

Unschooling in Hong Kong: A 10 Year Follow Up

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Abstract

This is a follow-up article focused on Maddie Woods, daughter of Karen Chow, an unschooling parent in Hong Kong and co-founder of EDiversity.org, which is an organization focused on rethinking education. At the time of this writing, Maddie was a senior in high school, and shares her experience of being unschooled in her primary years, and then later entering a more traditional school environment. In this paper, Maddie discusses her memories of being unschooled in Hong Kong, the benefits and challenges of being unschooled, the power of intrinsic motivation, and her goals for the future.

Keywords: unschooling, Hong Kong, interview, intrinsic motivation, homeschooling socialization

Introduction

Ten years ago, the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* published an article about Karen Chow, an unschooling parent in Hong Kong, and co-founder of EDiversity.org, an organization focused on rethinking education and educational alternatives (Riley, 2016). At the time of the original article, unschooling was rare in China and considered risky, and we wanted to document what Karen Chow was experiencing. Three years ago, Karen and I reconnected, after her move to the UK, and I got to meet her daughter, Maddie. Maddie and I decided to write a follow-up paper together, in the style of an interview and case study, highlighting all she has accomplished since the original article was published.

1) The article "Unschooling in Hong Kong: A Case Study" came out in the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* in 2016, (and people still read and ask me about it!). What do you remember about that time?

It's so crazy to think that the article came out 10 years ago! But it's amazing to see how much has changed for the better in this time, how much I have changed and how things are so different now than when they used to be. Back then, I was only 7 and I honestly don't remember much from that time, but I do remember being very dedicated to gymnastics and wanting to do it every day all day. I'd be cartwheeling around the house and everywhere I went. It was a time I couldn't share homeschooling as a prideful thing because Hong Kong was still so new to it. I didn't understand why I couldn't tell people that I was homeschooled back then, but I didn't question it much. I knew it was a special thing that not many people got to enjoy but I enjoyed it a lot. I liked being able to go to places during the day like visiting museums, going to gymnastics, taking peaceful walks in parks, and engaging in so

many more activities organized by other homeschoolers. I remember specifically there was a day I went to a farm with a group of homeschoolers, many of whom I considered my close friends. It was one of the most fun childhood memories from that time and I certainly would love to visit that farm again. We learned how to make pizza and got to watch them bake it in the stone oven. It was honestly the best pizza I've ever had in my life up until this point. After enjoying our pizza, me and my friends went off to play. We looked for carrot leaves, buckets, and other small little plants we found interesting. It was a hot day and we were all tempted to splash ourselves with water but instead, a light pole caught our curious little eyes. There was some sticker residue on the pole and we were eager to try and see if we could get it off. We filled the bucket with water together and added in some mud that we pretended was "cleaning solution". And of course, the carrot leaves were now scrubbing brushes. We quickly got to work and started scrubbing the pole with the mud solution and carrot leaves. We spent most of the time actually laughing at each other for splashing water than actually cleaning the pole. This was definitely an experience I wouldn't get if I was attending traditional school. The rules and not to mention mindsets in traditional schools would not allow for anything even close to playing with muddy water and carrot leaves for an extended period of time. After living in the UK for the past year, I have realized that there really is a massive difference in mindsets when you compare Hong Kong local school students to international students or people I have met in the UK, or those I have met through homeschooling groups.

2) Have thoughts about unschooling in Hong Kong changed since the original article was published?

In my opinion, I think it's not that people are not accepting of homeschooling but more that they don't understand what it's actually like to homeschool. A lot of the times when I tell people I was homeschooled, they ask me if I had any friends. I think that a lot of the time most of society thinks that school is the only way to make friends and that homeschooling is just staying at home all day long doing nothing. In fact, that couldn't be further from my reality. I was constantly out visiting museums, participating in activities, doing sports, or with friends. I made most of my friends through gymnastics, rock climbing, dance, homeschooler gatherings, and friends' friends. Additionally, a lot of people seem to think that unschooling means that we learn absolutely nothing. Every time I say this I laugh, but people seem to genuinely be confused when I can do mental math or can write an essay with decent grammar. But you know what's even funnier? I've not done a load of practice on grammar, and in fact I only decided I was going to start reading English books by myself when I was 9. At first, I couldn't read that well but I picked it up so fast and by the time I turned 11, I could read every word there was. I think that when people disagree with the idea of unschooling it's because they fear that their child will not have the ability to self-motivate or teach themselves; but as I always like to say, if you've built your child's foundation well, this should not scare you in any way. I think that a lot more people know about homeschooling now and don't think as negatively about it as they did 10 years ago, but there will always be people who judge and say negative things about it. There are also scenarios where I would take their negative criticism into consideration but then turn it into positive motivation. For example, when I used to run a YouTube channel there would always be a few people out of thousands who say negative things. However, what people don't realize is that those few people are the source of my motivation. If they tell me I can't do something, I'll show them I can. If they judge me on the way I speak or look, I just embrace it even more. In life, there is no way to avoid all negative criticism, so why not embrace it? You're only going to hold

yourself back from success if you keep trying to change yourself just because someone says something negative. I personally think that this is one of my strongest skills; being able to turn something negative into positive motivation. I think that this skill has definitely come from my many years of homeschooling. I wasn't stuck in a school with individuals that I was forced to face every day, or teachers that would tell me what to do every day at a young age. I had to choose to walk away from anyone who was causing me discomfort, and I think in fact that has taught me how to be okay around people more than you'd think. Having that safety of knowing I have the ability to walk away makes it easier to not walk away, and in fact try to listen to people who may disagree with me.

Author note regarding the current status of Unschooling in Hong Kong:

In Hong Kong, homeschooling is legally permitted, although it is not actively promoted by the Education Bureau (EDB). Families who choose to homeschool are expected to notify the EDB, which may review or assess the educational plan to ensure that children receive an appropriate education and complete the required nine years of compulsory schooling between the ages of 6 and 15 (HSDLA, 2023). Karen and Maddie's family was among the first to receive "non-disapproval" from the EDB to pursue homeschooling.

Though the exact number of home or unschooling families in Hong Kong is challenging to verify, there is a growing trend of parents opting not to enroll their children in kindergarten. This choice has led to an assumption that there are also older homeschooled children. In 2015, a local parent-driven charity called EDiversity (co-founded by Karen Chow) published a book featuring the experiences of 14 local and expatriate homeschooling families. An updated version of the book was released in late 2019.

3) I really appreciated how your mom really listened to her heart when it came to parenting and education, even though many around her may have disagreed or were critical of her parenting/educational choices. In Gray & Riley (2013), we did hear that the number one challenge regarding unschooling was "dealing with other people's opinions about unschooling". Do you feel people are more accepting of unschooling now?

People's opinions are actually the least of my worries. There are so many better things I can use my time on, I don't need to be focusing on other people's negative criticism. It's an absolute waste of time when I'm confident in what I'm doing and my capabilities. This is the reason I haven't really focused on whether the negative criticism has decreased. It doesn't concern me in the slightest bit. I prefer to focus on my goals and interests.

I will say that in December of 2024, my mom and I gave an online talk focused on homeschooling to more than 20 participants, including parents, psychologists, and a vice-principal of a famous secondary school in Hong Kong. More than half the participants stayed hours after the event and kept asking me questions. At the end, the vice principal told us he was "mind blown" and very impressed with my self-confidence. He shared that before listening to the talk, he and his teacher colleagues thought homeschooling had a disadvantage in terms of socialization, but having listened to us, he realized the opposite is true (i.e.: homeschooling actually allows individuals to know and interact with so many different people). He also stated that he would like my mom and I to give another talk to his school teachers on their staff development day. This is the first "formal" lecture I gave focused on homeschooling, and I was very pleased that the participants who were all adults sought my advice and showed positive views about my unschooling journey. So, I think acceptance has increased in recent years.

5) What do you see as the benefits of unschooling? Are there any challenges that you see?

I would say that unschooling definitely has a lot of benefits; but at the same time I do find a few things not too beneficial. I would like to speak about the positives first since there are so many. To start off with, I think that with unschooling, you get a lot more freedom and different ways to explore your passions and interests. In school, there is typically only one or two ways to learn things but unschooling allows you to learn things in many different ways. Unschooling also allows you to see things from a much wider perspective. However, I think that most of the major things people actually don't see. For example, my psychology knowledge I know is way beyond high school level; but people wouldn't see this, because school may measure our ability to memorize psychological studies done by different psychologists and specific definitions word by word. This is not the way I learn. I learn by reading books and watching videos, and actually from understanding humans instead of words on a piece of paper. I think for me there are not many challenges, they're more like traits shaped from being homeschooled that society doesn't understand the value of. I'm not sure people ever will, but that's okay! I think one of the things that people would see as a challenge or downside would be that if you plan to join back into school, not many people will understand you. For example, when I went to a year of middle school during 6th grade, I still had that playful little girl side to me; whereas everyone else in my grade was very mature and grown up. I was judged for that on multiple occasions but I'm honestly so glad I got to experience that year. I'm so glad that I kept my childhood spark and authenticity until that age. I've met multiple people in my life that act like people in their late teens or early 20s. This was a result of being forced to grow up too fast during childhood perhaps due to formal schooling or parenting decisions. I can confidently say that I'm now emotionally a lot more

mature than a lot of people in the same age group. Some of my friends like to tell me that my mind is of a 20-something-year-old. I think that this is the result of not being forced to grow up at a ridiculously young age. Now, I'm very confident in taking care of a group of children, providing for myself in tasks such as cooking, managing my time, packing the necessities for a trip, or even living alone for a period of time. Now thinking back, yes, sure I was judged in middle school for still liking unicorns and sparkly things, those were very surface area things. Even at that age I was capable of taking care of myself; cooking, cleaning, walking home, taking the bus, running errands, teaching my sister how to do the laundry, the list goes on. I realized that my ability of always being able to act according to my authentic self is very important. Other than back then being judged for having an untraditional learning background, I cannot think of anything else that people would think is a downside. I've adapted to formal schooling really well and I actually love this learning style just as much as I love homeschooling. Sometimes I think it's a little funny when I remember that most people my age are choosing to end their schooling journey by finishing off in specialized community colleges and I'm just now starting my journey. I think that a lot of people's spark has died down by now after being in school for over 12 years.

4) When I asked what you wanted to focus on in this article, you stated that you wanted to further discuss "not killing the spark at an early age" (I love that!). What does that mean to you? You also stated you wanted to talk about intrinsic motivation as well as emotional maturity. Please feel free to expand on these topics!

I have a goal to prove to the world that 12 years of formal education is a waste of time and youthhood. Everything you need to know in order to be successful can be learnt in under a few years of high school, or no formal schooling at all. Homeschooling truly gave me

uncountable gifts that are worth more than formal schooling will ever. The self-confidence I have; the spark that's there, my ability to be able to adapt to any situation and still make the most out of it, the list goes on. There will always be people who find things to criticize about homeschooling, but I'm not afraid of listing all of my good qualities because I know that the world can benefit from knowing what kind of miracles come out of being homeschooled. I think that another one of the positive outcomes of being a homeschooler is our creative ways of learning. For example, I had a psychology test today and for the past week I've been looking for different, unique ways to review the content. Yesterday I decided to write all the answers out in Russian and sing it in a song. Because I have a deep love for the Russian language, it made the whole task interesting and actually fun to do rather than suffering through it. In the end, I remembered over 90% of the content. I think that this is one of the truly magical things about growing up with self-directed learning. I always manage to find the best ways to learn that will make me remember the content more easily and find studying enjoyable instead of dreading it.

There is always a spark of curiosity and natural motivation to learn in early childhood. I think that it is so important to keep that spark going throughout later childhood and teenage years, or even adulthood. This will allow an individual to always have that sense of curiosity and keep learning even later on in life. There are many different ways to keep that spark going and prevent it from dying at an early age, but one of the things that helped me was homeschooling in my childhood. This allowed me to be able to find the answers to the things I was curious about, learn in various different ways such as visiting museums and farms, and actually doing things in hands-on ways such as dying fabrics and learning recipes. There is also the fact that I wasn't forced into doing things I was actually interested and passionate

about. This preserved my self-motivation and kept my curious mind on the edge of wanting to learn more things all the time.

I think that self-motivation is one of the things that a lot of people struggle with. For homeschoolers, it's one of the easiest things. Because our mindsets are quite literally unlimited and can go beyond space, there is nothing that will stop us from achieving what we want to succeed in; whether that's doing 12 years of school in 2 years, and then planning to double major in English and psychology, or deciding to change the world, or becoming a top artist, the list goes on. The most important thing is that we are able to motivate ourselves and do things in a way that we enjoy. As I always like to say, the most important thing about doing anything is that you enjoy it and that you're having a good time doing it. If you're not enjoying what you're doing, you won't do well no matter how hard you work. If you enjoy every little bit of it, you'll do well without even trying. The thing that has helped me most is romanticizing my life. No, I don't mean with relationships; not that kind of romanticizing. I mean genuinely falling in love with my life and everything in it. I pretend I'm living in a dream, or that a camera is following me and I'm the main character. I remind myself that main characters always have downfalls in order to rise, or things that come in the way of their success but eventually that's what they learn from and become the most successful person in the entire movie. I also know that I'm the only person I need to be focusing on. This allows me to ignore everyone else's negativity or opinions that I don't agree with. I do what's right for me and I don't need anyone to agree with me. My own validation is the only validation I seek. If someone is being toxic about something, I simply remove myself from the situation. I don't ever fear not being able to make friends, or not being liked by other people, because I know that it is a privilege to be friends with me and not everyone deserves that privilege.

Those who criticize my homeschooling, or really anything in my life, can find other people that agree with their mindsets.

5) Can you update us on what you are doing at the time of this writing? (Note: This article was written in 2023).

I'm actually doing pretty amazing now. I recently got into a high school and it's been great here. That's one of the things I would say is great about homeschooling. A lot of people may think "Oh, if we homeschool now my child may not be able to get used to traditional schooling again in the future." But that was not the case for me at all. I blended into traditional schooling pretty smoothly and I'm enjoying it a lot. Interestingly, it was a harder process to get used to my old school which was a lot more relaxed and less strict. I did my General Certificate of Secondary Education there for 8 months and I've found myself so much happier in my current school now than in my previous school. I was struggling really badly in my previous school because it was hard to make friends who have the same beliefs and goals that I do. Most of the people in that school were either dropouts from other schools or were bullied in other schools. I found that I was one of the only people who actually wanted to do my work and focus on the task at hand. The environment was constantly noisy and I found it super hard to focus. Now in my new school, everyone actually cares about their education and doing well on their tasks rather than just goofing around. One of the difficulties for the transition from homeschooling to traditional schooling though is that most traditional school students are used to certain ways of learning that I'm not. For example, I recently had a psychology test and we were given a sheet of information to recall. There were around 1500 words on that sheet of paper and I spent an entire week trying to study it with flashcards, reading it out loud to myself, teaching my best friend, typing it, writing it, and still I found it incredibly difficult to remember the information. I think that this may be because I'm more

used to ‘learning by doing’ than being given a sheet of paper and told to study it. However, I would say that with the right motivation and materials it’s not hard to get through this barrier. Sometimes I prefer to go home and watch videos to learn the information more deeply or read articles that actually explain the information. This makes it a lot easier for my brain to remember things for long periods of time; whereas I feel that a lot of traditional school students tend to have a short-term memory rather than long-term memory because they are not actively interacting with material.

6) What are your goals for the future?

My current interests are mainly psychology and English. I hope to double major in those in university and hopefully become a psychology writer, real estate agent, and public speaker. I think that a lot of people assume I want to become a therapist when I say I want to major in psychology, but that’s far from the truth. I enjoy exploring the deeper side of psychology and writing about it, but not so much listening to other people’s problems all day long (haha!). A lot of my friends claim that I’d make a good therapist so maybe very occasionally, but definitely not as a full-time career. Alongside psychology and writing, I also want to start a business that helps with the environment and also reduces consumer waste while allowing everyone to be able to refresh their everyday objects frequently. I won’t go into details, that’s for another time...but at the moment I’m constantly trying to come up with good business ideas. I still love a lot of the hobbies that I used to do as a child which would include crafts, gymnastics, rock climbing, and figure skating. I actually won first and second place at ISIAAsia (a competition with skaters from all the Asian countries) this summer. Although I’m not looking to become a professional figure skater, I still enjoy occasional competitions just to challenge myself and compete against younger me. I think that it’s so important to compete

against the old you rather than everyone else, because that is the only thing that will make you a stronger person.

I think now that I'm back in a formal school setting, there are a lot of things I've realized. For example, the other day as me and my classmates were about to enter our psychology class, no one dared to go in first. I found it quite surprising as it was our class time and the teacher was inside the room. I looked around and no one wanted to open the door and concluded that most school children are scared of teachers, even now at year 12. Or even just yesterday as I was stressing about my psychology test today, I realized that even though my school is already teaching with International Baccalaureate, there are still a lot of limitations of the education system. I would argue that the International Baccalaureate is already the best curriculum when it comes to formal schooling. It talks about how students should be open minded, how critical thinking is valued and how students should learn in various ways. I would say that the education system can still improve a lot based on what I have experienced in school. We are still told to memorize knowledge just by reading texts, and revising. To a lot of people who have been in formal school setting their entire life, this may seem very normal and see nothing wrong with it. However, as a previously homeschooled student, I'm used to learning through more interactive ways. Studies have shown that when we are more interested about something, we are more likely to remember and dive deeper into the subject (Altenmuller, Lange, & Gollwitzter, 2021). I think that it's unfair how formal school students are forced to do a lot of direct, lecture-based learning, because everyone has different interests and strengths. I think that we should embrace everyone's individual strengths rather than judge people based on their ability to perform in specific academic subjects.

If I want to change my life and look at it differently, I will do it immediately, or if something is not working out in one way, I change it and try another way. I have this belief that if I want to do something it will work out eventually; I just need to figure out a way that works for me. Sometimes I'll have too many ideas in my head that I'll want to immediately try them all. I think this is another reason my multitasking skills have become so strong. I always manage to finish my homework very quickly because I've already gotten used to finishing everything quickly through homeschooling. For example, math being my least favorite subject; is what I always complete first. I then like to spend the rest of the evening on things such as working on my book, writing this article, watching videos about psychology, engaging in interviews of successful business owners, or reading my favorite books. I never dreaded doing anything in my life, because weekdays were always just the same as weekends. My unschooling experience has taught me to enjoy every day because I knew that there's nothing I shouldn't look forward to.

Conclusion

I've followed Maddie's journey for almost her whole childhood, thanks to a beautiful, ongoing relationship with her mom, Karen Chow. This follow-up on Maddie Woods' educational journey reflects the transformative and multifaceted nature of unschooling in Hong Kong, especially within a cultural context where alternative education is often met with skepticism. Maddie's experiences provide valuable insights into how unschooling fosters intrinsic motivation, adaptability, and a strong sense of self. Her transition from unschooling to a traditional school setting underscores both the unique advantages and challenges of navigating a personalized educational path in a region steeped in conventional academic expectations. As Maddie continues to pursue her goals, her story serves as a testament to the power of homeschooling and unschooling, and its potential to shape confident, resilient individuals ready to engage with the world on their own terms.

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Biographies:

Maddie Woods is a now 19-year-old unschooler who was homeschooled for fifteen years. She was probably the first official local Hong Kong homeschool case to be sent to their Education Bureau. She has recently graduated after finishing her highschool studies. Her favorite things to do are learning about psychology, writing books and articles, speaking on education and homeschooling, and teaching people about success mindsets. She enjoys many sports such as figure skating, archery, horseback riding, gymnastics, rock climbing, and more. She hopes to major in International Relations at University and work on her 100% natural cosmetics startup business.

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Generative AI Statement

The authors declare that no Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.