

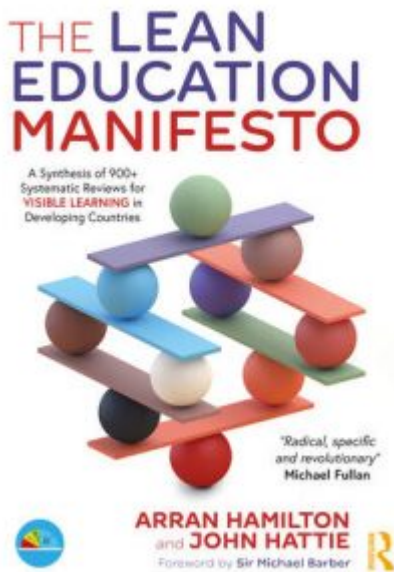
The Lean Education Manifesto: a review

by Robert Cannon

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Photo Credit: Robert Cannon



The authors of *The Lean Education Manifesto* declare “This is a book about a remarkably simple idea: how to get more out without putting more in...specifically for education systems in developing countries.” The book’s focus is on improving learning outcomes for children.

“Lean” is the central principle of this book. Lean methodology maximises value by achieving efficiencies with little wastage. It requires working backwards through the educational system to find where inputs that add little or nothing to children’s learning should be reduced or eliminated. Lean is the antithesis of the naive policy thinking that more in = more out, a blind alley that leads to waste and bloated educational bureaucracies.

The authors, Arran Hamilton and John Hattie, bring complementary experiences to their work. Hamilton’s focus has been on educational development, translating evidence into impact, and publishing. Hattie has a distinguished academic career in education. He is best known for his *Visible Learning* books, which synthesise meta-analyses of the effect of the different factors of what works in schools to improve learning.

Drawing from the evidence of over 900 systematic reviews of 53,000 studies, some startling suggestions for low- and middle-income countries are made. Three of these suggestions are:

- *Maybe* learners can be taught more effectively and less resource intensively in mixed-age classrooms, with peers tutoring one another.
- *Maybe* different approaches to curriculum, instruction, and the length of the school day might be more cost-effective ways of driving up student achievement than hiring extra teachers, reducing class sizes, or building more classrooms.
- *Maybe* school-based management, public-private partnerships, and performance-related pay are blind and expensive alleys that have limited influence or impact on what teachers actually do in classrooms.

The book focuses on enhancing children's learning at a time when the significant schooling challenges in developing countries before COVID-19 have now reached a crisis of unprecedented scale. To address this crisis, the authors drill down through the systematic reviews to identify 57 developing country reviews that tell us about what works to get children into school – the easy part – and how to transfer that into high-quality learning – the hard part.

The book is targeted at ministers of education and their staff in ministries in developing countries, international development specialists, and students. Already coping with the crisis, one wonders how many will have time to read this book. At 308 pages, this is not a lean guide for action in a crisis. On the contrary, it is a monumental academic text.

The Lean Education Manifesto is divided into three parts. Part 1 introduces the challenge that getting children into school does not solve the harder problem of learning. The terms “lean” and “meta-analysis” are introduced. A summary of what works in developing countries from the authors' meta-analysis of 57 systematic reviews reveals what the authors describe as its scantiness, a reasonable picture of how to increase access, and limited evidence on achieving quality.

Part 1 also outlines the open-access [Visible Learning META^x](#) database. This synthesises the findings from over 1,700 meta-analyses of studies involving 300 million students. The authors say they are “ultra-cautious” about using this resource as the data mostly comes from higher income countries. They justify its consideration on the grounds of the paucity of developing country evidence and the need to use, with the greatest of care, what evidence exists to inform policy and practice.

Part 2 surveys the findings from the database regarding the impact on learning of teacher selection and training, structural enhancements to school systems, teacher accountability and motivation, approaches to learning and teaching, and educational technology. From a detailed analysis of evidence, a range of tentative conclusions about how the research findings could be used for lean improvement is presented,

such as the suggestions quoted earlier.

The Lean Education Manifesto's implementation strategies comprise Part 3. This part will appeal to those interested in implementation science and concerned with turning evidence into action. Here, while there is limited evidence to assist in determining effective strategies, areas of agreement are distilled and presented. But the technical strategies presented are only part of the picture. There are also political economy considerations. The book neglects these, especially the idea of authority and the support needed to effect reform.

Readers need to be aware that the “meta-meta-analysis” underpinning the book has been strongly challenged, both for the [statistical methodology](#) and the [theoretical underpinnings](#). There is also the barrier to consider in translating this research into improvement strategies relevant to developing countries and, further, the implicit assumption that all developing countries are similar. The authors, while acknowledging these barriers, have ignored major contributions on these issues, and the strategies to address them – contributions that [I have been reviewing](#) over the past decade.

The Lean Education Manifesto is clearly written, but given its size and the intention to help in a crisis, it would nevertheless benefit from editing, perhaps using their lean methodology. Inappropriate business language such as “leverage students” should be removed, along with colloquialisms such as “goose and gander” and “joy juice”. These will be unintelligible to many readers, especially when English is not the first language.

This book's utility would also have been enhanced if the principles of good teaching outlined in Part 2 had been applied to designing and presenting the text. Authors and publishers of books on development must give more [attention to the design](#) and content of their books, so that readers from diverse backgrounds are assisted to understand and apply their precepts. Examples of books designed to teach and to support readers include these general texts [on learning](#), and [teaching](#), and from international development, this [book on classroom change](#) and another on [capacity building](#) supported by courses and research papers. The last two are freely accessible.

The Lean Education Manifesto is a major addition to the sparse literature on learning, teaching and educational change in developing countries. It will become a significant resource in educational development. Despite the authors' cautions, there is a risk that some may use this book to justify policies and practices antithetical to good learning outcomes. How to manage that risk is yet another challenge in educational development, but one that must be understood and

managed with great care.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/the-lean-education-manifesto-a-review-20221011/>