

Teachers defend trip to Deng Nan-jung museum

Written by Taipei Times

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Two elementary-school teachers yesterday defended their decision to take students on a field trip to the Deng Nan-jung Liberty Museum (鄧南仲自由博物館) last month after a New Taipei City councilor last week reported them to the city's Department of Education for "engaging in political activity."

Lujian Elementary School teachers Weng Li-shu (翁立樹) and Liu Fang-chun (劉芳春) on June 28 took their two classes to the museum to see a photography exhibition on the 228 Massacre.

While the field trip had been approved by the school and agreed by parents, the two were on Thursday last week informed by the school that New Taipei City Councilor Chen Ming-yi (陳明義) of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) had reported them to the department on behalf of a parent for taking children to what appeared to be a political event.

At a news conference on Friday last week, Chen described the field trip as inappropriate for children aged 10 and 11, because the subject of the museum and exhibition was "political" and Deng Nan-jung (鄧南仲) had "set himself on fire."

Deng is a nationally celebrated democracy activist and the first Taiwanese to openly express support for Taiwanese independence. He died of self-immolation in 1989 when police tried to break into his publishing house after he published a proposed constitution for a "Taiwan Republic."

The field trip controversy suggests that Taiwan has not entirely moved on from the White Terror era, Weng told a news conference in Taipei yesterday.

"For decades, Taiwanese have been taught to worship and serve authorities. While we do not hesitate to sing a national anthem that used to be a political party's anthem, salute political figures who have been deified and walk on streets named after Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), we fear talking about the future of our nation and look down on our native dialects," Weng said.

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To provide a better environment for children, the department should ensure that authoritarianism is completely eliminated from campuses and that transitional justice is realized in education, she said.

“Education should be about showing children the diversity of the world and allowing them to decide on their own what they want to learn more about,” Liu said, adding that children need to be offered a wide range of ideas to have a rich life experience and to develop an open mind.

Politics is anything that belongs to the public sphere and should not be simply understood as related to political parties or elections, Taiwan Association for Human Rights deputy chairman Weng Kuo-yan (翁國彥) said.

“If visiting the museum is political, should visiting Liberty Square, the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall or Chiang’s mausoleum in Cihhu (慈湖) and Chiang Ching-kuo’s (蔣經國) mausoleum in Taoyuan’s Touliao (頭寮) — which used to be common destinations for school field trips — be considered that too?” he asked.

The museum was founded in 1999 with the aim of educating the public about the history of Taiwan’s democratization by telling the story of Deng, museum CEO Huang Chi-hao (黃奇豪) said, adding that “it is an important part of history that schools do not teach.”

It is the nation’s shared responsibility to teach younger generations about history, and children have every right to learn about it, he said.

In Germany, young students are taught about the Holocaust and shown pictures of dead bodies and skeletons, but it is not considered a problem, he added.

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