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Better at their craft: Why time spent on post-grad studies by educators was a worthy investment

Beyond academic qualifications, the master's programmes at National Institute of Education help students broaden perspectives and sharpen thinking



Mr Nallu Dhinakharan (left) and Ms Murugam Durga Devi says the master's programme at NIE gave them time to reflect on their roles as humanities educators so that they can prepare their students for an increasingly complex world. PHOTOS: NALLU DHINAKHARAN, MURUGAM DURGA DEVI

PUBLISHED 3 NOV 2022, 4:00 AM SGT

When geography teacher Nallu Dhinakharan sought his principal's approval for him to pursue a master's degree, he was warned that the journey would not be easy. He would have to continue working full-time and spend his personal time on post-graduate studies.

"For two years, my wife and I didn't have any weekends at all. Weekends would be spent on our assignments from NIE," he says.

Together with his wife Murugam Durga Devi, also a secondary school teacher, they enrolled in the Masters of Arts in Humanities Education programme at National Institute of Education (NIE) in 2020. Both were in the same class and graduated in June this year.

The pair, who are in their thirties, had been thinking about going back to school for some time. “I had been asking myself, ‘What next? Where do I go from here?’” says Ms Devi.

Time to pause and reflect

Twice a week, the husband and wife would travel to the NIE campus in Jalan Bahar, from their schools in Tampines.

“The twice-weekly lessons in school were what I looked forward to the most. They offered a space for us to think deeper about big ideas, such as ‘What’s the value of a humanities education?’” says Ms Devi.

The course led them to question their assumptions, by building deeper reflective and critical thinking skills.



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The master’s programme not only deepened their subject knowledge, but also gave them time to reflect on their roles as humanities educators so that they can prepare their students for an increasingly complex world.

“For example, I used to think that we should help our students score well. But over these two years, I realised it wasn’t about helping students answer better, but to help them ask better questions,” says Mr Nallu.

Going back to school again after seven years also helped the two educators become aware of their own assumptions, and even question them.

For example, it led them to stop taking at face value what was held up as the correct standard, such as the Gini coefficient.

“We started seeing layers and shades, rather than the traditional black or white. For example, we learnt the datasets behind the oft-cited Gini coefficient as a measure of Singapore’s inequality. We questioned whether it was even an accurate measure,” Mr Nallu says.

In his own words, the programme taught him to explore the grey.

Getting a different perspective

The intellectual rigour of the master’s programme made them think deeper about current issues like sustainability and gave exposure to diverse viewpoints. The classrooms of NIE became a safe space for difficult conversations with experts from other domains in Singapore, such as the Civil Service College, and other institutions.

The class sizes were kept small to ensure quality interactions between the teaching staff and students. More than half of the cohort is made up of international students, from fields as varied as policymaking, and even game design.

The conversations they had in class – and with people from other fields and nationalities – allowed them to bring fresh perspectives and new ideas back to the classroom.

“Hearing these international students’ experience of education in India, China and Malaysia helped me see perspectives and layers that I could add to my classes. It also made me realise that there was no one-size-fits-all approach to education, and not to think one model was better than the other. This helped me better appreciate what we had too, in Singapore,” Ms Devi says.



Secondary school teacher Murugam Durga Devi says being in class with people from other fields and nationalities at NIE allowed her to bring fresh perspectives and new ideas to her students. PHOTO: MURUGAM DURGA DEVI

They had heated debates in lessons such as the future of education, whether teachers are preparing students well enough for a volatile world, and how the next generation can be pushed to greater heights.

“During a History course titled Contemporary Singapore, there were only three Singaporeans. The other 12 were international students. But it became the most interesting way I saw history in the 35 years of my life.

“For example, it led me to see how Singapore organises towns around a local shopping area. But in other places, they might organise towns around a place of worship, or a river. The history of a place was no longer just about where we came from, but also where we were, geographically,” Mr

Nallu says.

With Singapore's education focusing more on critical thinking, the course has given them better frameworks to better prepare their students for the future. One framework was the theory-practice nexus, bringing academic theory into reality.

For example, when the pandemic happened, Mr Nallu could not bring students out on usual field trips. Wanting to help students better understand the human impact on the environment, he used what he had learned from a course titled Issues and Research in Humanities Education to design a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) lesson based on Google Earth.

These principles of using e-pedagogy to "bridge the sensory gap" led him to construct an innovative lesson plan where teachers took water from eight different sources at Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park. Students then measured the pH levels and dissolved oxygen of the water samples and discussed why the readings were different.

By studying the locations of the water sources through a programmed Street View on Google Maps, students connected the dots. They inferred that water in a specific location was more alkaline as soap water from a nearby petrol station and carwash could have leaked into the water source.



For Mr Nallu Dhinakaran, taking the master's programme at NIE led him to grow his confidence in leading colleagues at work. PHOTO: NALLU DHINAKHARAN

An investment, not a sacrifice

The course also made them more confident in leading colleagues at work. For example, the Spatial Data Analytics theories in e-pedagogies taught them how to use cutting-edge tools to visualise trends such as urbanisation and climate change. As the head of the Geography Professional Learning Team in his school, Mr Nallu used this knowledge to equip his colleagues with the ideas behind e-pedagogies in education and put these into practice in the design of GIS-based lessons.

For Ms Devi, two years' worth of weekends she burnt studying was all worth it.

“After working for some time, there are more important things than financial gain. It wasn't a sacrifice. It was an investment to become better educators, to better shape the future of our future generations.”

She adds: “It was different from my days as an undergraduate student, because this was the first time you really had the chance to work with and learn from working adults from other countries. It was the best two years I had as it gave me the time and space for being a reflective practitioner,” says Ms Devi.

Whenever colleagues ask Mr Nallu whether they should take a master's, he would tease them, “It's not going to lead to an immediate pay rise.” Then he would quickly add, “But it will deepen your knowledge and raise your own bar for the craft of teaching.”

The application for admission to NIE's graduate programmes for the August 2023 intake is open till January 13, 2023. For more information, visit the NIE website [here](#).

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