



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Success Stories

Japan: “It changed the way we see the world”

by Hiroki Yanagisawa



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Tourists walking around the historic tourist site of Shizutani School in Japan, a registered national treasure, experience something extraordinary. Several high-school students offer to be their guide.

"We students work with the local council and provide a voluntary tour of Shizutani School site", says Fumika Morioka, a 12th-grader. Morioka, a member of Wake Shizutani High School's student council, is in charge of coordinating student volunteers.

Shizutani School, located in a suburb of Okayama, is the first school in Japan that opened to the general public in 1670. In those days, access to education was limited to a small privileged class. But Mitsumasa Ikeda, the domain lord of Bizen, created an academic institution providing everyone with the opportunity to study. He built Shizutani school based on the principles and teaching of Confucius. To this day, the school keeps up this educational tradition and teaches Confucianism within the classroom.

In 2006, Wake Shizutani High School decided to make use of its heritage as an extracurricular activity for students. "Because of its traditional architecture and atmosphere, the original site of Shizutani School, located 10km away from our school, is a popular tourist site. Considering our history and the fact that all the students study the history of our school in depth, the school came up with the idea to offer Shizutani School student tour guides for tourists," says Ryusuke Sadakane, a teacher in charge of the student council. "Our school joined the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) in 2011, but the foundation of Education for Sustainable Development, which is to value heritage, was already there."

At first, becoming an 'after-school tour guide' was a challenge for many students. "I used to be extremely shy and I was not good at speaking to total strangers," confesses Izumi Mannami, an 11th-grader. "When tourists came to the site I struggled with the question, 'Would you like a free guided tour?' But at one point, I overcame my shyness, approached them actively and offered tours. Though I think my first tour must have been pretty sketchy, the tourists said 'I can't believe it was your first time offering a tour. Thank you.' Being thanked was encouraging and simply made me

happy. I eventually overcame my shyness and became more confident. The tour guide experience allows me to meet people from extremely diverse backgrounds. This has opened a whole new world – giving me opportunities to think about my future career.”

Another volunteer, 12th-grader Misaki Fukuen, remarks: “I am very proud that my school and my town are the home of this heritage. Without the tours, I doubt I would have had a chance to realize the importance of the school in the world.”

The school offers other volunteer activities. As part of Japan’s Eco Cap Activity, students have installed collection boxes to collect and recycle plastic bottle caps for cash to fund vaccines for children in developing countries.

Mr. Sadakane sees this activity as a tool to connect Wake Shizutani High School and other local educational institutions and communities. “The more caps we have, the more we can contribute and commit to the world. In order to expand the activity, we foresee a community-based infrastructure, allowing the collection of caps throughout the community. Interacting with local people will allow participants to develop new perspectives and capacities.”

For Wake Shizutani High School, becoming part of UNESCO ASPnet meant getting in touch with the world. In 2012 Ramel Cherry Ann, an 11th-grader, was selected to take part in the Second ESD International Exchange Programme, sponsored and organized by the Tokyo-Mitsubishi Bank and the National Federation of UNESCO Associations in Japan. A group of 10 ASPnet high-school students from all over Japan visited another ASPnet School in Heidelberg, Germany and UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in March 2012. During the trip, Cherry Ann gave a presentation on her and Wake Shizutani High School’s volunteer activities. “I was extremely nervous making the presentation, but I tried my best,” she admits. The response from UNESCO staff was overwhelming. “It was also interesting to learn about other schools’ ESD activities. The visit to the international Gesamtschule Heidelberg was an eye-opener, because this school’s approach to ESD was environmental, which was a new idea to me. Having learned that and returned to Japan, I am more committed to the school’s volunteer activities now.” Apart from her motivating ESD experience in Germany, interaction with UNESCO staff in Paris enhanced her commitment to ESD.

“At UNESCO Headquarters, one of the staff members told me that if I want to pursue my dream, which is to become a nurse, I should put a 100 per cent effort into it. I began to reflect upon what she said. For instance, I was not that active in volunteer activities or in school subjects that I was not good at. After the trip, I am now more committed to everything I do.”

Wake Shizutani High School has won several awards for its student activities, including the Social Volunteering Award from the Soroptimist Japan Foundation and the Volunteer Spirit Award from Prudential Life Insurance. “Winning these awards is certainly motivating, because the value of our activities is being recognized. But for me a dream would come true if each student’s activity could ultimately help to have Shizutani School recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. That is something everyone could be proud of for generations,” Mr. Sadakane says with a smile.

Wake Shizutani High School’s ambition continues, and so does each student’s commitment to a more sustainable society.

Further information:

www.wakesizu.okayama-c.ed.jp (Japanese)

As lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), UNESCO promotes an education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.

Contact:

Section of Education for Sustainable Development

esddcade@unesco.org

www.unesco.org/education/desd

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