

A LETTER FROM A MEMBER

A letter addressed to the Hon. Secretary has been received from a member and is reproduced below. The writer requests to remain anonymous.

Re : Some Feedback on the Proceedings of  
the Singapore Mathematical Colloquium

Firstly, I wish to give some words of appreciation. I am writing this letter as a parent. Again I am not a "Mathematics" man but more of an "English" man.

I wish to inform you that I just yearn for the "Mathematical Medley" to turn up. It is delightful reading. More people should read it.

I was shocked to read that almost 500,000 people possess driving licences. Why cannot a fraction get interested in the wonderful work that the Singapore Mathematical Society is doing? The cost is the same - only \$10/- per year!

I suggest that letters be sent to primary and secondary schools and junior colleges requesting principals, teachers (specifically all maths teacher) and students to become members right away. The Society's good work cannot go to waste. Officials at the Ministry of Education should not be forgotten.

And it is the contents of Volume 5, Number 2 that prompted my hand to move. The subject matter was good food for thought.

My daughter is in Sec. I/10 and in the Tanjong Katong Girls' School. She was 7th in her class and has been promoted to Sec. II next year. The School is doing Modern Maths throughout. At the Sec. I final examination only 5 had passed in the Maths paper. And the pass mark was only 40. This is only in her class of 41. What happened in the

other 9 classes I do not know. Perhaps your Society could do some research on this.

I wish to present my assessment now.

The very day that my daughter had sat for the paper, she complained to me that it was tough and that she had done badly. So I went through the paper myself doing every problem that I could. I managed 70%. The other 30% is the so-called "modern maths" and surprisingly my daughter had got them all right - so she said and I believed her.

Firstly this proves on the plus side that "modern maths" is not difficult for the children, and not only that, they thrive on it. What shocked me was that she was doing Co-ordinates which I had only learnt when I was in the Senior Cambridge. A bigger shock was that she could not tackle simple geometrical problems - not "Modern Maths" but simple Geometry. Similarly she could not do simple Algebra.

I find "Modern Maths" confusing. But my daughter takes it in her stride. She has intelligence. If she had done better in her Maths she could have hauled herself higher. The only conclusion I can come to is that the children lack practice - I wish to reinforce the comments made at the Singapore Mathematical Colloquium.

I had gone through her maths book earlier. There are not sufficient problems for each topic. Either books with more problems should be produced or the teachers should use other text-books to supplement the usual ones.

One remedy I have thought of is to use my 25-year-old textbooks to strengthen my daughter's mathematics during the December holidays.

I managed to salvage a Geometry book by Durell, an Algebra book by Hall and "Elementary Analysis" by Dakin and Porter. I am still looking for others. My approach is that I could strengthen my daughter in 70% of the

"Modern Maths" by falling back on old books - not for theory - but for problems - exercises to be precise.

In conclusion I wish to echo the view that the children lack practice in Mathematics.

I still remember the old days. When I made inquiries as to why the Chinese stream students were better in Maths, the standard reply was that each student did every problem in a thick Maths book. Well, it still holds good today.

I would be very grateful, Sir, if you could inform me whether I am on the right track pertaining to my daughter's weakness in her Mathematics. I must be convinced.

The second point is whether the Singapore Mathematical Society could bring it to the attention of all maths teachers that they should pay more attention to the "Old" maths in the context of the "Modern" maths in the sense that they should give more exercises to the students all the time in these topics. The "Old" method still reigns supreme! The phenomenon is that the students are good in "Modern Maths" and weak in Geometry, Algebra, Elementary Analysis, etc. I would not call them 'weak'. More practice would solve the problem.

I would hope, Sir, that my analysis that students are weak in the "Old" maths in the context of "Modern Maths" would be some food for thought to the officials of the Society.

I would be pleased to have a reply as to how to strengthen my daughter's maths and some names of good text-books if possible.

Thank you.