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Equally, but Differently for Students in a Multi-cultural Classroom

People tend to search for differences before recognizing similarities. I once heard from a course I took in college – it was a course about the study of love – that people are naturally attracted to those who are similar to themselves. Two people fall in love because they have similar interests, similar backgrounds, or similar beliefs. However, human nature easily notices differences faster than similarities. It is not wrong to say that people share universal values. Still, educators need to be aware of the presence of different culture and learning styles in the classroom.

Students may share some similarities, but each individual student is different. Guild (1994) mentions in the article “The Culture/Learning Style Connection” that there is a possibility of different cultures causing different learning styles. As mentioned in the article, African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Native-Americans differ in accepting or comprehending academic knowledge learned in school. Regardless of the “obvious” cultural differences, it is hard to ignore the differences among students. Gardner’s model of intelligences was not to show there are geniuses out there in each field or area. It was rather to alert teachers, so that teachers could be aware of the fact that students receive and consume knowledge by using different methods. In other words, if the teacher educates students in the way of advocating a single mainstream culture, encouraging one specific learning style, or promoting one area of

intelligence, then there will be students falling.

Due to the globalization, multi-cultural classroom is now inevitable. When I was an undergraduate student in Early Childhood Education major, the concept of multi-cultural classroom began to emerge as an issue – it was treated as the new generation’s educational philosophy. Before, Korea was known as a single-race nation; everyone living in the country and receiving education was obviously Korean. For the recent few decades, the situation has shifted, and learning multi-cultural or intercultural education became very important. Now a classroom filled with students from different cultural backgrounds, and speaking different languages is not a story heard from those countries far away over the ocean. Teachers need to understand that the multi-cultural classroom from a book or an article could be their own classroom. Not only ethnically diverse, but according to Heath (1982), students are coming from different community groups, exposed to different literature, having different habits and values. All classrooms can officially be multi-cultural classrooms.

There might be certain suggested methods in teaching, but there cannot be one absolute method in teaching anymore. I used to teach students in the same level with the same textbook for three years, but the approach was never the same. When I had to teach the topic about continents and oceans, I gave a wide range of information to one class and students designed their own fact-book. I once had an artistic project with one class making a huge mosaic world map, marking the continents and oceans. I also had a class where students quizzed each other in a form of an athletic game to learn more about continents and oceans. Each year, how I approached was different, but they worked because those were uniquely designed for each group of students. The reason why culture and learning style was such a controversial issue is because it could easily generalize and label students into certain groups. Culturally, habitually, and

intellectually students are all different. There will be no rule-of-thumb in teaching these diverse students.

Guild (1994) points out the connection between culture and learning style, introduces the controversial issues regarding this matter, and alerts educators to be aware of the relation. There might never be a correct answer to this question, again, because each individual student is uniquely special and different. The best an educator can do is, to always be aware of the differences, and never rest to find a way to equally encourage students' different abilities.