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2023 Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching for International Teachers

Growing My Circles of Life



It was both a privilege and an honour to be selected as a recipient of the Fulbright Award, particularly at this point in my career in the education service. This recognition affirmed my contributions and commitment to excellence in my work. It also presented me with an exciting opportunity to further enrich my professional journey through international collaboration and exchange. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the global discourse on education.

As I began my Fulbright journey, I was clear that it was going to be a period of exploration and unknowns. I was both excited and apprehensive, and somewhat sad to have left my family, friends, colleagues, and students in Singapore. Right from the beginning, it was clear to me that flexibility and an open mind would be my tools for navigating my experience and managing my expectations as I interact with people from various cultures and backgrounds and grow my circles of life. Overall, my

experience in the Fulbright programme has been a mix of academic learning, cultural immersion, and relationship-building, each playing a unique part in my continued professional and personal circle of growth.

Settling In A New Environment

Ruddock Hall at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), a space both new and unfamiliar, became my home throughout my four-month stay in the US. There were 17 participants from 10 countries in the Fulbright programme at the IUP campus. Each of

us had a room with our names and countries pasted on our doors, a personal touch that helped me feel a little more at home. The thoughtful preparation to help us settle into our new home really touched me. Pots



17 Fulbrighters from 10 different countries (Brazil, Greece, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Uganda, Philippines, Senegal, Singapore and Taiwan).

and pans, cutlery, towels, bed sheets, pillows, blankets, etc., were all meticulously packed and provided. This, to me, epitomises a level of care and detailed planning, to address our basic needs and facilitate a smooth transition, akin to Maslow's hierarchy of needs in action.



Ruddock Hall at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

I truly appreciate the IUP Fulbright team for what they did to help us settle smoothly into our new environment so that we could focus on the rigorous programme planned for us.

At IUP, we attended professional development programmes such as the Fulbright seminar, a technology workshop, an audit course, field and cultural experiences, and completed a research project. Also, there were many opportunities among the



IUP Fulbright Programme Managers with me. From L to R: Dr Sue Rieg, me, Dr Michele Petrucci and Ms Farzaneh Jahangiri.

Fulbright participants to share and learn from one another. We had many insightful conversations on different educational contexts and challenges that we faced as educators and understanding different cultural practices and nuances.

Appreciating the US and Singapore Education System

Learning about the US education system and drawing comparisons with the Singapore education system provided me with valuable insights into their respective structures and approaches. A distinctive feature of the US education system that I value is the opportunity for students to pursue both academic and skill-based qualifications concurrently. I observed this during my visit to the Indiana County Technology Center (ICTC). At ICTC, students engage in industry-certified technical skills and academic-enriched career programmes. Students attend lessons on their core content areas in their district for half a day before attending programmes conducted by ICTC on the technical and career areas. This integrated approach allows students to acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, offering pathways to post-secondary education and employment in high-demand careers. ICTC's diverse range of high school programmes, which includes Automotive Technologies, Construction and Building Trades, Information Technologies, and Public Services such as cosmetology and health education, exemplify this holistic educational model and support for students to pursue their interests.



<https://youtu.be/gP661hWLvw0>



Visit to the Indiana County Technology Center (ICTC) to learn about the programmes offered.

One striking difference I observed is the level of government control and influence. In Singapore, there is collaboration between the government and stakeholders, with the government playing a central role in policy control, infrastructure development, and funding allocation. Singapore's education system features a tripartite relationship involving the Ministry of Education (MOE), the National Institute of Education (NIE), and schools. This centralised approach has contributed to an efficient and accessible education system, evident in Singapore achieving a high literacy rate of 97%. The US, on the other hand, adopts a decentralised approach, where the individual states and districts have considerable influence over school management. For example, individual schools bear the responsibility for teacher recruitment and dismissal. A critical aspect of the US system that caught my attention was the funding mechanism for public schools. While Federal funds are provided, the heavy reliance on local property taxes has resulted in an inequitable funding structure. From conversations with American educators, I learnt that this approach poses a challenge to equal access to facilities and resources based on the school district's wealth.

Appreciating a Tapestry of American Culture

Our exposure to American culture and way of life encompassed a diverse range of experiences. We encountered the excitement of sports, the traditions of rural life and the vibrancy of urban centres, the serenity of natural wonders and the communal celebrations of American holidays. These encounters enriched our perspective, fostering a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted American culture.

The fervor surrounding baseball and American football highlighted the enthusiasm and passion of fans and supporters, the communal spirit in the stadiums, and the significance of these sports in Americans' social life. The Indiana County Fair

and Farmers' Market provided a glimpse into the heartland of America, offering insights into rural traditions, agricultural practices, and the sense of community. These gatherings preserve the local customs.



American football at Indiana High School.



Indiana County Fair.

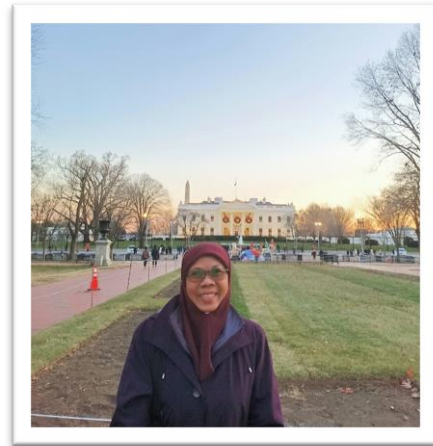


Farmers' Market with local produce.

New York City and Washington DC revealed to us the dynamic and cosmopolitan nature of American urban life. The bustling streets, diverse neighbourhoods, iconic landmarks, and the energy of the cities contributed to our understanding of the cultural mosaic that defines the United States. The blend of cultures, arts, and commerce epitomises the American urban way of life.



New York city.



White House, Washington DC.

The majestic Niagara Falls, a natural wonder, not only showcased the breathtaking beauty of the country but also underscored the significance of natural landmarks in American heritage. Experiencing the grandeur of the Falls connected us with the awe-inspiring landscapes that play a pivotal role in shaping the American identity. Thanksgiving, a cherished American holiday, provided an intimate look at familial and communal traditions. Sharing in the warmth of gatherings, the significance of gratitude, and the culinary traditions associated with Thanksgiving deepened our understanding of the cultural and social fabric that binds Americans together during such special occasions.



Niagara Falls.



Food served during Thanksgiving in one of the homes that I was invited to.

Learning with “Superpower” Educators

Conversations with educators in the programme unveiled the rich tapestry of global teaching practices and offered a comparative lens to examine the distinct landscapes of education. I was surprised to learn of the stark technological resource disparities faced by some of the Fulbright participants. Despite the lack of reliable internet connection, laptops or computers, these educators showed remarkable determination to ensure that their students have some exposure to learning with technology and are not shortchanged. One educator, for example, shared that she used her own mobile data as a hotspot so her students could connect to the internet. Another shared that they used Facebook to communicate and upload learning resources as they did not have a Learning Management System like the Student Learning Space (SLS) we have in Singapore. These are things that I have taken for granted. As I reflect, I learn to appreciate our education system more and would like to be the voice to tell the story of how lucky we are to have the necessary infrastructure and support in place. I really wish that our students would realise how fortunate they are as students in Singapore. These “Superpower” educators whom I have met are resilient advocates for equitable and quality education. They navigate their challenges with unwavering commitment and resourcefulness.

As part of the Fulbright programme, we had the opportunity to observe and co-teach in a suburban school in Indiana and a city school in Pittsburgh. I did a presentation on Singapore, my school, and our programmes, and co-taught a biodiversity lesson on the Eco-Link@BKE. Most of the students were surprised when they learned how expensive it is to own a car in Singapore. It served as a good talking point with the students as we were able to link the high cost of cars in Singapore to the idea of land scarcity in Singapore versus the vast land area in US, and the need to ensure

smooth traffic flow. The student population in the city school of Pittsburgh was more diverse than the student profile in Singapore classrooms. They are diverse in language, nationality, ethnicity, academic ability, learning needs and the list goes on. One of the contributing factors for the diversity is the immigrant population. I marvel at the care and commitment of these educators to support the learners with a range of needs under their charge.



Cultural lessons and activities at the schools in Indiana and Pittsburgh.

Deepening Understanding of Growth Mindset



An artefact I created using laser cutting when we visited IUP STEAMSHOP.

My research project began with a question that one of my colleagues asked. "How are you using and, in particular, implementing growth mindset in your teaching?" My personal experience of initially struggling to identify the instructional strategies or tools that I use to foster growth mindset in my classrooms made me feel that this was an important area to research on. My project became a personal mission for me to enhance my understanding of how teachers are fostering growth

mindset in the classrooms, in particular the instructional strategies and the tools used to facilitate growth mindset.

This research project has deepened my understanding of growth mindset and my appreciation for the power of one's beliefs in realising potentials. The critical conversations with my Faculty Advisor and IUP teaching staff, as well as observing and conversing with teachers in the high school in Indiana, went a long way in helping me work on my research project. I received positive feedback after my project presentation at IUP and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) End-of-Programme held at Washington, DC. I was pleasantly surprised when I received three invitations from the Fulbright participants to collaborate and facilitate the development of growth mindset for teachers in their schools.

This project has served as a timely reminder to assess the ways I approach challenges and view my own potential. Embracing a growth mindset is not only a subject of study but also a philosophy to be internalised and lived. The research experience has become a catalyst for personal development, influencing my mindset and approach towards setbacks, and reinforcing the belief that continuous learning is a lifelong endeavour.

Reflecting on Circles of Life

Circle of Life

From the day we arrive on the planet
 And, blinking, step into the sun
 There's more to be seen than can ever be seen
 More to do than can ever be done
 Some say eat or be eaten
 Some say live and let live
 But all are agreed as they join the stampede
 You should never take more than you give

Some of us fall by the wayside
 And some of us soar to the stars
 And some of us sail through our troubles
 And some have to live with the scars
 There's far too much to take in here
 More to find than can ever be found
 But the sun rolling high
 Through the sapphire sky
 Keeps great and small on the endless round

In the circle of life
 It's the wheel of fortune
 It's the leap of faith
 It's the band of hope
 Till we find our place
 On the path unwinding
 In the circle
 The circle of life

At our End-of-Programme Celebration at IUP, Dr Sue Rieg's speech really stuck with me. She shared the lyrics from the Circle of Life by Elton John, which got me reflecting. Like her, I have been so blessed in my circles of life.



Dr Sue Rieg (R) and me.

Dr Rieg's speech reminded me of the interconnectedness, interdependence, and cyclical nature of existence in both our natural and personal realms. She ended her speech by encouraging us to follow the lyrics of the song and advised us to not only "keep this circle together but also grow your circles to include other passionate and dedicated educators like yourselves." Her words inspired me to maintain the interconnectedness and friendships forged and to continue growing my circles of life.

The Fulbright programme has been an enriching journey for me, weaving together diverse experiences and perspectives. It has not only enriched my professional journey but ignited a fervour in me to share my experiences and insights within my educational community to promote a culture of global understanding and collaboration. The experience of learning with the international educators about the unique challenges and needs in their education system, has reinforced my appreciation for the educational infrastructure and support in Singapore. I am not just an educator. I am a global collaborator, equipped with a deeper understanding and a commitment to continuous growth. I leave this experience with a deepened commitment to maintain and grow my circles of life and foster connections with passionate educators in my country and worldwide. The interconnectedness of our educational circles has encouraged me to embrace the richness of global collaboration in my ongoing educational endeavours.