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Part of understanding how learning occurs and how most effectively to share knowledge involves examining first the nature of the child and how he or she learns best. Many philosophers and educators have expressed their views on these subjects and the dialogue has not been without conflict.

In discussing first the nature of the child, Rousseau felt humans are born inherently good and it is possible to preserve this "original perfect nature" by control of his or her education and environment. Rousseau argued that a child went through developmental stages and educators needed to observe and recognize those stages in order to take advantage of learning opportunities. Another philosopher and educator who believed strongly in the need to individualize and pay attention to the needs and environments of students was John Dewey.

In Democracy and Education, Dewey discusses educational aims and argues that thought must be given to the result of the educational process in developing the means needed to help a child develop his or her talents and skills. Aims are as varied as the learners and any goals that are not intrinsically developed, may have the opposite effect of narrowing what a student can accomplish. Instead of allowing for the observation of the impulses and inclinations of the individual learner, learning is instead dictated externally. These ideas were modeled in his work at the Laboratory School in Chicago, which encouraged a model of learning that was based on collaboration and creative problem-solving. By modeling the educative process through the hands-on activities students had traditionally performed at home, he sought to show how learning was a social process and thrived in environments where students actively engaged in real-life problems and solutions.

A colleague of Dewey was Francis Parker whose work in progressive education brought him to the University of Chicago where Dewey's Laboratory School was already finding success. After the merger of their two elementary schools, sometimes the differences in their educational philosophies were in conflict. Where Dewey focused more on the social aspects of learning, Parker believed strongly in the power of a child's curiosity as the primary director of learning.

A theorist with another view of the learning process was Michael Oakeshott. In Learning and Teaching, Oakeshott argues that learning is a paradoxical activity that is never truly complete. Some part of learning always involves practicing something we have already learned. Learning is not only the acquisition of knowledge but the "extension of the ability to learn." He too notes the importance of the social nature of learning. He argues that students cannot learn to feel and think unless they have acquired the skills to do so through interactions with others.

In conclusion, the conflict between "traditional" and "progressive" education continues today. Theorists like E.D. Hirsch point out the weakness of the progressive school in teaching cultural competency. In his words, "Progressive education has coincided with the decline of education competencies." Proponents of caring relations, like Nel Noddings, focus on the need to develop social connections between students and teachers in order to facilitate learning. Although these philosophies have elements that seem very much in conflict with each other, the primary goal remains the same, to help students reach their greatest potential and become meaningful participants in society.