

Yeo Peng Seng

2022 Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Programme:

An Unexpected Journey

'The essence of intercultural education is the acquisition of empathy—the ability to see the world as others see it, and to allow for the possibility that others may see something we have failed to see, or may see it more accurately.' - J. William

Fulbright



21 Fulbrighters from 14 different countries (Botswana, Brazil, Finland, Greece, Indonesia, India, Israel, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Philippines, Senegal, Singapore, and Uganda) at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP)

In Singapore, teachers are often criticised as being too rigid in our teaching methods while chasing academic achievements and high test scores. The Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching (FDAT) offers a counter-narrative that teachers

can be authors of their professional development when given the time, support, and freedom to pursue their projects.

In 2022, I had the privilege of participating in the FDAI programme and interacting with a cohort of 20 teachers who were also working on their own inquiry projects. We considered how ideas and material practices in the projects could transfer across cultural contexts. If Finnish teachers could produce world-class learning achievements without homework, could teachers in Singapore lighten their students' burdens by doing the same? What would research-driven education in the Philippines look like in Singapore? Could the tools of inclusive education in India be used in Singapore? As I observed the development of these inquiry projects over my stay in the United States of America, I was repeatedly struck by our community of teachers' resilience, resourcefulness, and persistence in finding our pathways to inquire further.

For the past 14 years, I have taught and worked happily in a school of about 1400 students, with hard-working and highly professional colleagues. I have always wanted to expand my voice in the educational system and to improve the educational outcomes in my school and students. Even more so, I wanted a broader perspective. I wondered how teachers in other countries, such as in the Philippines or Mexico, could be so successful despite their challenging teaching conditions. When I wrote my FDAI application in 2019, I surmised that teachers have the training or tools to engage students, but many struggle to create lessons that evoke curiosity and the joy of learning.

Starting with the premise that learning and engagement is essential for learning, I was determined that I wanted to help teachers find the joy of teaching, and likewise, for students to find the joy of learning in school. While this may seem

simple on paper, it is often complex for many educators in practice. Another question beckoned: 'Are we preparing students for the 21st century when we focus primarily on imparting knowledge as opposed to teaching self-reflection and inquiry skills?'

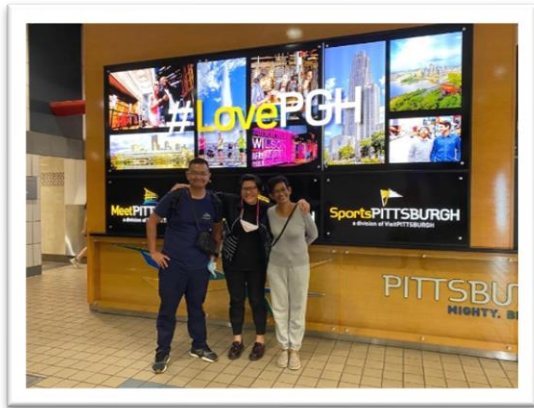
Packing up and preparing for a four-and-a-half month overseas stay presented a few challenges. While I was excited about pursuing my project and interacting with educators worldwide, I was less certain about living in another country and leaving my family with two young girls behind. I was fortunate to have two supportive Singaporean Fulbright colleagues whom I could rely on to help navigate the new city.

I was very quickly immersed in a different life with my 20 other FDAI teachers, my university hosts, and other professors. I learnt to navigate the bus system and walked numerous miles daily to reach the different parts of the university. I worked on a schedule filled with weekly seminars, audit courses, and workshops. The last time I was on a similar schedule was back in the days when I was training to be a teacher at the National Institute of Education in the 2010s.

Over the course of the programme, I asked broad and detailed questions, and followed different leads in my inquiry and readings. I visited classrooms in rural and public school systems, participated in seminars and workshops and, more importantly, interacted with teachers and students.

The classrooms I observed in the United States of America were extremely bright and welcoming. Artworks of students filled the walls along the hallway and classrooms. I observed many instances that challenged my ideas of student engagement and what a classroom should look like. As a primary school teacher, now I believe that we must create an engaging physical learning environment and design engaging learning tasks if we hope to nurture happy and successful students.

It is not instructionally sound to ask nine-year-olds to sit at tables all day and perform activities that are not engaging or at their developmental level. This is my greatest lesson from the FDAI programme.



(From left to right) I with Singaporean Fulbrighters Yard Wah and June at Pittsburgh International Airport on their first day of arrival



Dr Soo Lu (second from right in blue), a Singaporean, teaches courses in US foreign relations and recent US history, and works with Social Studies Education majors



Welcome reception for Fulbrighters with the President and the Provost of IUP



Cultural presentation at Eisenhower Elementary School

Learn, Change, and Learn Again

As part of the Fulbright DAI programme, I designed and completed an individual inquiry project directly relevant to my teaching subject and educational practice. Apart from that, I participated in an undergraduate class at our host university, IUP. I also had the opportunity to observe classes, co-teach and share my expertise with US teachers from elementary schools. I participated in numerous workshops with other participants to share our local educational practices. I also interacted with a global network of colleagues and engaged in other educational and cultural activities.



With partner teacher at Eisenhower Elementary School



Group discussion at Fulbright Seminar



First day at Eisenhower Elementary School



NCTM 2022 Conference: Presentation by Mr Kyle Pearce from makemathmoments.com

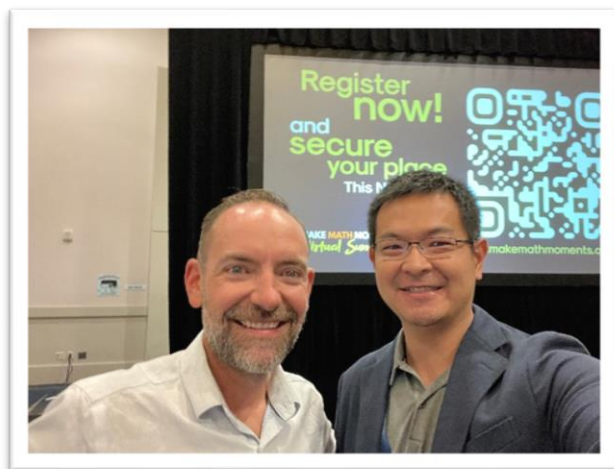
Besides the courses at the host university, I had the privilege of attending the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) conference in Los Angeles. This conference was an excellent platform to network and exchange ideas with fellow mathematics educators worldwide. I

learnt many best practices and plan to share these upon my return to Singapore.

Learning from the rich exchanges, I have adapted the three-act math task, curated by Mr. Dan Meyer. These are rich mathematics tasks that start with a picture or video that lends itself well to students asking their mathematical questions. They

are aligned with various Common Core Standards and the Singapore Mathematics Curriculum

Framework. This three-act task is a whole-group mathematics task consisting of three distinct parts: an engaging and perplexing 'Act One', an information and solution-seeking



With Kyle Pearce from makemathmoments.com

'Act Two' and a solution discussion and solution-revealing 'Act Three'. I plan to develop a series of lesson packages to be shared with Singaporean teachers and students. This experience opens me up to the possibility of the powerful impact our fraternity of teachers would have if they gave themselves the time and space to explore questions that mattered most to them.

As we enter the endemic phase of the Covid-19, it became clear to me over the past two years that creative ideas and methodology would be needed to continue to teach and learn in the new norm. Although my Fulbright experience is over, I need to continue to extend and implement what I had experienced in many ways. We overcame the challenge of teaching and learning during a pandemic because we had the time to collectively work together to develop differentiated lessons that targeted our students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Moving forward, we ought to reflect and improve the design of our lessons.



End of Programme Graduation at Washington DC

Back in School: The Fellowship of the Engagement 'Ring'

Back in my school, I saw that not all educators had the opportunity to take the time and space to pursue an area of interest. Many educators feel overwhelmed and frustrated with the increasing challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. With these waves of challenge and change, it feels like many of us are on our own rowing against the tide.

So where do we go? How do I get everyone in the same 'ring'? I decided that I can take the initiative to start. Moving forward, the first thing I want to do is to find like-minded people to join me in the 'ring'. Coming together would mean we have more capacity and strength to address the obstacles ahead. That is why a professional learning team must start at my school. None of this work can be done in isolation.

We are mindful that another pandemic may come. Struggles and stumbles may happen, but we can build a more captivating classroom when we give each other the chance to learn as a team.



Graduation Ceremony at Washington

What does it mean to be a Fulbrighter?

'Fostering these—leadership, learning, and empathy between cultures—was and remains the purpose of the international scholarship program... It is a modest program with an immodest aim—the achievement in international affairs of a regime more civilized, rational, and humane than the empty system of power of the past.' - J. William Fulbright



Lunch with Fulbright Board members

Becoming a Fulbrighter

to me means joining a community of more than 380,000 Fulbrighters from over 160+ countries since it began in 1946. Hundreds of Fulbright alumni worldwide currently hold top positions in government, higher education,

journalism, law, and the private sector. This programme is one of the flagship international educational exchange programmes supported by the US government that brings outstanding international educators to the United States (US) for a semester-long programme to pursue professional development, and to learn with and from international educators on the programme. While each awardee has a specific teaching or research project to pursue, I know that my goal as a Fulbrighter is to promote mutual understanding and respect between the



St Andrew's Junior School students visiting USS John P. Murtha

United States and other nations. I represent Singapore as a cultural ambassador to the host country, and am mindful to continue to be an active member of my community after the programme.



Remember that you are a Fulbrighter for life!