

Putting it into Practice

An Interview with Dr. Betsy Coe

Unlike many adults who find themselves in a Montessori classroom, Betsy Coe always wanted to be a teacher. As a child, Coe says, she would gather neighborhood children and create her own "school," and she never thought about any other line of work. Except for a few years away when her two daughters were small, Coe has been in the classroom since 1968. As a recent education graduate and new bride, she began her career officially as a second-grade teacher in a Dayton, OH, public school, while her husband was stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Although she'd heard something about Maria Montessori in her college classes, it was during her 3-year stint in Dayton that she began to hear more—from friends who enrolled their toddlers in an unusual program run by Virginia Varga.

When the Coes were transferred to Louisiana, it seemed natural for Betsy to look for a Montessori school for their first child. She went to an open house at the Montessori School of Metairie and came home with a job as a classroom assistant, as well as enrolling her daughter in the school.

In the years that followed, Coe completed the St. Nicholas Montessori Nursery course, a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and the AMS 3-6 and 6-12 certification programs at Houston Montessori Center, founding new schools or program levels as she went in order to "stay one step ahead" of her own children.

Since 1985, however, she has stayed with the same project: development of the middle-school class (for ages 12 to 15) at School of the Woods, in Houston, an enterprise which also led to her achievement of the Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology in 1988.

Clearly, Coe is no "ordinary" teacher. On the staff of Houston Montessori Center since 1980, she assumed the Director's position in 1992, adding a pilot training for the 12-15 age

range to the Center's 3-6 and 6-12 teacher education levels. The HMC staff now numbers between 30 and 40. In addition to the 90 students currently enrolled at various levels in Houston, the Center operates four extension sites for public school districts: in Texas at Fort Worth, Victoria, and Waco, and in Yakima, WA.

Coe also found the time to serve on the AMS Board of Directors for 10 years (1984-94), finishing with a 3-year term as President. In demand as a guest speaker and Montessori advocate, she has made over 100 presentations to public and private schools, universities, and educational organizations, even traveling as far as the People's Republic of China. Among the acknowledgments for her activities are listings in the *International Director of Distinguished Leadership* and *Who's Who in American Education* and honors that include the Girl Scouts of America's Super Leader Award, Notable Woman of Texas, and Outstanding Teacher Award from Houston Montessori Center.

At present, Coe's middle-school teaching responsibilities occupy every Monday through Thursday, but she spends Fridays and weekends traveling to the other HMC program sites or making other presentations—all but one weekend a month, which is reserved for time with her family. The following interview took place by telephone, in between class time and the parent meeting at which she was giving a speech that evening.

Joy Turner: *What a schedule you have! Don't you ever get tired or sick, like the rest of us?*

Dr. Betsy Coe: I rarely get sick or tired, but I've been sick the past few days—with an earache, the first I ever had in my life. I didn't like it! I was taking medicine that was making me so tired! But I'm better now. Of course, we also had 60 children in our class yesterday and 60 again today. . .

JT: *Why was that?*

BC: We had the sixth graders visiting—we have 26 of them coming into middle school next year, and then some adults from Dallas were there with their sixth graders. And it rained!

JT: *Of all the nerve! I can imagine being shut in with 60 adolescents! What led to your interest in this age range, anyway?*

BC: When my older child, Debra, finished sixth grade, I thought there would be lots of options out there, but when we began to look around and visit, we found there really weren't.

JT: *By options, do you mean in private schools?*

BC: No, in the public sector, for middle school. She was accepted to some "gifted and talented" programs, but I didn't feel they were very. . .

JT: *Gifted and talented?*

BC: Right. And there was intimidation of the students, even in the orientation. I felt it wasn't going to be a nurturing environment. There were parents at School of the Woods who wanted a middle-school program, so I said, "Well, I'll do it!" And of course I thought I'd go out, find a program, bring it back and do it. I really didn't know I was undertaking such a large task.

JT: *Was there a Montessori training available at that level, at that time?*

BC: No. So I did it purely by observation. I really had very few preconceptions of what it was going to be like. My first class had eight students, and I observed and responded. Anyway, that's how the whole process has been—once again, out of being a parent.

JT: *But your girls went through it and outgrew it—and you stayed!*

BC: It's a very challenging age. There are so many dimensions to it, and the kids are really wonderful. I think there are two most important things about teaching this age group. One is that you have to like it! And the other is that you have to be really in tune with yourself. This age group is going to push every button! And they're going to call you on everything that is not consistent. If you give a mixed message, they're able to pick up on that. Of course, I appreciate that they do that, though I think many people are offended by it. Most of us really don't notice when we're saying one thing and thinking another.

JT: *What about the emotional upsets teens are so famous for; is that hard to take?*



A community meeting in Coe's middle-school class at School of the Woods, Houston.

BC: It's like a roller coaster! And my advice is, don't get on it! You can't support them if you're on the ride with them. But it's not easy to stay off, to be there and not get involved with all their traumas. Usually they're short-lived; they explode and then come back and are fine—while the adults are still dealing with it!

JT: Of course, you have lived through this period as a parent. How old are your daughters now, and what are they doing?

BC: Debra is 25 and she's a marine engineer with Brown and Root, a construction company that does work all over the world. She's done many interesting things, for example, building a submarine, which she developed with a group as part of her ocean engineering degree. Now she works on constructions in water. She just got married in December, to David, who's in a Ph.D. program in quantum physics at Rice, here in Houston. And my other daughter, Stephanie, is 22 and finishing her last semester in architecture at Texas A&M. She was here from May to January because she was doing an internship in an architectural firm in Houston. It was nice having her around again, for awhile. She's very interested in building communities, especially hospitals and schools. They've allowed her to take courses in barrier-free architecture, because of that interest, even though that usually has to wait for an advanced degree.

JT: Neither girl wanted to be a teacher?



Coe's sense of fun was showing when she and Ray clowned around at Halloween 1992, and recently when she and friend Michael Dorer joined the musicians at the AMS winter seminar in Fort Worth.



A family portrait: (from left) Ray, Betsy, Debra, new son-in-law David, and Stephanie pose at Debra and David's wedding last December.

BC: Well, all the way through high school and the beginning of college they wouldn't have considered it, even though Stephanie did peer tutoring and even received an award for it, in high school. It was a long period of time when they didn't want to do anything that I was doing! But now, it's interesting that both of my daughters have said they want to take Montessori training—Debra for elementary

level, and Stephanie for middle school.

JT: How do you account for this change of heart?

BC: I think they're naturally teachers. They both like what they're doing, but as Debra puts it, she wants to "do something to contribute to the world."

JT: Were either of your own parents teachers?

BC: Not exactly. My mother was a nurse, and my father was in the army. He was a teacher, in a way, because he was a consultant to the local populations. The first 11 years of my life we lived in Japan, Germany, and then Taiwan. Every place we went, we were the first Americans there, so we "lived on the economy," as it was called, and really participated in the life of each of those cultures.

JT: Did you learn the languages?

BC: I did; I don't have access to them now, but I was able to speak them when I was there. I can still understand what's going on, but I can't translate each word, so it's still in there someplace.

JT: How do you think that influenced you, growing up outside your own country?

BC: It was a wonderful opportunity to see many cultures, and I think I learned to appreciate them and to create some understanding. I had to make new friends each time we moved, which required learning to be a little bit more outgoing and to sort of create my own environment, sometimes. A few parts of it I remember as very frightening, like being greeted by firecrackers when we arrived in Taiwan, and living in a concrete building with a wall that had

broken glass on top of it. It was obviously done to protect us, but it was still quite different and a little scary. I remember going to the market with the housekeeper and carrying home food wrapped up in leaves. There were many new foods, new ways of doing everything. But most of my cultural experiences were very positive. I'm sure it was hard on my mother, but my two younger brothers and I usually had a good time.

JT: *Moving a lot can be hard, but it sounds as if you found its positive side.*

BC: Yes, and then I had the advantage of being in the same place, from junior high through high school, in El Paso. When I needed the same environment, I had it. When my father retired from the military, he was professor of military science at New Mexico State. He then became a high school counselor and of course is retired from that, now. My parents still live in El Paso. I guess the most positive part about my childhood is that both of my parents always believed in me.

JT: *How are you able to fit in everything you are doing? Do you teach in all of the teacher education courses?*

BC: I have, in the past, so I know what needs to be happening. But now what I do is organize all of it. There are a few parts I teach, but never a whole component, because I'm tied up in presenting most of the middle-school training. My focus is to continue to learn how adults learn and keep changing the program so it reflects the best that we can give.

JT: *What is your biggest challenge?*

BC: For me, right now, it's to stay in the classroom and to do the teacher training. I could probably spend full time just giving talks about middle school. But one of the things that makes me an effective teacher educator is because I'm living this every day. I can relate stories and experiences; I know what all the dilemmas are. On one side, I think that's a very positive part. The other part is that we came up with a schedule so that I could still be here and provide the security and routine for students, yet still be able to leave. Monday through Thursday I'm in the classroom, then I leave every Thursday night and go someplace else in the country. Friday is the day we've chosen for the students to have electives and speakers and use community resources. I'm not needed, because the other staff members support the people who come in. I would have this kind of schedule whether I left or not, but it's nice that both work together well.

JT: *What kinds of things do they do on Friday?*

Fruits of the Labor: Kyle's College Essay

Kyle's mother writes: "This is the essay Kyle wrote to get early admission at Brown University. With a second (even better, and more personal) essay, he gained acceptance at Harvard, Columbia, Stanford, and Berkeley. He chose Stanford, but first took a year off and spent 6 months in Costa Rica on an AFS program, living with a family and attending university classes. Then he spent a few months in Berkeley studying environmental policy and jazz piano. Then he went to work for the summer in the Secretary of Interior's Office in Anchorage, AL, on endangered species. Then Stanford. So I would say he lives life to the fullest. He is studying lots of different things at Stanford—Western Civilization, Anthropology, Advanced Calculus, Spanish, perhaps with a major in environmental science. He lives in Ujamaa House, the African-American theme house, and really enjoys the social and intellectual exchange at Stanford."

In large high schools, subjects are often kept far away and isolated from each other. They do not stray outside their secured 55-minute havens, buffered by 6-minute barriers—no-man's zones—which protect math from science, science from English, English from music, and music from math. Unfortunately, the mind often models itself after the schedule. The brain puts each discipline into cubicles and then further partitions academic and nonacademic pursuits.

I believe that my greatest intellectual asset is a natural tendency to notice and discover connections and relationships between disciplines. I pour the contents of my classes into one big vat, let them interact, and observe the results. I then enjoy discussing and sharing these observations. I believe that the relationships I find between subjects are not created, but discovered. After all, the uni-

verse is not segregated into abstract parts. Nature does not subscribe to "Algebra II" or "Physics I." Nature exists: it exists as an infinitely complex whole of math, physics, biology, chemistry, music, and art collectively. Even the social sciences, centered around the study of men, contain their own laws and theories which sometimes parallel those of the natural sciences. ($E=mc^2$ is not unrelated to *There is no such thing as a free lunch*.) Mathematics interests me not only for its aesthetic beauty, but for its utility as a language in science. English should not be considered merely a language class of sentence structure, but a means of communicating and empathizing. Like music, English can create emotion, purge the soul, and free the mind. Sometimes, as I listen to the last reverberations of a pleasing interval or triad, I am awed to think that the harmony results from a simple mathematical ratio between the pitches.

The partition between the academic and nonacademic worlds is also a false barrier. This summer, I learned as much about nature, culture, and spirituality from my experiences living on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana as I ever could have learned from literature and lecture. On the reservation, I witnessed the merging of an urban culture (25 high school students from northeastern cities) with a nature-based one, and I saw that nature can be understood spiritually as well as intellectually.

More importantly, I came to realize that spirit and intellect are symbiotic. The unification of heart and mind creates wisdom. To me, wisdom seems the greatest peace of mind one can attain: a fully developed sense of right and wrong, a conscience for what should be ideally, and an awareness of what is realistically.

BC: For the electives they do cooking, pottery, yearbook. They did roller-blading, one time. There's photography, drawing, painting, carpentry, sewing; they choose what they want to do. We also go swimming at the Y, do social dancing and etiquette, rock climbing, and this week we're starting the indoor tennis. They choose one of three electives each trimester and do that for an hour and a half each Friday.

JT: *So the people you bring in are experts in the field. Well, what's next for you? Are you going to move up to high school?*

BC: I am working with a group of parents to design a high school. We're doing a feasibility study to see if there's an interest. And I want to help them get it started, but then it can be

somebody else's work! I still want to continue developing the middle-school program and the teacher education part of that. And I really want to stay in the classroom.

JT: *Here's the question almost everyone wants the answer to: where do you get your energy?*

BC: (laughs) I think I really enjoy what I'm doing, so it's not work, in a negative sense, anyway. All areas of my life are connected, so I don't feel conflict or being pulled. Being in the classroom gives me energy. It's really fun, because when you plan a wholistic program for students, you can participate in the activities with them. So—I get a lot of exercise! When they have personal reflection, I have personal reflection; when they write in journals, I write in journals. So my life is very

wholistic, just based on participating in the environment that I set up.

A lot of the work I did was for my own children, and they were with me and a part of it. My daughters are wonderful, very self-sufficient and strong, strong in their values, strong in their commitment. They really have the same values that I do on contributing to the world and encouraging and being supportive of all people. I'm taken aback, many times, at how warm and nurturing they are. They're really fine people. My husband, Ray, has always been very supportive of my work and goals. We've been married for 28 years. And my family participates, in some way, in most of what I do. My friends and their families are friends of our family, and they also give a lot of support and encouragement. When I travel, I enjoy myself. When you're training and you're with people a long time, you can become friends with them. So it's always like going to see friends, when I go out to teach. I'm not tired of it!

JT: You have done as much as anyone toward helping Montessori education become better known and accepted. What do you think about the state of Montessori today?

BC: It's very exciting that more and more people realize the benefits of a Montessori education. I think more and more people are understanding that it's a continuum and that the whole continuum is really what we're wanting to offer children—that each level builds on the next and for the most complete education, children should be able to stay in a Montessori setting through high school. But I'm very cautious, doing one thing at a time with the levels, because I think we need to do each one of them right. More people value Montessori now; our method is being advocated by educational reform. I think the gift Montessorians can share is to show how to put these accepted theories into practice.

I think that we still have a lot to learn, too. The greatest thing we can do is research on ourselves, to find out what are the benefits of our practices and how to refine them, if necessary, and to let people know what we're doing.

JT: How do you see that being possible?

BC: One of the things I'm really hoping the teacher education committee will do is to make decisions on standards based on research. I'd like Montessorians to be more knowledgeable about and model active research and literature review, and to develop pilot programs for study. Montessori is growing both nationally and internationally, at all levels. It's getting more positive press. All we can do is get better!

*"Being a child is to feel the joys of living.
Teaching a child is to know the delights of life.
Educating an adult to teach
is to generate the promise of humanity."*

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