

**Ripley's Believe or Not?**

**Educational Reform Must Begin with Rigorous Teacher Training**

A Review and Application of Amanda Ripley's *The Smartest Kids in the World*

by

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To the great mystery of “Why were some kids learning so much - and others so little?” (2) Amanda Ripley’s study of internationally high performing schools, *The Smartest Kids in the World* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), poses a clear answer - rigor.

While numerous others, from Thomas Jefferson to E.D. Hirsch to KIPP, have been calling for a rigorous curriculum throughout the centuries Ripley rejects the tough accountability measures of the

current reformers and instead focuses on another the less mentioned variable - teacher training. By closely following and chronicling the experiences of three US exchange students, and surveying hundreds of others she concludes:

“”Because teacher colleges selected only the top applicants in Finland and other educational superpowers, those schools could spend less time doing catch up and more on rigorous, hands on training; because teachers entered the classroom with rigorous training and solid education, they were less likely than American teachers to quit in frustration. This model of preparation and stability made it possible to give teacher larger class sizes and pay them decently, since the turnover cost were much lower than in other countries. And since they had all this training and support, they had the tools to help kids learn, year after year, and to finally pass a truly demanding graduation test at the end of the high school.” (p95)

The key to a rigorous education for all kids began with rigorous education for teachers.

To prove this Ripley points to the history of high performing schools around the world. Korea in the 1980's and Finland in the 1970's consolidated its teacher training schools into elite universities. Poland dramatically increased teacher training requirements in the late 1990's. In all cases student performance on international testing skyrocketed after these reforms. Sadly, in Ripley's words, “elevating the selectivity and rigor of the teaching profession at the very beginning of teachers' careers- has never been attempted on a large scale in the US, despite its obvious logic.” (p268)

Thus current US reform attempts are not only wrong but backwards. Trying to manufacture a high performance teaching culture by testing and removing low performing teachers will fail since they will only be replaced by other poorly trained teachers. Also such accountability measures, while superficially logical, only further decrease teacher prestige. In fact one American teenager in Finland actually cites “the academic rigors that teachers had to endure” as a cause for how how seriously Finish students approach school since “the students were well aware of how accomplished their teachers were.”

As the great William James said nearly a century ago “a human being can alter his life by

altering his attitude.” How high performing nations changed students attitude toward work and learning reflects this wisdom. It began with respect for accomplished teachers, but bore educational fruit with not mere compliance but internalization of an educational work ethic. When a US exchange student in Finland asked classmates why they care so much and work so hard in school it was, as Ripley aptly states, like asking “why they insist on breathing so much.” Finally one said “Its school. How else will I graduate and go to university and get a good job?” (98) With this attitude these students altered their and their country's future.

Ripley then turns to why this acceptance of the necessity of hard work was so absent in American students. Again Ripley points to rigor. American kids simply didn't have to work hard since in America class was easy. Nine out of ten foreign exchange student surveyed said “classes were easier” in America and 7 out of 10 US exchange student agreed. In a large national survey over 50% of American students state that history work “was often or always too easy” and in math less than 50% thought they “were always or almost always learning in math class.”( p101) As a Finnish student in America stated “Not much is demanded of US students,” and “It was like elementary school in Finland.” (101). No rigor meant no effort.

Ripley also connects fear of failure to American attitudes toward work and school rigor. Failure was not normal and typically “experienced as a private trauma(71).” Failure in American schools was demoralizing and to be avoided at all costs. American kids could not handle routine failure, or so adults thought (72).” Failure in math meant “he was not good in math.” (p72) In Poland math tests were graded from 1-5 and no one ever got a five, and no one was surprised or despondent. Kids in Poland were used to failing. “If work was hard, routine failure was the only way to learn.” (72) ) Here Ripley quotes Churchill “Success is going from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.” Introducing rigor will cure this crippling fear of failure so common among American

youth by making it necessary and acceptable.

This lack of rigor and fear of failure is particularly worrying to Ripley in the area of math. Typically American students gradually lost their way in math during middle school since they were either too embarrassed to ask for help, or because poorly trained math teachers could not help them. The prevailing view held that American kids who excelled were smart, and those that failed weren't and most math American math teachers, did not major in math. Two of the three students profiled reported feeling like they were getting dumber, and both figured they "were just not good at math." (p69). Multiply these attitudes by millions of students and poorly trained math teachers and it becomes understandable why only 50% of American high school graduates can not handle entry level college math. Sadly math "had a way of predicting kids' future" (70). Math competency is closely tied to college graduation for all races and classes. Even for those that don't go to college need at least fluency in math in science to get a decent job: estimates for contractors, geometry for x ray technicians, adjusting industrial equipment and reporting results all mean "In real life math was not optional (71) ."

By putting the focus on the lack of rigor Ripley rejects the most common liberal reasons for low educational performance and attitudes: poverty and uneducated parents. To the issue of American poverty Ripley simply points to the national destitution of Korea in the 1960's or Poland in the 1990's. To the "savage inequalities" argument of Kozol and others she would point to the huge rural vs urban gap that existed in Finland in the 1950's evidenced by 10% high school graduation rate and over 50% illiteracy (39). In the 1960's only 33% percent of Korean students attended middle school. She also asks how do explain the fact that wealthy, white kids from New Hampshire - a state with extremely low poverty and diversity- still were trounced in math by kids from Finland and Korea? Many liberal reformers see poverty as the cause of poor educations: end poverty and you'll end the education gap. Ripley counters that again the US has it backward:

education ends poverty. In her words formerly poor nations were “turning education into currency.”(58-9)

Concerning the issue of cultural others would point to “nordic robots” and the confucian tradition to explain Scandinavian and Asian success. Ripley then asks why Norway’s scores, despite similar culture, diversity, wealth and income distribution as Finland has even lower scores than the US? Why did Korean scores so consistently ahead of Japan? And in the one Finish school that has large numbers poor African immigrants its test scores are the same as in other schools in Finland. More specifically Riley states “white American teens performed worse ...than *all* kids in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia which had higher ratios of immigrant populations” and white kids in New York were less likely to score at a high level in math than all students in Poland and Estonia. Perhaps its not culture, or diversity, perhaps its rigor.

At this point conservative pundits would point to unions and tenure as roadblocks to rigorous learning, and school choice; again Ripley refutes an old argument. All the high performing democratic nations had strong unions, and all teachers were protected by rules that made it almost impossible to fire them. Korea tried to pass laws requiring retraining of ineffective teachers, as measured by an elaborate American assessment rubric, but fewer than 1% were assigned, and many did not even show up. In Finland they had a similar intricate teacher assessment system but let it dissolve during a budget crunch: test scores did not decline. School and teacher choice was not an major issue if all teachers were qualified and all schools performed well. As long as teachers faced a rigorous, and selective process to get their job they could be trusted to plan and teach rigorously in all schools.

If you ask parents how to close the achievement gap they typically answer: increase spending and parental involvement. However Ripley points out that the US has doubled spending in

the past twenty years, and yet its math scores are flat. However a few other nations' scores have soared without increased spending. As to parental involvement this has actually dramatically increased in terms of parent volunteers, and attendance at extra curricular activities. In fact according to a nation wide 2007 survey 9 out of 10 attended a parent teacher conference in the past year (107). Ripley also note that American parents are more involved, but more as "cheerleaders" for their children than "coaches" at home of good study habits.

Its not that spending and parental involvement don't matter, but it depends how and where. If they support sports, technology and a beautiful campus it may have no or even negative impact on learning. While more research is needed there certainly is no comprehensive study showing how any these improve critical thinking. "...in most of the highest performing schools, technology is remarkably absent (214)," states the creator of the PISA test Andreas Schleicher. Also when exchange students are asked to compare technology in classrooms or interscholastic sport interest to US the overwhelming majority state that the US has more of both (224). In fact In Poland, Korea, and Finland there were no Smart Board's, no calculators math class, and no school sports teams, and no fancy buildings. Instead they possessed a clear focus on the mastery of rigorous learning.

What American educational reformers on both sides have in common, according to Ripley, is that they blame factors outside of actual student learning. "Once you start locating the source of your problems outside your own jurisdiction it s hard to stop." According to a US principal interviewed "Parents and reformers expect too much" (36 ) given the poverty and ragged home life of many of his Oklahoma students. According to many government leaders and pundits they would love to change but are blocked by unions. Kids and parents blame boring out of touch teachers, or believe education is something rich, white people do. The problem of blaming outside factors, according to Ripley is that it is "habit forming" (p36). AS JFK so eloquently said "The great enemy of the truth

is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic." Instead of training kids to work, learn and accept failure the US seems to simply be pointing fingers at those supporting a different, yet still erroneous popular myth.

By exploding such popular myths its difficult to find fault with this well written and clearly supported call for rigor, but Ripley does fail to seriously consider prenatal and early childhood conditions in educational achievement. From a surge of recent research comes not just scholarly proof that such conditions impact brain development, but also concrete plans for mandatory pre-k in places like New York City. How preschool age children are raised, fed, and treated in Finland or Poland is not discussed and only touched on in Korea. Perhaps this important variable will be addressed by Ripley or another noteworthy researcher in the future.

Some, most famously Diane Ravitch, would also call in to question the relevance of international testing to American education due issues of who and how the test is given. Ripley does go into much depth about the creation of the PISA test to measure critical thinking internationally and how variable such as poverty and diversity are taken into account. Ripley makes a strong case for PISA being both a reliable assessment and relevant to American educational debate. However instead of getting into details of such debates I am much more interested in what lessons Ripley has for American schools.

From these schools she learned three specific beliefs epitomized a culture of academic rigor to exist. One, faith in education can cure poverty . Second belief in hard work and resilience to failure can lead to a mastery of standard rigorous material for all children - In practice this meant no educational tracking until age fifteen. Three, acceptance that school existed purely for academics ; ie no sports, nothing high tech, no mention of social development. Finally she argues that the one best

way to achieve this culture is to begin with rigorous teacher training. As a veteran teacher I wondered how would my school measure up?

Greenwich High School, in a large, ethnically diverse, wealthy district, with pockets of poverty, believes that education can cure poverty. Schools certainly promote this faith through official and unofficial lessons, posters, and parent emails. Education is the pathway to better jobs and careers. Children with free and reduced lunch are carefully monitored academically to offer additional services as needed. Reading specialists, group counseling, foreign language translations services for parents and teachers, special education teachers, and peer tutoring by national honors students are not only offered but actively scheduled for these students. Numerous scholarships are offered both from the Greenwich Community and every student is individually guided through the college selection and financing process. Closing the gap is not just a buzzword but forms the basis for all these policies just listed, and within the Mission of Greenwich schools it states “to prepare them to be productive members of society.”

However another common belief contends that poverty is a barrier to education, and therefore belief in hard work being enough for all to master rigorous material is far from universal. Tracking, which began in second grade, is seen as appropriate to differentiate both material and pedagogy. However the remedial classes are vastly over represented with the poorer children, and the advanced classes are nearly devoid of any free and reduced lunch students. Different textbooks, and different teaching guides ensures that all students do not face the same rigor. Ripley’s book sits that “statistically speaking tracking tended to diminish learning wherever it was tried (138).” However when polled in 2012 about a New England Accreditation standard for one mandatory heterogeneous class in a core academic area 60% of the parents opposed it, while 60% of the faculty supported it. From anecdotal discussions, it is still a common concern that slow kids will hold back

learning. During numerous curriculum meetings it was repeatedly said by teachers of remedial classes, “my kids can't learn that.”

On the other hand there are also many signs of Greenwich moving toward embracing universal rigorous standards. Starting next year, 2014-15, there will be standard learning guides, exams, and rubrics for all courses. All students must demonstrate competency or, as in Finland be tagged for numerous additional services. However educators like E.D. Hirsch would cringe at the small amount of content that all students need to know, at least its move in his desired direction. Greenwich also has the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program whose title obviously supports Ripley's finding. This additional work block for children of non college educated parents clearly instills not only study skills but the work ethic.

To further strengthen standardised rigor for all students Greenwich has created a school wide “Vision of the Graduate” (see Appendix) that includes , “Respond to failure and success with resilience and reflection.” Greenwich also lists “High Expectations” as a core value, and the Greenwich mission includes the promise to “educate all students to the highest levels of academic achievement.” While many schools, even failing ones, have similar missions and vision Greenwich is moving beyond mere words by developing a comprehensive assessment of students achievements based on the completion of mandatory yearly assessments carefully linked to each rigours point.

However Greenwich disagrees with Ripley’s desire for a purely academically focused high school. She repeatedly uses the word “muddled” to describe the purpose of American High Schools and certainly would describe Greenwich High School purity of purpose that way. Sports while not the center of school culture do require that athletes would frequently miss part or all of last period class to travel to games. Ripley would certainly ask what message this is sending to students about the value of sport vs academics. Coaches demand and receive much higher levels of effort and

excellence than teachers do in the classroom, and this seems normal to both students and parents. Faculty has been repeatedly asked to limit homework on weekend and holidays, but no one has asked sports teams to limit practice and games. Parents arranged as town wide screening of “Race to Nowhere” out of concern of over stressed youths but homework and tests and not extracurricular activities were the focus of concern.

Likewise Greenwich seems to moving away from the low tech high rigor schools of Poland, Korea and Finland. When I was first hired by Greenwich in the 1990’s its surprisingly low level of technology and slightly dated and worn appearance was explained by both union heads and administration as a conscience cost benefit decision. “In Greenwich we prefer to spend our money on people.” Teachers were always the highest paid in the state, but the internet was not reliable and the carpets were old. Likewise the downtown education offices of this world center of wealth were old, worn, drafty and crowded. The school and offices still can’t compare to surrounding towns but they have been updated. We are still the highest paid teachers, but not by nearly as much.

However in recent years parent and teacher demands have lead to a massive building and technology plan. Greenwich has long had renowned music and drama programs, but they lacked practice and performance space. A multi million dollar auditorium and performance arts teaching space is being built. However Ripley would point out that this does not lift all test scores since many students are not involved, and the arts were flourishing without this huge expense. Likewise Greenwich test scores of its typical student has been far above average without Smart boards or individual, school provided devices, but I received a Smart board last year, and in 2015 every child in Greenwich will be issued a device. While there was great debate on the amount money spent, there was little debate about whether or not building and technology in themselves were anything but obviously positive.

Ripley also learned from Korea that extreme competition will also lead to a loss of focus on learning, and I'm afraid among the upper third of Greenwich high school student this is also true. In this hyper successful town of millionaires and billionaires the pressure to gain acceptance into elite schools pushes students so hard that it damages learning. Cheating, as measured by student surveys, is rampant as the grade means more than learning. In Ripley's interview of the Korean minister of Education she states " Families and kids can lose sight of the purpose learning and fixate obsessively on rankings and scores." Students rarely ever ask me to explain content after class, but regularly ask to explain a grade. No parent has ever asked me to explain a historical concept, but they have called meetings about grades. Frequently these meetings, whether student or parent, end with the appeal that the student is trying to get into college X and they need an A. That they need to gain and communicate understanding of the content for life is not a concern. Sadly Greenwich certainly fits Ripley's description as a "high-income American neighborhood" where often students are "working day and night to get into an Ivy League college and prove themselves perfect on paper, perhaps only later wondering why." (p65) As Socrates said "Beware the barrenness of a busy life." These overly driven kids have lost sight of the purpose of education as surely as the the football player leaving school early for a the game.

Despite these issues Greenwich High School still manages to produce a large number high achieving students because of Ripley's most clear prescription - rigorous teacher selection and training. Due to the high pay and a good reputation Greenwich employment is highly selective; elite colleges, and advanced degrees in both education and content areas are the norm. The interview process involves a panel of teachers and administrators grilling on both content and pedagogy. Then a practice lesson for the top few candidates comes next; also viewed by the panel. All first year teachers in Connecticut are assigned a year long mentor but Greenwich goes the extra

step of scheduling regular meeting times. They also adds both an academic coach and an instructional coach all non tenured staff. Also all teachers are assigned and scheduled to a collaborative data teams to identify and area of concern, develop a plan to address the concern, and keep records to measure improvement. Greenwich, as Ripley suggests, is in the process of creating differentiated staff development and moving away from the lecture all format.

I know from personal experience the selection process and the mentoring clearly sent a message to me that this was a school of academic rigor and critical thinking. It also instilled in me that I needed to truly work hard to teach, and yet trying and failing at innovative teaching was applauded and nothing to be ashamed of. I have tenure, seniority and have a pretty much guaranteed six figure income, but I am constantly pushed to work harder not by fear but by the common, infectious attitude of my colleagues. My students and student teachers know that learning is both hard and the purpose of class, that failure is part of the process, and being poor is a reason to learn and not an excuse to give up.

For all these experiences and her well supported text I say I believe the amazing Miss Ripley. Believe it or Not starting rigor in teacher training will dramatically change American education. While not all districts could pay what Greenwich does, they could cut sports, say no to high tech widgets and have slightly dingy facilities. They then could pay teachers more, attract my candidates and then be more selective in hiring. While closing “teacher mills” by fiat is not and should not be the American way, dramatically raising state standards for teacher certification will drive them out of business, and not cost the taxpayer a dime. It also won’t cost any union dues since as Ripley points out we are producing twice as many education graduates than we have teaching jobs. What we will produce is not just better schools but a stronger more productive, more economically competitive, and less poverty stricken America. Great educational thinkers down

through the ages, on all sides of the educational debate from John Locke, Horace Mann, and Harriet Beecher, to Maria Montessori, to Howard Gardner all call for well trained teachers. Yet we insist on blaming teachers without changing the education of teachers. In the words of Schopenhauer "The wise have always said the same things, and fools, who are the majority have always done just the opposite." If you don't believe Ripley or these great minds from the past just look at Poland in the 1990's, Korea in the 1960's, and Finland in the 1950's ...nothing changed until teacher training changed.

Amanda's Ripley's *Smartest Kids in the World* hopefully will shift the debate from finger pointing to teacher preparation. You can't teach what you don't know. Ironically this important work is mistitled; the secret is that all kids are smart enough and tough enough to learn a rigorous curriculum if someone is prepared well enough to teach them.

## **Appendix: Greenwich Vision and Mission Statements**

## VISION OF THE GRADUATE

**The Greenwich Public Schools are committed to preparing students to function effectively in an interdependent global community. Therefore, in addition to acquiring a core body of knowledge\*, all students will develop their individual capacities to:**

- Pose and pursue substantive questions
- Critically interpret, evaluate, and synthesize information
- Explore, define, and solve complex problems
- Communicate effectively for a given purpose
- Advocate for ideas, causes, and actions
- Generate innovative, creative ideas and products
- Collaborate with others to produce a unified work and/or heightened understanding
- Contribute to community through dialogue, service, and/or leadership
- Conduct themselves in an ethical and responsible manner
- Recognize and respect other cultural contexts and points of view
- Pursue their unique interests, passions and curiosities
- Respond to failures and successes with reflection and resilience
- Be responsible for their own mental and physical health

\*The core body of knowledge is established in local curricular documents which reflect national and state standards as well as workplace expectations.



**Mission:** It is the *Mission* of the Greenwich Public Schools

- to educate all students to the highest levels of academic achievement;
- to enable them to reach and expand their potential; and
- to prepare them to become productive, responsible, ethical, creative and compassionate members of society.

### ***Core Values:***

“As educators, we value...

**A Comprehensive education:** we provide our students with a challenging, well-rounded education that includes the arts, humanities, mathematics, the sciences, technology, and health, and that fosters students’ social and emotional well-being.

**High expectations:** we hold ourselves and our students to high standards of performance and behavior.

**Integrity:** we are honest, ethical, and respectful of others, and we foster those traits in our students.

**Accountability:** we establish clear goals, measure progress, and take responsibility for results, and we teach our students to become responsible, self-motivated learners.

**Collaboration:** we partner with parents and our diverse community to support our students’ learning, and we teach our students to work cooperatively with others to accomplish goals.

**Diversity:** we appreciate, respect, and learn from diverse viewpoints, and we teach our students to do the same.

**Life-long learning:** we challenge ourselves to continue our own professional and personal development, and we strive to instill a love of learning in our students.”