



November 30, 2016

ISSN 1094-5296

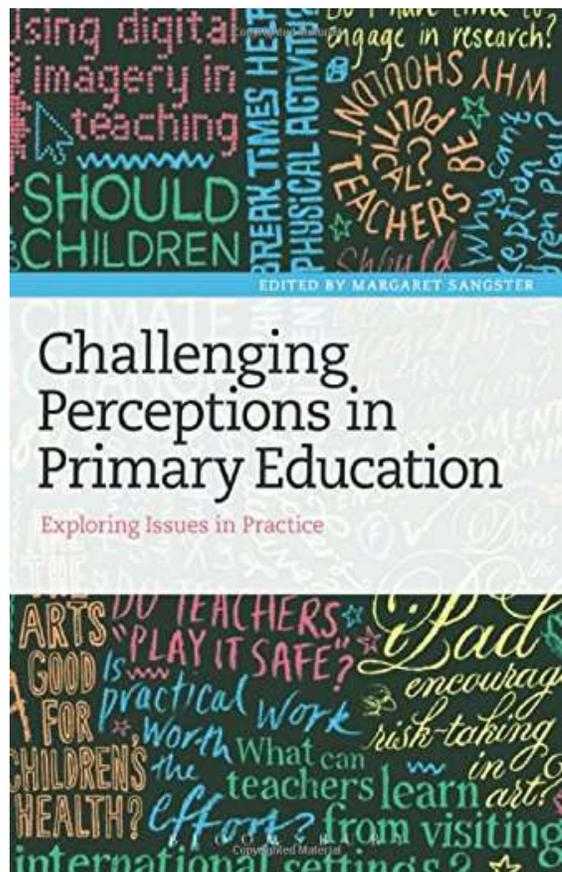
Sangster, M. (Ed.). (2015). *Challenging perceptions in primary education: Exploring issues in practice*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Pp. 184

ISBN: 978-1472578372

Reviewed by Lisa M. Chang
The University of British Columbia
Canada

New and experienced teachers are now facing massive changes in education as today's understanding of childhood, learning, and school curricula by educators, parents, and children are greatly different from a generation ago. Subsequently, the expectations of what children should know and what teachers should teach have grown significantly. Teachers must constantly confront and question their own perspectives on children and learning due to these societal changes and expectations. *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education* encapsulates all these issues and changes to underscore the importance of teacher knowledge and to reinforce the often forgotten fact that "beyond policy, syllabi and rules each teacher is unique; unique in their interpretation of education, unique in their procedural choices and unique in their relationships with the children in their class" (Sangster, 2015, xviii).



The purpose of *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education* is to expand discussions and debates about primary education and to invoke teachers' reflection of their own professional practice. The book implores readers to question their implicit assumptions of education and whether or not so-called traditional teaching methods are appropriate in today's schooling. The volume also addresses what influences teachers' pedagogical styles and methods as well as what factors contribute to their decision making in the classroom (i.e., practical experience, personal beliefs, educational background, theoretical perspectives, etc.). The objective is to engage readers to reflect on their past, current, and potentially future teaching practices as well as inform policy makers and administrators of the current issues that affect teachers.

Edited by Margaret Sangster, *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education* includes contributions from over 30 researchers and lecturers of education from Canterbury Christ Church University in England. All of the authors are based in the UK and have experience in primary education and various areas within the field such as arts, math, and physical education. Sangster herself is a former Principal Lecturer of Primary Mathematics and Professional Studies at the university and has worked as an advisory teacher in mathematics in primary and middle schools before transitioning to higher education. She has also published other works on teacher expertise and mathematics education.

Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education is organized into five parts that address learning environment, effective curriculum, imagery in teaching, education in other countries, and exploring other perspectives on education. Each part contains a number of brief chapters that are about four pages long including references. Contributing authors of this book address very different aspects of the targeted theme. For example, Part 1 on "Creating a Good Learning Environment" includes chapters on disability,

the role of play in learning, classroom dynamics, and assessments. These chapters are a combination of anecdotes on teaching practice and research with a bit of theory mixed in. Perhaps the most unique aspect of each chapter is the question and answer format that is consistent throughout *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education*, which directly focuses the reader to consider key questions and the author's perspectives. This anecdotal/question and answer format delivers relatable information and content to readers in North America despite the use of examples from the UK.

A particular strength of this edited volume is its comprehensive analysis of the current structure and status of education for young students. Particular issues that are written about by the contributing authors include the division of responsibility among teachers (e.g., general educators and special education specialists); the teaching of "traditional" subjects such as math, science, social studies, and literacy; the integration of digital tools in the classroom; the role of the local community on schooling; the professional identities of teachers; the perceptions of religious education; and the outlook on 21st century teaching and learning. The more personally reflective chapters entail teachers' professional identities, in which the authors discuss politics, mentoring, and risk-taking in primary education. These issues in schooling and the profession not only exist in the UK or in North America, but around the world, and are important to address because teachers "are required to meet the demands of an ever more complex society" and the practice of teaching is increasingly evaluated and scrutinized (Sangster, 2015, p. 152).

Sangster and the co-authors provide anecdotes that harken back to canonical research on the professional socialization of teachers that impact practice, decision-making, and beliefs (e.g., Bolster, 1983; Clandinin, 1986; Goodman, 1988). For example, Goodman (1988) argued that research on teaching perspectives need to extend beyond

“static dichotomies” (e.g., traditional versus progressive or conservative versus liberal) to better understand the socialization of educators within educational institutions and their workplaces (p. 121). This practice enriches the discussion of teachers’ training, professional perspectives, and their practical philosophies on teaching and children (Goodman, 1988). The authors in this book provide a more contemporary view of the issues that teachers face in reflecting on their profession and their perceptions, thus further extending Goodman’s (1988) argument that teachers’ beliefs are “in a state of flux” (p. 132). Some of the selections in also fit well with Connelly and Clandinin’s (1986) research on using narrative inquiry to examine teachers’ experiences. Reflection and reflexivity are difficult to accomplish without some form of storytelling. Sangster and the co-authors make sure to support narratives with critical questions and detailed reflections to fully illuminate the topics.

While *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education* can be useful to a variety of professionals in education, there are some issues to consider. Given the condensed length of the book, the brevity of each chapter ends a topic rather abruptly and I was left feeling I needed more details or examples to ground my understanding. I would have preferred to read excerpts and accounts of teachers’ points of view and experiences that illustrated the authors’ main points rather than a summary of other research. It felt as though the perceptions of educators were somewhat absent in many of the chapters despite the importance of sharing these views to reflect on professional practice and to build a more engaging connection with teachers reading this book. Another topic that is not addressed in the book is working with and understanding colleagues with different perceptions of education. As society is increasingly mobile and global, many teacher education programs employ instructors from other countries in which the institutionalized understanding of children, learning, and pedagogy are shaped by

diverse social, cultural, and historical factors. I find recent literature by Darling-Hammond and Lieberman (2012) to be a useful supplement to *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education* because it extends the discussion on teacher training programs around the world. Darling-Hammond and Lieberman highlight the differences in policy and training in other countries to diversify the perspectives on teacher education outside of the UK and the United States with a focus on curriculum and policy changes, teacher knowledge and professional development, and school improvement practices. An understanding of teacher education and pedagogical practices around the world can further enrich reflection and reflexivity of teaching practice.

Another downside is the relatively short section on visual literacy, digital imagery, art and design, and technology use in the classroom. All of these topics are related to literacy instruction and development, which is an area that has seen a lot of growth and changes in the past couple of decades as our understanding of literacy is now beyond just reading and writing print (The New London Group, 1996). Although the chapters in this section touch upon the growing literacy and communicative practices of children, the underlying theories and concepts are barely addressed. For educators who are trying to understand this burgeoning body of research and changes to literacy pedagogy, Rowsell, Williamson, Simon, and Beck’s (2013) book on teacher training and literacy pedagogy explores these topics in a more in-depth manner.

On the other hand, one of the greatest strengths of this book is the ability of the authors to make difficult topics approachable because of the conversational nature of the writing. With the wide scope of topics addressed in *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education*, it would be helpful if a future edition tackled educational theory in a similar writing style and across multiple topics since understanding and using theory is fundamental in teacher training programs. I would also like

to see the next edition of this book address cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom because of the increased migration of people and the ever-changing demographics of schools with high rates of immigration such as the UK, Canada, and the United States.

The target audience for this book is diverse, as it is appropriate for preservice, new, or experienced teachers as well as teacher educators, administrators, and policy makers. Despite the title, this book can be useful for educators in elementary or secondary education since some of the chapters discuss professional issues that extend across grade level such as the political climate of teaching, mentoring teachers, or the ever changing landscape of curriculum development. The book can be an appropriate primer for new and experienced teachers who are reflecting on

their professional identities in a challenging field. Teacher educators will also find some of the chapters helpful as reading material to begin discussion or supplement other reading material on the topic of teachers' professional socialization.

I find one of the difficulties of being a new instructor in a teacher training program is how to transform the reflections of the knowledge, perspectives, and beliefs of schooling and children to be of practical use for the teachers-in-training. Reflecting is a common practice in education and yet at times regarded as just busy work for the preservice teachers. *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education* provides some examples on the possible questions that can help preservice teachers and instructors engage with reflections on a deeper level.

References

- Bolster, A. S., Jr. (1983). Toward a more effective model of research on teaching. *Harvard Educational Review*, 53(3), 294-308.
- Clandinin, D. J. (1986). *Classroom practice: Teacher images in action*. London, UK: The Falmer Press.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1986). Rhythms in teaching: The narrative study of teachers' personal practical knowledge of classrooms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2(4), 377-387.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Lieberman, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Teacher education around the world: Changing policies and practices*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Goodman, J. (1988). Constructing a practical philosophy of teaching: A study of preservice teachers' professional perspectives. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 4(2), 121-137.
- Kosnik, C., Rowsell, J., Williamson, P., & Simon, R. (Eds.). (2013). *Literacy teacher educators: Preparing teachers for a changing world*. Boston, MA: Sense Publishers.
- The New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-93.

About the Reviewer

Lisa M. Chang is a PhD candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. Her research focuses on teachers' multimodal pedagogies for students with learning difficulties. She also teaches courses on literacy instruction and assessment in the Bachelors of Education program.



 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview