

Shirley Charles

2025 Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program for International Teachers

Refining One's Bearings Through Reflection

"We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience." John Dewey

I did not begin the Fulbright journey with certainty about the programme or the experiences that would await me, but with the conviction that I would make the most of it. Leaving my family for an extended period was one of the hardest decisions I have made as an educator, yet it was a necessary one- because growth rarely occurs in comfort.

Feeling privileged to be selected, I embarked on this enriching professional development journey alongside two fellow Singaporean educators, with Ruddock Hall at Indiana University of Pennsylvania as my home for the next four months. Perhaps the greatest gift of this experience was time - time away from the immediacy of personal and professional responsibilities, and time to reflect deeply on what I value most as an educator. Through reflection, several themes emerged.



Arriving in Pittsburgh with my fellow Singaporeans, Edwina and Huoy Fen



FDAI 2025 at Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Welcome Ceremony

Learning That Endures

Indiana University of Pennsylvania had thoughtfully curated a wide range of experiences that offered deep and sustained insights into the American education system. Learning during the Fulbright experience was not confined to seminars or lectures; it was embedded in conversations, contradictions, and shared struggles.



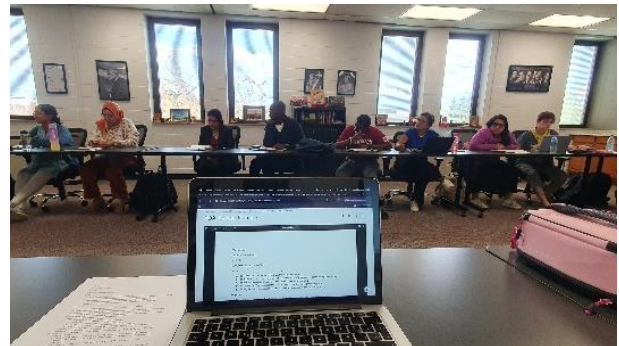
Our packed schedule for Fulbright Programme



Technology Seminar with Dr. Jacqueline McGinty and Ms Jess Oest

Interacting with nineteen educators from diverse countries and educational contexts through Fulbright and Technology Seminars broadened my perspectives in ways no textbook could. We exchanged ideas, questioned long-held assumptions, and learned from one another's lived realities. I developed a profound respect for educators

working in vastly different and often challenging circumstances. Regardless of how modest their classrooms were, these educators shared a common conviction: a deep commitment to improving the lives of young people in the face of significant adversity. Some stories stayed with me long after the conversations ended. One educator, concerned that students were not



Hard at work at our Fulbright sessions

returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic, personally funded a van fitted with loudhailers to drive through surrounding villages, playing recorded messages to encourage students to return to school. Another spoke passionately about spending countless hours engaging parents to dissuade them from withdrawing their daughters from school for early marriage.

In contrast to Singapore's context, I was also struck by the scale of some learning environments. Classrooms of 150 to 200 students were not exceptions, but norms. Yet even within these constraints, educators demonstrated remarkable ingenuity, resilience, and moral courage. These

encounters reshaped my understanding of learning- not as access to resources, but as a commitment sustained by belief and purpose.

When Learning Feels Welcoming



Corridors lined with uplifting messages at Eisenhower Elementary School

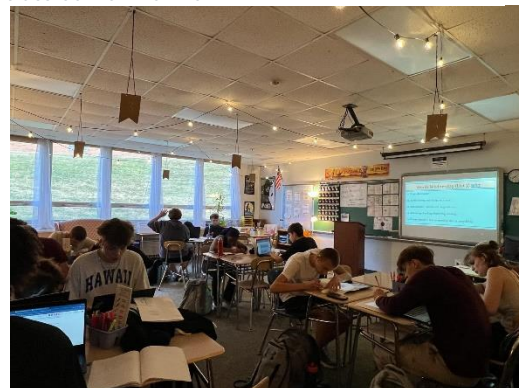
Beyond conversations, the physical spaces of schools also became powerful sites of learning. During visits to both public and private schools, I was struck by how deliberately these spaces were designed to welcome students. Corridors were filled with uplifting messages that affirmed effort, belonging, and possibility.

Classrooms, too, were far from uniform. Rather than static or standardised spaces, they reflected the personalities, values, and pedagogical approaches of the educators who taught in them. These were warm, inviting environments - spaces that communicated care, identity, and purpose even before a lesson began.



Drawing on a barista café vibe to create a welcoming classroom environment

This stood in contrast to the efficiency-driven uniformity often prioritised in highly systematised contexts. I began to see classrooms not merely as instructional spaces, but as relational ones - places where students are invited to belong, to be seen, and to engage meaningfully with learning.



A classroom at Indiana Senior High designed to feel warm, calm and welcoming

Acceptance in Practice

I began my Fulbright experience with a clear intention: to understand how adolescents with special educational needs can be better supported within mainstream systems. During my six-week placement at Indiana Senior High, this learning was shaped profoundly by my partner teacher, Ms



Ms Tara Pangonis, my partner teacher, from Indiana Senior High

Tara Pangonis, a special education needs educator who guided me through the structures and practices supporting students on Individualised Education Plans (IEPs). At Indiana Senior High, the IEP process was thoughtfully managed by special education needs educators and supported by clear school-wide structures. What stood out, however, was that support did not end with accommodation. Equal emphasis was placed on self-advocacy- a skill explicitly taught through Pathways lessons. These lessons helped learners understand their own learning profiles, articulate the support they required, and recognise that learning differences did not preclude success.

Advocacy was framed not merely as a school-based skill, but as a life skill. Students learned that IEP provisions do not automatically transfer to university or the workplace. Instead, they would need to understand their needs, seek support proactively, and navigate systems independently. This emphasis reshaped my thinking. Inclusion, I realised, is not only about protection within a system, but about preparation for life beyond it.

This learning extended beyond the secondary school context. Ms Pangonis also facilitated Labyrinth sessions at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and I was invited to observe these weekly classes. Designed to support autistic students, these sessions focused on self-regulation and emotional awareness, and provided a safe space for students to seek help when needed.

Given Indiana's smaller community, schools were also required to support students with a wider range of needs, including those with moderate to severe disabilities. I had the opportunity to visit such classrooms and was struck by the collaborative support provided by multiple allied educators. Inclusion here was visible, intentional, and collective.

One particularly powerful example of advocacy leading to acceptance was the school's student-run coffeehouse operated by students with moderate to severe needs. These students were trained in workplace skills and interacted daily with peers who would one day be part of their broader community and future workforce. This initiative did more than prepare students for employment;



The daily queue for the Commons Cafe run by its moderately-challenged special needs students



Presenting my Educator Project- a project that means a lot to me

it cultivated empathy, visibility, and recognition. Acceptance, I came to see, is most meaningful when it is lived through shared experiences rather than spoken through policy.

Through these encounters, my understanding of inclusive education deepened. True inclusion is not only about access or accommodation, but about empowering learners to understand themselves, advocate for their needs, and be recognised as valued contributors within their communities.

What Home Does Well: Strengths Seen from Afar

Armed with a mission to learn as much as I could and to contribute meaningfully back to the Singapore education system, I found that my Fulbright experience unexpectedly deepened my appreciation of the strengths of our own system. Singapore’s reputation in education had clearly travelled far beyond its borders despite our small size. While many people were unsure of where we sat on the world map - or occasionally reduced us to stereotypes like *Crazy Rich Asians* - one thing was certain: there was genuine curiosity about what underpinned Singapore’s educational success.



Being an ambassador to Singapore across several platforms

This curiosity surfaced across multiple platforms: cultural sharing sessions at both partner schools, engagements during Unity Day at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and countless informal conversations. I also had the opportunity to present a snapshot of Singapore’s education



Presenting the strengths of Singapore' Education System at the 6 o'clock series

system on behalf of my fellow Singaporean Fulbrighters during the 6 o'clock series, where I witnessed firsthand how eager others were to learn from - and even replicate- our approach.

That initial sense of national pride, however, quickly evolved into a more sobering realisation. If we were to remain relevant, we needed to be nimble and vigilant, especially in a global landscape where many nations are far more resource-rich. Strategic collaboration, adaptability, and a willingness to learn from others would be critical in compensating for our constraints.

Passion as a Critical Cornerstone

As I reflected on the areas where we could do better, I found myself returning repeatedly to the idea of passion and the quiet yet powerful role it plays in shaping one's bearings in life. During my time, I encountered several individuals who had made their passions larger than their day jobs - allowing these pursuits to guide how they gave back to their communities and made sense of their own journeys.



The Treehouse Dr Ed Donley built

There was Dr Ed Donley, a retired professor who, inspired by episodes of Treehouse Masters, spent four years post-retirement building a treehouse from scratch in his backyard. I met a baker determined to pass on his passion for traditional apple-

cider making to anyone eager to learn. I observed a community of individuals who gathered weekly to tend a shared garden - working hard not for personal gain, but so that anyone could benefit from its harvest. I also encountered people who trained their

dogs to become therapy animals, scheduling visits to schools, universities, and any spaces where comfort was needed, offering calm and connection through these gentle companions. Even a restaurant



Learning the art of traditional apple cider making

owner at Le Mouna embodied this spirit, providing free dinners to foster a stronger sense of community.



Owners of Le Mouna bringing the community together with free dinner from 4-6pm on Tuesdays

These were just some of the exceptional individuals I had the privilege of encountering. What struck me was not the scale of their actions, but the way their passions extended beyond themselves. I began to wonder whether a passion larger than self could serve as a compass- guiding individuals toward pathways that not only benefit others, but ultimately lead to deeper fulfilment and a more enduring sense of success.

Looking across these experiences, I am struck by how consistently purpose, inclusion, and passion shaped the most meaningful forms of learning I witnessed. Whether in classrooms stretched far beyond ideal conditions, in systems that deliberately taught self-advocacy, or in communities sustained by individuals acting beyond obligation, the common thread was intention. Learning endured when it was anchored in belief, and support mattered most when it prepared individuals to navigate life independently and with dignity. For me, the Fulbright experience clarified that education cannot be reduced to structures, policies, or outcomes alone. Its strength lies in the daily choices educators make - what we prioritise, whose voices we amplify, and how intentionally we design spaces for belonging and growth. As I return to Singapore, I carry with me a sharpened sense of responsibility: to build classrooms that are relational as well as rigorous, to advocate for inclusion that equips rather than shelters, and to model a passion for learning that extends beyond professional duty. In this way, reflection has not merely deepened my understanding of education; it has refined the bearings by which I choose to practise it.



Precious memories with the 2024–2025 Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program for International Teachers Family