



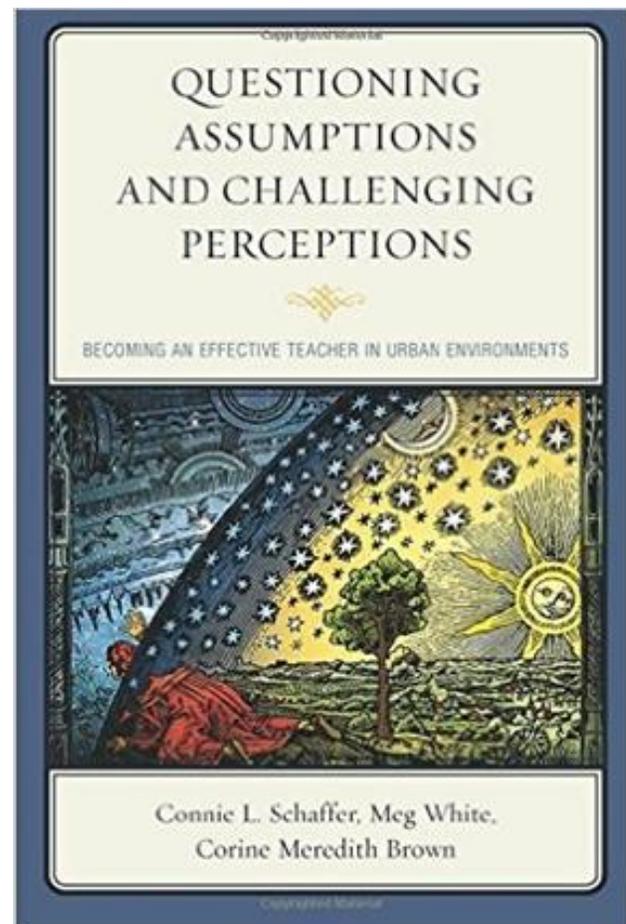
Schaffer, C. L., White, M., & Brown, C. M. (2016). *Questioning assumptions and challenging perceptions: Becoming an effective teacher in urban environments*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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At a time when the field of education acknowledges more than ever the need for preparing preservice teachers for an ever-increasing diverse student population (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Gay, 2013; Martins-Shannon, 2012), *Questioning Assumptions and Challenging Perceptions: Becoming an Effective Teacher in Urban Environments* heeds the call. Challenges continue to present themselves and questions arise as we seek to find the common threads that seamlessly weave teacher education curriculum together to create the tapestry for becoming an effective teacher in urban environments. Chapter by chapter, authors Connie Schaffer, Meg White, and Corine Meredith Brown braid together theory, practice, and reflection to elucidate this process, which according to the authors, first begins with an individual teacher's questioning of his or her own assumptions and challenging his or her own perceptions about urban schools and the students who attend them.



Teaching content alone is not enough to be an effective teacher in today's classrooms. The National Academy of Education recognizes that content knowledge alone does not adequately prepare teachers for the challenges they will face in today's classrooms" (NCATE, 2006, p. 6). Similarly, Darling-Hammond (2010) noted the need for teachers to have "even more sophisticated abilities to meet the [diverse] needs of public school students" (p. 2). In addition to content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge is integral to teaching. The combination of the two—pedagogical content knowledge—involves knowing and understanding one's learners to effectively teach content. *Questioning Assumptions and Challenging Perceptions* is replete with powerful instructional tools that support this transformational learning experience, as teachers grapple with inner conflicts inherent to working effectively in urban environments and finding their voices as advocates for social justice.

Furthermore "the needs of public education are greater than ever before", particularly the requirements to better prepare our future teachers to meet the needs of all students – including those from increasingly diverse economic, racial, linguistic, and academic backgrounds – to the same learning outcomes (NCATE, 2010, p. 1-2). The challenges encountered in training teachers for diverse student populations are real (Williams et al., 2016). In particular, one major issue with teacher preparation is the lack of attention given to the ingrained bias, attitudes, and beliefs of teacher candidates (Gay, 2013). *Questioning Assumptions & Challenging Perceptions* fills this gap, forcing readers to grapple with how their own lived experiences shape their assumptions and perceptions and understand how *people don't know what they don't know* (p. 1). As simple as it may seem for a reader to recognize that he/she doesn't know what he/she doesn't know, the complexities associated with this statement begin to

unravel revealing nuances and intricacies associated with becoming an effective teacher in an urban environment.

The foundation of the book places emphasis on personal reflection of assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs about cultural identity. An essential feature of an effective teacher education program is time and space for critical reflection of one's own cultural competence (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Introspection through personal exploration parallels anti-bias education practices "...linked to understanding one's social identities; knowing who you are strengthens the work you do" (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo, 2015, p. 18). Schaffer, White, & Brown advance the significance of knowing how one defines their own cultural identity in order to understand others. The intentional design of the book guides the reader's journey of self-discovery through the lens of Cognitive Dissonance. The authors posit Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957) as a means for preservice teachers "to challenge their existing world views" (p. 4). Readers are encouraged to embrace the dissonance they face throughout the experiential learning experiences in the book to challenge inequities impacting urban students.

Delving further into the book, readers gain familiarity with the topic's rich vocabulary, enhancing both confidence and ease when articulating concepts paramount to understanding what it means to be an effective educator in urban environments. The authors carefully unpack the terms *urban* and *poverty* to illustrate the multifaceted nature of these concepts, as well as the interplay between them, to help the reader gain a deeper understanding of how social contexts impact children, families, and educators. Borrowing Milner's (2012) classifications of urban schools - urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristic – the authors use these classifications to emphasize multiple

perspectives and broaden the definition of *urban*, allowing the reader to transcend a *single story* (p. 23) of urban schools. The authors emphasize the complexities associated with poverty and risk factors impacting children living in poverty. Additionally, the authors identify unique features of cultural capital; aspirational capital, social capital, navigational capital, familial capital, linguistic capital, and resistance capital to illustrate ways for teachers in urban environments to recognize their students' strengths and embrace an asset view rather than a "rescue mentality or deficit approach" (Delpit, 1995, p. 49).

*Questioning Assumptions and Challenging Perceptions* is a valuable volume, as it holds the potential to provide a shared learning experience between teacher educators and preservice teachers. Outside of academia, key stakeholders in the educational community may find value in the many features the book has to offer. While reading *Questioning Assumptions and Challenging Perceptions*, I found myself embarking on a journey of reflective practice. Reading one of the book's scenarios felt strikingly familiar to me:

Perhaps a white, female teacher grew up in a middle-class community with little diversity (1st cognition). As an urban teacher, her classroom may be located in a neighborhood with great cultural and linguistic diversity (2nd cognition). The dissonance is created when this teacher thinks, behaves, or responds in ways that support her own experiences, when the actual needs of the students in the classroom are perhaps quite different (p. 43).

It was as if I were the teacher candidate the authors were referring to some 20 years ago when I began my own journey as a teacher in an urban setting. I am the white, female teacher who grew up in a middle-class community with little diversity. However,

while engaging in the internal reflection of moving through the stages of cognitive dissonance presented in Chapter 4, I began to reflect on my current experiences as a teacher educator at a university nestled in an *urban* environment. I began to grapple with the essential question, "In what ways is cognitive dissonance created in teachers whose background is different from that of their students?" (p. 41). While I found personal relevance with the essential question posed and the experiential learning experience, I could not help but feel something or *someone* was missing from this conversation and learning experience. I pictured the many faces of the teacher candidates sitting in my classroom, many of whom fit the snapshot depicted in statistics as "predominantly white, middle-class, and female" (p. 42). Yet, the voice of the aspiring teacher candidate—the '*urban*' student who attended the '*urban*' school and grew up in this very '*urban*' community—was missing.

This scenario demonstrates how the missing voice becomes a missed opportunity. Teacher educators utilizing this text need to differentiate the essential question posed and "making it personal" activities in Chapter 4 to honor the varying entry points (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo, 2015; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013) of pre-service teachers' journeys to becoming effective teachers in urban environments. The voices and life experiences of our preservice teachers from urban environments possess the richness of urban communities reflecting what Ladson-Billings (2008) describes as the "vibrancy and dynamics of these spaces" (p. 46). Making it personal through cultural walks (p. 47) takes on a whole new meaning when one can experience the urban community through the eyes, voice, intellect, heart, and soul of the primary source: their peers. By reaffirming the significance of how the spaces that we create recognize and honor the very capital students bring to the teacher

education classroom, we might diminish the overwhelming presence of Whiteness, which can be silencing in our teacher education classrooms (Sleeter, 2001).

Midway through the book, the journey shifts from internal reflection to external implications. The authors illustrate the larger role individual teachers play in society as “teachers as activists” (p. 72). Teachers have a responsibility for turning knowledge into action as advocates for social justice. Now that the reader *knows what they know*, the authors’ intent is to empower the readers to translate their newly gained knowledge, changed perceptions, and/or beliefs into action. Akin to Freire’s notion that people link knowledge to action so that they actively work to change their societies at a local level and beyond (Freire Institute, 2017), the authors encourage this through engaging in reflection and creating a concrete representation of the multi-layered influences and relationships within and among one’s personal sphere of influence. This learning experience “guides personal actions as the reader becomes a catalyst for change beyond the classroom” (p. 78). By the book’s culmination, the reader feels empowered having found one’s voice. The case study of Ruby Bridges, the first African-American child to integrate an all-White school in the South during the 1960s, reveals how cognitive dissonance, sphere of

influence, and social justice create the fabric for becoming an effective teacher in urban environments. The powerful nature of this historical event in the civil rights movement resonates with the role of teachers today and the magnitude of their responsibilities as advocates for social justice for children, families, schools, communities, and society.

As I came to the end of the book, I found it was not the end of the story but the beginning of a new one for me on a lifelong journey of questioning assumptions and challenging perceptions to promote social justice in education. *Questioning Assumptions and Challenging Perceptions: Becoming an Effective Teacher in Urban Environments* serves as a valuable resource for a variety of audiences within the field of education and offers a versatility that meets the needs of different readers. The complete volume would fit well within teacher preparation curriculum, or portions could be tailored to meet the needs of a reflective practice or professional development course. Moreover, vital to continuing the courageous conversations and call to action enlisted as we *question assumptions and challenge perceptions* is creating safe, trusting spaces for preservice teachers to do the critical reflection necessary to grapple with teaching challenges, as well as celebrate the accomplishments of becoming an effective teacher for children in urban environments and beyond.

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