

A lesson learnt from Singapore

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IN a global economy, learning from the success of other nations makes sense. Maths teaching in Australia should receive a boost when new textbooks are released next month setting out how the subject is taught to primary school children in Singapore. The books for Years 1 to 6, to be published by Scholastic Australia, will be linked to the Australian curriculum and endorsed by the Singapore Ministry of Education.

As The Australian reported recently, key maths concepts such as multiplication, division and simplifying fractions are taught to students in Singapore at least one year earlier than in Australia. A report comparing the Singapore and Australian curriculums, commissioned by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, found Singapore schools spent twice as much time on basic operations and geometry in the first few years of school and had a greater focus on problem solving.

There is no disputing the success of Singapore and other east Asian nations in teaching maths or the importance of giving children the best possible start in basic subjects early in their school lives. In the most recent OECD test of 15-year-olds, Singapore ranked second in the world in maths, with Australian students in 19th place. The lack of students proceeding to higher maths study is a problem in Australian schools and universities, contributing to a serious shortage of engineers and maths teachers.

Student textbooks need to cover the prescribed curriculum. For this reason, the review headed by professor Ken Wiltshire and Kevin Donnelly should look carefully at the lessons to be learnt from Singapore in maths teaching. It needs to determine whether the approach set out in the texts is worth adopting nationally.

Education authorities should be encouraged that the national executive of the Australian Primary Principals Association was impressed after a briefing on the textbooks. President Norm Hart said the system would enable children to gain a deeper and better understanding of mathematical content and ways of working. Maths specialists have noted that the Singapore approach involves teaching whole topics in depth in the same unit. The Australian curriculum takes a more scattergun approach, spreading the same topic across different years as children mature.

The publishing venture has also drawn attention to the role of textbooks in schools at a time when parents have noticed their absence in subjects such as English and history. Depending on the core content recommended by the national curriculum review, comprehensive textbooks for primary and secondary level could become an essential part of education reform. Such resources could provide a thorough grounding in aspects of the humanities that have received scant attention in recent years, such as spelling, grammar and narrative history, for example.

Australian children are as intelligent as any in the world. They deserve textbooks that present the most user-friendly, logical approach for mastering vital concepts under an improved curriculum, taught by teachers with the best training and support.

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