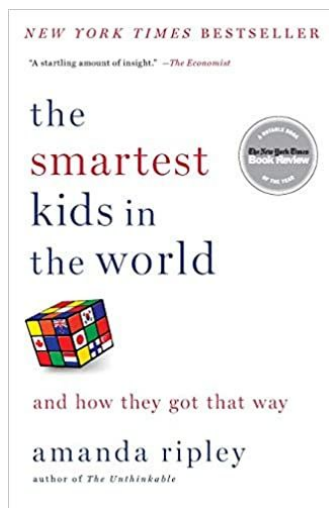


Ripley, Amanda. The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way. Simon and Schuster, 2013



## Amazon Blurb:

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.

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## My Summary

I picked this book because I thought it would be very readable in audio format, and it was. Ripley’s research question is: Why are American kids not as “smart” as kids in other developed countries? So this is NOT a book about students’ emotional welfare; its focus is definitely on academics. For her standard of “smart” Ripley uses the internationally administered, highly reputable PISA test, which focuses on critical thinking and problem solving. High PISA scores correlate closely with student success in college and with a country’s economic health.

Ripley focused on three disparate democratic countries -- Korea, Finland, and Poland -- that have turned from academic failures to successes. She did the traditional research and interviews, which she reports in very user-friendly, conversational language. But she also included the student perspective by following three American students in both their American high school and their year as a foreign exchange student in each country.

She found some clear similarities among the countries. Here are the ones that caught my attention:

- School is about academics. The USA is the only country where school is also about clubs and sports. Students in other countries do these activities, just outside of school. This gives schools a clarity of purpose.
- The countries have all had national economic crises and responded to them by reforming education. The entire country cares deeply about education as a tool for social and economic growth. For example, Korea stops air traffic over the country on the days of national testing.
- There are high stakes tests for every student (not just college bound or 'smart kids') in every high performing country, and the test results affect students' futures.
- Equity matters. These countries don't track kids until very late, and they have the same academic expectations across the country for all kids. In fact, Poland attributes their increased PISA scores to delaying tracking until students are 16. Schools with needier children and/or lower test results receive more funding. Eliminating sports from school is seen as part of creating this equity; all funding goes to academics for all students.
- There are fewer standards. Thus, standards are clearer and teachers are expected to teach every child all the standards to mastery. For instance, the average American junior high math textbook is 800 pages, whereas the average junior high math textbook in the top-performing countries is 250 pages. It's not that the kids learn less with a 250-page book. Instead they learn a higher percentage of what's in the book, which means their next math teacher knows what they have learned and can just move on instead of reteaching and filling in gaps.
- Teachers are highly, highly trained, and teaching is a difficult profession to enter. In Oklahoma 3 out of 10 teachers were in the top third of their highschool graduating class. In Finland, 10 out of 10 were. You can't get into teaching college unless you were. Training is rigorous. If you want to be a math teacher, you have to take the same math classes as math majors; in the US, you can take 'math for education majors.' In fact, Finnish math teachers have to major in math; many American math teachers do not actually fully understand the math they teach. Training in teaching is equally rigorous. In Finland, for example, a teacher candidate must complete a masters that includes a thesis in their area of specialization PLUS a co-hort year embedded in a school under the supervision of a teacher team.
- Because teacher training is so rigorous, there are fewer teachers. Not too few, just not too many. America creates as many education majors as colleges can produce, not as many as schools need. Finland attributes their rise in educational quality to closing all but the three top education schools in the country.
- Teachers have crazy autonomy. Because they are trained so rigorously, they are generally trusted to do their jobs well.
- Rigor is expected. For everyone. Teachers teach well, but they also teach very challenging content. Students are expected to struggle, and they are expected to fail. Teachers routinely share student test scores, and students routinely fail tests. It is not considered a matter of personal shame. The foreign exchange student in Poland

NEVER saw anyone in his math class get an A in the entire year he was there.

Teachers care deeply about what students learn and how they think, but not about their self-esteem per se. And yet self-esteem is not an issue for these students.

- In Poland and Finland, students have a lot more free time and independence. Teenagers have the freedom to make serious mistakes.
- In all these countries, parents are much less actively involved in school than American parents. In America the only two components of parental involvement actions that affect PISA scores are whether the parents talk about substantive issues with their students and whether parents read for pleasure themselves.
- Across the board, these higher performing countries have less technology (like NONE in most countries), bigger class sizes, and lower per pupil spending.

## My Take-Aways

So, how does this relate to MSSM and especially the Student Welfare Committee? Well, it is a good counterpoint to some of the books and discussions focusing on social/emotional learning. And one thing I liked about reading it was it helped me identify the things that MSSM is definitely getting right:

- One of Ripley's big take-aways is that you can tell the quality of a school best by watching the students. She advises to look for student engagement in the classroom. This is an area of excellence for us. MSSM teachers give students real, challenging, critical-thinking work and then let them do it. Students turn to each other for help. The work is hard enough they don't assume they'll just get it easily. While there is a lot that could change at MSSM, this is the heart of what our students desperately need to become happy adults, and we are delivering it to them.
- A key ingredient in successful education is highly trained, highly committed, autonomous teachers. We also have that.
- Another key ingredient is a lived cultural belief in the centrality of academic rigor to school. While we don't have that as a country, we do as a school. This cultural consensus is part of what brings students to us and part of what helps them thrive intellectually and emotionally. Real work and real success are tremendously nourishing.
- Finally, Ripley points out that the countries she studied show that real, substantive change is possible, even in just one generation.

Ripley reminded me that sometimes doing LESS, while counterintuitive, is the best solution.. Students in Finland and Poland actually have considerably more free time than American teens because they do fewer sports, have fewer part time jobs, and do fewer extracurricular activities. And schools operate on much smaller budgets because they have very clear, narrow purposes. I don't know that this is the way to go for us. But when we talk about student stress and especially the role of organized athletics, I think this book gives us an interesting cultural perspective. One could play the devil's advocate and say maybe organized sports are part of what causes stress (vs part of what relieves stress). Ditto with the need to offer a gazillion clubs and courses. Not that that's what we should conclude. ...

So rather than new topics, I'd say that this book raises radically culturally different perspectives on our existing topics.