

Practical Life Experiences, Core Subject Matter, and Caring for Students: Exploring Well-Known Teaching Methods

Education professionals have been debating what makes students successful learners since the founding of the public school system in the mid-nineteenth century. Many debates center around the nature of the child, that is, learning from experience and exploring their interests, versus learning subject matter taught by the authority of a competent, expert teacher. Educational philosopher John Dewey believed in the idea of child-centered learning, or learning based on the interests and experiences of the child, whereas educational scholar E.D. Hirsch promotes a more strict practice and rote learning of subject matter. In addition to debating *what* to teach, others such as educational philosopher Nell Noddings debate *how* to teach. Noddings believes that caring should be the main goal in schooling, and that other learning comes from this foundation. This essay briefly explores some of the conflicting ideas about what makes successful learners.

John Dewey's progressive ideas for a child-centered education fell in line with the forward movement of the Progressive Era. In his book *The Child and the Curriculum* Dewey reflects upon the debate between traditional and progressive education. He believed that children should not become victims of the curriculum—that is relying solely on the teacher, subject matter, and textbooks, and giving no attention to their interests. In other words, learning should be about what comes naturally to children. Teachers should facilitate children's interests by teaching subject matter in a way that builds upon practical work and experiences.

Dewey's Lab School put his ideas into action, and children learned life and social skills by working as a community, doing practical work such as sewing, cooking, and farming. Although Dewey favored a child-centered education, he also realized the importance of teaching subject matter. He incorporated subject matter into students' lessons. For example, students

applied reading and mathematics to their cooking recipes (“Dewey Creates a New Kind of School” 2). As opposed to using subject matter for rote learning, Dewey used it as the foundation upon which students built their interests and experiences.

As Dewey strongly believed in a progressive learning style, E.D. Hirsch believes just as strongly in a traditional or classical approach to learning. He states that progressive learning is a romantic notion that caters to emotions and nature, that is, how children develop naturally. He affirms that learning subject matter is not a *natural* process, but children do need a strict curriculum and practice of subject matter in order to be successful. He quotes Max Rafferty, a state superintendent in California: “Schooling is not a natural process at all. It’s highly artificial. No boy in his right mind ever wanted to study multiplication tables and historical dates when he could be out hunting rabbits or climbing trees....but when man’s future began to hang upon the systematic mastery of orderly subject matter, the primordial, happy-go-lucky, *laissez faire* kind of learning had to go” (“Romancing the Child” 4). To the classicist the *laissez faire*, or “natural,” kind of learning is ineffective, and students come out of school with little concrete knowledge of subject matter. Hirsch and other classicists believe that knowledge of subject matter is what determines a successful learner.

Taking a different perspective on what determines successful learning, Nell Noddings states that students need caring teachers. “First, as we listen to our students, we gain their trust and, in an on-going relation of care and trust, it is more likely that students will accept what we try to teach (“Caring in Education” 4). As the nature of the child, or a human being in general, needs caring, students also need to build caring relationships with teachers in order to be successful learners. Noddings believes that one reason for the hesitancy to accept her theory is that of the Western cultural value of individualism. As opposed to achievement within

relationships, individualism puts an emphasis on lone hard work in order to achieve and build character (“Caring in Education” 2). However, Noddings goes on to say that forming these caring relationships with students is necessary. When teachers get to know students’ needs and interests, they are motivated to increase their own competency in order to help students be successful learners.

Debates about education are still prevalent today and will continue along with changes in society. The debate over traditional education versus progressive education applies now in the age of standardized testing. Should teachers encourage rote memorization so that students can earn high scores, or should they allow students to discover the world around them naturally? Will a demanding curriculum and practice in all subject matter make students more successful, or should teachers motivate students by fostering their interests and teaching them important skills they can use as adults? There are pros and cons to each side of the debate. That there is a debate at all, however, proves that education professionals do care about what is most important: the students and their success.