# A Response to Suzy Horton's Paper 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)'

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In response to Suzy Horton's paper, I would like to do a short introduction to a non-profit educational organisation in Taiwan—the Humanistic Education Foundation (HEF), which also pays attention to children's social and emotional aspects of learning.

The HEF was formed in Taiwan by a group of professors and middle-class parents in 1989. Its formation was a reaction to the highly competitive educational environment in the country. Its main mission is to promote humanistic education, and it further aims to create a happier and healthier learning environment for the students. Since 2004, a new primary and junior high school curriculum has been implemented in Taiwan by the government, which endorses a more progressive (child-centred) education. The HEF plays an important role in influencing the formation and implementation of this new curriculum. For the HEF, humanistic education refers to:

> an educational philosophy that believes humans are, by nature, self-developing creatures. An educator's primary responsibility is to create an environment in which students can do their own growing. Humanistic educators have a broad understanding of the knowledge that children acquire as they grow, and highly value a student's emotional and social development as well as their intellectual development. The goal of humanistic education is to contribute to the development of energetic, positive, self-respecting, caring human beings who can meet all challenges (HEF, 2009).

The HEF's educational philosophy is primarily derived from the ideas of the twentieth century so-called humanistic psychologists, especially Carl Rogers. In many aspects, the HEF has contributed to the well-being of Taiwanese students. However, there are inconsistencies in the HEF's educational philosophy. One example can be given here on the concept of freedom.

The concept of freedom is much emphasised in Rogers' writing. The HEF constantly refers to it in its publications. There is, however, a difference in their views as to what 'freedom' consists in. A question posed by Paul Standish (2003) helps us to see this difference clearly. He asks 'whether freedom must be given now to the child, or whether freedom is rather a state to be worked towards and progressively achieved'. Progressive educators, such as Rogers and A. S. Neill of Summerhill School, are more concerned with the former kind of freedom. Liberal education, which has dominated the UK's educational scene since the 1970s, pays more attention to the latter kind of freedom.

The HEF's educational philosophy is intimately related to progressive education. On the subject of freedom, the similarity between the HEF's ideas and those of progressive educators can be seen in its efforts to stand against the external constraints that the Taiwan government, teachers and parents put on children, for example, depriving children of their free time by giving constant tests in schools and after-school cramming sessions. Moreover, the HEF is firmly against the fear that adults inflict on children, such as by the use of corporal punishment. However, on the same subject, the HEF also endorses the liberal educators' views which stressed that freedom is gained through acquiring academic knowledge. Seen from an extremely progressive educator's perspective, persuading children to attend class is also an external imposition on children of adults' values. Of course, in normal circumstances, the necessity for any child to be initiated by adults into any cultural or social environment is acknowledged. It may be improper to see this as external 'imposition'. The point made here, therefore, is best justified in a traditional learning environment, such as that in Taiwan during the past few decades, where, to a great extent, teaching is narrowly viewed as transmitting the already existing body of knowledge to students, and teachers are expected to instil political dogma in students. In this situation, children would be better given more freedom.

Liberal education has been criticised for putting too much emphasis on the development of pupils' intellectual side. There is a danger in the HEF's adopting the liberal education idea of learning, as this may bring Taiwan's education environment back to a narrow focus on the pursuing of academic knowledge. It is a true and important idea that pursuing knowledge can free people's minds from error. However, it is a concern that the ideal of liberal education is too hard to achieve and too easily distorted. For example, it may be the case that before children could enjoy the freedom that academic knowledge gave them, they were deprived of the freedom that they should enjoy immediately, such as some free time after school, and were turned into unhappy children. This is a worry that it is very difficult to compensate for the damage caused by adults' depriving children of freedom by the freedom that they gain from pursuing academic knowledge.

## REFERENCES

Humanistic Education Foundation (2009) *English Introduction* Available at: http://hef.yam.org.tw/index_english.htm [Accessed 1 September 2009].

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