

The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way
by
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The author spent the 2010-11 school year following three American teenagers as they experienced the education system in 3 countries – Finland, Korea and Poland. What she saw left her more optimistic about the education system in the United States, but she observed that schools and families in the U.S. lacked the “priority of purpose” seen in these other countries. Her book reports on the differences between schools in the U.S. and other countries.

In Korea, students and parents found it hard to resist the pressure to study more and more, but complained that the focus on ranking and testing scores was crushing their spirit and creativity. Many Korean parents view themselves as coaches, rather than cheerleaders for their children. High expectations are imposed at an early age. In Korea, joyless learning produces good test scores, but not a resilient student.

The Finnish have developed a robust system with highly educated, well trained teachers. Collaboration among teachers, principals, union leaders and legislators to improve the education system is the norm. Rather than testing all students every year, government standardized testing is administered to targeted samples of students. The American student studying in Finland saw a marked contrast between the seriousness with which Finland students approached their high school education, as compared with her classmates in Oklahoma.

While there is over an abundance of teachers in many parts of the United States, their preparation is significantly shorter than in some other countries. Rather than 12 to 15 weeks of student teaching, a yearlong residency is typical in Finland. Teacher colleges in Finland select only the top applicants, and provide them with rigorous, hands-on preparation. They have seen a much lower rate of teacher turnover than in other countries.

As many recent studies have shown, a high impact form of parental involvement does not require parents actually being at school – if parents read at home, and kids see that parents value reading, their children will more likely enjoy reading themselves.

In many other countries, teenagers are expected to manage their own time – and generally do so. There is a broader agreement on the purpose of school– that schools exist to help students master complex academic material. While other things, such as sports, matter, the primary focus is on academics. Top down policy changes in the U.S., such as No Child Left Behind, have failed to create support for rigor.

In another international comparison, most other countries tied spending on education to need. The schools with the poorest students have more teachers per student; the opposite was true in only 4 other countries – the United States, Israel, Slovenia and Turkey. In each of these countries, the author noted a consensus around rigor and the need to learn higher order thinking for all students in order to strive in the world.