

Singapore: Five Surprises in Education

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Photo provided by Bill Jackson

The Daily Riff EXCLUSIVE

Editor's Note: *Singapore is notable for their outstanding Math scores ([here](#) and [here](#)) internationally. Yet the lessons and Singaporean practices learned and shared by American Math teacher Bill Jackson during this past week's trip to Singapore, not only surprises(!) but also may seem extremely counter-intuitive to what we Americans may think about the seemingly more "Math-centric" cultures -- that produce this achievement. Not the sweat-shop robotrons we often encounter in stereotypical depictions, we find concepts such as constructivism and emotional learning of high value. If the name sounds familiar, Jackson is Scarsdale NY Math Helping teacher and author of the exclusive series featured in The Daily Riff, "[Singapore Math Demystified!](#)" , along with his "[Journal to Japan: What American teachers can learn from Japan](#)". - C.J. Westerberg*

Differentiated Instruction? Constructivist Approach? Social-Emotional Learning? In Singapore?

The Five Key Features at Singapore Chinese Girls' School Day 1

by Bill Jackson
Singapore

Yesterday I arrived in Singapore for the 2010 Singapore Mathematics Global Forum sponsored by Marshall Cavendish, the publisher of Singapore's [Primary Mathematics](#) textbooks. The forum brings together educators from around the world who are using Singapore's world-class math program to learn more about mathematics teaching and learning, exchange ideas, and discuss the challenges we face in improving mathematics instruction in our respective countries. (Ed. Note: To learn more about Singapore Math, please see Jackson's series of posts, "[Singapore Math Demystified](#)".)

The flight was long - with the time change I arrived two days later- and in spite of severe jet lag today my Scarsdale colleague Nancy Pavia and I are going to the Singapore Chinese Girls' School - one of the top schools in the nation - to tour the school and participate in their Teachers' Day celebration. Tomorrow is National Teachers' Day in Singapore and all the schools will be closed. So today, all Singaporean schools are honoring their teachers in special ways.

The Singapore Chinese Girls' School

The Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS) was founded 111 years ago by Singapore-born Chinese businessmen to educate Chinese girls because only Chinese boys were able to attend school at that time. Today, about 2400 girls attend the school in the primary (grades 1-6) and secondary (grades 7-10) levels. (After secondary school Singaporean students attend Junior College and then either university or trade school.) Although begun for Chinese girls, the school now serves girls from many ethnic backgrounds, principally Chinese, Malay, and Indian.

The SCGS consistently scores among the top schools in Singapore on the PSLE and O-Level exams - extremely high stakes tests that students take at the end of grades 6 and 10 respectively. The school seeks to develop both academic competency and character. Education at SGCS has five key features:

- 1) Infusion of character development and social-emotional learning into academic subjects
- 2) Teaching for enduring understanding using the [Understanding by Design](#) framework
- 3) Meaningful real-world application to contemporary issues
- 4) A [constructivist](#) approach to inquiry, knowledge creation and problem-solving
- 5) And [differentiated instruction](#) that takes into account students' interests, readiness and learning styles.

We were given a tour of the school by secondary mathematics teacher Mrs. Rosemary Song who kindly showed us the grounds, brought us into classrooms to observe instruction, and explained many things to us about schooling and teachers' professional lives in Singapore.

Perhaps the first impression one gets upon seeing the school is the beautiful and colorful open-air, well-equipped and maintained buildings and gardens, the happy and vibrant students, and the colorful displays of students' work and art everywhere. The SCGS is a government (public) school at the primary level and an "independent" school at the secondary level.

Independent schools in Singapore function very much like charter schools do in the U.S. and are funded by a mix of government monies, per-pupil tuition (250 Singapore dollars per month), and private donations. Students must apply to the school and priority is given to girls whose siblings or parents attended the school, and girls from the surrounding neighborhoods. Most students come from high-income households. Class sizes are large, between 30 and 38 students per class, usually leaning toward the high end.

Since I will be talking more about mathematics instruction and learning in later posts, I will focus on one interesting aspect of Singaporean schooling that we learned about - teachers' professional lives.

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