

UNSCHOOLING IN HONG KONG: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Although homeschooling, and more recently, unschooling, is slowly gaining acceptance in the United States; unschooling in Hong Kong is rare and considered risky. The Educational Bureau of Hong Kong (EDB) tends to discourage alternative forms of education, believing that traditional schooling is the best way to educate students. This case study focuses on the unschooling experience of Karen Chow and her family. Karen is one of the first individuals to choose to unschool her children in Hong Kong. She is also the founder and executive member of EDiversity.org, an organization focused on rethinking education and educational alternatives in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Unschooling, Cross Cultural Studies, Hong Kong, Case Study

In the United States, home education is legal in all 50 states. Some of those homeschooling consider themselves “unschoolers”, or individuals learning primarily through life experiences and not through a set curriculum. According to Wheatley (2009), these are usually experiences that the child or teen chooses themselves, and that therefore match their own abilities, interests, and learning styles. There are approximately two million homeschoolers in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), and approximately 10 % of those homeschoolers consider themselves unschoolers (Pat Farenga, personal communication, July 11, 2012). Homeschooling in the United

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States is generally seen as an accepted alternative option to attendance at a public or private school.

In Hong Kong, a region on the southern coast of China, homeschooling is viewed a bit differently. Homeschooling in Hong Kong is not illegal (as many incorrectly assume), but it is not encouraged by the Educational Bureau of Hong Kong (EDB) either (LCQ11: Home Schooling, 2014). Specifically, the EDB feels that “schools have a more comprehensive range of hardware and software compared with family settings and are better positioned to cater for the individual needs of students” (LCQ11: Home Schooling, 2014).

Currently, when a parent or family in Hong Kong would like to home school, the parent may choose to contact the Educational Bureau of Hong Kong (EDB) by email or postal mail. There is no traditional application to homeschool (again, the EDB makes it clear that they do not want to encourage home education as a viable educational choice); but the EDB will give a “non disapproval” for parents who meet the EDB’s criteria for being able to provide a balanced education for their children at home on a case by case basis (Cheung, 2014). Renewal of a “non disapproval” happens around every 3 – 6 months (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014). In 2014, there were between 18 (Cheung, 2014) and 25 cases of parents receiving “non disapproval” (LCQ11: Home Schooling, 2014) to home school from the EDB; although as of January 2015, that number may have increased to approximately 33 homeschooling families (Chow, personal communication, January 8, 2015).

If the EDB does give a “non disapproval”, homeschooling families still expect officers from the EDB to contact them regularly via email, phone call, or visitation (Steimle, 2014). This contact may include extended interviews regarding why and how the child will be home educated, as well as regular home visits until the child is 15, which is the last year of mandatory school attendance in HK (Ediversity, HKGCC Bulletin, 2014). It has been reported by many homeschooling parents in Hong Kong that officers from the EDB may try and persuade families to enroll their child in a more traditional school setting during these visits (Steimle, 2014), however – the parent is free to homeschool their child(ren) unless an “attendance order” has been served.

It is important to note that in Hong Kong, “attendance orders” are only served if the EDB suspects physical, emotional, or educational abuse/neglect or any other extreme concern. If a homeschooling parent is served an “attendance order”, they must obey the order under law (LCQ11: Home Schooling, 2014). According to Cam Cheung, chairman of the non profit organization EDiversity and the first mother in Hong Kong who received a non disapproval from the EDB to home educate, “there is an appeal procedure after the attendance order is served. If not successful, the parent may face fine and imprisonment” (Cam Cheung, personal communication, January 10, 2015).

Unschooling is a whole other story, and is even considered a risky decision in Hong Kong (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014). Generally, government officers in Hong Kong do not understand this style of homeschooling, and obviously do

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not prefer it. Families who unschool must provide lots of evidence that the unschooled child is learning appropriately (Homeschooling in Hong Kong, 2014). Currently, there are at least 6 families that practice some form of unschooling in Hong Kong. However, further understanding of self-directed learning, or unschooling, in Hong Kong may open the door for further acceptance by the government; which would make it easier for more families to choose this viable educational option.

Karen Chow is an unschooling parent in Hong Kong who contacted me in the Summer of 2014 after seeing me in a YouTube video about unschooling in Australia. She is a married mother of two girls, ages 8 and 3. She is also the founder and executive member of EDiversity.org, an organization focused on rethinking education and educational alternatives in Hong Kong. She has two Bachelors degrees and one Master's degree, and has experience teaching in traditional schools in Hong Kong. Researchers in Chinese culture tend to be hesitant about recognizing the value in unschooling, so she reached out to me, hoping she could be involved in some way in the work I do regarding unschooling. We both agreed that her story and experience unschooling in Hong Kong should be documented via case study. On July 1, 2014, a consent form and a fourteen question interview was sent to Karen. She returned the consent form and her responses to the in depth interview questions later that month. Our email based conversations together continued throughout that year, and into 2015. This paper is a focused case study on her experience as one of the first individuals to unschool in Hong Kong.

Chow's oldest daughter, Abbie, does have some schooling experience. Abbie attended a half day Montessori based kindergarten for three months. She also had a very negative experience in pre kindergarten; *“over frightened by a huge and loud speaking teacher who yelled at her to stop her from crying, and grabbed her to the toilet and changed her diaper without her consensus”*. After that incident, Chow and her husband decided to withdraw her from school. *“We just let her play every day. And then over the next few month's time, we found that she acquired various skills very well and could learn many things on her own. Also, she became more relaxed and happy as months go by. So we just continued to unschooling”* (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

According to Chow, unschooling has allowed her daughter to thrive. It allows her daughter to focus on her passions and follow her intrinsic motivations as she goes about her day. Currently, Chow's daughter is involved in English lessons, ballet, gymnastics, swimming, and private Mandarin lessons. Chow and her husband may suggest activities to her daughter, but she can decide whether she wants to pursue those activities or do something else (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

Similar to many private schools, Chow's family has put great thought into their children's educational experience, and has created an educational philosophy of sorts that they shape their days on. Specifically, Chow stated:

What we do is based on certain beliefs and principles:

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- 1) *Children are naturally curious and can be self-taught. About the acquisition of knowledge, the role of me and my husband is mainly answering questions and providing assistance to search for answers/tools.*
- 2) *Teaching is given only when our girls request so, and we try to make sure we don't teach more than they need. It is because we think adult-driven teaching may not correspond to children's actual need and logic, and may adversely imply that adults are more capable and superior.*
- 3) *Children can learn by observations and interaction with people so parents are not the only role models.*
- 4) *A person should be free to do what he/she wants as long as he/she is not harming others and the environment. Conformity to rules and social conventions before one feels the need to cooperate may not be good for children. As parents who were trained to respect others and conform to rules without questioning, it's difficult for us to allow our girls to be free all the time, but we feel good about what we've been doing. And our elder girl can always suggest and remind us of what we could do better.*
- 5) *We avoid interrupting our girls when they are concentrating on any tasks. Before the age of 5.5, except during the short schooling period, our elder girl did not have a fixed schedule, so we rarely requested her to stop doing*

something because of the next scheduled thing. From the age of 5.5 to now, she has engaged in more regular group activities, but we've never made the schedule tight so she has plenty of free hours almost every day.

- 6) *We expose our girls to things we are interested or unfamiliar with, as we don't want to limit them only to the things we know. We want to supply them with abundant opportunities to look at the world, and see the things that we don't see, discover the things that we don't know. We trust that they always choose what's best for them and as long as we don't restrict them, they will blossom into beautiful flowers.*

- 7) *We try to connect to the girls' emotions and feelings as much as we can. As I learned the techniques of play therapy before, I try my best to show concern to the girls' feelings before I figure out what is happening.*

- 8) *About the cultivation of good virtues, my husband and I think as we continuously improve ourselves, tell our girls how we feel, why we act in those ways and what we think, the girls will automatically possess the good virtues from us and people around. This is based on our beliefs that we are very good human beings who are kind hearted, generous, patient, compassionate, honest, responsible, trustworthy, positive, open-minded, etc. Even though we have moments that seem to be selfish, stubborn, angry, neglectful,*

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greedy.....we admit to our elder girl that we are not perfect people, and we might do something that sound bad to some people. But we never mean to hurt anybody and we accept who we are now while striving for a better self. We want to let our girls know that everything can be viewed as good or bad to different people, and if we choose to think more the good sides, more good and happy things will happen around us. We hope to let our girls know that life can have enormous possibilities, and we always have plenty of choices. And if we believe in the good values of the things that we are doing, we have nothing to fear. Also, we explain our “misbehaviors” to our elder girl. For example, sometimes when I calm down after showing my anger, I tell my girl that I didn’t intend to get angry with her, and what she did was not anything wrong, but my inability to change my habits and sudden emotions due to the negative experiences in my childhood. I would tell her how much I wish to reduce the barriers that hinder me to love her unconditionally.

I pay much effort to care for the spiritual health of myself, my husband and the children, and the extended family. And I believe the spiritual health cannot be easily achieved if my girl attends a whole-day school.

9) I encourage the whole family to go to the nature more often, and pursue green living. We go to farms, nature parks, eat organic food, and try to be environmentally friendly. I hope the children can have a close connection with the earth and will be able to help protect the environment (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

The path to officially “unschool”, however, has been a rocky one. Chow’s family did receive “non disapproval” in November of 2013 from the EDB. However, her family is monitored and checked on every 3 – 6 months to renew the EDB’s “non disapproval”. In home visits on March of 2014 and July of 2014, the EDB officer who monitors them outwardly showed his doubts towards the Chow’s method of education. He verbalized to the Chow family that *“I am not considering issuing a school attendance order today, but I can’t guarantee that I won’t do that tomorrow”*, leaving the Chow’s with much fear. *“Moreover,”* according to Karen Chow, *“he always emphasizes that our government believes that school is the best option for children. He also expressed that he wanted us to go back to school, because only in a school can my daughter meet many children, and this would help her adapt to society”* (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

The struggle to unschool freely in Hong Kong has continued. Specifically:

In March 2014 he requested us to meet an educational psychologist who persuaded us to do systematic evaluation for our girl, so that we won’t miss anything that is important for her. When we asked them for an example about what we might miss in the future, the former officer replied “if a child likes apples and examines too passionately only on all types of apple trees, he might never know there are orange trees in such a big forest even he knows there are thousands of different types of apples.” When we expressed our confidence that our girl will automatically acquire all necessary skills and be well equipped in the future, he thought we are “too confident” about this.

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What this officer thinks is not uncommon here. Our culture emphasizes teaching, following authority, and likes to see outstanding performances at an early age.

My mother once criticized me as “putting your child at risk”. Other people do not say such harsh words to us, but they show many worries (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

Chow is hoping that many worries will be diminished the more people understand unschooling and self-directed learning. In early 2014, Chow allowed television cameras from a major news program in Hong Kong to film her and her daughters so that those in China could see firsthand what her family is doing and how well it is working for her child (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014). The show was broadcast in February of 2014, but Chow was a bit disappointed that the *“television program did not convey our unschooling style. The videos chosen for the program only showed homeschooling and teaching, while almost nothing was mentioned about ‘self-taught’ and ‘self-directed learning’.* The program aroused hot discussion because that was the *first ever TV program in Hong Kong about homeschooling. But after the program was aired, I saw more negative comments than positive ones on the forums on the internet”* (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

Two of the greatest challenges unschooling families face is other people’s perceptions regarding unschooling as well as unschooling parent’s difficulty in overcoming their own preconceived notions regarding schooling and education (Gray & Riley, 2013). It is difficult to do something no-one else is doing, as well as doing something that goes against cultural and societal norms. It is also difficult if family and others around you

don't seem to understand or support what you are doing. Chow feels this non support immensely from family, friends, and the government (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

With regards to overcoming preconceived notions and experiences regarding one's own schooling and education, Chow affirms that:

The biggest challenges come from the inside of my husband and me. We grew up in traditional Chinese families and received traditional education. We need to de-learn many things we absorbed from our ancestors, cultures, teachers, etc., and re-build a new thinking and attitude. For example, our traditional culture always require us to have very good manners, be well-behaved, be able to take care of ourselves at a very young age, acquire lots of knowledge at a young age and these were often achieved by a strict and authoritative style of parenting. We now want to become empathetic and negotiable parents and help to build up our children's good virtues by role modeling instead of using harsh verbal approach. Also, we want to fully trust our children, and assume for everything they do, there must be a good reason behind it (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

Thankfully, Chow does feel some support from her homeschooling group and those within the non profit organization she helps run. The EDB is also coming around. For example, in October of 2014, two officers from the education bureau attended an alternative education conference organized by EDiversity and the faculty of education at the University of Hong Kong to hear about self-directed learning of all kinds. In recent months, the senior officers of the EDB have been especially receptive towards Chow and

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her family, lengthening the time between home visits, and calling the Chow's "positive parents" (Karen Chow, personal communication, October 26, 2014).

Also, Chow knows about two other unschooling cases that have now been "not disapproved" by the government. According to Chow, *the case officer mentioned to one of the unschooling moms that 'Karen set an example to us, and we feel reassured about your unschooling'* (Karen Chow, personal communication, October 26, 2014).

Despite all odds, Chow feels confident about the educational decision she has made for her family. Unschooling, says Chow, "*has lots of wonderful outcomes*".

For example:

Our elder makes friends easily with new people, without any bias towards friends' ages and appearances. Also she always likes to give small gifts such as hand-made crafts and snacks to people whom she likes. She doesn't bully others and likes to help protect the kind children who are bullied. And perhaps because of her frequent smiles, she looks gentle and friendly. I think she respects others very well, and is calm most of the time during social gatherings. Moreover, she is very good at negotiation, and can compromise a good solution with friends.

During the first birthday party at her age of seven, she invited about 50 children and adults. Everybody was very impressed that she waited at the door and welcomed and talked to each child at the entrance, because we hardly see any children at this age do this naturally.

There are also the benefits of “*flexibility, autonomy, freedom, high concentrating ability, and quality of life...our elder girl can concentrate on a task for long hours...and can take part in the decision making for almost everything she is involved in. Also, she can act out many creative ideas*”. Chow adds that “*We hope the girls can sustain their passion about learning and be happy and contented persons throughout their lives. We also hope they would become caring persons who are thoughtful and empathetic to people and the earth*” (Karen Chow, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

Doing something outside the norm takes enormous courage. From enormous courage comes great passion, and tremendous belief in a philosophy that not many are exposed to. Unschooling in the United States comes with many challenges, including social pressure and criticism regarding one’s educational choice (Gray & Riley, 2013), but to choose to unschool in Hong Kong is truly revolutionary. Thanks to Karen Chow, others in Hong Kong may be able to more freely choose a similar path of education for their own children, with the knowledge that they will not be alone in their journey.

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