

Mrs Wendy Goh

My Fulbright Experience

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said; 'The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step'. I had travelled to the United States (US) twice for the purpose of professional development in the many years that I have been an MOE teacher, but did not imagine that the opportunity would come my way a third time in the form of a Fulbright programme, where I would be able to spend not one or two weeks, but close to three months (the original programme duration was four and a half months but shortened due to the COVID-19 pandemic) immersed in the US context to learn about education and cultures in and beyond the America. I was thrilled and grateful for this opportunity.



Here I am, with Richard (right) and Faisal (left) at Washington DC for the programme orientation. Together, we were the SG trio for the 2019–2020 Fulbright DAI.

A Taste of Different Cultures in Arizona

The Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program for International Teachers (Fulbright DAI) programme brought together educators from many different countries, not just for the purpose of professional sharing and learning, but also cultural interactions and exchanges. I was amongst a group of 16 educators who were based in Tempe, Arizona and for the time that my team was in the US, we were warmly hosted by Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. The 16 educators hailed from India, Greece, Finland, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Uganda, Senegal, and the Philippines. Over time, we became one close community through our daily interactions from attending classes and attachments at a local high school, and commuting from one place to another. In fact, much of the time in the first month of being in Arizona was spent getting to know one another and our respective cultures.



The 16 educators based at Tempe, Arizona for the Fulbright programme.

Sometimes these exchanges took place in a planned and orchestrated manner in the form of cultural awareness classes, with the key takeaway messages of empathy, acceptance and celebration of cultural differences being reinforced every time we met.

Other times, they took the form of 'stove-top' conversations where over home-cooked meals, my Brazilian, Indian, and Greek housemates talked about the various aspects of their lives back in their home countries: be they things they were proud of, areas they felt their governments could do better (much was mentioned about improving their education system), or how one of them had to carefully negotiate the tensions between cultural expectations and her own beliefs. These were personal recounts no doubt, yet through the interaction, I felt 'transported' to their societies; places that I had thus far only possessed head knowledge of soon became pulsating places with real human stories that I could put a face to.

Then there were more conversations, with American families who were also fondly referred to as our 'friendship families'. With them, I experienced American hospitality, warmth, and friendliness. Invitations to dinners were common, where we would sit and have long chats at the dinner table. Many curious questions about Singapore were often asked, and the topics ranged from education to our system of governance and standard of living, and even food and culture. The challenge for me (self-imposed perhaps) was not to merely give textbook answers, but to respond as authentically as I could, of what being a Singaporean meant to me.



Kathy (left), a retired teacher, at a picnic with friendship families.

I walked away from these conversations with a renewed understanding of people and their cultures, being ever more convinced that my world view shaped by my lived experiences within my country, was but one view. There were different world views out

there and along with them, different values, and priorities. What I used to know as head knowledge, I now understood by heart through these honest, authentic conversations. I learnt that there was no better way to understand another's culture than to spend time conversing, if not living, with people from other cultures.

Observations Gleaned from North High School in Phoenix, Arizona

Being attached to North High School in Arizona was certainly a highlight of the Fulbright program. I had read about American schools in the news and heard about them as references or case studies in educational conferences. But to experience being in an American high school as a visiting teacher was certainly a first for me, and on the whole, an unforgettable experience. Unforgettable for the simple fact that the American school culture and system were different from Singapore's, and I found myself challenging my own assumptions and widening my horizons regarding the management of education, be it at the state, district, school or even class level. One observation that left an impression on me was how classrooms looked and were arranged differently, one from the other, even though they were just adjacent to each other in the same school.

At North High School, students reported for lessons at the teacher's homeroom. Each teacher's homeroom very naturally looked unique, depending on the subject taught as well as how the teacher envisioned the kind of place and space the classroom ought to be for the students. The difference was not just in terms of whether there were more or fewer posters or wall decorations in one classroom as compared to another. Rather, the furniture, as in the way the tables and chairs were arranged; whether there were bookshelves filled with books; whether there were computers visibly placed for students' access; the brightness of lighting in the classroom and of course, back to the walls in the classroom and what they were used for. How classrooms were set up conveyed a message to students, and it included the unspoken rules and expectations each teacher had of the kind of learning and activities the students would be engaged in during class. To some extent, it also revealed the unique personality of the teacher in that classroom.

Differences also extended to the composition of students in each class. A Grade 11 class could have a Grade 10 student taking an Advanced Placement for that subject. It was a mixed-ability setup, and with differing levels of motivation and ability meant that the teacher had to apply the right teaching tools to respond to and meet the differing learners' needs. This was on top of the cultural mix of students, and where North High School was concerned, there were a sizeable number of Latinos in the student population, as well as a small number of Chinese students who were completing high school education before moving on to college education.

Taken together, what I saw at the North High classroom was a degree of non-uniformity and at the same time, a high degree of acceptance of this non-uniformity which stood in contrast to the more predictable and uniform Singapore classroom.

People and What They Taught Me

From my Fulbright educator friends, I learnt the various hindrances and challenges that the young faced in their respective countries, and how the opportunity to attend school each day was not to be taken for granted. For example, when roads were not repaired or when the unreliable school bus did not show up to pick up school children that day, then that day's learning was lost. Or when parents deemed it more convenient and profitable for their young to be working, then the opportunity to go to school would be robbed from that child. When children did turn up for school, it would be the teachers who would make the difference to their learning experience, because the school building, their classrooms and other educational resources were often basic—nothing 'fanciful', to quote the very word used by one of my housemates. These teachers have been, and still are, testaments of resilience and passion. Above all, they reminded me of a simple truth: we could all improve when it comes to pedagogical skills, but the heart for the students must undergird our quest for improvement and excellence.

From the Fulbright instructors who facilitated the weekly Fulbright seminar and technology sessions, I learnt much. Beyond gaining insights into the different educational systems and challenges, learning about new instructional tools including the use of technology in teaching and learning, I witnessed the patience and mindfulness of these instructors in all their interactions with the group of us. They displayed the art of good listening: being respectful, patient, attentive in listening, and ever willing to reshape their thinking and incorporate ideas based on what was mentioned by individuals in the group.

In Arizona, I witnessed intensely blue skies, captivating hues at dusk, amazing cacti-filled landscape, including many a handsome-looking Saguaro cacti, and these beautiful scenes of nature were as much the topics of conversations that brought people together as were weightier matters of pedagogy and school improvement. The thousand-mile journey to the US certainly has driven home this one point for me: there is much to learn and understand about people, their different cultures, the perspectives they bring with them and the different ways of doing things. Yet equally powerful are the things that bring us together and bind us as one: the same heart that beats for our students, in desiring to make that positive difference in their lives.



Big group Canyon Lake outing—sharing life on these scenic trips.