

## Autonomy and Education: The Case of Homeschooling

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Looking back at my education, the most significant learning has all taken place outside of a classroom. Here, I especially think of time spent with my father during middle school. My father's special - a welder who barely got out of high school, through a mentor's influence, he began pouring through books in his mid twenties, developing a deep passion for learning. Starting when I was in fifth grade, my father would get me up early so we could read together read some of his favorite books before he went to work. Over several years, we walked with Dante through Hell, laughed at Don Quixote, watched Oedipus' demise and, most importantly, had countless conversations based on Dad's Classics. My father was the Socrates of my life - always questioning, always probing, always challenging - and in the process, he modeled for me the philosophy he shared with Socrates: "An unconsidered life is not worth living." The passionate curiosity he instilled in me has driven my studies since.

I had this special experience because I was educated very differently from most students. In America, most students regardless of their background, and what school they attend, share a common "organized" educational experience which involves them attending classes together with many other students according to a fixed schedule every day, and more generally following a fairly fixed educational path determined by whatever institution they attend. However, in the United States since the 1980s, a distinctively different educational option has emerged as many parents have chosen to personally shoulder their child's education. This way of education, homeschooling, offers much greater flexibility than traditional educational models, and because of this greater flexibility, it is an interesting contrast to those models which merits of discussion. It is also the way in which I personally was educated. Today, my goal is to introduce this way of education both generally and in terms of my personal experience, and then attempt to draw a few lessons you as Chinese teachers can draw from the homeschool experiment.

### **Background Information**

The homeschooling movement has its roots in desires of some parents for their children to have more freedom in education beginning in the 1970s. Although initially beginning with isolated families, today, based on government studies, there are at least 1.5 million homeschooled students in the United States,<sup>1</sup> in total composing 2.9% of all school-age children. Although there are also a substantial number of homeschooled students in Britain<sup>2</sup> and Canada, the movement remains largely confined to its American roots. Today's parents choose to

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1 <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009030.pdf>

homeschool for a broad range of reasons ranging from a concern about the school environment (88%) to a desire to provide religious instruction (83%), to dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools (73%), to children having special needs (21%) or some physical or mental health problem (11%). Uniting most parents' decision is a desire to specially tailor their child's education in some way unavailable (or unaffordable) otherwise.

In the United States, specifically, there are minimal legal restrictions on parents choosing this path of education, with most states requiring simply notification to the local school officials that the child is being educated at home or at the very most requiring that children educated in this manner take certain subject and pass certain standardized tests to ensure their academic progress. This legal freedom allows a wide space for parents to work to tailor education to the needs of their child.

Homeschoolers use take advantage not only to educate their children themselves but also to form loose associations to coordinate different activities to further their children's education. For example, some families will organize "co-ops" in which a number of different families mutually share the burden of teaching. This can take the form either of division of labor, where, for example, a mother skilled at math teaches this subject to all the children, while another mother teaches English etc. It can also involve family pooling resources to hire someone to hold an actual class for all there children – this was how my physical education class was organized. Higher up, there are area, state and national organizations that coordinate various activities, events and competitions – my own parents, for example, served on the homeschool board for our county which meant overseeing curriculum fairs, the publication of a newsletter, and the creation of a lending library among other things.

Comprehensive data on the educational performance of homeschooled students in the United States is hard to collect because of the decentralized nature of homeschooling and the fact that homeschooling families are often not required to register with the government. As a result, it is extremely difficult to identify a representative sample of homeschoolers on whom to conduct a study. However, such studies as have been performed indicate homeschoolers generally do better than the broader student population. In terms of simple data, of particular importance is homeschool performance on national college entrance exams (ACT & SAT). Although these exams only reflect the performance of students likely to attend college (and thus are self-selective), within this pool of students, homeschoolers perform strongly. For example, during 2004-2005 school years administration of the ACT (the most recent year for which data is available), homeschoolers average composite score was 22.5 (out of 36), over 1.5 points above the average score of 20.9. This places homeschooled at around the 66<sup>th</sup> percentile of the test,

meaning that the average homeschooled test-taker scored better than two thirds of non-homeschooled test takers.<sup>3</sup>

However, even as homeschooling has an advantage in cultivating students intellectually, the purpose of education is more than simple intellectual cultivation – more broadly, education is about producing good citizens who contribute to society. As such, an important question is how homeschooling contributes to this part of education, to student’s “socialization.” Concerning this issue, homeschooling, at its best, enables healthier socialization, by giving students flexibility to experience a broader range of healthy social contact. Public schools, by segregating students into classes based on their age, create an artificial social environment in which students are always interacting with other students from the same grade level. By not confining students to the schedule and institutions of the school system, homeschooling gives them freedom to pursue social relationships in other ways. Part of this takes place within the homeschool community. Homeschoolers often form deep connections with each other, typically through a range of extracurricular activities which they (or parents) organize. Thus in my area there were always myriads of homeschool activities taking place ranging from skating and dance parties to glee club to sports teams. Beyond the homeschooling community, homeschoolers are also often very active in community organizations such Boy Scouts or 4-H. Most importantly, homeschoolers are often very actively involved in community activities ranging, in the case of my friends, from political campaigns to music festivals to various volunteering opportunities. As a result, homeschool students are exposed to wide variety of different people of all ages in a wide variety of different contexts. Based on the data available, homeschooled student as adults are very active in their local communities, with one survey finding for example that they were almost twice as likely to do community service as the general population.<sup>4</sup>

So what is it like to be educated as a homeschooled student? Looking back on my experience, I would say that the central feature of my education was that it was much more “enabling” than a typical education available to a student attending a private or public school. Education involves many choices encompassing not just what content to teach, but also how to create a learning environment that fully brings out student potential. Students need support, guidance, and discipline and the best way to provide those things varies from student. Even as students need teachers’ help and correction, they also need to a certain amount of freedom to develop their unique interests and abilities, and again, the amount of freedom that is most effective varies depending on the student. In a public school setting, however, because teachers

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3 <http://www.act.org/news/data/05/data.html>

4 <http://www.hslida.org/research/ray2003/HomeschoolingGrowsUp.pdf>

have many students and limited time, these individual student needs cannot all be fully accommodated. However, because I was one of only three children, my parents were able to really customize my education to fit my particular needs as a student in both of the ways mentioned above: first, individualized attention and support, and second, growing “ownership” or control over my education.

Early on in my education, my parents were very dominant, providing a tremendous amount of guidance and help in my schooling. In elementary school, my day followed a fairly set routine, involving getting up early to work on completing homework assigned every day by my mother, who would then, after breakfast, spend several hours checking it and going over it and the day’s lessons with me. At the beginning, this also involved a lot of individual tutoring in the basics of mathematics and reading, as my mother would spend a substantial amount of time every day drilling me on phonics as well as rules of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

This kind of individualized attention and support continued throughout my education. My parents invested a tremendous amount of *time* into helping me learn. My mother, for example, was always willing to act as my individual tutor in any way she could, even in high school spending several hours with me every day to critique speeches I would practice for her.

As I grew older, my parents’ role gradually changed, as they gradually gave me more and more “ownership” over my education, giving me greater and greater freedom over how and what I studied. For example, after elementary school I was no longer required to drill facts and information with my mother, instead moving toward memorizing things on my own. Gradually, I also became responsible for checking my own homework (using keys provided by the curriculum we used), correcting my own mistakes and learning on my own. By high school, my course requirement consisted simply of taking the series of tests provided by our curriculum which my mother graded to assign me my course grades, a series of tests which, by end of high school I was free to select the speed and frequency at which I took. As a result, I chose eventually to condense my schooling – completing all of my course requirements over the summer and fall of each year in order to be able to focus on my extracurricular activities during the spring.

This control that I was granted was extremely important to my education because it allowed me to create time for the extracurricular activities I participated in beginning in middle school which became central to driving forward my studies. Beginning in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I competed intensively in the first of these - the National Geography Bee, a competition focused on testing students’ ability to memorize and recall facts about and features of international geographic features and foreign cultures. To prepare for this competition, I spent hours every day memorizing maps from atlases and facts from books, even taping lists of information so that I could memorize while doing chores, in the end memorizing several thousand facts and place names. Although I no longer remember much of what I memorized then, this experience deeply

impacted my learning by causing me to learn how to focus and study over long periods of time and more importantly, by developing in me a long-running passion for international affairs.

After the geography bee, I moved on to intensively compete in an entirely different activity – extemporaneous speaking. This event is a public speaking activity that focuses on analyzing current events. Prior to competition, participants are expected to prepare wide ranging files of news and scholarly articles on current events, and at the start of each round of competition are given a question about current events and are allotted 30 minutes to prepare a memorized 7 minute speech by consulting their files. Participating in this competition provided wonderful motivation for me to read widely and develop my communicative skills. I prepared for this in many ways – partly by practicing speaking, as mentioned above, but more importantly, by furiously reading news articles, in total printing, reading, marking and filing well over a hundred pages of newspaper and magazine articles every day from dozens of domestic and international sources coming from a wide variety of perspectives. It was through this experience that I developed a particular interest in China that I pursued when I came to college.

Both of these experiences were deeply meaningful to me, fundamentally because participating in them caused me to taste the rewards of disciplined study. By supporting me in participating in academic competitions and moreover giving me flexibility in my academic schedule so that I could focus on those competitions during the spring, my parents greatly increased my motivation to study. On the one hand, for my regular studies, I was strongly motivated to throw myself into getting through and learning the material required because I wanted to ensure that all of these studies would be completed before the beginning of the competitive season. In addition, during competitive season, because the activities directly related to my interests, I would throw myself entirely into preparing. This helped me not only by enabling me to refine my academic interests, but also by causing me to hone memorization and communication skills whose benefits poured out into all of my studies.

From a broader perspective, my experience illustrates the value of tailoring education to meet the needs of individual students. I certainly cannot pretend my particular form of education would be ideal if applied to every student – homeschooling is simply not practical for most families, and in addition, my parents' teaching methods and the activities I participated in would not suit every student. However, I am firmly convinced that my pre-college education was ideal for *me* personally. My parents understood me thoroughly as a student, and as a result, were able to customize my education to my particular needs and interests, enabling me to both learn what I needed to learn and to come to enjoy the process of learning. This idea of tailoring student education to fit individual student needs has application far beyond the sphere of homeschool education because all forms of education have the challenge of providing individual students with the kinds of support they need and also with an appropriate balance of freedom and guidance.

Students need to be provided with individual support because different students have different skills and different ways of learning material. Some students learn best kinesthetically, while others are visual learners, and in turn some students thrive at communication while other thrive at analytic tasks. In the classroom setting, the challenge becomes to adopt a teaching method that helps the most students possible, working to make sure all students are included in the learning process. However, regardless of the classroom method adopted, in terms of enabling students to acquire material, individualized tutoring will almost always be more effective than classroom instruction, because in a one-on-one setting, a teacher can closely calibrate to an individual student the way material is presented, the way discussion is conducted, and the type and difficulty of assignments.

Individual students also have a unique balance between the freedom and guidance they require, both of which are essential. Students need guidance, especially at the beginning, to ensure they channel their energies into activities and subjects that will be really useful in furthering their education. However, if an instructor is too controlling, this guidance can be counterproductive serving to reduce student motivation to study because they do not identify with what they are studying. As a result, particular as students acquire study skills and mature, some freedom needs to be granted to them in pursuing their studies. The ideal level of freedom, however, varies between individual students because different students have different levels of maturity.

What ideas then can Chinese educators take from the homeschooling experience in America? The main idea that I would suggest is the idea of “customized,” student-centered education. Homeschooling embodies some of the benefit that can be gained from seeking to ensure each individual students’ education matches as much as possible their unique interests and needs. This ideal in practice entails that while society may set certain general goals for education, a great deal of flexibility should be left to those actually working with the individual children as to how to attain them. This principle has many applications. Most broadly for example, in order to tailor the education provided to the needs of individual students, schools can work to have small class sizes with a high teacher to student ratio. The fewer students an instructor is responsible for, the more it possible for him or her to provide individual support to every student whether in answering questioning or in tailoring the teaching methods used. However, teachers are not the only people crucial to a child’s education: my experience also suggests the important role that parents play. Parents are the first people from whom their children learn, and even when students attend a formal school, their home environment remains an important influence. Beyond their influence, parents generally understand their children better than anyone else and have the interests of their child at heart more than anyone else. As such, including parental input and advice can potentially help greatly improve children’s

education, as well as allowing parents themselves taking on responsibilities to teach their children.

Turning to homeschooling itself, there are a number of ways in which society can grant greater autonomy to parents in educating their children while still guaranteeing the quality of those children's education. Some examples of regulations that can be imposed include standardized curriculum, testing and record-keeping requirements which put the burden on the parent to demonstrate each year that their child has made adequate progress in school. In this respect, it is also important to recognize that homeschooling/public schooling need not be a total dichotomy – in the United States, “partially” homeschooled students are very common whether they are homeschooled during certain stages of their education and not others, or are homeschooled for certain subjects while attending group classes for others. As such homeschooling is best viewed as a useful supplement rather than a direct challenge to public school education, something particularly for students with special academic needs, and worthy of being encouraged and fostered by society.