

The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way. By Amanda Ripley. New York: Simon & Schuster. ISBN 978-1451654424.

In “The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way,” Amanda Ripley, an investigative journalist for *Time Magazine* and *The Atlantic*, among other magazines, sets out in search of the answer to the question why some countries score significantly higher than others in international large-scale assessments, or ISLAs. She closely examines the nations that produce the students that have the highest scores in the PISA tests, Finland, Korea, and Poland, through the eyes of three teenagers who visit these countries as exchange students. This approach, a rather unique way to research educational systems, provides an interesting inside view, which Ripley offsets with her interviews with the scientists and educational policymakers in these three nations.

As it turns out, there are several factors that the top scorers in the PISA assessment have in common. The most important of these is rigor, which the New Oxford American Dictionary (2015) defines as “the quality of being extremely thorough, exhaustive, or accurate.”

Undoubtedly the most rigorous of the three top-scoring nations is South Korea, where students attend school and tutoring facilities, called *hagwons*, for an average of 10 hours a day, after which they go home and proceed to do homework for another 2 hours. While student life in Poland and Finland is nowhere near that time-intensive, in both of these countries students take education very seriously. So much so, that it prompts Kim, a 15-year-old girl from Oklahoma who raised funds to be able to travel to Finland as an exchange student for a year, to ask her classmates, “Why do you care so much!?” The better question, according to Ripley, is why American students care so little. In 2012, Ripley surveyed 1346 students, both international and American. Since only about 15 percent of the students completed the survey, the results cannot be assumed to be representative of the nations surveyed, but they shed at least some light on how students perceive the educational system in America. For one thing, American students spend far more time doing extracurricular activities like sports. According to Ripley, 85 percent of international students and 82 percent of American students stated that American students place more importance on doing well in sports than doing well academically.

Ripley refers to the South Korean approach as the pressure cooker model. The average school day in South Korea adds up to 12 hours, and the school year is two months longer than the American school year. South Korean children, not surprisingly, perceive their education as burdensome, and the national assessments as tremendously stress-inducing. Only 2 percent of students who graduate from high school get into one of the top three most prestigious universities in South Korea, which guarantees them a good job and a comfortable life. This system, according to Ripley, creates “an extreme meritocracy for children that harden[s] into a caste system for adults” (p.60). Finland’s rise to the top in PISA scores came as a complete surprise, not in the least to the Fins themselves, who appeared to have no idea how well their students were doing in school. A lot of the students’ success seems to be linked to their teachers. The Finnish government rebooted their teacher-training programs in the 1970s, making them far

more selective and rigorous. Getting into a teacher's university program is as prestigious as getting into medical school in America. Consequently, the position of a teacher in Finnish society is one of respect. Similar to Finland, the overhaul in Poland's educational system was achieved in a relatively short time. Poland's PISA response rates seem to do away with the myth that money is the solution to end the educational gap; Poland has almost as much child poverty as America, but it fared far better in the PISA test. Poland's success story is the result of a four-step national reform, initiated by Miroslaw Handke, a former chemist turned minister of education, which included injecting rigor into the system, adding accountability, raising expectations, and creating autonomy for teachers. Although it met with tremendous initial resistance, mostly from teachers, this initiative enabled Poland to catch up with the developed world in a mere three years.

The main takeaway from "The Smartest Kids in the World" is that, although rigor is a valuable tool for improving students' performance, assessing students across demographics and nations remains a complicated undertaking. Additionally, overhauling an educational system on a national basis can be achieved in a relatively short amount of time and can be extremely effective, but is generally met with considerable resistance. Importantly, the top-scoring nations all appear to be far more demanding when it comes to teacher education. It appears that if rigor is applied not only in elementary and secondary schools but in teacher-training programs as well, the results are higher test scores in large-scale international assessments like the PISA test. This book's central research question, why do some countries score so much higher than others in international, large-scale assessments, is quite broad, and the book only examines the surface of the issue. Ripley attempts to explain the performance of American students on the PISA standardized test in relation to students from other countries. The question itself betrays a certain bias towards Eurocentric hegemony. Every experience of the subjects in the book is counterpointed with an example from American students or educational policy. In essence, the author cares more about what is happening in America than she does about what is happening in these other countries.

Finland, South Korea, and Poland are investigated within this book, but in a very superficial way. The author does not present an adequate explanation of the educational successes of these countries. For example, she focuses on teacher training and school architecture as key differences explaining the success of Finland's students but barely examines pedagogical, curricular, and cultural differences. Ripley's lack of background in educational research limits the effectiveness of her argument. By her own admission, she is a journalist who has written several pieces on education, but it is not her sole focus. The author approaches her research as a journalist focusing on statistics and news articles, rather than taking an academic approach to research. Her lack of familiarity with the educational scholarship means that she does not place her book within the other research done on this topic¹. This lack of familiarity also means that

¹ The following is a snapshot of the scholarship on PISA in an American context (Engel & Frizzell, 2015; Meng, Muñoz, King Hess, & Liu, 2017; Rutkowski, 2015; Rutkowski, Rutkowski, & Plucker, 2015; Stephens & Sen, 2014)

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education, 2019, 14(2), pp. 57-59.

doi: 10.20355/jcie29397 ISSN 1718-4770

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themes she discusses tend towards the superficial. Specifically, the author focuses on the austerity of Finish and Korean classrooms in comparison to American classrooms. However, the analysis of this comparison is very superficial; it lacks a discussion of outside research on the effect of classroom design on learning. The argument is simply because Finish and Korean students did better on PISA, classroom design must have an effect. An author with a background in educational research would have made a more substantial argument. Even if we accept Ripley's conclusion, she offers no framework or suggestions to improve educational policy based on their conclusions. Since Ripley is examining the possible issues with American education, she should offer at least some suggestions for improvement.

Does "The Smartest Kids in the World" offer anything of value to those who are studying international and comparative education? Ripley brings up several valid points, the most important of which is the supposed significance of international standardized tests such as the PISA. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) administers the PISA and disseminates the results every three years to a great amount of fanfare. This book inadvertently highlights the standard reaction to the PISA scores; most countries do not care unless they are being shown to be dropping or rising in rank. The purpose of this book was to discover why three countries which seemingly have nothing in common outperformed not only American students, but most other students in the world in the PISA test; however, a more interesting question would be, perhaps, what is the significance of international standardized tests in the first place?

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