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# The Smartest Kids In The World: And How They Got That Way

the  
**smartest** kids  
in the world



amanda ripley



## Synopsis

How do other countries create "smarter" kids? 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. What is it like to be a child in the world's new education superpowers? In a global quest 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, 15, raises \$10,000 so she can move from Oklahoma to Finland; Eric, 18, exchanges a high-achieving Minnesota suburb for a booming city in South Korea; and Tom, 17, 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. A journalistic tour de force, *The Smartest Kids in the World* is a book about building resilience in a new world—as told by the young Americans who have the most at stake.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Very interesting book. The title might mislead you to think that this is just a book on how to make your kids smarter; it's not. It's comparing different methods with funding and what they do differently

in other countries and societies, and what seems to make a difference for the children to get a good education, and on to better careers.

To write a review after 497 others have done so may seem redundant. But I was so taken with Ripley's writing and reporting that I woke up this morning and decided to add my two bits. Here's the problem: US education, from top to bottom, creates underperforming students, especially in math and science (but including reading and writing. We've been doing this for two generations. Since most modern jobs require cooperation, communication skills, high-level thinking, and initiative (and many can be reduced to bits and bytes (Friedman)), US kids are, as a whole, not fit for global competition. This includes those who go to private schools (and probably those in home school, although Ripley doesn't report on this aspect of the problem. Her questions are, How did we get this way, and what can we do about it? Her answer is: multiple causes, but the primary one is that US students fail because we expect so little of them. She sees wretched teacher training as a second cause of this problem. There are other causes, also. I loved Ripley's writing, and it is clear in this book that she is at the top of her journalistic game. Woven through her book are the stories of three US exchange students (one each to Korea, Finland, and Poland) and their struggles with systems substantially better than ours. All three kids and their families should share kudos for their stories. Her story is understandable, clearly written, and from the heart. I love this writer and her work!

All educators should read this book. Period. It was enjoyable and interesting from cover to cover! Even before finishing this book, my mind was racing about what I could do to promote more rigorous teaching in my school, my school district, my state, and my country! Changing the focus of our culture from sports and entertainment to a national focus on problem solving and critical thinking, along with an expectation of rigor in the classroom, seems like a daunting task. I share the author's enthusiasm about improving the intellectual education of our country, and it must start with having high expectations for our teacher training programs and hiring the most educated and highly trained teachers who are taught how to teach with rigor! Districts and principals can start by updating their hiring practices, and universities can update the requirements for entering and completing their teacher training programs. If you are an educator or a parent interested in your child getting the best education possible, this book is one you **MUST** read and share with everyone you know, because one by one we can all make a difference in the future of our country!

Many times I've heard the negativity about how other countries are so much better than America's. Last year I even thought of researching it and writing a book about it. Now I don't have to. This book has given me so many insightful ideas that I just cannot wait to implement them into my classroom. Some of the basic plans: more science and math, harder questioning, more breaks, convince the kids that they are capable of great things and have them consider their futures throughout the school year. One important detail that this book gives us is that socioeconomic does not actually matter all that much. There are tons of poor kids out there doing way better than some of ours. What matters is that the kids believe in themselves and get the work done because their future depends on it.

Amanda Ripley chose a great way to make the dry differences between educational systems exciting: by following American exchange students as they attend a year of high school in countries that did much better than the US on international tests. This book covers the adventures of Kim, Tom, and Eric as they take on a year of high school in Finland, Poland, and South Korea respectively. The contrasts with their American experiences and with each other are illuminating and highlight the differences that drive success in each country. However, for a book that starts with a quote saying that without data, there are just opinions, the author certainly asserts a lot of her own opinions. She sees certain differences between Finland and the US, for example, and claims without backup that those differences are responsible for the success of Finland. Some of her conclusions match my perception, others don't - but none of them are backed up by more than her personal observations. I am persuaded by her larger themes: that poverty is no excuse for poor performance (she does present data that poor students in other countries perform better), and that massively increasing the prestige, pay, and quality of teachers is probably the best focal point odd change. However, many other claims - about the irrelevance of parental involvement, for example - are simply asserted as fact with no backup. For all I know, that could be true...but to the author's own point, without data, it's just another opinion...Anyway, a great read and a great contribution to thinking about how to improve our schools. Highly recommended.

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