

A Conversation with Dee Coulter about Adolescence, Learning and Schools

Dr. Dee Joy Coulter is a nationally recognized educational consultant who is noted for her ability to make complex ideas seem simple through her use of humor, story telling, and clear explanations of often difficult concepts. About twelve years ago Dee began working closely with music educators as a clinician and lecturer. Her writing has appeared in past issues of The Orff Echo, and she presented at the AOSA conference held in Denver in November of 1990.

Last July, I spoke with her about middle school students and what we involved in Orff Schulwerk could bring to them musically and personally. Following are excerpts of that conversation.

— Liz Gilpatrick



Dr. Dee Joy Coulter

Dee: "If we looked at it [adolescence in the United States] from a broad perspective; if we panned back and looked at ourselves as a species, then one of the most glaring phenomena is that the onset of adolescence is happening sooner — probably two years sooner, maybe even three years sooner in the inner city than it did fifty or sixty years ago. Cognitively, that has some real significance because it's the delay in the onset and the completion of adolescence that expands the learning potential of a creature. So when we look at just the primates, those that have the longest delay before maturation are the ones that have the greatest learning capacity. Once you cap it off and become adult, there's some aspect of cognition that also caps off, and postponing the onset and culmination of adolescence, in sexual maturity, (which is really a critical piece because once you're sexually mature and active then you become adult, essentially) and the body chemistry shifts around. If you can postpone the onset of adolescence, then you have a longer time with formal reasoning before it becomes a major distraction.

"If the child goes into adolescence before he goes into formal thinking, then we have some pretty dead behavior in the middle school years. We're seeing that now...we're seeing kids becoming adolescent in fifth grade. In that case they've short-circuited a time that was supposed to be the brain's turn and we're essentially missing a turn — a cognitive turn — by having the adolescence happen first. We're precipitating that with all the media and the advertising that's aimed at these kids. The clothing we're asking them to wear, the music — all of that is accelerating adolescence.

"We could, as a society expand childhood, if we wanted to. The body-mind connection is really major. And it is through the arts that this can best be done. Waldorf education is the prime example of this because it is an arts and a soul-touching approach to education. (Incidentally, Waldorf School students experience the onset of puberty an average of a year later than their counterparts in the public schools.) That kind of relationship to children can expand their childhood and give them a cognitive growth spurt of greater magnitude than they are getting. I remember a student I had when I ran my school for drop-outs, who, when we were talking about the plight of kids in the inner city, told me that if you could get the 13- and 14-year olds, for whom it was already too late to escape the quagmire of the inner city, to turn around and help their younger siblings, 10-12 years old — to help them to fight the good fight to get out — there'd be some hope for the next generation. For the teen-agers, the fork in the road had come and they had taken the only one available to them. That's really a poignant statement. As long as early marriages, early bonding, and early sexual activity go on, we're foreshortening the mind.

"We try to bring our kids into too much form, even cognitively. When I first came back to teaching in the middle school a few years ago I felt like Rip Van Winkle because I ran that school for dropouts some seventeen years ago. I was struck by two things: first, that the kids in this regular middle school seemed more burned-out than the kids in my drop-out school did, and second, that their auditory processing was really shot. I would say one out of three normal students had auditory processing problems. The other factor in addition to their being auditorially impaired was that

they were burned out — they were jaded. I couldn't fathom that because we tend to think that it's the middle school that burns the kid out, but what was real obvious to me was that they were coming in like that.

"They're doing something real strange at the grade school level. We have the same funny notion about precociousness — we equate it with giftedness. Most of the time, they're not related. We move our expectations earlier and earlier. In order to cram in all these expectations we have to take away all the time for moving and dancing and the physical activity that prepares the child for learning. Then we have students in the fourth and fifth grade who we expect to be able to sit still and learn, only they can't because they missed the crucial preparation of moving when they needed to. Extraordinary prodigies are, I think, a case apart from the general notion of 'does earlier mean brighter.' It doesn't, and in fact you can look at many of our finest thinkers and see they were quite slow. For example, Einstein didn't do any math until he was thirteen, and he credits the fact that he took it on so late and with such depth of curiosity when he finally touched it with why he went so far in it. He brought greater maturity to the questions he began asking. So, we need to break some of our associations, which are counter-intuitive. You would think that earlier means brighter, but it's not so. If you want to look within a species, the more advanced members are not going to be the early maturers; they're going to be the late maturers.

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