

My Free School Days

Akira Potter

I have never been to a so-called normal school in my life. I started school at Kinokuni Children's Village, in Japan, when I was 6 and then spent six years there. Then I went to the famous Summerhill School for one and a half years. And now I go to Mie Shure free school. I chose Mie Shure because you can go there and study freely but at the same time you can get a high-school leaving certificate. The good thing about Mie Shure is that it's like Summerhill and children decide things in the meetings by themselves. Also, you have many activities that you can do outside the school as well.



Bread-making at Kinokuni: Akira is in the centre

I spent six years at Kinokuni from the age of six to twelve and I stayed in a dormitory there as a weekly boarder. I went there every Monday and came home on Fridays for the weekend. This was my first experience in a free school so I enjoyed it a lot and I had a very good time there. I enjoyed both the lessons and the free time, but I enjoyed the free time with my friends most. Lessons were mostly based around the idea of "Project". "Project" is a kind of work that you do that is not like paperwork or deskwork. It's more like practical activities. For instance we made various kinds of bread in our cooking project. We learned a bit about the history of bread first. And we gave the bread we made to various people around the school after we made it. I also did a farm project in which we organised a kind of farming activity and grew vegetables near the school. Another project that some people did was building a small café in the grounds of Kinokuni. After I left the school there was also a project in which you looked after sheep.

As well as project we had to go four or five times a week to a lesson called Basic Learning. These lessons included reading and writing.



Akira working on the building of the café

Another thing about Kinokuni was that you could decide things in the school meetings, so everyone had their own rights. I thought that was usually good. But at other times I didn't like it that much because the adults had a bit more power than the children so you couldn't really decide everything that you wanted to. Once I was playing football outside and I wanted to continue playing football all day. However, one of the adult staff immediately said "no". She explained to me that it wasn't good to do that, because I had to go to lessons. So I had to go to the lesson instead. I didn't mind going to the lesson really, but sometimes you just want to do the same thing all day, and we weren't allowed to do that at Kinokuni. Still, I enjoyed myself there.

After that I went to Summerhill School in England when I was twelve. I was there for one and a half years. The journey from my home to Summerhill took all day, and I had to fly first to Korea to change planes, so it was very long. I

understood when I went there that Kinokuni was based on Summerhill, but at Summerhill itself there was more freedom than at Kinokuni and you could decide nearly everything yourself. At Summerhill if you harass someone or give them trouble it's brought up at the meeting and discussed with that person and everyone else and usually you are fined. But at Kinokuni, even if you do quite bad things you don't get punished or fined. Usually you just have to apologise and that's all. Also, when I was there, sometimes a bad thing happened but it was not allowed at the meeting to name the child who was causing trouble when discussing the matter. This is very different from Summerhill. (That's when I was at Kinokuni. It may have changed now.)



Summerhill: Akira with Zoe Readhead

And at Summerhill you didn't have to go to lessons if you didn't want to. So that was the big difference between Kinokuni and Summerhill, I think. Still, I couldn't settle at Summerhill very well. One reason was because I wasn't used to staying a long time abroad and also because I had to have such a long journey from Japan to England and back three times a year. But it was a good thing that I went to Summerhill, because I experienced living in a foreign

country for some time. Also, I met lots of other people from various places around the world.

Now I go to Mie Shure in Japan. I go there every day by train and stay there all day until 5 o'clock in the afternoon. I think that Mie Shure is more like Summerhill than Kinokuni because you have more freedom and you can decide for yourself what you want to do. The adults never force you to do anything but if you ask them for help they are very co-operative and so I think it's very good at Mie Shure.



Akira, left, lunching at Mie Shure

On a typical day at Mie Shure I wake up first at home in Nabari and then get a train from my home to Tsu City. This takes about an hour. By the time I get to

Shure it will be about half past ten. There is a lesson once a week on Modern Sociology which goes on until lunchtime and I always go to that. On Wednesdays there is a meeting which takes place after lunch. The basic idea of the meeting is similar to Summerhill, because everyone has equal rights. We decide what we want to do or if we want to get things for the school and so on. After the meeting, and on other days, there is usually a lesson in Maths or English, or sometimes some other kind of lesson, depending on the day. If you don't want to go to the lessons then you don't have to. When I'm not in a lesson I usually just chat with my friends or play some different kinds of games with them. When it gets to half past five, Shure finishes and we all go home.



Akira having an easy time studying English

I think that Shure is similar to both Summerhill and Kinokuni in a lot of ways because everyone has freedom and you can choose yourself what you want to do. But compared to the other two it's not really like a family, because everyone goes home every day, whereas at Summerhill and Kinokuni they live in dormitories at the school. That means there is more sense of community, but there is nothing good about living in a dormitory, in my opinion. You don't have much privacy and you're away from home. You don't have total freedom either because you have to go to bed at a certain time and turn the lights off.

All the three schools I have been to are equally good places to be and I think they are probably much better than normal schools. I hope that there will be more free schools in Japan in the future, because sadly there aren't many free schools now. Also, Mie Shure is very special for me because it's in Mie Prefecture where I live.