



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

By Amanda Ripley

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How do other countries create “smarter” kids? What is it like to be a child in the world’s new education superpowers? *The Smartest Kids in the World* “gets well beneath the glossy surfaces of these foreign cultures and manages to make our own culture look newly strange....The question is whether the startling perspective provided by this masterly book can also generate the will to make changes” (*The New York Times Book Review*).

In a handful of nations, virtually all children are learning to make complex arguments and solve problems they’ve never seen before. They are learning to think, in other words, and to thrive in the modern economy. Inspired to find answers for our own children, author and *Time* magazine journalist Amanda Ripley follows three Americans embedded in these countries for one year. Kim, fifteen, raises \$10,000 so she can move from Oklahoma to Finland; Eric, eighteen, trades his high-achieving Minnesota suburb for a booming city in South Korea; and Tom, seventeen, leaves a historic Pennsylvania village for Poland.

Through these young informants, Ripley meets battle-scarred reformers, sleep-deprived zombie students, and a teacher who earns \$4 million a year. Their stories, along with groundbreaking research into learning in other cultures, reveal a pattern of startling transformation: none of these countries had many “smart” kids a few decades ago. Things had changed. Teaching had become more rigorous; parents had focused on things that mattered; and children had bought into the promise of education.

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The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way By Amanda Ripley Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #4088 in Books
- Brand: Simon Schuster
- Published on: 2014-07-29
- Released on: 2014-07-29
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.37" h x .80" w x 5.50" l, .62 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

“[Ripley] gets well beneath the glossy surfaces of these foreign cultures and manages to make our own culture look newly strange...The question is whether the startling perspective provided by this masterly book can also generate the will to make changes.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

“Compelling . . . What is Poland doing right? And what is America doing wrong? Amanda Ripley, an American journalist, seeks to answer such questions in *The Smartest Kids in the World*, her fine new book about the schools that are working around the globe . . .Ms. Ripley packs a startling amount of insight in this slim book.” (*The Economist*)

“[T]he most illuminating reporting I have ever seen on the differences between schools in America and abroad.” (*Jay Mathews, education columnist, The Washington Post*)

“[*The Smartest Kids in the World* is] a riveting new book. . . .Ripley’s policy recommendations are sensible and strong. . . .The American school reform debate has been desperately in need of such no-nonsense advice, which firmly puts matters of intellect back at the center of education where they belong.” (*The Daily Beast*)

“*The Smartest Kids in the World* should be on the back-to-school reading list of every parent, educator and policymaker interested in understanding why students in other countries outperform U.S. students on international tests.” (*US News & World Report*)

“Gripping. . . .Ripley’s characters are fascinating, her writing style is accessible, and her observations are fresh. . . .If you’re interested in how to improve public schools, read Ripley’s book today.” (*The Huffington Post*)

“In riveting prose. . . .this timely and inspiring book offers many insights into how to improve America’s mediocre school system.” (*Publishers Weekly, starred review*)

“If you care about education, you must read this book. By recounting what three intrepid kids learned from the rest of the world, it shows what we can learn about how to fix our schools. Ripley’s delightful storytelling has produced insights that are both useful and inspiring.” (*Walter Isaacson, author of Steve Jobs and Benjamin Franklin*)

“This book gives me hope that we can create education systems of equity and rigor—if we heed the lessons from top performing countries and focus more on preparing teachers than on punishing them.” (*Randi Weingarten, President, American Federation of Teachers*)

“This is a no-nonsense, no-excuses book about how we can improve outcomes for all kids, from the poorest to the wealthiest. It avoids platitudes and ideology and relies instead on the experiences of students.” (*Joel Klein, CEO, Amplify, and former chancellor, New York Department of Education*)

“Amanda Ripley observes with rare objectivity and depth. She finds a real and complex world ‘over there’—schools with flaws of their own but also real and tangible lessons about how to do better by our kids. *The Smartest Kids in the World* gave me more insights, as a parent and as an educator, than just about

anything else I've read in a while." (Doug Lemov, author of *Teach Like a Champion*)

"Such an important book! Amanda Ripley lights the path to engaging our next generation to meet a different bar. She makes an enormous contribution to the national and global discussion about what must be done to give all our children the education they need to invent the future." (Wendy Kopp, founder and chair, Teach For America, and CEO, Teach For All)

"*The Smartest Kids in the World* is a must read for anyone concerned about the state of American public education. By drawing on experiences, successes, and failures in education systems in the highest-performing countries across the globe, Amanda Ripley lays out a course for what we must do to dramatically improve our nation's schools." (Michelle Rhee, Founder and CEO of StudentsFirst)

"Ripley's stirring investigation debunks many tenets of current education reform." (BookPage)

"In lively, accessible prose...Ripley's book looks at the data from a new perspective. Those stunned parents and teachers in New York State and elsewhere would do well to read this book first if they are inclined to blame their children's/students' poor results on a new test." (OECD "Education Today" Blog)

"[Ripley] is a compelling storyteller who deftly plaits humorous anecdotes and hard data to whip you in the face with her findings." (Kristen Levithan *Brain, Child Magazine*)

"Ripley's evaluation of education in a changing world is revealing and thought-provoking." (*Rocky Mountain Telegram*)

"A good read If you want to understand what goes on in other countries' education systems, read [*The Smartest Kids in the World*]." (*Coshocton Tribune*)

About the Author

Amanda Ripley is a literary journalist whose stories on human behavior and public policy have appeared in *Time*, *The Atlantic*, and *Slate* and helped *Time* win two National Magazine Awards. To discuss her work, she has appeared on ABC, NBC, CNN, FOX News, and NPR. Ripley's first book, *The Unthinkable*, was published in fifteen countries and turned into a PBS documentary.

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prologue

For most of my career at *Time* and other magazines, I worked hard to avoid education stories. If my editors asked me to write about schools or tests, I countered with an idea about terrorism, plane crashes, or a pandemic flu. That usually worked.

I didn't say so out loud, but education stories seemed, well, kind of soft. The articles tended to be headlined in chalkboard font and festooned with pencil doodles. They were brimming with good intentions but not much evidence. The people quoted were mostly adults; the kids just turned up in the photos, smiling and silent.

Then, an editor asked me to write about a controversial new leader of Washington, D.C.'s public schools. I didn't know much about Michelle Rhee, except that she wore stiletto heels and tended to say "crap" a lot in interviews. So, I figured it would be a good story, even if it meant slipping into the fog of education.

But something unexpected happened in the fog. I spent months talking to kids, parents, and teachers, as well as people who have been creatively researching education in new ways. Pretty soon I realized that Rhee was interesting, but she was not the biggest mystery in the room.

The real mystery was this: Why were some kids learning so much—and others so very little?

Education was suddenly awash in data; we knew more than ever about what was happening—or failing to happen—from one neighborhood or classroom to the next. And it didn't add up. Everywhere I went I saw nonsensical ups and downs in what kids knew: in rich neighborhoods and poor, white neighborhoods and black, public schools and private. The national data revealed the same peaks and valleys, like a sprawling, nauseating roller coaster. The dips and turns could be explained in part by the usual narratives of money, race, or ethnicity. But not entirely. Something else was going on, too.

Over the next few years, as I wrote more stories about education, I kept stumbling over this mystery. At Kimball Elementary School in Washington, D.C., I saw fifth graders literally begging their teacher to let them solve a long division problem on the chalkboard. If they got the answer right, they would pump their fists and whisper-shout, "Yes!" This was a neighborhood where someone got murdered just about every week, a place with 18 percent unemployment.

In other places, I saw kids bored out of their young minds, kids who looked up when a stranger like me walked into the room, watching to see if I would, please God, create some sort of distraction to save them from another hour of nothingness.

For a while, I told myself that this was the variation you'd expect from one neighborhood to the next, from one principal or teacher to another. Some kids got lucky, I supposed, but most of the differences that mattered had to do with money and privilege.

Then one day I saw this chart, and it blew my mind.

The United States might have remained basically flat over time, but that was the exception, it turned out. Look at Finland! It had rocketed from the bottom of the world to the top, without pausing for breath. And what was going on in Norway, right next door, which seemed to be slip sliding into the abyss, despite having virtually no child poverty? And there was Canada, careening up from mediocrity to the heights of Japan. If education was a function of culture, could culture change that dramatically—that fast?

Worldwide, children's skills rose and fell in mysterious and hopeful ways, sometimes over short periods of time. The mystery I'd noticed in Washington, D.C., got far more interesting when viewed from outer space. The vast majority of countries did *not* manage to educate all their kids to high levels, not even all of their better-off kids. Compared to most countries, the United States was typical, not much better nor much worse. But, in a small number of countries, really just a handful of eclectic nations, something incredible was happening. Virtually *all* kids were learning critical thinking skills in math, science, and reading. They weren't just memorizing facts; they were learning to solve problems and adapt. That is to say, they were training to survive in the modern economy.

How to explain it? American kids were better off, on average, than the typical child in Japan, New Zealand,

or South Korea, yet they knew far less math than those children. Our most privileged teenagers had highly educated parents and attended the richest schools in the world, yet they ranked eighteenth in math compared to their privileged peers around the world, scoring well below affluent kids in New Zealand, Belgium, France, and Korea, among other places. The typical child in Beverly Hills performed below average, compared to all kids in Canada (not some other distant land, Canada!). A great education by the standards of suburban America looked, from afar, exceedingly average.

At first, I told myself to resist the hype. Did it really matter if we ranked number one in the world in education outcomes? Or even number ten? Our elementary students did fine on international tests, thank you very much, especially in reading. The problems arose in math and science, and they became most obvious when our kids grew into teenagers. That's when American students scored twenty-sixth on a test of critical thinking in math, below average for the developed world. But, so what? Our teenagers had performed at or below average on international tests for as long as anyone had been counting. It had not mattered much to our economy so far; why should it matter in the future?

The United States was a big, diverse country. We had other advantages that overwhelmed our K-12 mediocrity, right? We still had world-class research universities, and we continued to invest more in research and development than any other nation. It was easier to start a business here than in most places on earth. The values of hard work and self-sufficiency coursed like electricity through the United States, just as they always had.

But everywhere I went as a reporter, I saw reminders that the world had changed. The 2,300 days that our kids spent in school before high-school graduation mattered more than ever before. In Oklahoma, the CEO of the company that makes McDonald's apple pies told me she had trouble finding enough Americans to handle modern factory jobs—during a recession. The days of rolling out dough and packing pies in boxes were over. She needed people who could read, solve problems, and communicate what had happened on their shift, and there weren't enough of them coming out of Oklahoma's high schools and community colleges.

The head of Manpower, a staffing and recruiting firm with offices in eighty-two countries, said one of the hardest jobs to fill anywhere was the sales job. Once upon a time, a salesperson had to have thick skin and a good golf game. Over the years, however, products and financial markets had become wildly more complex, and information had become available to everyone, including the customer. Relationships were no longer everything. To succeed, salespeople had to understand the increasingly sophisticated and customizable products they were selling almost as well as the engineers who worked on them.

Rather suddenly, academic mediocrity had become a heavier legacy to bear. Without a high-school diploma, you couldn't work as a garbage collector in New York City; you couldn't join the Air Force. Yet a quarter of our kids still walked out of high school and never came back.

Not long ago, zero countries had a better high-school graduation rate than the United States; by 2009, about twenty countries did. In an era in which knowledge mattered more than ever, why did our kids know less than they should? How much of our problems could be blamed on diversity, poverty, or the vastness of the country? Were our weaknesses mostly failures of policy or of culture, of politicians or of parents?

We told ourselves that we were at least raising more creative children, the kind who might not excel in electrical engineering but who had the audacity to speak up, to invent, and to redefine what was possible. But was there a way to know if we were right?

the mythical nordic robots

Education pundits had worked mightily to explain different countries' wildly different results. They had visited faraway schools on choreographed junkets. They'd debriefed politicians and principals and generated PowerPoints for the folks back home. However, their conclusions were maddeningly abstract.

Take Finland, for example, which ranked at the top of the world. American educators described Finland as a silky paradise, a place where all the teachers were admired and all the children beloved. They insisted that Finland had attained this bliss partly because it had very low rates of child poverty, while the United States had high rates. According to this line of reasoning, we could never fix our schools until we fixed poverty.

The poverty narrative made intuitive sense. The child poverty rate in the United States was about 20 percent, a national disgrace. Poor kids lived with the kind of grinding stress that children should not have had to manage. They learned less at home, on average, and needed more help at school.

The mystery was not so simply solved, however. If poverty was the main problem, then what to make of Norway? A Nordic welfare state with high taxes, universal health care, and abundant natural resources, Norway enjoyed, like Finland, less than 6 percent child poverty, one of the lowest rates in the world. Norway spent about as much as we did on education, which is to say, a fortune, relative to the rest of the world. And, yet, Norwegian kids performed just as unimpressively as our own kids on an international test of scientific literacy in 2009. Something was amiss in Norway, and it wasn't poverty.

Meanwhile, the Finns themselves offered vague explanations for their success. Education, I was told, had always been valued in Finland, going back hundreds of years. That explained it. But, then, why did only 10 percent of children finish high school in Finland in the 1950s? Why were there huge gaps between what rural and urban kids knew and could do in Finland in the 1960s? Back then, Finland's passion for education had seemed rather uneven. What had happened?

At the same time, President Barack Obama and his education secretary said that they envied the South Korean education system, lauding its highly respected teachers and its demanding parents. On the surface at least, Korea appeared to have nothing in common with Finland. The Korean system was driven by testing, and Korean teenagers spent more time studying than our kids spent awake.

Listening to this cacophony, I kept wondering what it would be like to actually be a kid in these mystical lands of high scores, zero dropouts, and college graduates. Were Finnish kids really the Nordic robots that I kept reading about? Did Korean kids think they were getting such a sweet deal? What about their parents? No one talked about them. Didn't parents matter even more than teachers?

I decided to spend a year traveling around the world on a field trip to the smart-kid countries. I wanted to go see these little bots for myself. What were they doing at ten on a Tuesday morning? What did their parents say to them when they got home? Were they happy?

field agents

To meet the Nordic robots, I needed sources on the inside: kids who could see and do things that I could

never do on my own. So, I recruited a team of young experts to help.

During the 2010–11 school year, I followed three remarkable American teenagers as they experienced smarter countries in real life. These kids volunteered to be part of this project as they headed off for year-long foreign-exchange adventures, far from their families. I visited them in their foreign posts, and we kept in close touch.

Their names were Kim, Eric, and Tom, and they served as my escorts through borrowed homes and adopted cafeterias, volunteer fixers in a foreign land. Kim traveled from Oklahoma to Finland, Eric from Minnesota to South Korea, and Tom from Pennsylvania to Poland. They came from different parts of America, and they left for different reasons. I met Kim, Eric, and Tom with the help of AFS,

Youth for Understanding, and the Rotary Clubs, outfits that run exchange programs around the world.

I chose these Americans as advisers, but they turned out to be straight-up protagonists. They did not stand for all American kids, and their experiences could not reflect the millions of realities in their host countries. But, in their stories, I found the life that was missing from the policy briefings.

Kim, Eric, and Tom kept me honest. They didn't want to talk about tenure policies or Tiger Moms; unburdened by the hang-ups of adults, they talked a lot about other kids, the most powerful influences in teenagers' lives. All day long, they contemplated the full arc of their new lives, from their host families' kitchens to their high-school bathrooms. They had much to say.

In each country, my American field agents introduced me to other kids, parents, and teachers, who became co-conspirators in this quest. In Korea, for example, Eric sent me to his friend Jenny, a teenager who had spent half her childhood in America and the other half in Korea. Jenny, an accidental expert on education, patiently answered questions that Eric could not. (Video interviews with my student sources can be found on the website for this book at www.AmandaRipley.com.)

To put the conclusions of these informants in context, I surveyed hundreds of other exchange students about their experiences in the United States and abroad. Unlike almost everyone else who proffers an opinion about education in other countries, these young people had first-hand experience. I asked them about their parents, schools, and lives in both places. Their answers changed the way I thought about our problems and our strengths. They knew what distinguished an American education, for better and for worse, and they did not mind telling.

When I finally came back to the United States, I felt more optimistic, not less. It was obvious that we'd been wasting a lot of time and money on things that didn't matter; our schools and families seemed confused, more than anything else, lacking the clarity of purpose I saw in Finland, Korea, and Poland. Yet I also didn't see anything anywhere that I didn't think our parents, kids, and teachers could do just as well or better one day.

What I did see were whole generations of kids getting the kind of education all children deserve. They didn't always get it gracefully, but they got it. Despite politics, bureaucracy, antiquated union contracts and parental blind spots—the surprisingly universal plagues of all education systems everywhere—it could be done. And other countries could help show us the way.

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