

Preservice teachers and multicultural education:  
Stressing difference or commonality?

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Fear of differences—differences in religion, culture, ethnicity, race, nationality, language— is a fundamental piece of the complex web of problems causing current international and cross-cultural conflicts. Less violent manifestations of our fear of differences are a daily occurrence in our children's schools and classrooms—racism, classism, heterosexism, elitism, ethnocentrism, abilism—and bring harm to mainstream and minority children alike. One of our central goals as educators is to help children develop caring, compassionate, and socially responsible attitudes toward others. To reach this goal I believe we must create curricula that dismantle fear of difference and promote understanding, appreciation, and respect among all people.

Many current approaches to multicultural education in the US attempt to address fear of difference by highlighting the essential commonalities uniting all humans. In this paper I want to call this widely-held and widely-taught perspective into question, examining the ways in which this commonality view of human experience reinforces fear of difference and sows seeds of mistrust and violence. The commonality viewpoint, although rooted in the best intentions, is deeply problematic and leads to the creation of classroom cultures that undermine efforts to build partnership and community among children.

In place of the commonality view, I propose an approach to multicultural education that focuses on and emphasizes variety and difference. In this paper I argue that examining and celebrating variety—in culture, language, ethnicity, race, religion, family structures, personal abilities, and so on—can serve as the foundation stone of an approach to diversity education for young children that leads to the development of a culture of respect, dignity, and peace.