

Version date: 30 December 08

1250 words

Hattie, John A.C. (2009). *VISIBLE LEARNING: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London, England, Routledge: Taylor & Francis. Pp378

Many years ago (don't ask me for the reference) David Donnison observed that the most important outcomes of research are the insights gained in the course of the research rather than what is actually documented within it. (One wishes that more journal editors would take the injunction to heart.)

This book is certainly to be even more strongly commended for the insights which have emerged from Hattie's reflections on the deeper implications of his data than for the specific relationships documented in the studies reviewed.

The basic data consist of a meta-meta-analysis of more than 800 meta analyses of the contribution to pupil "achievement" (traditionally measured) of 138 variables widely considered to be important. The meta analyses are based on more than 50,000 studies (which yielded some 150,000 effect size estimates) derived from testing several million pupils. Its major limitation is the limited range of "outcomes" covered. Unfortunately, this constraint is not limited, as Hattie suggests, to exclusion of studies of such things as the "affective" outcomes of education but includes the dearth of measures of such basic academic outcomes as the ability to forge new syntheses, craft new insights, form good judgments, engage in critical thinking, and muster explanations and arguments - never mind such vital outcomes as the ability to get together with others to contribute in one or another of a huge variety of different ways to the collective process of understanding and influencing the socio-cybernetic processes which determine the operation of society.

But one of the things I personally find both surprising and amazing is that Hattie's reflections on the implications of the data obtained with this very limited range of outcome measures seem, from the evidence we ourselves have accumulated (see reference below) to apply, perhaps with even greater force, to the achievement of outcomes like those mentioned at the end of the last paragraph.

However, the first insight to hit me between the eyes was not at this level at all. It was the fact that the average effect size of an additional year of schooling on conventional measures of 'academic' achievement is 0.40. In comparison with this, the impact of most widely touted "innovatory" educational practices (like setting homework) pales almost into insignificance. For this reason, Hattie sets the criterion to be reached by variables to be considered worthy of serious attention at 0.40. Note how dramatically this differs from the prevailing notion that any educational process ... particularly an "innovative" one ... which can be shown to yield an effect size greater than zero is worth promoting.

But the conclusions which emerge from Hattie's reflections on the deeper, "theoretical", implications of the data he has reviewed are striking indeed.

Effective teachers emerge (collectively) as extraordinary people characterised by high levels of dedication and personal competence. One of the most important things they do is to continuously seek feedback from their pupils and use it to reconsider their goals and reflect on, and improve, the quality of their teaching. They study the barriers the pupils have encountered and, when they find that their own activities have not had the desired effect, they restructure what they are doing so as to achieve their objectives. This stands in stark contrast to the more common interpretation of “feedback” – which tends to be viewed as feedback *to pupils* of some kind of mark or score unaccompanied by any attempt to understand and remedy the problems which have prevented the pupils “doing better” – ie arriving at “The correct answer”.

Beyond that, effective teachers engage with their pupils in setting explicit, realistic but challenging, measurable, learning objectives on a group and individual basis. Hattie prefers the term “visible” to “measurable”, arguing that effect sizes of above .40 are visible to the naked eye.

The choice of the book’s title *Visible Learning* also reflects Hattie’s observation that effective teachers discuss their objectives and procedures with their pupils ... thereby making them visible. More than that, by discussing the barriers to achievement experienced by their pupils they make the sources of their own competence and incompetence visible to their pupils in such a way that they can learn from them, as role models, how to be learners in the wider sense of that word.

Hattie argues that programmes like these demand safe classroom environments in which mistakes – on the part of teacher and pupil alike – are viewed as a stimulus to learning and development, not as something to be ashamed of.

At the heart of this shift in understanding of the educational process lies the task of reconceptualising “teaching” as “managing development” rather than “telling”. Interestingly, our own work not only supports this conclusion in schools but also shows that a similar shift is required in ways of thinking about “management” more generally (again, see reference below).

At one point Hattie engages us in an intriguing discussion of what is meant by the term “learning”, arguing strongly for a move away from a focus on knowledge of content to a focus on learning to formulate alternative ways of thinking, form judgments, ask questions, and even learn to teach! He takes issue with such things as the introduction of special programmes to nurture “thinking skills”, saying that any felt need to do so should be viewed as evidence of a basic defect in the nature of the “educational” programme being offered.

Unfortunately, this engaging and insightful discussion of what amounts to the objectives of education (and their achievement) kind of falls by the wayside when Hattie summarises the specifics of what the studies he has reviewed actually show. For example, some of the meta analyses are said to show that whether pupils approach school with a love of learning and an appreciation of what schools have to offer has a significant (0.25) effect on their “learning”. The fact that what is being offered in reality contains very little of value to many pupils (so why would one approach it with enthusiasm?) is not alluded to in this discussion. Likewise, although, from time to time, there are remarks to the effect that, for example, pupils are always learning something ... thinking about something ... and may, for example, be learning to pretend that they are paying attention to the teacher, the word “learning” –

implying the kind of learning assessed by most attainment tests – is continuously used in a manner which seems almost designed to entrap the reader into conventional, content-oriented, educational thoughtways.

In conclusion the book is to be strongly recommended for (i) the theoretical insights into the educational process it contains and (ii) the demonstration that the vast majority of the activities widely touted in the “what works” literature have effect sizes much lower than the average effect size of an additional year at school. Most widely debated changes in administrative arrangements, such as mixed ability teaching or whole language teaching, have very little effect at all.

The specific activities that are shown to have an effect are best understood as producing that effect, not directly, but via their contribution to one or a number of more basic variables constituting a theoretical framework on which our knowledge of human development and its management should be built.

REFERENCE.

Raven, J. (1994). *Managing Education for Effective Schooling: The Most Important Problem Is to Come to Terms with Values*. Unionville, New York: Trillium Press. www.rfwp.com; Competency Motivation Project, 30, Great King Street, Edinburgh EH3 6QH.

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