

# Foreword

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**O**n too few occasions does one have an opportunity to read a book that approaches the most important questions regarding student achievement and school reform. *What Is It About Me You Can't Teach?* by Eleanor Renée Rodriguez and Jim Bellanca is a book that faces the domain given short shrift in the nation's analysis of what is going wrong with many schools, that is, the importance of preparing and keeping good teachers. Though a national publication by Linda Darling-Hammond, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (1996), addresses the centrality of teaching and learning and its impact on achievement, very few school reform publications give attention to the issue of classroom instruction.

Rodriguez and Bellanca have made an important contribution to the school reform literature. In this book they acknowledge (through the "voices of children") the impact that teacher attitudes and performance have on the learning of the urban child. Poignant examples abound here, which force the reader to consider how teachers behave differently to many urban students. As has been reported by the authors in their examples, teachers often tend to slow down the pace of learning, persist less strenuously in helping students, and view urban children as disadvantaged, unruly, unsocialized, slow, and backward—thus perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Teachers who expect students to be successful will work toward that end, and usually they will produce results that justify their optimism, for example, providing strategies that deliver subject matter in interesting ways and helping the students to cognitively adapt and process information.

The legacy of research shows that urban teachers must change their teaching practices in the direction of concentrating more time and effort on concept and cognitive development, reasoning, thinking, and higher-order comprehension skills when engaged in subject matter instruction. A strong base of research linking cognitive development to prior knowledge in learning emerged in the late 1970s. Those studies concluded that, particularly when reading is the learning mode, those students with much prior knowledge and experience relevant to a subject have less difficulty learning new material and retain more than those with inadequate or incomplete prior knowledge and experiences. Urban students need the benefit of teachers who know how to access prior knowledge that students might not be aware of and that might help them with the material to be learned.

Through illustrative examples, Rodriguez and Bellanca guide the reader through integrated and interdisciplinary lessons that use much of the cognitive research referred to above. The reader is guided on a virtual tour of relevant topics and ideas that will work well with all students, but particularly with urban children. The use of predictions, graphic organizers, elements of Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment

program, concept themes, problem-solving strategies, and concept attainment models are all embedded in content-area instruction. This synthesis provides the conceptual foundation necessary for appropriate classroom mediation.

The lasting contribution of this book is that it also gives the reader a clear portrait of the educator best able to serve urban students. This educator is sensitive, empathetic, confident, knowledgeable about appropriate teaching methodologies and subject matter, and is acclimated to the nuances of learning used by many urban children. This educator also provides a strong role model for the students, maintains high expectations for all students served, and is able to integrate academic learning into structured applied learning opportunities. Thus the context of schooling becomes one of nurturance, guidance, leadership, and support, in spite of the harsh realities of everyday life continually faced by many urban students in our schools.

I am pleased to introduce the revised edition of this book to our many partners in urban school systems across the country and to thank the authors for their outstanding contribution.

—Eric Cooper  
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