


Singapore Math Books Might Need a Warning Label For Homeschool Parents

 web.archive.org/web/20100210110101/http://www.learningthings.com:80/articles/Singapore-Math-Might-Need-Warning-Label.aspx

About 10 years ago, a new math curriculum took the homeschool community by storm. Singapore Math, an exotic alternative to traditional math instruction, was touted as the ultimate math curriculum. After all, Asia was consistently trouncing the United States in Math scores, and Singapore Math was the curriculum they were using. Whatever they were doing was working, and it was working very well.

Persuaded by rave reviews, homeschoolers switched to Singapore Math in droves.

Fortunately for me, my parents said no thanks. I was being homeschooled at the time. I was doing just fine with my math lessons the way they were... nothing fancy, just ordinary, traditional math lessons filled with repetitive problem solving. If my parents would have switched to Singapore Math, I think it would have been a train wreck for them and for me.

Singapore Math's main attraction is its focus on teaching mathematical thinking instead of repetitive problem solving. The goal is to give students an understanding of the way math works instead of drilling formulas into their brains. Singapore Math students are walked through each component of the problem then presented with the whole problem to solve. The goal is to train students to think actively as they work through each step of a problem, instead of mindlessly plugging formulas into repetitive problems.

Sounds great, right? Not if you've already been trained to learn math the old fashioned way. For years I had learned math by working out practice exercises. Please don't take away my exercises and expect me to just think about it. That is a big leap for me!

If my parents had started me out with Singapore Math from the very beginning, I wouldn't have known any different. But even if I could make the leap, there is another problem with Singapore Math that I think is even harder to overcome, our teachers.

As hard as it might be for me and older U.S. students like me to make the transition from traditional math to Singapore Math, it must be even harder for U.S. teachers because they are just older students themselves. Teachers have more unlearning to do than the rest of us because they spent more years in school and then they spent years teaching math the traditional way. Old habits are hard to break!

As if this was not already hard enough, U.S. teachers have more adjustments to make than their students. With its focus on introducing new concepts thoroughly, Singapore Math requires teachers to slow down and focus intensely on areas the student does not understand right away. Forget about spending a few minutes to introduce the concept then moving on to practice drills. Teachers must be more aware of their students' progress and frustrations and

be prepared to present concepts in new ways, breaking them down more, encouraging students to think more, and not moving on until the student can see it and grasp it. That sounds hard!

Despite these challenges, I really do like what Singapore Math is trying to do because it makes a lot of sense to focus more on understanding the concepts than on memorizing formulas. All I'm trying to do is point out some stubborn realities that have to be dealt with and should be considered before anyone starts using this curriculum. Perhaps it should come with a warning label, 'Warning: This is a lot different from what you are used to!'

Bringing Singapore Math textbooks into our classrooms is easy. Getting United States teaching methods out of our classrooms is not so easy.