

GLOBAL

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The Professional Lives of Teachers in Singapore

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Image provided by Bill Jackson

(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 "[Travel Journal](#)" series about teaching and learning in Japan.)

Click Here for Part 1 of Day 1

["Singapore: Five Surprises in Education"](#)

A Math Teacher's Travel Journal to Singapore
The Singapore Math Forum
Day 1 - Part 2

The Professional Lives of Teachers

by Bill Jackson

Monday, 31 August, 2010, Singapore

Teachers work very hard at the Singapore Girls' Chinese School (SGCS), normally arriving by around 7:00 AM and going home at around 5:00 PM, sometimes a little later, sometimes a little earlier, depending on what's going on at the school. The school day for students begins at 7:20 AM and ends at 1:40 PM for primary students and 4:00 PM or so for secondary students, although this varies according to the needs and activities of each student. Sports and club activities as well as tutoring and remedial help are provided after school.

Although teachers work hard, they seem to be afforded a great deal of respect as evidenced by the fact that the entire country has a national holiday to honor teachers. Many teachers, however, feel that this respect is being eroded and there have been a few recent well-publicized incidences of student rebellion. Teachers get paid well and have good benefits by Singaporean standards

In Singapore, every teacher must choose from one of two professional tracks - teaching or leadership. There is also sometimes a third track, specialist, but very few teachers enter this track. Teachers move their way upwards in these tracks based on the "grades" they receive and generally there are four levels in each track that teachers work through, each one carrying increased salary and responsibilities.

In the teaching track, teachers can eventually become senior or master teachers, which mentor new teachers, develop the programs within the school, and focus on school improvement. In the leadership track, teachers can eventually assume leadership roles such as subject or department head, vice-principal and principal, and superintendent, or even work for the Ministry of Education. In the specialist track, teachers can become

content specialists, develop curriculum, decide which textbooks to use, and possibly do curriculum work for the Ministry of Education. Salary increases are tied to this system and some teachers make more than others based on how far they have progressed. Teachers get salary increments for longevity as well.

Each year, teachers are evaluated according to a grading system - A, B, C, D or E. Only about 2% get a grade of A. and most teachers receive a grade of C. Salary increments are tied to this system and if a teacher gets a grade of D, he or she cannot be promoted through a particular track, for three years. If a teacher gets an E grade, he or she is dismissed. Mrs. Song told us that this is very rare and she had never seen a teacher dismissed in her ten years of teaching, although she has seen incompetent teachers leave the profession of their own volition.

Teachers' grades are based on three criteria - performance, contribution, and "estimated potential." Performance includes students' test results and grades, formal and informal teacher observation, and feedback from stakeholders, which include students, parents, and "reporting officers" (department and subject heads). Contribution involves the extra things that teachers do for the school, such as chair meetings and committees and teach extracurricular activities. Estimated potential involves the potential a teacher has to improve based on their academic background, performance and contribution. There is no such thing as tenure for teachers in Singapore, but as I mentioned earlier, firing teachers is rare.

There has been much ado in the U.S. these days about performance pay, tenure, the teacher evaluation system, and how to weed out incompetence. I cannot say that I think that Singapore's system is better than ours but one good thing about it in my mind is that in Singapore teachers have the potential to grow and move on to other areas of interest, whether it be leadership, curriculum, or working for the Ministry of Education.

In the U.S., unless you go back to school to get higher degrees or more accreditation, you are basically stuck in the same position throughout your career. Also, if you work harder you can make more money. A former principal of mine once told me, "Teaching is the only profession in which a person gets paid more for getting old." I do not believe in tying teacher salaries to performance the way it is narrowly defined in the U.S. (i.e. standardized test scores) but I like the idea of using multiple criteria for teacher evaluation.

Unlike the U.S. where teachers' workspace is in their classrooms, teachers in Singapore have their desks in a common teachers' room and because of this, there is much collegiality and many opportunities for informal collaboration (this I also observed in Japan). Next to the teachers' room at the SCGS is a teachers' lounge where they can sit and relax and it even has a vibrating massage chair! Every now and then a massage therapist comes in and offers massages to teachers (although they have to pay). Also, students seem genuinely appreciative. For teachers' day, they sang, played instruments, read poems, served lunch to the teachers, and gave them many gifts, cards and notes of gratitude.

In our conversations with Singaporean teachers, we realized that they also struggle with the same things that we do in the U.S. - unruly students, difficult parents, trying to make ends meet, and the challenges of being on top of your game even when you are under stress. American teachers also work hard and I don't know where the current trend in teacher evaluation and performance pay will lead us. But we owe it to ourselves to move the conversation beyond paying teachers more (or punishing them) based solely on standardized test results, which is open to all kinds of abuse. The job of teaching is complex, real learning is difficult to measure, and these issues cannot be looked at so simplistically.

That's all for now. I look forward to sharing more of the insights I glean from the trip as we begin the Singapore Math Forum.

Until then, "take care arh" ([Singlish](#) for take care).

Bill Jackson
Monday, 31 August, 2010, Singapore

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Link to Day 1 - Part 1 - "[Singapore: Five Surprises in Education](#)"

Link to Day 1 - Part 2 - "[The Professional Lives of Teachers in Singapore](#)"

Link to Day 2 - "[The Teacher Model In Singapore: What Matters Most](#)"

Link to Day 3 - "[The Creativity & Critical Thinking Initiative](#)"

For more on Jackson's Travel Journal to Japan:

Day 1 & 2: Link [Here](#) - "What American Teachers Can Learn From Japan"

Day 3 & 4: Link [Here](#) - "A More Global Perspective On Teacher Assessment and Development"

Day 5: Link [Here](#) - Developing Creative Talents, Not Just Academic Skills

Day 6: Link [Here](#) - "Less Is More"

Day 7 & 8 - Part 1: Link [Here](#) - "Teaching For Students. Sounds Obvious. Not."

Day 7 & 8 - Part 2: Link [Here](#) - "Teachers Walking The Talk"

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