

Exploring Cleverlands

Lucy Crehan talks about her two-year journey to discover the world's education superpowers from the inside

Interview by [Cornelia Puhze](#)
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In her recent book [Cleverlands](#), Lucy Crehan describes her lessons learned from teaching in Japan, Singapore, Shanghai, Canada and Finland.

Cornelia Puhze: *What made you go to take a closer look at the top performing education systems?*

Lucy Crehan: I was teaching at a secondary school in outer London in a bit of a rough area. What was particularly frustrating for me was that a lot of the difficulty was coming from the constantly changing education policies. And despite all the government initiatives, there were still 1 in 5 children leaving school without basic reading and numeracy skills. Then, I was reading about all these other countries, where they were seemingly doing so much better than us. I wanted to know what they were doing and how they were doing it.

CP: *So you took off for two years and went to these so called 'education superpowers' and taught in their schools.*

LC: Yes, I spent a month in each place. I did more teaching in countries that were non-English speaking because I was of more use as an English speaker. In English speaking countries I was helping out and observing.

CP: *What was different in the classroom compared to the UK?*

LC: The countries are all different from each other. I suppose some stereotypes are true, but there were some surprises as well. In Japan, the lessons were very formal with the teacher speaking from the front and the children were studying very long hours. I was expecting it to be similar in Singapore but there was a lot more interaction and student talk. On the flip-side, you might expect Finland to be very student-led but the teaching seemed fairly traditional.

CP: *Did the most recent PISA results surprise you?*

LC: No, to be honest. There is not a big change in terms of the countries that are doing well, and the countries I visited are still doing pretty well. Canada has actually gone up even further. Finland is still up there. Actually, the surprise for me is how consistent it was.

CP: *Singapore, for example, is again at the top. Why do you think they're so successful?*

LC: They do teacher management really well. Teaching hadn't always been a popular profession. Back in the 1980s, they had to bring in teachers from the US and the UK because there were shortages in Singapore, but they deliberately took steps to make teaching more attractive.

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They now pay people to train to be teachers and they've broadened the career opportunities in education. You can do a leadership route and become a head of department, head teacher and even director general of the whole of the education system as part of the career track for teachers. Or you can do specialist teaching and train in teaching math with calculus, or you become a master teacher and become an expert in pedagogy. So, it is quite attractive and quite an interesting career to go into, as well as being paid quite well right from the start.

CP: *As a teacher, what do you think of PISA as such?*

LC: I think it is the best system we have. It's what you do with the information that matters. I don't think that saying that a country has moved up or down by two or three points means anything because there is a margin of error. However, if you look at the countries that are consistently in the top twenty compared to the countries that are consistently average, that is telling us something. It is telling us about children's ability to problem solve using academic knowledge.

CP: *So how do the education superpowers teach that skill?*

LC: In East Asia, there is less in the curriculum, to begin with. There will be fewer math concepts and they will spend longer on each one. The teachers will really make sure that every child understands it and has a lot of practice before moving on to the next subject. There is a really deep understanding. Not only do the children know the concept but there is a fluency in mathematics because they have practiced it so much.

Now, that means as they get older they don't have to revisit concepts because everyone understood it the first time. In England, and I think in America as well, we try and cover too much, particularly in primary school. We do one lesson on something and then we move onto the next lesson, whether or not the children have got it the first time. So we have to revisit it time and time again. Or sometimes teachers just assume that some children won't get it and teach them easier stuff instead, which is a very bad reaction, I think.

CP: *How did different education systems check up on the teaching?*

LC: School accountability was actually another big lesson. All of these countries hold schools accountable, they collect data on how schools are doing. So they know which schools aren't doing so well, but the response is quite different to the UK or the US. Rather than publicly announcing that a school isn't doing very well and firing the head teacher, they give support with expert head teachers advising the management and teachers how to improve. So rather than punishing they support because they don't assume that people are lazy, but they assume that people don't know what they're doing.

CP: *What would you change in the English education system?*

LC: I would have less academic content in the curriculum in the earliest years of school and make it much more play-based and holistic. Also, I would have fewer concepts once the children begin studying more academic content. So we would give children time to deeply understand a concept before moving on. What this would mean is that kids of different abilities could all be in the same class.

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Unfortunately, that’s the opposite direction from where we are going in the UK. Our prime minister wants to bring back grammar schools and I think that’s the wrong approach.

Almost all of the countries that I’ve visited (except Singapore) didn’t put children into different schools based on ability until they were 15 or 16. These countries had some of the highest PISA scores in the world. So it is possible for all children to achieve to those levels.

CP: *Where do you see the advantages of a comprehensive system?*

LC: It’s not enough by itself, you can also have a really bad comprehensive system. But if you don’t have a comprehensive system you’re already giving up on some children’s chances of being academically successful at a young age.

It’s no surprise that in less comprehensive systems your parents’ background has a much bigger impact on academic success than in a comprehensive system. In most cases, the children who end up in the non-academic schools are the ones with parents who are non-academic.

Lucy Crehan is a teacher, education explorer and author of [‘Cleverlands - The secrets behind the success of the world’s education superpowers.’](#) Since returning from her trip she has written another book, for [IIEP UNESCO](#), and speaks regularly at education conferences around the world. Lucy now works as part of a team advising governments on education reform at [Education Development Trust](#).

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