

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

A Report From a Short Visit to The Holistic Education School

Yong Shian Phoon
Independent Scholar

The Holistic Education School in Taiwan is the only democratic secondary school in the country. I visited the school on the 16th and 17th of December, 2014. The school's history dates back to 1994, when millions of members of the public demanded educational reform. This led to the school being established in the subsequent year. The school has chosen a Summerhillian approach, including a regular school meeting and compulsory boarding. The school grounds are located in a peaceful mountain area 500 metres above sea-level, surrounded by ever-green trees and a few private houses. It is spacious for a school community of less than a hundred people and it felt quiet when I was there. The following report is my observation of the school with a focus on what I felt was distinct about this democratic school in terms of specific features of it that add to our knowledge of how the many varieties of democratic schools we have today function.

Shortly after my arrival, I attended a committee meeting (not the whole school meeting which is a separate matter) which was student-led and guided by teachers. The committee members are nine students elected at the start of the semester and they hold a meeting three times within a 10 day

cycle. Other students are welcome to observe the meeting and earn credits from regular attendance. At the time of my visit the meeting discussed a breach of school rules, proposals for changes in judiciary structure and the breakfasting location. As for the breach of school rules, the cases discussed included thefts and unauthorised school leaving. In the meeting, the committee members made reference to, whenever in doubt, the principles of the school effectively and in a mature manner.

A whole school meeting was held that evening after dinner and after the committee had convened. The meeting was chaired by two of the committee members and it started with the principal's short speech and short announcements from the staff members. The principal expressed his excitement about the school-wide debates which were about to be held. The announcements from the staff members included warnings of cold weather and reminders about the procedures of taking leave from the school site. Then the verdicts for the breach of school rules and proposals brought out in the committee meeting earlier on were announced and votes were cast over the proposals after a short question-and-answer session. This was followed by

school-wide debates which were titled “why we have to be vegetarians” and “what a good school is.” In terms of the curriculum, there are compulsory courses and each student has to complete enough courses before they can be awarded with a high school certificate. Interestingly, mountaineering is one of the compulsory courses while students are free to choose other electives such as carpentry and glass-making. In addition, there is an initiative designed to fund student-tailored projects, named *M Plan*. The funding amount is decided by selected students and staff members who hold *M Plan* meetings after school meetings. In the *M Plan* meeting I observed, the project leader showed her persuasiveness, organisational ability and assertiveness when speaking to staff members in order to secure funding for her 40-day mountaineering trip.

For an outsider who attended mainstream education system, observing the interactions between students and teachers in the Holistic Education School challenged my expectation that teaching and learning should occur in a disciplined environment. In the classrooms, I had to accommodate myself towards the casual relationship between students and teachers, where both parties could be themselves. Discipline was not emphasized and teaching content was conveyed via dialogues. This is made possible in small classrooms with less than

ten students and hence teachers could respond to students’ questions and curiosity in a relaxed environment. The interactions between students and teachers outside the classrooms are no different from those inside the classrooms. A student was observed sitting in the vice principal’s room and engaged in a casual conversation with three adults. The principal was seen sweeping and also playing wooden sword fighting with a young student.

From the short visit, it seems to me that the Holistic Education School is still in the process of working towards being an “ideal society.” Indeed it is not easy to share a living environment with people from diverse background who all have different expectations of how people should behave and what their need are and how they should be met. Nevertheless I am of the firm belief that the school is striving to adapt itself to peoples’ needs as much as it can. Luckily for the students and staff members, they are able to propose any change with careful evaluation and to negotiate with their fellows with rationality. This visit confirms what I believe about democratic education: that it gives people the freedom and power to change their environment. The school website is here: <http://holistic-society.com/front/bin/ptdetail.phtml?Part=Eweb2011002>

Author Details

Yong Shian Phoon has recently completed postgraduate study with the University of Glasgow. She has a deep interest in democratic schools and education. Contact address: No 2269 Jalan E5/16, Taman Ehsan, Kepong 52100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. E-mail: phoon_yong_shian@hotmail.com



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