
Many students at one time or another have asked themselves, “Why must I take this test?” or “OK, I took the test, now what?” In other words, they want to know the purpose of their assessment. Some educators may also ask similar questions. Is the purpose of assessing to ascertain information about students’ current achievement levels or to find out what needs to be taught to achieve results? Is the test fair to all the students in the class? Is the purpose of assessing to make transfor- mative assessment in Practice: A Process of inquiry and action. Margaret Heritage, author of Classroom To Tomorrow, provides an interesting perspective on why educators test students and how results should be used. She also challenges educators to consider adopting a “children’s rights” assessment approach. This method suggests that educators approach assessment from the position that students should be involved and have input into their own assessment. Heritage provides transformative examples of students reflecting on their own learning.

Heritage also speaks to the idea that learning is a collaborative activity that requires learning and participation by both students and teachers. To accomplish this, teachers should practice routine assessments, provide a positive environment, and set up situations and assignments where they can actually witness whether a student is progressing toward a desired goal. This book also outlines steps for developing learning progression. These steps explain how learning expertise develops over a period of time. Heritage breaks down how students begin with a limited amount of knowledge and how their thinking and understanding progresses. She also expands on gathering and interpreting evidence as well as how to use it effectively once it has been gathered.

The author also elicits the support of policymakers. She proposes that they make sure their assessment policies ensure that all students are learning, regardless of their status. This book is written in a straightforward manner and can influence teachers to change some traditional methods in favor of adapting some of these innovative ideas and procedures into their assessing practices. The book is a must-read handbook for educators and preparing them for the 21st century classroom.


The saying goes that if you keep on doing what you’ve always done, you’ll keep on getting what you’ve always gotten. School leaders who make transformative changes do not do so by doing things “the way they have always been done.” As Frederick M. Hess titled the book, these leaders do not remain “stuck in a cage” of policies, regulations, and contracts. These educational reformers drive improvement by working through the obstacles in their path.

In each chapter, of Cage-Busting Leadership, beginning with one titled, “It Doesn’t Have To Be This Hard,” Hess shares examples of how superintendents and principals have worked around the “cages” in their districts to escape the “culture of cant’s.” He describes ways in which administrators have been able to work around the policies, procedures, and laws by just having a different mindset—that of a cage-buster. While the book offers many great examples that administrators can learn from, I caution the reader to make sure that the cage you try to bust is always based on what is best for students. For example, Hess shared a loophole around a state class size cap: allowing a district to increase their class size by adding college students to the room for work-study or internships. I disagree with this solution, based on my personal experience and the research on teacher effectiveness. This book offers concrete examples of how administrators around the country are breaking the status quo to move their schools and districts forward. It is certainly not a quick read, but it’s worth the effort if you find that your school or district is bound by bad policy, procedures, or contracts.

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