

The Smartest Kids in the World*

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Amanda Ripley:

The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way

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In her book, Amanda Ripley tries to find out how children studying in certain countries can be smarter than students elsewhere, and what is it like to be a child in one of the new educational superpowers of the world. The book looks under the shining surface, presents the educational cultures of some countries and sheds new light on the American educational system.

The author spent months with children, teachers, parents and people who tried to creatively find new avenues for education. That was when she asked herself why certain children learn so much, while others learn so little?

She compares the educational systems of three countries – South Korea, Finland and Poland – to the system in the United States through the experiences of three American exchange students who spent a year in those countries. She chose South Korea and Finland because they are among the world leaders in educational achievement, and Poland because it has recently improved its educational results considerably, despite facing the same challenges as the USA, including widespread child poverty.

In a number of countries, something astonishing was achieved. Practically every child was taught to employ logical, critical thinking in the field of mathematics, sciences and reading. They did not simply learn to memorise facts, but to solve problems and apply what they had learned. That is, they were prepared for living in a modern economy.

In America, mathematics defines children's future. When one disregards all the other factors, such as family background or income, those pupils that attend advanced mathematics classes have a better chance to graduate from college. They

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can also expect to earn better at their workplace after graduation. Why do American students underperform in mathematics? Surveys show that American third-graders get easier mathematical problems than, for example, their counterparts in Hong Kong. If an American student fails in a subject, it is their personal trauma. Neither students, nor parents can handle failure. In such cases, the student tries to avoid the subject in question as much as possible. In the lower grades, reading, arts and behaviour are deemed more important skills.

Poland started to reform its educational system in 1997. The basic goals were set and guidelines were established, but the details were at the schools' discretion. One quarter of teachers were sent back to school to improve their knowledge. In order to measure progress and to see that students do in fact learn, standardised exams were required at specified intervals. These were not as frequent as for American students, but were to be taken at the end of primary school, and at the beginning and end of secondary school.

Teacher training in Finland is of high quality, and teaching is considered a prestigious profession. By contrast, teacher training at American colleges is the easiest course. In the United States, almost 2.5 times more teachers are trained every year than necessary.

In Finland, teachers treat students as equals, do not show too much empathy and do not pigeonhole students. In the USA, the situation is different. Teachers need to take into account students' family background and ethnicity.

In Korea, the whole process of education is reduced to one number: if students' test results are good, their successful future is guaranteed. Getting a high score in the exam means an entry ticket to the three most prominent Korean universities, which in turn ensures a good job, a nice house and an easier life. Along with respect from everyone. However, only 2% of high school graduates can get into the top 3 institutions. That is why Korean children spend most of their time studying.

The combination of low expectations and abundant supply has lowered the esteem for teachers' profession all over the world. But the main message of the book is that all students need to acquire the skills for a strict, higher order of thinking to succeed in the modern world.