

## **Mr Syed Faisal Syed Ismail**

### **My Fulbright Experience**

People always say, 'Things happen for a reason'. What started as a four-month professional learning opportunity ended rather abruptly due to the unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19. Though the experience in the United States (U.S.) was shortened to two-and-a-half months, it did not fall short in helping me reflect on who I am as an educator and my guiding principles as an educational leader.

### **Journey of Personal Growth**

To be honest, during the early stages of the interview, I did ask myself if I had what it took to pursue this opportunity. I applied for the Fulbright award because I have always been passionate about equity work within education. But to be chosen to represent the Ministry of Education and be given the chance to dive deeper into this area of research was something I had never expected. And here I am penning down my reflections: about how grateful I am for taking that leap of faith to be part of the 2020 Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program for International Teachers (Fulbright DAI).



*The 16 educators (representing 10 different countries) at Arizona State University (ASU).*

When we talk to teachers, one of their common gripes is how they are often stuck in the daily grind and struggle to find time to reflect and re-energise themselves. One of the biggest discoveries for me was how much I found myself being at ease with who I am and, in the process, cultivating authenticity as an educator. Authenticity to me is a choice to show up and be real, a choice to remain honest and let our true selves be revealed. Being true to oneself is being a person who draws a lot of energy from others; I used to suffer from solitude phobia: the fear of being alone. However, the times spent alone in my room on days I did not have classes made me learn to enjoy the 'me time'. Soon, I slowly overcame this fear of being alone. To me now, solitude offers restoration, and embracing this alone time has made me a more self-assured educator.



*A picture of my room, which gave me strength and space for personal growth*



*A picture of my housemates, represented by educators from the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Senegal (clockwise starting from the bottom)*

During my time away from my classroom and the comfort of my family, I learnt to let go of who I thought I was supposed to be, and started embracing who I truly am. And with that came a lot of new opportunities for growth—cultivating the courage to try something new, courage to be imperfect and vulnerable. Besides attending North High School which was assigned to most of us for our weekly teaching, I wrote in to the principals of five to six other high schools for opportunities to visit and carry out my research. Two got back to me and I had a chance to visit them. One of them (Marcos De Niza High School) even gave me a chance to



*Students from North High School exercising their vote in the passing of a bill*



teach and carry out my survey with their students. Working through all these arrangements via cold emails, being rejected by four schools, visiting a foreign school alone and getting lost on the way there: these struggles served as powerful experiences as I started to invite grace, joy, and gratitude into my life, being so at ease with my imperfect self. I also began to exercise self-compassion from knowing that I am made of strength and struggle.

My second point of learning is something so personal to me—something that I struggled a lot—the idea of letting go of perfectionism and beginning the work of becoming myself. I learnt that perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best. It is more of a thirty-ton shield that one lugs around thinking that it will protect us, when in fact it is the very thing that prevents us from taking flight. I soon learnt that perfectionism stems from one's trying to earn approval and acceptance from others, trying to look perfect in the eyes of others.



*Visit to Color Factory  
in New York*

The reality is that Fulbright brings together 16 outstanding educators from different countries—akin to having 16 athletes from all over the world coming to ASU for Olympics. We all have something to give, and for a few, something to 'prove'. However, it does not have to be like that.

Luckily, my daily check-ins with the other two Singapore Fulbrighters with me, Wendy and Richard (they were my strongest confidants at Arizona), allowed me to see that we need not be debilitated by a belief system that focuses on people-pleasing behaviours exercising onto others based on our own moral compass.

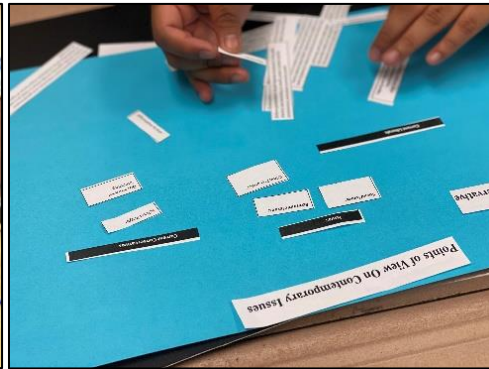
There is some truth that 'less is indeed more'. During my time there, I learnt to acknowledge my own vulnerabilities and more importantly practise self-compassion and mindfulness. I was fortunate to meet a few like-minded individuals who shared common beliefs of what it means to be an educator. These served to affirm that I was not alone on this journey; that my feelings of personal inadequacy were part of a shared human experience.



*Catching American football match with  
fellow Fulbrighters*



*Picture taken with my  
friendship family*







*A collage of pictures of my field experience at North High School and Marcos De Niza High School, and of the visits to Central High School and Kyrene Centennial Middle School.*

### **Journey of Professional Growth**

Earlier, I mentioned about how passionate I am in equity work. I do feel that educators who centre themselves in equity can create educational institutions that help students self-actualise their success. My research zoomed specifically into classroom practices that helped break down barriers and increase academic engagement of minority students within our education system. Looking at the American context (in this case, the schools at Arizona), I wanted to better appreciate what is hindering equity and not promoting the vertical mobility of minority students in the schools. Subsequently, my research endeavoured to investigate a possible support system in the form of culturally responsive pedagogies to close inequity gaps and create a climate for equity in student learning. Personally, my dream is that our classroom can support all minority learners so that they can learn, and ensuring no child is left behind.

Through an array of ethnographic activities, my research looked at the central role of culturally responsive practices at the classroom level and proposed a menu of deliberate practices of what the teacher can do, say and sound like to foster a positive schooling experience for the minority students. I am extremely grateful for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit the American schools and interact with the teachers as well as having conversations with both school administrators and the students. These have provided me with a renewed understanding of how schools and classrooms can become important agents in alleviating critical educational issues such as low academic achievement and disproportionate representation of students from minority communities.

Though my research was disrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic, work continued even after I returned to Singapore. I wished I had a few more weeks in America to strengthen my ground observations, but all of the Fulbrighters were in the same boat: we had to make the best of the situation and take our projects to completion. I am thankful to my

faculty advisor, Dr. Blasingame, educational consultants Beth and Mike Lang, as well as all my partner teachers who became my pillars of strength throughout my research journey.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In many small little ways, I feel that I have changed since returning. When I think back about the time before this experience, I often recalled feeling judgemental, fearful and the need to be perfect. Today I realise otherwise. These days I continue to feel at ease even if I am unable to keep all of the balls juggling in the air. I am no longer as pressured over what people think of me if I fail. I no longer need to prove myself to everyone. It was a short experience, but my heart is contented and at peace.