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Fulbright Award goes to Dominican's Suresh Appavoo

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Appavoo notes that this is an optimal time for this work as the Republic is engaged in curriculum reform efforts, and is in the throes of implementing a new primary and secondary school curriculum. The Maldives National University recently opened and is offering diplomas and degrees in teacher education and licensure.

“I believe that an opportunity to experience a country that is on the cusp of establishing a world-class education is one that will perhaps come once in a lifetime and a chance to contribute in a small way to it will be beyond comparison,” Appavoo said.

Beginning fall 2012, Appavoo plans to spend 10 months working in collaboration with the Republic’s Center for Continuing Education (CCE), the Maldives National University, and the Maldives College of Higher Education teaching and offering professional development seminars in developing, designing, implementing, and assessing online courses for educators, specifically in teacher preparation and educational leadership programs.

Universal primary education is mandated as part of the Republic’s Strategic Plan 2009-2013. As a result, the demand for teachers has increased exponentially. While the government is working to develop a new cadre of teachers – often sending prospective teachers overseas to get educated – demand for teachers has outpaced supply.

“One of the primary challenges facing the archipelago is to develop a national cadre of educators, primarily a critical mass of effective teachers who can serve as the vanguard for both intellectual and economic development,” Appavoo said.

One key challenge, however, rests with the fact that licensed teachers are required to complete 15 hours of professional development, a task made challenging due to the widespread dispersal of primary schools located in the 198 inhabited islands.

Appavoo, who has more than 15 years experience designing courses in education for online learning in both exclusively virtual and hybrid formats, is uniquely suited to solve challenges posed by physical distances and a dispersed population of both teachers and students. While the Republic’s CCE has created a Teachers Virtual E-Learning Environment and created Teacher Resource Center hubs, the center is overwhelmed by demand, Appavoo said.

“I believe that the current technology infrastructure in the Maldives and the wide availability of the Internet presents a unique context to develop and apply online and hybrid models of learning that can bridge not only the geographic distances between the islands, but also substantially decrease systemic inequities in education for all students.”

Appavoo will draw on his own experiences in teacher preparation and K-12 instruction to help train prospective teachers, enable new ways of using technology for instruction, and enhance the teaching-learning process. The Republic’s curriculum reform efforts aim to preserve the national culture while at the same time addressing issues of educational inequity among its citizenry – areas that align closely with Appavoo’s own background and his work at Dominican.

Appavoo, who came to the United States from Southern India to enroll in undergraduate studies in 1984, has headed up Dominican's Office of Diversity Initiatives since 2001. In recent years he has worked in partnership with Marin County-based nonprofit Education, Excellence, and Equity (E3) on an annual Engaging Pedagogy Summer Institute designed to train K-12 teachers in culturally competent teaching and learning with the overarching goal of increasing engagement and learning for all students.

One model Appavoo helped to develop in partnership with Dr. JuanCarlos Arauz, E3's executive director and an adjunct professor in [Dominican's School of Education and Counseling Psychology](#), is to use the cultural competencies and skills that many children of color and members of disenfranchised communities bring to the table as the core basis for engaging learning.

Many students involved with the E3 program already have cross cultural experiences, Appavoo explained.

“Our students come from immigrant communities and communities of color. So, simply going to school is a cross cultural experience. They have already learned to navigate social structures and survive. This shows they understand and observe cultural patterns and react accordingly, and that they are able to show a high level of resilience in surviving in what might be unfriendly environments.”

“This is important because as educators we can show students that they already have important skills – and we show how these skills can be used in the work environment, as an example, when training employees to work in teams effectively.”

Of his own teaching philosophy, Appavoo says he remains inspired by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose work focused on the belief that education is not something you do to people, or for people, but rather something you do with people.

“My approach to teaching reflects a dialogic process wherein the students are engaged in a process of collective joint inquiry with me. Specifically, my classes reflect multiple modalities of engagement, with a mix of simulations, discussions, critical inquiry, and reflective practice that speaks to the thinking-feeling-acting paradigm in very innovative ways.”

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