

Preface

“It is better to know than not to know.” This adage, as is the case with all such adages, conveys a commonly recognized reality. Although we can understand why, in rare instances, someone might prefer to remain unaware of certain kinds of knowledge, it is almost always better to be knowledgeable than to be unknowledgeable—even when the knowledge involved might be unpleasant.

For today’s school leaders to be unknowledgeable about educational assessment is more than professionally imprudent: It is professionally suicidal. Students’ test scores have become the yardsticks by which the people who operate our schools are judged. Thus, school leaders who know naught about assessment are heading into battle without important protective armor. School leaders who know naught about assessment are nutty.

And this is precisely the reason I wrote this book. I wanted to support those who run our schools by helping them understand what they truly *need to know* about educational assessment. Frankly, I don’t think there are any books currently available that accomplish such a mission very well. Most of the assessment books written for educators enshroud their messages in off-putting quantitative complexities. Moreover, many of those books deal with nice-to-know, not need-to-know, content. In contrast, I’ve tried in this book to avoid the use of quantitatively rooted explanations, and I’ve been ruthless in deciding what it is that school leaders genuinely *must* know about educational assessment.

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Why Do We Test?

Most of us who chose to become educators did so in order to help children learn the things they ought to learn. Typically, we started off by wanting to be teachers. Then, after we'd taught for a while, some of us decided to tackle other educational challenges, such as becoming school administrators. But the dominant motive for first selecting an educational career is almost always to help students learn. Let's face it, few people opt to become educators as part of a get-rich-quick financial strategy.

Okay, what is the nature of this "learning" we hope to promote in our students? Well, the things students ought to learn are, for the most part, skills and knowledge. The *skills* involved are usually intellectual skills, such as when students are able to compose a coherent essay. But children also need psychomotor skills, such as being able to use a computer's keyboard or discovering how to stay afloat while swimming. With respect to *knowledge*, there is a truly enormous collection of stuff that students need to know, for example, flocks of facts, tons of truths, and piles of principles. The more knowledgeable we

3. Excessive Difficulty

If an item is so extraordinarily difficult that even marvelously instructed students might not answer it correctly, then the item also won't distinguish between well-taught and poorly taught students. For instance, consider this italicized sample item: *"Without using your computer, what is the square root of 1,522,756?"* Because most of us have forgotten how to extract square roots of numbers from scratch—assuming we once knew how to do so—this ("no computers") sample item would be truly a difficult one for most students—and most adults. (Incidentally, the seven-digit number in the sample item is the square of 1,234.) Test items so blinking tough that even well-taught students will stumble on them also turn out to be instructionally insensitive.

4. Flawed Items

Items containing serious deficits (for example, ambiguities, garbled syntax, more than one correct answer, or no correct answer at all) will prevent well-taught students from answering the item correctly, hence making it impossible for the item to accurately distinguish between effectively and ineffectively taught students. Merely consider, for a moment, such an obviously flawed subtraction item as the following, *"When you subtract three from nine, which of the following answers do you get? (A) 7, (B) 8, (C) 5, (D) 12."* Because the correct answer (6) isn't there, can you see how such a flawed item is unable to distinguish among students according to how well they were taught? Flawed items are instructionally insensitive.

5. Socioeconomic Status (SES) Links

If an item gives a meaningful advantage to students from higher SES families, then the item will tend to measure what students bring to school rather than how well they are taught once they get there. This is a particularly insidious cause of item insensitivity. Items with SES links are often found in educational accountability tests, and such items definitely

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Formative Assessment

Underused Magic Bullet

School leaders need to know what *formative assessment* is—and what it isn't. School leaders also need to know that formative assessment can dramatically improve the caliber of kid learning. Finally, school leaders need to know how to get more teachers to use formative assessment—and then make sure those teachers do.

Before dipping into formative assessment per se, however, I want you to engage in a brief, two-part thought experiment. *Please!* For Part I, please imagine that members of the pharmaceutical industry have discovered a low-cost, research-proven vaccine to protect young children from a life-threatening disease. Imagine further that, despite the vaccine's demonstrated ability to shield children from this deadly disease, few physicians ever urge parents to have their children vaccinated. As a consequence, thousands of young children die needlessly. How do you think the parents of those children would view the conduct of the offending physicians? How would *you* regard the conduct of those physicians?

SPREADING THE WORD

Aristotle opined, probably when he was in an opining mood, that the most serious metaphysical evil occurs when any entity's potential is unrealized. Putting it a bit less abstrusely, Aristotle believed that whenever a person or thing possessed the capacity to become something, and did not do so, the failure to achieve this potential was inherently wrong. That is, when any capacity is not fully implemented as it might have been implemented, this is profoundly inappropriate. Well, assuming you have by now comprehended the top-20 crucial understandings well enough to be able to explain their meaning to colleagues or to laypersons, why not heed Aristotle's advice? That's right, I'm asking you to start explaining!

Not Just for Kids

Human beings are tough to change. That's true whether those human beings are little ones or big ones. So, when school leaders are asked to increase the assessment literacy of their colleagues, all of whom are grownups, and most of whom have been relatively successful in their profession, this constitutes a nontrivial challenge. Experienced educators who have been doing pretty well are unlikely to clamor for opportunities to learn more about something they don't really see as all that relevant to their work. So, it is in recognition of the realistic recalcitrance of many seasoned school people to learn about assessment that some promoters of assessment literacy will be tempted to play the *good-for-kids* card. Resist the temptation. It rarely works.

That's right, if you want to modify the entrenched behaviors of a group of educators, never tell them to do what you've suggested because "It's good for kids." Granted that most educators entered the profession because they wished to educate their society's children and, other things being equal, educators will usually subscribe to what's apt to benefit children. But it is markedly more powerful, when appealing to an experienced educator, if you can legitimately assert that "This is good for *you!*" Putting it differently, promoters of assessment literacy will be more successful if what a target educator hears is the following: "If I increase my personal understanding of educational assessment concepts, that is, if I enhance my own assessment literacy, *this will be good for me.*"