

Global education

The learning power of PISA

Cleverlands: The Secrets Behind the Success of the World's Education Superpowers. By Lucy Crehan. *Unbound*; 304 pages; £16.99

FROM 2000 to 2002, about a third of a million 15-year-olds from 43 countries took similar tests in maths, reading and science. The results of the first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) were a pleasant surprise in countries whose kids aced the exams—such as Canada, Finland and Japan. But for the laggards, the PISA results led to a sense of crisis. “Are German Students Stupid?” asked *Der Spiegel*, a magazine.

The tests' influence has since grown. Teenagers from 72 countries or regions are part of the latest triennial analysis, which will be published on December 6th. Michael Gove, a former British education secretary, is just one politician hoping to see the success of his reforms reflected in future PISA scores.

PISA has its opponents. Some query the methodology. Others complain about reducing the purpose of school to passing exams. Still more critics add that policymakers who seek to ape high-achieving countries neglect the unique cultural reasons behind success. This debate forms the backdrop to what Lucy Crehan calls her “geeky gap year”. As a science teacher in London she had read about countries that scored higher in PISA than England, and wanted to see their schools up close. So she taught in Canada, Finland, Japan, Singapore and Shanghai. “Cleverlands”, her first book, is her account of that odyssey.

At each stop Ms Crehan discovers idiosyncratic reasons for the area's results. Finland's schools were a storehouse of national pride during Swedish and Russian rule. Teaching remains a respected and sought-after job. In Helsinki ten times as many students apply for education degrees as there are places.

Across East Asia she finds a culture that celebrates effort. In China graduation cards praise recipients' hard work—not how clever they are, as in America. In Singapore, extra tuition is so common that parents hire tutors to help their kids pass entrance exams for the best tuition centres. In Japan, as a mark of shared sacrifice, some mothers give up their favourite food during their children's punishing exam terms.

But dismissing the success of top performers as a result of culture alone is a “grave mistake”, writes Ms Crehan. Policy matters, too, and laggards who change their ways can catch up. In top-performing

countries, children do not start school until they are at least six or seven years old. Aside from Singapore, all the places she visits wait until children are in their mid-teens before diverting some to less academic tracks. Teachers are given time to practise and they receive feedback from peers. Pupils are expected to learn both facts and skills.

Other authors have gone on peripatetic school tours. In “The Smartest Kids in the World” (2013) Amanda Ripley follows American exchange students in Finland, Poland and South Korea. Her book is an easier read, while covering some of the same ground that “Cleverlands” does.

But Ms Crehan's work has the edge in relating reporting to research. Studies show that academic work can wait, she explains, because otherwise it can go over the heads of kids while hindering social

skills and a love of learning. She shows that schools can delay selection without harming brighter pupils. This is for two reasons. First, intelligence is not fixed: slow starters can catch up, at least a bit. Second, expectations matter: in delaying selection, top-performing countries suggest to all pupils that they can achieve high standards. Theresa May, Britain's prime minister, who is intent on increasing the number of schools selecting the ablest pupils as early as age 11, should take note.

Too much writing about education is polemical and ill-informed. “Cleverlands” is neither. Ms Crehan is refreshingly fair-minded, acknowledges the limits of research and does not idolise highly stressful school systems. And yet her book is a powerful defence of the idea that there is a lot to learn from how other countries learn. It is time to swot up. ■