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Visible Learning: The Sequel: A Synthesis of Over 2,100 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement: A Book Review

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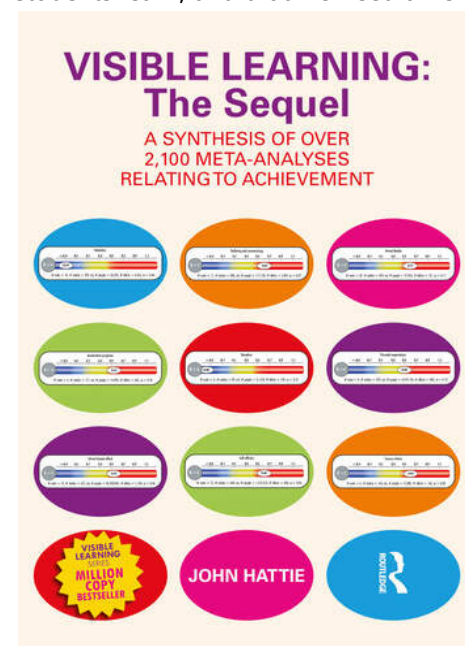
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Visible learning: The sequel: A synthesis of over 2,100 meta-analyses relating to achievement, Written by John Hattie, London: ROUTLEDGE, 2023, 512 pp., (e-Book), ISBN: 9781003380542

INTRODUCTION

John Hattie's *Visible Learning: The Sequel* is a follow-up of his earlier research (Hattie, 2008). This update builds on the massive success of the earlier work by synthesizing evidence from over 2,100 meta-analyses, representing over 130,000 studies and over 400 million students worldwide. It does more than just update the original; it revises and refines the underlying concepts of VL, addresses the successes and limitations of the original and responds to some of the criticism it has received since 2008. This review therefore explores Hattie's latest meta-analysis to provide a summary of his findings and what they mean for practice. The sequel challenges the status quo and provides a practical framework for continuous improvement and this review aims to provide researchers and education practitioners with a comprehensive look at the key arguments, strengths and weaknesses of the book and how the findings can be applied to practice and future research. Hattie also significantly expands the database to include domains like digital technologies, motivation, and socio-emotional learning. The chapters, hence, are reviewed thematically rather than sequentially; chapters from different parts of the book may be synthesized together if they share a common theme and/or purpose.

duce VL and its development since 2008. He emphasizes the shift from knowing "what works" to "what works best" (p.3) and responds to key criticisms, such as Terhart's (2011) skepticism about the validity of learning as the dependent variable and the model's challenge to traditional European views of teaching. Rømer (2018) similarly critiques VL's constructivist basis and its reductive notion of feedback. The chapter begins with outlining the problems educators face in improving student achievement. Hattie says that traditional education focuses on what teachers do rather than what students learn, and that we need an ev-



idence-based approach to education that focuses on identifying and implementing the best teaching and learning strate-

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Introducing VL and Responding to Criticism

The book is organized into 16 chapters, the first of which Hattie uses to intro-

gies. It also responds to critiques who think the model is too simplistic or that it ignores context.

Hattie explains, “a mistake of many critics is to overly focus on the one book in 2008, as I have expanded, clarified, and explored many of the ideas in VL1 in these other sources” (p.1). Here, he indicates that the model is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a framework for understanding the factors that contribute to student achievement. He also acknowledges the need to consider context as key for effective implementation of the principles. Although this chapter sets the scene for the rest of the book, an overview of the VL model, its key principles, the challenges, and criticisms of implementation; readers may benefit from a more detailed overview of the book’s structure and the specific educational interventions to be discussed including how theoretical concepts apply to educational factors or interventions. His revised synthesis may therefore be understood not only as an academic contribution through the aggregation of empirical findings, but also as a methodological intervention into the politics of educational evidence. This positioning places VL within a broader academic and policy-driven efforts to formalize educational improvement through empirical aggregation and ranked effectiveness.

The VL project is a global initiative that engages with evidence-based educational policy designed and developed by organizations such as the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). While these organizations have somewhat distinct scopes and methodological emphases, they share a common goal of being dedicated to syntheses and aggregation of empirical evidence primarily aimed at enriching teaching and better learning outcomes. Hattie’s methodological approach favors statistical generalization through meta-analysis over narrative or primary study review, aligning with the WWC’s emphasis on evidence from randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental designs (Slavin, 2020). In contrast to the OECD’s focus on large-scale structural determinants of learning such as national socio-economic and political systems, Hattie’s framework prioritizes intra-school variables, particularly teacher-led practices (Grey, 2020).

Theoretical Foundations

Chapters 2 and 3 collectively lay down the theoretical background that enables the understanding and application of the VL model in its entirety. Chapter 2 focuses on the methodology of meta-analysis as a statistical technique used to synthesize the results of several studies and, particularly, explore the effects of different educational interventions. This process often uses statistical indicators like Cohen’s d to measure effect size, where values above 0.40 are generally considered to indicate a meaningful impact. Hattie adopts this 0.40 benchmark to signal influences that exceed the ‘average zone of desired effects.’ Moreover, the R -val-

ue is introduced to gauge the replicability and robustness of these findings across contexts. Here, Hattie explains how meta-analysis provides estimates of the overall impact of these interventions and dispels criticism that it is too simplistic and contextually blind. He goes further to illustrate how VL has developed an approach that keeps refining itself with ongoing research and feedback.

Hattie revisits the VL model in Chapter 3 and categorizes what influences student achievement into eight explicit areas: the student, the home, the classroom, the school, the curriculum, the teacher, teaching strategies, and learning strategies. In addition, the chapter includes concrete examples for educators about how the model can help in understanding students’ struggles and putting effective interventions in place. It must be noted, however, that the second chapter addresses researchers, who are statistically inclined, more than educators who might be overwhelmed by the technical details. Although the third chapter delves into practical details, it responds more to criticism than explains how schools and teachers can effectively implement the VL model.

Implementing Visible Learning

Chapters 4 and 11 concretize the real-world structure of how to implement and optimize the VL model in school environments. Chapter 4, «*Implementing the Intentional Alignment VL Model*,» describes steps necessary for the alignment of teaching and learning strategies to produce specific intended learning outcomes. It argues for clarity in understanding goals of learning and instructional strategies aligned to meet those goals. It also addresses the roles of various stakeholders, including teachers, students, leaders, and parents, with some useful practical advice on how to involve each of these groups in a cohesive way that ensures focus on common objectives. Yet, the actual implementation of purposeful and evidence-based teaching strategies is covered in Chapter 11 «*Teaching with Intent*». It highlights that setting clear learning objectives, choice of appropriate teaching methods, and consistent monitoring of student progress by use of formative assessments are important in adapting instruction to student needs. Speaking of which, student feedback is reported here to be the backbone of instructional adaptation. These chapters complement each other and placing them sequentially in the book would enhance the reader’s understanding by pairing practical applications with a focus on intentional teaching. Although they write more to the academic community, teachers should not expect specific implementation examples; the chapters simply link the theoretical constructs to practical strategies with the hope of improving student learning and their own teaching environment. To facilitate implementation, teachers can consider experimenting with strategies that Hattie identifies as being very high impact, such as formative assessment, teacher clarity, and classroom discussion. These

could take the form of concrete practices like exit tickets, explicit learning intentions, or scaffolding peer discussion.

Learners and Learning Environment

To discuss the learners and learning environment, Hattie provides a comprehensive explanation of the critical factors influencing student achievement in chapters 5-7 and 15 which explore how various internal and external factors interact to shape student achievement. Chapter 5, «students,» is focused on personal characteristics such as motivation, self-efficacy, prior-knowledge, and learning style. Hattie stresses the value of responsive instruction to students demonstrating self-confidence and adaptive learning, and he indicates the value of the growth mindset, which «puts students in a position in which they can look at difficulties as opportunities for growth.» Chapter 6, «The Home and Family,» focuses on family and socio-economic drivers of learning, arguing that «active parents, supportive home environments, and adequate access to resources significantly boost student achievement.

Chapter 7, “School and Society,” extends this analysis to institutional and community supports, stressing that “a positive school environment and quality teacher influence, with community support,” contribute meaningfully to outcomes. Hattie also identifies extracurricular and real-world learning experiences as valuable supplements to classroom instruction. Notably, these ideas reappear in Chapter 15, “Whole-School and Out-of-School Influences,” where school leadership and broader environments are positioned as levers for educational equity. As he notes, “School-wide initiatives and out-of-school influences [...] are to reduce the achievement gaps among groups of students or increase the impact on students with specific learning needs” (p. 411).

From the reviewer’s perspective, while these chapters collectively set out the ecological richness of student learning, their internal sequence is incoherent. Chapter 7’s break with 5–6 discontinues the thematic sequence, and the conceptual duplication with Chapter 15 dilutes the strength of both. More significantly, while the evidence base is robust, the text makes very few specific suggestions as to how teachers could carry these findings forward into school-level interventions. The discussion remains highly abstract, and practitioners need to bridge the gap between concept and practice themselves.

Classroom Practices

Chapters 8, 9, 12, and 13 collectively address classroom practice in terms of instruction and how this influences student achievement. Rather than individually describing each com-

ponent, these chapters emphasize how classroom climate, teacher effectiveness, and student-centered approaches to instruction operate and impact success. Hattie stresses the importance of teacher clarity, positive classroom management, and high expectations in inclusive and heterogeneous learning environments. In the reviewer’s view, even if these claims are in line with pre-existing literature on quality teaching, treatment of such topics is shallower in terms of practical scaffolding.

Chapters 12 and 13, for example, stress metacognition, self-regulation, and self-motivation as critical to academic success but have little to say about how these are implemented in practice classrooms. The book appears to assume a professional level of sophistication that many may not possess, especially in the taking up of abstract strategies without practical examples. This limits the application of Hattie’s otherwise solidly grounded conclusions to those practitioner teachers in search of pragmatic approaches based on the realities of curriculum design and time constraints.

Curriculum

Curriculum is addressed in chapter 10 as a mediating structure between teaching, learning, and assessment. Hattie names four dimensions, clarity, coherence, relevance, and challenge, as essential to a high-quality curriculum. Clarity requires both students and teachers to share a clear, unwavering understanding of content and intent of the curriculum. Coherence requires systematic relationships between concepts and topics, and relevance entails consistency with what students are experiencing and concerned about. Challenge, on the other hand, is the level of mental effort to sustain engagement and enable development. These are presented as dependent dimensions which require intentional design and regular scrutiny.

From a practical perspective, Hattie’s point to assert that curriculum development should be done collaboratively and rooted in classroom realities is valid, in the sense that he maintains that teachers ought to be at the center of this exercise, considering that they have special insights into the feasibility of instruction and the needs of students. This focus, however, differs from practices in most education systems, where policy makers and administrative centers end up commanding curriculum design. The book works this gap by advocating additional teacher participation in decision-making, but not to the point of offering structural recommendations or case examples demonstrating how it would work in practice. The argument, therefore, is inspirational rather than a practical one. Including more specificity in this chapter through actual models for participatory cur-

riculum planning would make it of more value to practitioners as well as to proponents of reform.

Technology Integration

Technology integration is discussed in Chapter 14 in terms of how technology supports student learning, including its ability to enhance good teaching instead of replace it. Hattie provides guiding principles for the application of educational technology, noting the necessity of connecting tools with good pedagogy. The chapter discusses the ways technology can improve formative feedback, working together, and access to rich learning environments, particularly through mediums such as social media or systems that provide feedback.

According to Hattie, technology in the classroom is relatively a question of how its impact on student learning and developing effective teaching practices are integrated together. Although he does not explain how different technological advances can be used to improve learning, he focuses on several key principles in using technology effectively: it should enhance, not deliver, content; it must complement a diverse range of teaching strategies and by no means replace them; and teachers need proper training to use technology effectively.

While the inclusion of this technology takes in the new scope of Hattie's synthesis, the coverage remains conceptual. The chapter lacks concrete examples of the effective use of specific technologies in varying classroom contexts. Educators who read the book, from a reviewer's point of view, would benefit from clearer illustrations of how to integrate tools in alignment with the high-impact strategies identified elsewhere in the book, such as metacognition or formative assessment. There is also minimal attention given to the challenges of technology adoption, such as training, infrastructure, and digital equity, which may limit the practical utility of the chapter for teachers and school leaders seeking guidance.

Style and Language in VL: The Sequel

The language used in the book is clear and concise which enhances accessibility to the diverse audience, including researchers, educators, and policymakers. Occasionally, anecdotes, case studies, and humor are used which help to make it readable and engaging. Although Hattie takes on a very direct and engaging style of writing that avoids jargon and technical terms so that content is approachable for readers who are less familiar with educational research, there are several instances where the style is burdened with technical explanations of data that may not address most practition-

ers' needs. Furthermore, although the organization of the chapters could benefit from better sequence and order in the book for enhanced continuity between them, each chapter's structure is well-organized. Each chapter is fitted with "conclusions" and "reflections" which are found to be direct and straightforward a variety of readership for an in-a-nutshell glimpse or main takeaways of the chapters. The use of headings, subheadings, bullet points, and lists makes it easy to navigate and locate information». Such well-thought-out presentation not only makes the book user-friendly but also shows its practical relevance.

The fact that the book provides a wealth of information that is helpful to a variety of audiences, including researchers, education leaders, teachers, and policymakers, generally makes it somehow challenging to navigate. Depending on the purpose of the book, the reader may need a 'How To Use This Book' section to guide different readerships to their respective needs (e.g., researchers vs. teachers). Such a section might direct researchers to the chapters on meta-analytic methodology and evidence classification, while guiding teachers toward practice-oriented sections on classroom effects, learning strategies, and implementation models.

The book's strengths are its massive scope, derived from over 2,100 meta-analyses of studies involving over 400 million students, and its thematic consistency, with chapters addressing rational categories of learners, teaching, and curriculum. It constructively builds on criticisms and develops the VL model to include new fields like digital technology, socio-emotional learning, and school-level factors. Although terminology is more accessible to academic readers than to education practitioners, the inclusion of case studies and bullet points helps to improve overall clarity. In the meantime, the book has several limitations. It is not overly forthcoming with pragmatic implementation strategies for practitioners. Certain sections, particularly those dealing with statistical thresholds, are likely to alienate non-specialist readers. There are a few structural discontinuities that disrupt the flow of the whole, and the emphasis on «what works» is not always followed through with sufficient interpretive depth regarding how or why particular strategies operate in varied educational settings.

This Research-to-practice gap is evident in sections where high-level models are introduced with limited procedural elaboration. For instance, the "intentional alignment" framework includes a five-phase cycle: Discover, Design, Deliver, Double-back, and Double-up, but its implementation in concrete classroom routines and instructional practices remains largely implicit. While the "Double-back" phase emphasizes that all stakeholders (i.e. students, teachers, and school leaders) need to systematically and deliberately mon-

itor and evaluate the impact of all the factors on the learning journeys, such guidance remains abstract and undeveloped at the level of practical enactment. Hattie's endorsement of teacher mind frames is another example; the statement "I explicitly inform students what successful impact looks like from the outset" (p. 47), is not accompanied by sample protocols, diagnostic tools, or illustrative enactments. These instances exemplify the broader pattern in *The Sequel*, where strong empirical syntheses are not always matched by equally robust interpretive or operational scaffolds to support implementation across varied educational contexts. Hence, this work is strongest in its synthesis of evidence, but its practical utility would be enhanced by more explicit attention to the classroom-level constraints typically navigated by mediating actors such as schools, educational leaders, and teacher preparation programs, for whom additional scaffolding within the model would be valuable support.

CONCLUSION

The book revisits and updates key conclusions drawn in the original VL model, as it reflects on the 14-year journey of VL and its significant impact on education practice. It updates initial conclusions with key findings from the experience of over 10,000 schools implementing the VL approach. Hattie's recent deliberations emphasize that, for achievement

in students, it is essential to have positive and caring learning environments, to keep expectations high, and to develop critical thinking. Although the book presents a detailed overview of the findings, there is a lack of sequential organization in some chapters, potentially hindering readers from following the evolution of ideas in a coherent manner. Furthermore, most chapters are found to be devoid of real-life examples of implementable strategies and their fulfillment, which would go a long way in bridging the theory-practice or research-teaching and learning divide. Although Hattie expounds on his previous advocated principles by moving from 'what works' to 'what works best,' which is useful, talking about 'how what works best works' could potentially be more enlightening. A «How To Use This Book» section would also be helpful in guiding different types of readers on how to utilize the material in the book based on their specific requirements (e.g., researchers vs. teachers). This book review is addressed primarily to education practitioners, for it outlines the main arguments and raises several limitations, particularly in addressing the practical interests of classroom teachers who very often need help with specific applications of research findings.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

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