

Singapore's Perspective of Singapore Math

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There has been many articles fussing about Singapore Math on the internet. After reading a number of them, I thought they all lacked a Singaporean perspective. While many authors bemoaned or even whined about the difficulty American kids had with Math, it made me at times sympathetic or even amused. You see, Math in Singapore was highly enjoyable in my time and we dreaded other subjects like English and Science instead. Why is this so?

Although English is the official language in Singapore, more than half of the population used Chinese, Malay or Tamil as their main spoken language in households in the 1990s. This meant that children in 50% of all households were weak with their English Language. As a result, our English and Science scores suffered in school. Lucky for us however, we were able to find refuge in Math.

Math in primary school (for 7-12 year olds) was one of the easiest subjects to ace. It did not involve language application as extensively as Science. Although the word problems in Math papers still involved the English language, it required us only to write one-liners as conclusions. Many friends of my age then scored above 80 marks out of a 100 in Math on a regular basis. Being able to score so highly in Math (as opposed to barely passing English or Science) easily made Math our favourite subject in school!

That may have been so in the years between 1990-2000, but there has been a rising trend of schools setting impossible-to-pass Math tests and examinations in the late 2000s, as if to generate even more stress for our poor parents. In almost every primary school, parents marched in hordes to confront teachers about the abysmal standard of Math of their children. However, being the passive sort of citizens we generally are, no schools were closed nor were cars overturned. Most parents took the tried and trusted route of engaging private Math tutors or signing their children up for more Math enrichment classes instead!

It is true that the Mathematical concepts are built year upon year and concepts that have been taught are not taught again, but merely revisited briefly. This is as opposed to the slightly incoherent system in the US, where kids can sometimes wonder why they are doing the same things again. While this arrangement may appear to be harder on Singapore students, I actually felt it was very easy on us. In fact, we felt that it was a gift from heaven to be able to do fractions at primary 6 again, right after we learnt something similar the year before.

It might appear as though a Singapore student would have had to spend many hours poring their beady eyes other Math textbooks and Math problems to acquire such 'astounding' proficiency in the subject. The truth is, the pace of learning was rather fine. I could do quite well in school without having to attend extra lessons (tuitions), and school only lasted from 730am to 1pm, Monday to Friday. There was still ample time for monkey business after 1pm.

To sum up, I am positive that Math in primary school was enjoyable for most students in the 1990s. This may not be so after internal Math examination standards were revised upwards in the late 2000s, but we shall address this issue in another article.