered learning and much more.

She feels that if one of the goals of education is to develop capable, responsible people who are self-directed, life-long learners, then students need to take an active role in developing academic goals and participating in problem-solving activities.

Dr. Coe generously gives her insights from her years of observations of the young adolescent. She spends Monday through Thursday in the classroom with her students and the weekends traveling and sharing her knowledge and details about her program. During the summer, she meets with teachers who travel from all over the world, training them to use the model she has developed. At this point her program is in use in forty countries. She is a remarkable woman. My friend and I were glad we attended the lecture. The parents and staff at The Children's House Montessori were very excited to have her spend the evening and the next day sharing her expertise with them as they embark on a new project. A few days after listening to Dr. Coe's lecture I spoke to Stuart Finklestein, the founder and director of the Children's House Montessori School in Rockport. He feels strongly that Dr. Coe's ideas and practices will have a bearing on what will take place at the school in Rockport. The school has begun their search for a teacher. If anyone would like more information about this opportunity, please contact him at the school at: 236-2911. This is a unique opportunity to be part of an exciting middle school program.... one which many teachers dream of.