

# *A Preliminary Inquiry of Homeschooling Practice Route with Comparative Perspective Between China and America*

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**Abstract:** As a new form of education, homeschooling can effectively promote the individual development of children and satisfy different groups by providing education with equal opportunities. Although it has a series of problems, such as legalization in China, the growing population still attracts extensive attention of the society. At present, most of the domestic researches in this field remain in the causes of formation, historical background and problem analysis, while having very little discussion on practical issues. The paper uses the literature research method and the comparative method to describe and analyze the history, laws and regulations, learning conditions, reasons for choosing homeschooling, and problems of homeschooling in China and America. Based on China's national conditions, the paper refers to the advantages and disadvantages of American homeschooling, and proposes a specific implementation plan from the perspective of national legislation. By clarifying the status of homeschooling in the law and constructing a sound managing and guiding system, homeschooling in China can become more regularized and developed.

**Keywords:** homeschooling, comparative perspective, legal regulation, individualized development

## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, with the progress and development of society, people pay more and more attention to education. Parents generally want their children to receive quality education. However, under the Chinese traditional school model, the over-emphasis of knowledge, outdated teaching methods, and test-based evaluation system have made schooling more and more difficult to satisfy individual needs. In the meantime, a new type of education, homeschooling, is quietly rising and tending to increase over time. Compared with school education, homeschooling has its progressive side, while also facing many challenges and controversies. On the basis of defining the concept of homeschooling, the paper analyzes the origin and current situation of homeschooling between China and America, and discusses how to construct relevant legal systems to promote its further development in China.

The main research methods of this paper are literature research method and comparative method. The literatures are collected by searching Chinese and English academic papers on Google Scholar, WanFang Data and CNKI, while consulting relevant works, research reports, statistics and legal documents on the Internet. Under the perspective of comparative study, the paper chooses China and America as the objects. As a strong nation in education, America has been at the forefront of

homeschooling from theoretical study to practice, and its rich achievements have great referential value for China's homeschooling development. Reviewing the current research status, America concentrates on the reasons and historical background of local home school formation, policy analysis, as well as academic performance, socialization and family characteristics in practice; the research in China, however, is mostly focused on describing phenomena and analyzing problems. The discussion of future development is limited to reflection and prospection, with very few of them using comparative perspective to propose systematic solutions. By summarizing the differences of homeschooling situation between China and America, the paper hopes to draw on the experience of American education, giving measures and advices that fit China's conditions, so as to better promote education equity, reinforce parents' awareness on the right of educational choice, and provide a new perspective for Chinese education to become diversified.

## **2. The History and Current Situation of Homeschooling**

Homeschooling, also known as home school or home education, is an educational method primarily home-based, in which parents hold the position of educators and conduct teaching activities. As the opposite of "formal school education", it has the feature of being personalized and minor. Although China and America have many differences in national conditions and education environment, the main approaches can be concluded into five categories: the first is that parents teach their children at home. This is the most typical and thorough one that approaches the original meaning of homeschooling; the second is when several families teach jointly. Relatives and friends send their children to study together, with each parent teaching the subjects he is good at. In America, similar groups are called "Homeschool Co-ops," the third is to hire private teachers, including tutors and online teachers; the fourth is self-study. In many cities and regions of China, after-school training institutions are widely available. Therefore, some parents will choose to let their children attend the curriculum held by these institutions, which is to buy educational services indirectly with family as the unit.

### **2.1. The Historical Background of Homeschooling**

The history of American homeschooling can be traced back to the time before the 18th century's Revolutionary War, when Puritans instructed their children in reading, writing, and religious education. During this period, America was still an agricultural society, and families were self-sufficient units. Inherited John Locke's educational philosophy, most people thought education was essentially a private affair related to faiths and morals, which should not be intervened by the government [1]. By the time of American Civil War, in order to promote the immigrants assimilate into society, train the public to learn the skills of industrial production and guarantee social democracy, the compulsory, free and pervasive public education system began to rise. In 1852, Massachusetts passed the first compulsory attendance act, and other state governments followed one after another. By 1918, all states in America had established laws of compulsory attendance. School education was brought into the framework of national regulations.

By 1950s and 1960s, the problems of public schools became increasingly prominent. The reinforcement of governing, the ossified education structure, the supremacy of admission rate made it more and more unable to satisfy the individual needs. On the other hand, schools' secularization caused the religious conflict. According to the decisions of Supreme Court in 1962 and 1963, schools were not allowed to organize prayer and Bible study, which made conservative Christians very angry [2]. Under these influences, many people started to reconsider homeschooling, and actively promoted legislation through interest groups and lobbying campaigns. In 1993, all 50 states of America recognized the legal status of homeschooling in different forms.

China's home education has been influenced by family orientation and family culture since ancient times, forming a learning inheritance with family tradition and precepts as the core. Due to the late start of industrialization, Chinese modern school education lagged significantly behind the West [3]. The reform of school system in the late Qing Dynasty laid the foundation for Chinese modern education. After the founding of People's Republic of China, the government implemented the policy of "combining education with productive labor", making education popularization as an important goal for revitalization and development. As of 2020, China had fully implemented the nine-year compulsory education system. The net enrollment rate of primary school-aged children was 99.96%, and the gross enrollment rate of junior high schools reached to 102.5% [4]. Like Western countries, in the process of popularizing education, people's doubts about schools continue to emerge. In recent years, more and more cases of homeschooling have been reported in the media. There are not only successful examples of parents teaching their children, such as Zheng Yaqi, the son of Zheng Yuanjie, who is known as "the king of fairy tales", but also old-style tutorial schools and private schools. Some of them have preliminarily reached the size of microschools, such as Guangzhou Liuyue Primary School.

## 2.2. The Analysis of Current Homeschool Situation

### 2.2.1. Laws and Regulations

America has clear legal regulations for homeschooling. However, due to the differences in the attitudes of courts and the educational authority of state governments, homeschool requirements vary widely from state to state [5]. Specifically, they can be divided into 4 categories:

**No Notice:** This type of district shows great respect for homeschooling. The government has the lowest intervention, which is close to zero control. Some states only stipulate that the learning time at home must meet the instructing hours of public schools, and make no requirements for curriculum, teaching credentials, or academic achievement.

**Low Regulation:** Areas belonging to this type ask homeschool families to send notifications to the education department in advance, and have low requirements for teaching. Typically, the curriculum should include subjects like language arts, mathematics, natural science, social science and health. Parents also need to submit teaching plans, student's learning portfolio and attendance records annually.

**Moderate Regulation:** This type of district requires parents to priorly submit a notice of intent to the Department of Education, and offers multiple options for homeschooling. Parents not only need to be qualified, they should also record and report the learning outcomes of students, while having them to take standardized test regularly.

**High Regulation:** In this kind of area, parents must obtain permission from the Department of Education besides meeting the above requirements. Massachusetts, for example, has listed four criteria through judicature: the first is the proposed curriculum and number of instruction hours; the second is the teaching ability of parents, but teacher certificate and college degree are not necessary; the third is to determine whether the course content is equivalent to the same grade of public schools; the fourth is to evaluate students' learning by standardized test, so as to ensure their education progress.

Yet in China, homeschooling is still a blank area of law. According to the article in Compulsory Education Law, "The parents or other statutory guardians of school-aged children and adolescents shall ensure that school-aged children and adolescents go to school to receive and complete compulsory education." The word "school" here apparently refers to formal schools (including private schools), which have been approved by the education administrative department and have corporate capacity, but does not include "family" and various forms derived from "family" [6]. This

is the fundamental reason why the legitimacy of tutorial schools in some cities has been frequently questioned. At the same time, the Article 14 made a supplementary provision on exceptions, “If they carry out compulsory education by themselves, they shall be subject to approval of the administrative departments of education of the people’s governments at the county-level.” That is to say, “homeschooling” is not completely illegal, but the ambiguity and absence of relevant regulations will let families involved into many troubles, such as student status and entrance exams.

### **2.2.2. Learning Conditions**

In recent years, the homeschooling population in America has grown rapidly. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were about 1.1 million homeschool students in 2003; by 2016, the size of this group rose to nearly 1.7 million, accounting for 3.3% of the total number of school-age children [7]. In order to better protect the rights and interests of homeschool families, the state government introduced a series of policies. This includes allowing homeschool students to participate in public school activities, courses and exams, providing opportunities for distance education and online learning. Many states established homeschool associations, giving parents professional guidance and resources. Moreover, American colleges and universities provided homeschool applicants with special admission policies, making homeschooling generally recognized by society.

In the process of practice homeschooling, American families have different teaching methods. Among them, the typical ones are the traditional school-at-home method, unschooling method, classical homeschooling, Charlotte Mason homeschooling, unit study, Montessori homeschool method, Waldorf homeschool method, multiple intelligences method, and relaxed/eclectic homeschooling. Usually, most families do not strictly follow one style or method, but select the ideas and suggestions that fit themselves best, or use a combination of methods for different subjects.

In China, despite homeschooling is not supported by laws and society, it is difficult to suppress the increasing number of practitioners, and the support and recognition are also growing. The 21st Century Education Research Institute has conducted two surveys on homeschooling phenomenon. The result shows that in 2013, the number of homeschooled students was about 2000, with over 18000 people who closely followed and intended to try [8]; by 2017, this number boosted up to 50000, and the real homeschooling practitioners also rose to around 6000 [9]. In terms of specific teaching methods, China homeschooling can be roughly divided into 5 types: school-orientation, unschool-orientation, traditional Chinese culture-orientation, children specialty or special needs-orientation, and religious education-orientation. Among them, the traditional Chinese culture-orientation is the method with the most Chinese features. Parents who adopt this kind of education hope to cultivate children’s moral character by learning from the thoughts of ancient sages. Classics such as The Three Character, Di Zi Gui, The Analects and Mencius are frequently used by these families, and reciting is a common way of learning.

## **3. Reasons for Choosing Homeschooling**

The primary reason American parents choose homeschooling is their concern about the school environment. With the shortage of teachers and decrease in funding, overcrowded classrooms have become a significant issue in public schools. Often, a teacher needs to face 20 to 30 students inside a class at the same time, which makes it almost impossible to pay individualized attention for each student, or give accurate guidance to their interests, strengths and weaknesses. Students compete to compare academic performance, social circles and family status, which make them more likely to experience negative peer pressure. In addition, a large number of schools also have safety problems.

Violence, drug abuse and other vicious incidents often occur. By contrast, homeschooling provides a broader space for personalized education. Parents can create curriculum that are specifically tailored to children's interests and needs, allowing them to learn at their own pace, while having more time to explore and discover their passions. When children come to challenges, parents will easily notice their physical and mental changes, so as to give emotional support in time, and create a safer, friendlier learning and social environment.

Another type of situation is when parents consider homeschooling for religious reason. Mostly made up of Christians, they root their faiths based on Bible, and incorporate it into most subjects of school learning. They strongly oppose secular ideas and technological encroachment, believing that this will have a negative effect on children's personality development. By adding religious and moral instruction to the daily routine, families can keep their children observing their faith safely in a healthy environment.

The motivation for Chinese parents to choose homeschooling is mainly resulted from the disagreement with school's educational philosophy. The teaching activities in schools generally focus on imparting knowledge and skills, while giving very little or no attention to children's communication and collaboration, sense of responsibility, moral character, and the ability of dealing with others. Under the guidance of exam-oriented education, scores become the only way to measure their performance. Students go to school no longer with the purpose of exploring the truth, pursuing well-rounded development and improving moral integrity, but simply to prepare for further studies and examinations. In addition, school education lacks love and care. Some teachers overemphasize discipline and norms in daily management, forcing students to obey orders, which has a negative impact on students' mental health. While homeschooling has more freedom, parents can cultivate children's specialties in-depth and promptly make up for weaknesses on their learning and areas of interests. By giving them more attention, parents and children can establish a relationship of mutual trust and dependence. Homeschooled children can have a higher sense of self-determination, and at the same time, they can have both knowledge and comprehensive quality.

#### **4. Homeschooling Problems and Controversies**

Although homeschooling has advantages that cannot be replaced by school education, it still faces many problems and controversies in the process of development.

To be a good decision-maker of children's education, parents not only need to have certain economic strength and sufficient time, but also comprehensive and systematic understanding in pedagogy and psychology. Although the survey result shows that most parents who choose homeschooling have received higher education, what they learnt is often limited to their own specialized fields, with very few of them received formal pedagogical training [10]. It is the common wish of parents to let children grow up healthily, happily and freely. In the process of practice, how to grasp the educational law as a whole and provide proper guidance to children's problems test the quality and comprehensive ability of parents.

Homeschooling has great flexibility in learning schedule, space and curriculum. Without the strict disciplines of school and teachers' authority, children need to have strong power of will and execution to study volitionally. However, the formation of willpower cannot be accomplished by one single effort. Due to the lack of effective supervision and evaluation standards, their efficiency and progress are often difficult to be guaranteed, and the learning process is highly spontaneous. Therefore, although homeschool students have a more relaxed learning environment, the environment also brings them challenges in self-management.

In addition, homeschool students are relatively weak in socialization due to studying alone at home and the lack of effective communication platforms. Although parents can lead some kinds of group activities, the scope of these activities is generally small, and the value of social circle is too

simple, which makes it difficult for children to fully develop their sense of competition and the abilities of collaboration and communication. While school education provides knowledge, it also gives children opportunities to communicate with other people at different levels [11]. In class, students must discuss and share their views with their partners, solve problems in cooperation, so as to gradually learn getting along with others and develop qualities such as tolerance and acceptance. Communicating with peers is not only the psychological needs of students, but also an important way for them to understand and integrate into society.

## **5. The Practice and Development Route of China Homeschooling**

As a new form of education, homeschooling has great potential for developing while meeting the diverse needs of individuals. At present, homeschooling in China is still in its infancy, and the conditions in many aspects are very immature. Therefore, the author proposes systematic solutions to improve homeschooling from the perspective of national legislation.

In order to protect the education right of school-aged children and make homeschooling properly cultivate them into well-rounded individuals, it is necessary for the central government to enact laws to regulate the practice of homeschooling. The legal regulation mainly focuses on two aspects: the first is to amend or add relevant articles in Education Law, Compulsory Education Law and Law on Protection of Minors, specify that homeschooling can become an alternative type of education to formal schools. Second, without violating national education laws, the local people's congresses and governments may formulate homeschooling rules and regulations based on actual circumstances, and have county-level education administrative departments as the direct governing body to implement homeschooling according to specific policies [12].

The management process of homeschooling is divided into four steps: admittance, supervision, evaluation and exit. First of all, families applying for homeschooling should submit the homeschool application form and teaching plan to the education administrative department. The application form includes the basic information of parents and children, family income, parents' education and teaching level, and certification of teachers and other professionals. The teaching plan covers homeschool education philosophy, cultivation goals, selection of curriculum, teaching methods, staged assessment approaches, and the arrangement of learning schedule. Parents who open old-style tutorial schools and private schools must also have a regular location, financial information, fire safety certificates and other materials. The education administrative department will appoint representatives to visit and investigate the families, and decide whether to approve the application based on the factors such as educational environment, economic strength, and qualifications of parents and teachers.

Secondly, in order to carry out homeschooling smoothly according to the plan, it is necessary to establish a homeschool appraisal commission, which is an affiliation of the education supervision offices of local people's governments at all levels, and is consisted of education administrative department representatives, experts and scholars, principals and teachers of formal schools, and homeschool parents. The commission should regularly and randomly visit the families to investigate the implementation of homeschooling, including teaching stages and processes, the use of resources, children's learning progress, and whether parents and teachers conduct assessments, so as to discover problems in time and propose specific measures to solve the problems.

Thirdly, the education department should organize periodic evaluation of homeschool families at the end of each year. The evaluation work is conducted in two ways: the first is parents' self-evaluation, which is to write a report of the teaching tasks, teaching progress, teaching outcomes and reflection on teaching experiences at each stage, while also conducting overall assessment of children and submitting the assessment documents and self-evaluation report to the appraisal commission for filing, so as to provide records for children to apply for schools and go to

work in the future. Second, the appraisal commission should make an on-site investigation based on the submitted written materials. This includes inspecting facilities and equipment, observing the class instruction, and talking with parents and homeschoolers. They may also use standardized tests to examine children's mastery of subject knowledge. After the investigation, the commission writes an evaluation report, which will be reviewed by the education administrative department. If it is not approved, the department must inform the reasons to parents and instruct them to improve within a specified time. If parents do not agree with the decision, they can bring a suit to the local court and further state their opinions. The court will then organize a hearing and make the final judgment. If the result is still negative, parents shall not continue to implement home education.

Lastly, in the process of homeschooling, parents may also encounter problems such as insufficient funds and difficulties in teaching, which cause the education effect deviated from expectations and become difficult to continue. Some parents choose to homeschool but fail to fulfill their educational responsibilities, forcing their children to labor at home without giving them education, or using corporal punishment, insults, and other inappropriate behaviors, which have a negative impact on their physical and mental development. These situations require the use of exit mechanisms. In the first case, parents can choose to quit voluntarily. The local government will ensure students to return to school, and the school will provide necessary assistance and guidance. For the last two reasons, education departments at all levels should promptly take compulsory withdrawal measures and deprive the homeschool qualifications of parents. If parents abuse their children, they must also undertake the corresponding legal responsibility.

## 6. Conclusion

With the increasingly prominent internationalization of education and the impact of overseas education experiences, homeschooling is showing a vigorous trend of development in China. Although it is still a minority choice at present, its flexible and self-directed characteristics can fully adapt to the individual needs of children. In the meantime, it also enriches the current education system and promotes education to become diversified. On the basis of defining the concept and approaches of homeschooling, the paper uses comparative perspective to review and analyze the similarities and differences of the historical background, legal system, learning conditions and reasons for choosing homeschooling between China and America. In general, the legalization of homeschooling in America was earlier than in China, and American homeschooling also gained rich experience and achievements in laws and policies, social support, as well as forms of practice. However, due to the significant differences in national conditions between China and America, it is necessary to fully consider the actual situation of the Chinese Mainland when drawing on the experience, and establishing a homeschooling system suitable for China. The paper systematically proposes solutions on regulating homeschooling from the perspective of national legislation. While recognizing homeschooling in the law, it is also necessary to construct a complete mechanism from admittance, supervision, evaluation to exit, so as to fully play the guiding and managing role of government and departments and promote the further implementation and development of homeschooling.

The depth of research in this paper is limited, and many descriptions in the current situation of American homeschooling are not detailed enough. The lack of cases and interviews also limits the further development of theory and practice. The author will continue to follow the latest researches in curriculum construction, socialization and teaching methods of homeschooling, and further refine the specific measures and route for implementation. The author sincerely hopes that in the future, homeschooling will develop healthily in China and become a beneficial supplement to school education, thereby promoting Chinese education to be more developed.

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