

Ripley, A. (2013). *The smartest kids in the world and how they got that way*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Different Approaches to Education Reform from Countries Leading in International PISA Scores

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Ripley uses her investigative background to delve deep into the reasons behind the variation between students' test scores found on the international achievement test, PISA by following three American students on study abroad as they venture into the educational systems of three countries with the most successful or most improved scores. In *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way*, each country was carefully chosen to demonstrate a different educational model. Finland has an "utopian" model that focuses on the students, while South Korea is known for being a "pressure-cooker" nation marked by intense competitiveness and parental involvement. The third country, Poland, is referred to as the "metamorphosis model" due to their drastic improvements in test scores in recent years. The exploration behind each country's score adds another dimension to the data. Instead of simply learning that American students score average or below average on the PISA, readers have the opportunity to explore possible reasons other countries surpass the United States in test scores.

The author opens by sharing her connection to the topic at hand. Her previous years as a reporter introduced her to the field of education where she began to develop research questions based on the array of news headlines and plethora of data plaguing the system. Ripley tries to tackle how each separate piece, students, parents, teachers, and policies, plays into the larger system. While the book focuses on the case

study narrative of the three students, mixed methods are employed to back up key findings, including interviews with leaders in the system, reviews of current research, and a larger survey of experience of study abroad students.

In order to demonstrate the contrast between international educational systems, Ripley sets out to paint a portrait of the current state of the system through a case example of Oklahoma public schools attended by one of its students, Kim. As Ripley describes Kim's experience in Oklahoma, an average school system, the reader is walked through many problems shared by other state school systems. The problems detailed include budget spending per pupil, curriculum requirements, achievement tests to graduate, parental involvement, and teacher quality. Many of the issues brought up would be revisited in later chapters.

As the next two chapters introduce the remaining two study-abroad students, Eric and Tom, the comparisons to their home schools are seen through the description of their new schools abroad. Immediately, the issue of testing is brought up as Eric spoke with his peers in his South Korean school, "Korean schools existed for only one purpose: so that children could master complex material...U.S. schools, by contrast, were about many things, only one of which was learning" (p. 64). Insight delivered by the students living the experience, similar to the example above, is the key to the book's success, as it provided

a direction in which Ripley can follow up with additional research and interviews to explore the differences in the remainder of the chapter.

Novice readers will find the book to be an easy read due to the structure and organization of the content. Ripley provides a great introduction explaining the PISA test and current state of education in the United States that sets the reader up for the chapters to follow. Following the introduction, the remaining chapters are in chronologically format divided into the seasons of the year. Readers are able to learn about the study-abroad students as they begin planning for their trip in their home states to their time spent abroad to their return to the United States in the summer. Studying the educational system throughout the time of one year compared to just one point in time allows the reader to see shifts in activities and behavior. For example, testing is an important element of education throughout every country and readers are able to experience what the school environment feels like prior to testing and as testing nears for each of the student populations.

Another strength of the book is that Ripley addresses a number of key educational issues currently being debated in the United States, including teacher quality, tracking, standardized testing, and equity. The book tackles the pros and cons of relevant issues in the debate today appealing to a large audience of stakeholders in education. The inclusion of the multitude of topics allows readers to connect with the topic and see how each of the issues plays out depending on the population and culture. For example, in Poland, the Minister of Education delayed the tracking of students and for those years, the PISA scores of students increased. However, later research discovered that the achievement gaps between students simply returned at a later age. The inclusion of these examples allows

the reader to understand the difficulty of finding the perfect reform as most educational reforms include both advantages and disadvantages.

At times, the intertwining of the narrative and exploration of the research can leave the reader wanting more depth as the author tries to cover numerous hefty educational issues within the context of one year abroad for three different students. The brief descriptions can leave the readers with more questions, but this may spark readers to follow up on the debate and share the ideas presented in the book. Throughout the book, the focus seems to rest a little more heavily on the experience of one student, Kim in Finland, but this may be due to the concept of Finland serving as an educational model for which the United States aspires.

The decision to choose the best and most improved countries on the PISA is clearly articulated at onset of the book, however, readers may wonder if these countries are fair comparisons to the United States throughout the book. The overhaul in educational reforms for each of these countries was often brought on by an economic crisis. Is the international economic downturn in 2008 enough to spark a tipping point in the United States? Ripley points out in a later chapter that all three countries presented have a very homogeneous population compared to the United States. How can the United States account for their history and the issue of equity in their educational system?

As Ripley compares and contrasts different aspects of educational policy in other countries to the United States, the reader can easily see the complexity surrounding education from the politics to the history and economics. The initial excitement each study-abroad student faced upon arrival was met with challenges throughout their year abroad as the students adjusted to their new school system. The

comparison to their home schools, as well as their conversations with natives of their new country demonstrates that every educational system still faces flaws in their own system. However, readers can gain new ideas for the future of education in their country by exploring the different policies and cultures of international school systems and their impact on current students. Despite the different approaches in educational policies, one theme emerged from Ripley's research. This key element was missing from the American school system, which was the concept of rigor. Rigor is explained as taking education and its demands more seriously. As one international student studying abroad in America notes, "The expectations were lower in America... and the consequences were, too" (p. 101). Low expectations are bound to catch up with students eventually as they travel through the educational pipeline into the real-world. Even the students defined as high achievers in the book experienced a disconnect when they started college and realized how unprepared they were compared to their peers. While the policies implemented in other countries may not be successful if implemented in the United States, the inclusion of rigor can be adapted into the current system.

Overall, Ripley provides a great introduction into the variety of educational

policy initiatives by focusing on three countries often cited in the educational field. The idea of the major reform needed in the educational system can seem daunting at times, but Ripley concludes with an optimistic look at what change could bring in the future. As she points out, some schools in the United States already outperform on the PISA, while other schools in the same country perform worse. Readers interested in educational policy can gain insight into the complexities of the educational system to learn why some policies work and why other policies fail. The book's easy readability presenting research through a story line makes it a great introduction and overview into the many issues plaguing today's educational system. By comparing and contrasting the most common reform arguments in the educational debate today, such as teacher quality, Ripley is able to show that reform movements, especially compromised reforms, occurring in the margins are not enough to bring substantial change to the current educational system. As the economy continues to require more advanced education and critical thinking skills, we will need to think of innovative solutions, perhaps by learning from other nations' examples, to truly change the culture of education in the United States.