

# Parents' Perspectives on Homeschooling in Chinese Mainland

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**Abstract.** Homeschooling, as a new form of education, is currently emerging in Chinese Mainland. According to the latest report released by the 21st Century Education Research Institute in China (2013), there are about 18,000 children across the country receiving education at home. However, in one of the largest academic journal searching engines in China - China National Knowledge Infrastructure, there are only less than 30 researches concerning homeschooling in China. In the current study, qualitative research method has been adopted. Three homeschooling parents in Chinese Mainland were interviewed regarding their reasons, concerns, and perspectives of homeschooling. Results revealed from the findings include Chinese test-oriented educational system; concerns of socialization led by One-Child Policy, legality of homeschooling in Chinese Mainland; and challenges for Chinese homeschooling parents. Discussion also includes a unique Chinese perspective on homeschooling, and potentiality of homeschooling in Chinese Mainland.

**Keywords:** homeschooling, parents, Chinese Mainland, perspective.

## 1. Introduction

Homeschooling - that is, parent-led home-based education is an age-old traditional educational practice that a decade ago appeared to be cutting-edge and "alternative" but is now bordering on "mainstream" around the world (Brian, 2011). With the increasing dissatisfaction among parents concerning children's educational setting in general and the school setting in particular, homeschooling become one of the favourite choices among parents (Edward, 2002). Historically, home education was the primary method for parents to educate their children in western world. Nowadays this phenomenon is widely accepted among the western country. There were an estimated 2.04 million home-educated students (1.73 to 2.35 million) in grades K to 12 during the spring of 2010 in the United States (Brian, 2011). Meanwhile, it also shows an increasing trend among some particular Asia countries, such as Malaysia and Taiwan.

However, despite the popularity of homeschooling in those relatively developed countries, homeschooling is a rare topic to be mentioned in China, especially in Chinese Mainland. Few Chinese parents have knowledge of homeschooling yet alone consider this form of education. This is resulted in a lot of cultural and social concerns rooted along the Chinese history and the society. Based on the teaching of Confucian educator, Mencius (372-289 BCE), who is regarded as the greatest Confucian thinker after Confucius, parents should let someone else teach their children, because it can avoid tensions between parents and children in the teaching process (Tung, 2010). In addition, education in Chinese Mainland emphasizes socialization so much that children may be considered aberrant if they do not go to school with their peers, which is in contrast to individualism highly valued in American society. For recently years, there are an increasing number of homeschooling families in some metropolises in Chinese Mainland, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. It's estimated that there are about 18,000 children across the country receiving education at home (21st Century Education Research Institute, 2013).

Taking the advantages of various platforms, such as internet, online chatting, the homeschooling parents try to establish their own circles, such as homeschooling websites, forums, or chatting groups, etc (He, 2012). They gathered together on Internet, sharing homeschooling resources, organizing online discussions among parents. They also held off-line activities for parents and homeschooling children. However, despite all these delighted developments of homeschooling in China on surface, there has not been a single specific regulation

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for homeschooling, or any official organizations or supportive group so far (He, 2012). One of the major concerns that expressed by homeschooling parents is “no supportive body in the community”.

Hence, the development of homeschooling in Chinese Mainland, under such circumstance as described above, faces great challenges. On the one hand, while this practice has not legally acknowledged so far, families and children’s rights have no social protections and supports. Parents and children don’t have the enough access to the reliable resources, curriculums and professional guidance. According to the report by 21st Century Education Research Institute in China (2013), 75.42% of the parents hold the bachelor degree, but not necessarily from educational background. As the result, parents hold the ambiguous educational idea and philosophy towards their children’s education at home, which might mislead the direction towards holistic education. On the other hand, according to the homeschooling report (21st Century Education Research Institute, 2013), there are three issues that are considered as major concerns regarding to the homeschooling children, respectively their socialization, how homeschooling can be connected to the tertiary education afterwards, and no official acknowledgment and evaluation upon the homeschooling achievements.

Therefore, it’s not groundless to predict that parents may face a lot of problems, difficulties and challenges in practicing homeschooling in Chinese Mainland. Thus the current research seeks to investigate the homeschooling parents’ perspectives in Chinese Mainland, through a qualitative pilot study of homeschooling among Chinese families. The main objective of the study is to investigate of perspectives of homeschooling parents in Chinese Mainland. By achieving the main objective, several sub-objectives as following must be stated: 1) to investigate the reason(s) why parents in Chinese Mainland choose homeschooling for their children; 2) to identify the major concern(s) of the homeschooling parents in Chinese Mainland; 3) to investigate the challenges faced by the homeschooling parents in Chinese Mainland.

## **2. Method**

The current study is accomplished through qualitative study based on in-depth interview of parents’ perspectives of homeschooling in Chinese Mainland. Therefore, this study involved descriptive research, to obtain the data concerning with the respective research questions.

The purposeful sampling strategy, specifically snowball sampling strategy has been adopted in this study, thereby three participants are currently homeschooling their children in Chinese Mainland.

Firstly, the researcher approached the first respondent A, who is the founder and administer of one of the most famous and influential forum regarding homeschooling in China nowadays - “Chinahomeschooling” (chinahomeschooling.com). He started homeschool his son 3 years ago, and established the forum at the same year. The researcher sought his permission to participate in the study. Then he was asked to introduce other associates who might also be interested in participating in this research, on the condition the participants must attend at least bachelor degree and have at least 2-year homeschooling experiences. The other two respondents, B and C, respectively from Guangzhou and Beijing, have been recruited through snowball sampling. Both mothers B and C have only one child at home and have homeschooled them for 2 years. Three respondents’ children are all in primary education level.

The data is gathered through semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted through telephone call, due to the geographic distance. Before the interview, the respondents were given the consent letter through email. At the beginning of the interviews, the researcher reconfirm their consents again by restating the key points in the consent letter and giving a brief introduction on the topic, research objectives. Then the interview started. It lasted about half an hour and was conducted over a single session, respectively to each participant. Three interviews were conducted in Chinese and audiotaped. The researcher translated the whole interview sessions into English before data analysis.

## **3. Findings**

In the current research, three respondents are from Guangdong, Guangzhou, and Beijing respectively, in which homeschooling are the more popular compared with other places in Chinese Mainland, (21st Century Education Research Institute, 2013). Two families of respondent B and C only have one child at home, due to the restriction of One-Child Policy in China. Respondents A and C didn’t let their children attend school

from the very beginning, while respondent B said her son used to attend school for one year only, but she was not satisfied with the school academically and socially, then she decided to start homeschooling for her kid herself. Three parents all attend bachelor degree in different fields, but none from educational background. As stated, the three families are from different backgrounds, present unique perspectives, but still share some common understandings upon homeschooling in Chinese Mainland. More importantly, findings from interviews with them, illustrate Chinese beliefs, ideologies, and the current political, cultural and educational climate in China.

### **3.1. Parents' Reasons for Homeschooling**

Regarding the first and primary motivation for homeschooling in Chinese Mainland, parents' response can be related to their dissatisfaction to the current educational system, especially exam-oriented system, as the parent A stated, *"Nowadays, the school teaching is exam-oriented, kids have many homework to do every day and they suffer great pressures since very young age....I want my son to be able to appreciate the nature and the world more than simply learning and memorizing knowledge."* This is in line with parent B and C's ideas, as they said, *"Schools nowadays focus too much on study, but less attention to children's moral and spiritual development."* *"I think those facts knowledge can be learned anytime, the most important responsibility upon our parents is to choose or create a safe and clean environment for them, to teach them how to survive themselves."*

During the interviews, the respondents' answers indicate their negative experiences or perceptions with public schools and wanted to "protect" their children from them. Various reasons can be concluded as their dissatisfactions for schools. The first very reason is the exam-oriented system resulted in long-time study at school and overloaded homework after school, from which students suffering physically and psychologically. In the long term, this is also detrimental for children to develop their love for learning and reading. As stated by parent B, *"Nowadays the joy and excitement for learning knowledge is overshadowed by the fear and pressure for examinations"*. The cramming learning pattern make students not reflected about what they learn, but what will appear in the test paper.

School, by its nature, is designed to benefit the majority students in a consistent, equal and "standard" manner. The pros and cons on "standard education" never ends, but Chinese education system do share many its characteristics, like standardized curriculum and standardized testing, which neglect the individual differences in general. As parent A explaining, *"School try to evaluate all the students with one single cut-line, but every child is different, with different talents."*

Interestingly, religion is also a significant factor that influences parents to homeschooling. According to the report by 21st Century Education Research Institute in China (2013), 5.59% of the parents choose homeschooling because of religious reason. As in the current study, parent A and C are both Christian, they emphasized on the discontinuity upon the religious education between school and home, as *"it will cause the confusion in child's mind. This period is critical for the formation of his worldview."*

### **3.2. Concerns for Homeschooling in China**

Two of the parents (B and C) only have one child at home due to the restriction of One-Child-Policy. The policy itself has significantly affected the structure of Chinese family since its implementation in 1979 as government's attempt to curb the growing population. However it's resulted in the whole generation in which almost every child is the only one in his/her family. They are deprived from having siblings at home from the very beginning. Thus, among this generation, the socialization among children is mainly occurred inside the school. However, for the family who choose the homeschooling, without school mates and siblings, how child learn to socialize with other is one of the major concern for parents, as the parent B expressed her concerns during the interview, *"The child is the only one inside the family. They are spoiled and coddled, which caused them to be self-centred....I try to create the chances since she is not in the school, by sending her to the summer camps or gatherings in the community."*

Early socialization among children is mainly occurred inside the school, but the homeschool children don't have such access. So there are arguments against homeschooling come as it's detrimental to child's early socialization. However, parent A has some different opinions, *"Children's socialization should not be*

*based on the quantity, but the quality. There are a lot of students being reported of having psychological disorders because of loneliness and the sense of unacceptance by their peers in school. And we know abuse and discriminations between classmates happening in school all the time. That also cannot be the good environment for socialization.”*

As the discussion going further, parents shared some ways they tried to create the chance for socializing, by sending child to summer camp, attending community activity, participate in volunteering works, and making friends online domestically and international.

As been stated previously, so far in Chinese Mainland, there is not a single specific regulation for homeschooling, or any official organizations or supportive group so far (He, 2012). So parents expressed their sense of loneliness upon embarking on this journey. Most of their extended families don't understand and support their idea, as the parent C said, *“Most of my family doubted and questioned my choice on homeschooling, no matter how I explained.”* And as most of the parents attend their bachelor degrees from different fields other than education, though they choose homeschooling out of various reasons, they are still freshmen in this new field. Parent B confessed that *“to be honest, I'm not that confident about my method of teaching.”* Meanwhile there is no reliable curriculum or guiding book especially designed for homeschooling in China so far. Hence, they are always in urgent needs for the professional guidance in this practice, as the parent A explained, *“Because it's not legally acknowledged, we still have long way to go. We need supportive group; parents need a platform to share experiences; and more importantly, parents need to receive professional training and excellent curriculum specifically designed for homeschooling.”*

### **3.3. Challenges for Homeschooling in China**

According to the latest homeschooling report (2013), there are about 18,000 children across the country receiving education at home. However, if compared with the 1.4 billion populations in China, this number is still extremely small. In a sense, those 18,000 parents are only the pathfinder for the future of homeschooling in Chinese Mainland. The Chinese traditional school-education rooted firmly in Chinese culture. Up to now, more and more parents get to know this new practice of education, whereas, the one who take the courage to embark on it are still minority. Not all the people have the determination, which demands educationally and financially, to reject the social “educational flow production line”, which is the public school. So when been asked about the main challenge of homeschooling in Chinese Mainland, the parent A's answer is as expected, *“The core challenge for homeschooling among all the challenges we are facing right now in China, is how to publicize this idea, and make more and more people come to know this new form of education and accept it.”*

To be specially, the challenges in the homeschooling practices can be concluded in one key word – balance, in two perspectives. The first balance is the one between homeschooling child and other social responsibility upon parents. As the mother C stated that: *“I'm not only a full-time housewife, but also a full-time teacher.”*

The second balance is the teaching balance among subjects. Parents come from various educational background, either science or social science background. According to the report (2013), parents from social sciences are more inclined to homeschooling. However their ability of teaching professional science subjects is still uncertain. As the parent B shared: *“Sometimes I feel my ability is not equal to my ambition. I was from social science background, so somehow I'm not confident with my teaching in some purely science subjects.”*

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Homeschooling in Chinese Mainland is a unique and new topic worthy to be studied more. The current study attempts to investigate the reasons, concerns and challenges of homeschooling parents in Chinese Mainland. The reasons that parents choose to homeschool can be mainly concluded as their concerns and dissatisfaction towards current educational systems in Chinese Mainland, specifically the exam-oriented system. And religion can also be the other motivation, as it's critical for one's formation of worldview. These are in consistency with the previous findings as the 21st Century Education Research Institute reported that 54.91% of parents don't agree with the school practice and 5.59% chose out of religious consideration. But parents still hold lots of concerns in homeschooling. One-Child Policy leads to the issue of socialization; lack of legal status and supportive body results in insufficient resources and guidance in helping parents to

achieve their homeschooling goal in an effective manner. But above all of these, the major challenges for the development of homeschooling in Chinese Mainland, is its publicity of idea. Most participants believe if more people get to know the essence and advantages of homeschooling, a lot of problems and concerns will be solved automatically in China. This idea got one step forward than the previous finding of simply unacceptance among the public and family members. On the other hand, parents also face the challenges in balancing the home-education and social responsibilities. And the balance between teaching different academic subjects also bring difficulties to parents.

Nonetheless, China is rapidly changing in every possible sense. There are significant changes taking place in China that influence education. For example, at one time, non-public education was unavailable in China from 1958 to 1978. Now private education has developed over the past 20 years in China's "changing social, cultural, and economic context of the reform era, catching national and international attention and raising hopes but also many new questions" (Lin, 1999, p.xiii). The development of private education signifies the government's response to the need for high-quality schools.

Similarly, the emerging of homeschooling, also needs government's adaptation on this issue, although there are many challenges in the front as stated in the study. Moreover, homeschooling requires academic freedom, whereas the government still holds the authority in education, which raises skepticism as to the future of homeschooling in China (Michael, 2008). The bottom line is that the Chinese and government must be radically transformed. Nevertheless, the changing Chinese culture and economy make the possibility of parents having more choice in their child's education in the future a reality and perhaps with significant time, the gradual acceptance of some form of homeschooling.

So this study revealed the current situation of homeschooling in Chinese Mainland. This new form of education is emerging gradually, yet along the path there are still concerns regarding, as well as challenges of the overall development in China. Homeschooling parents now are in urgent need of professional guidance, support group and legal recognition from the society.

Lastly the limitation of this study lies in the small number of sample, and geographical limitation. Different places having different situations and cultural roots, may significantly influence parents' perspectives. Hence a larger scale of study is needed in the future research to provide further in-depth understanding on this issue.

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