

The Skewed Role of Home Education in Child Development in China

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Abstract: Home education plays a unique, vital role in child development that differs from that of formal education. Currently, there is an abnormal phenomenon in Chinese basic education: home education becomes academically focused. This article gives an overview of skewed home education in basic education students, analyzes its causes and harms, and proposes relevant suggestions for a more reasonable implementation of home education with the aim of promoting legitimate home-school partnerships for student healthy growth.

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Introduction

THE FUNDAMENTAL role of education is to socialize children by teaching cultural values and norms and equipping them with the skills needed to become productive members of the community. There are many forms of education in human society. In the Chinese context, “school education” is the term denoting formal education, and “family education” refers to the informal, home-based education being delivered to children through daily life experiences. Child development is contingent on the joint efforts of the school, family, and society, with each of them playing a unique role in child education. Student healthy growth is the product of the effective partnership between them (Yan, 2023). In 2022, the Ministry of Education of China and other twelve departments issued the “Opinions on Improving the Mechanism for the Partnership between the School, Family, and Community in Child Education,” which affirms the school’s leading role in home-school collaboration and its responsibility for providing guidance and advice on home education (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Recent years, however, have witnessed an ambiguous division of responsibility between the school and home in Chinese basic education. Using the initiatives of “home-school partnership” and “parental involvement in child learning” as excuses, schools are breaking the boundaries between school and home education by making parents direct executors of school education and transferring some of the school’s responsibilities to the parent. Consequently, home education is being deprived of its original function, and parents are overburdened with responsibilities for child academic development, resulting in the mistaken role of home education in child growth (Yuan, 2020). To meet the school’s requirements, parents have to invest massive amounts of time, money, and energy in private child tutoring. Student academic performance has become the primary evaluation indicator for the success of home education, which interferes with parents’ making legitimate educational decisions and increases parent-child tension (Chen, 2008). This article gave an overview of signs of skewed home education at the basic education level, pinpointed its causes as well as consequences, and proposed measures to bring home education back on track, with the purpose of promoting a reasonable home-school partnership for healthier child growth.

Signs of Skewed Home Education

Home education is an education conducted at home with a focus on an all-rounded person. It covers a wide variety of facets, including fostering proper behavioral habits, cultivating morality and character, and developing the basic life knowledge and skills of the child. However, the responsibilities that

should be handled by the school have been burdening home education in China.

Digital Education Imposes Extra Burdens on Parents

China's digital education has transitioned from the 1.0 to 2.0 eras in consequence of the universal coverage of the "Three Links and Two Platforms Program" (namely, the school link to a broadband-based network, the class link to excellent teaching content, the individual link to the online learning space, the national public educational resource, and educational administration platforms). Digital transformation has significantly increased the efficacy of instruction, and the use of educational administration platforms and other public communication platforms has successfully improved the efficiency of school management (Lu & Zhou, 2020).

On the other hand, digital platforms have been misused by schools, giving them opportunities to transfer educational responsibility to parents by taking advantage of the policy of home-school partnerships. Between 2019 and 2020, Central China Normal University's Institute for Educational Governance Studies (hereinafter referred to as CCNU's IEGS) conducted a survey on home-school collaboration and found that the online parent group had become a "stressful group" or "anxiety-fueling group," an unbearable burden to the majority of parents. Numerous parents polled complained that teachers dumped teaching duties on them via online parent groups, and they must accept it without reservation. There were endless messages about assignments for parents, including but not limited to correcting the child's homework and checking their reading and recitation. Sometimes they were even required to pay visits with their children to museums or other public places in order for the latter to complete relevant assignments or conduct community-based activities and social practice. During these events, parents must take photos and upload them onto the platform as evidence of their engagement. The phenomenon of blurred boundaries of responsibility was pervasive in home-school partnerships. The survey research team suggested that school and home education should each have their own focus and that teachers should not utilize digital platforms to transfer instructional duties to parents (China Youth Daily, 2021).

Students' Homework Becomes Assignments for their Parents

Teachers assign homework to students after class for specific purposes. It is an integral part of the curriculum and a necessary process between curricular implementation and evaluation. For students, homework is of great signifi-

cance in that it helps them consolidate the knowledge and skills acquired from in-class learning, develop problem-solving ability and scientific learning methods, and nurture academic resilience (Gao, 2023).

Nevertheless, under the misused “home-school partnership,” helping their child with homework and correcting it have become compulsory “homework” for parents. If they do not do their “homework” well enough, they will be blamed by the teacher (Liu, 2017). The 2019-2020 research by CCNU’s IEGS found that only 14.1% of parents surveyed did not have to help kids with their homework; 26.8% of them felt the need but did not do it; 23.3% helped kids with their homework in 1-2 days per week; 11.1% did so in 3-4 days per week; and 24.7% did so almost every day. That is to say, only about 40% of parents were not involved in their children’s homework. The research team also found through interviews that the majority of parents were not happy about this phenomenon. They had an exhausting day at work; it was so much that they had to help kids with their homework after work. Some assignments were far more difficult than they could handle. The parent-child tension fueled by homework completion has sparked heated debate online. Despite the Ministry of Education’s explicit stipulation that parents should not be given any academic assignments or required to check or correct their children’s homework, parents apparently did not dare to publicly disobey teachers for fear that their kids might be unfairly treated at school (China Youth Daily, 2021).

After-school Private Tutoring and Training Become a “Must”

To reduce student academic burden, the Chinese government has released a series of papers on this issue, including 2018’s “Measures for Reducing the Burden on Primary and Secondary School Students” (Ministry of Education of China, 2018) and 2021’s “Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Compulsory Education Students” (State Council of China, 2021). Under the current education and talent selection systems, however, these burden reduction policies increased worries among parents, who feared that their implementation might negatively impact their kids’ academic results. As a result, parents tend to enroll their children in as many off-campus tutoring programs as possible to win the educational competition (Li et al., 2023).

According to the 2019 *Annual Report on Chinese Children’s Development: Children’s Out-of-School Life Condition*, jointly issued by the China National Children’s Center and Social Sciences Academic Press (China), participation in extracurricular programs has become an important component of children’s out-of-school life. 60% of them were signed up at

off-campus tutoring institutions, spending 3.4 hours there in the five school days and 3.2 hours on the two-day weekend on average. The average cost of extracurricular tutoring for each child was 9211 CNY per year, accounting for 12.84% of their household income (People.cn, 2019). These results of the report found support from data from the 2019-2020 research by CCNU's IEGS, which showed that students spent an average of 0.5 hours every day on private tutoring from Monday to Friday and 2.34 hours at off-campus training institutions on the weekend (China Youth Daily, 2021).

Consequences of Skewed Home Education

Reasonable home education provides appropriate educational resources and home learning environments for children and can play a vital role in fostering their characters, habits, and social adaptation (Chen, 2012). On the other hand, a skewed home education can produce dire consequences, such as exacerbated burdens on the child and parent and impaired parent-child relationships.

Increased Burden on the Child

Legitimate home education should provide children with opportunities to experience different learning materials and methods from those taught at school. The intention is to broaden the scope of their competencies and interests. Academically focused home education means children need to deal with subject-based knowledge and skill training arranged by parents while going through all the pressures of disciplinary knowledge study in school. This is an unnecessary burden and a waste of time (Liu, 2023). Moreover, when home education becomes supplementary to formal schooling, the child is deprived of the chance to go for home-based hands-on practice. Under this education paradigm, the child can hardly make time to develop interests and hobbies, let alone social skills. Feeling overburdened, they may lose their aspirations and enthusiasm for learning. Even worse, the double burdens have detrimental effects on their physical and mental health (Xi, 2023).

Exacerbated Burden on the Parent

In the process of their children's growth, the parent needs to bear all kinds of pressure: economic, emotional, educational, social, and more. A skewed home education significantly increases the burden on the parent. First, when home education is dominated by school education, the parent may have to unwillingly accept and practice the school's educational ideas, which are likely contradictory to their own educational notions (Lyu, 2023). Second, when school education intrudes on home education, the parent needs to be

overly involved in the children's assignments and other academic activities. Fully loaded with their own professional duties, they may choose to send their kids to private tutoring institutions. To guarantee that their children achieve ideal exam results at school, the parent may enroll them in a lot of subject-based tutoring programs, which can elicit colossal amounts of expense and, as a result, exacerbate their economic burden (Lu, 2023). Third, with a blurred boundary in home education, the parent may have to play conflicting roles concurrently. To play the role of the parent well, they need to create a harmonious home atmosphere and provide tailored education for their kids; in the meantime, they have to play the role of the teacher to implement instructional tasks imposed by the school. That can heighten their psychological burden and compromise their quality of family life (Li, 2023).

Impaired Parent-Child Relationships

Overemphasis on academic knowledge and skills in home education often results in the neglect of the child's affective needs and potential for unique development, leading to alienation and conflicts between the parent and child. An overburdened child is most likely deprived of the opportunities to have meaningful emotional communication with their parents as well as personal time for play and leisure. Over time, they may nurture grievances against their parents, resulting in mounting parent-child tension (Chen, 2023). Furthermore, under the unscientific home-school partnership, the parent may lose autonomy in child education and cannot administer personalized education to their children, which can also instigate the latter's resistance to the former's educational involvement (Chen, 2023). In addition, the loss of the inherent functions of home education may negatively impact the relationships between all family members. The lack of smooth communication and meaningful interaction between them can produce a tense and incompatible home atmosphere. It may make the child feel isolated and helpless and is detrimental to their emotional development and character building (Chao, 2023).

Causes of Skewed Home Education

Schools' Attempts to Transfer Their Own Responsibilities to Parents

In the broad educational system, the school and family are each expected to fulfill their respective duties. Generally, society holds the school primarily responsible for the instruction of disciplinary knowledge. However, a considerable portion of teachers disregard the boundaries between school and

home education, making the practice of school-home partnership an infringement on the latter (Shan, 2020). A pronounced sign of this is that the teacher has attempted to dump some of the instruction-related duties on the parent.

Zheng (2022) conducted a questionnaire survey on the issue of division of responsibility in home-school partnerships, which included as participants both teachers and parents in certain primary schools in Tianhe, Zengcheng, and Conghua Districts of Guangzhou City. The survey results showed that carrying out school-based duties without reservation, helping kids with assignments, and correcting their homework on the part of the parent were pervasive in primary education. Some of the teachers polled claimed that it was justifiable for parents to correct their kids' homework, yet they never made it an obligation. At the same time, parent participants in the survey argued that the misconducted home-school partnerships consumed excessive amounts of their time and energy, that they were allotted responsibilities that should not have rested with them, and that their home education was rendered an extension of formal schooling.

Wrong Notions of Home Education among Parents

The parent's view of and attitudes towards home education are determinants of its outcomes and quality (Li, 2023). Parents with misconceptions about home education tend to be fixated on kids' academic achievements, disregarding the importance of their moral, emotional, and social development. Such one-sided home education makes child all-round growth impossible. Other parents may implement unscientific home education methods, which make it a blind and arbitrary education, resulting in ineffective communication with their children and failure to achieve its expected effects (Zhao, 2020). On the other hand, a portion of parents hold the mindset of "perfectionism" in home education, expecting that their children should excel in all aspects (Zhang, 2023). This expectation leads to parents being overly strict with their children but ignoring their personal traits and peculiarities. As a result, home education's role in providing tailored education is sacrificed.

Social Pressures on Parents

The ever-heightening social expectation of education contributes to the intensive social pressures faced by parents, skewing their attitudes towards home education. Social competition is a major factor in unreasonable home education. Currently, the process of education is a rat race for the majority of Chinese students. Parents hope that their children can stand out in the competition and enjoy a brilliant future (Li et al., 2023). In this milieu, parents frequently prioritize their kids' academic success and intellectual prowess

over the most crucial concerns in home education, such as their physical and mental health, moral development, and character building. In the meantime, the biased definition of success by society is also a contributor to skewed home education. In today's Chinese society, being successful in life is most often defined as "career success" or "wealth accumulation" (Niu, 2022). This simplistic conception misleads parents into overly emphasizing their children's academic and career success and deviating from the original focuses of home education, such as children's interests and hobbies, emotional experience, and purpose of life.

Suggestions for Bringing Home Education Back to the Right Track

The child first receives care and education from their family, primarily their parents, at home. The institutionalization of the education system means more educational responsibilities are shifted to schools. Nonetheless, the place of home education is irreplaceable in cultivating the child's morality, character, and habits. The 2022 release of the Home Education Law marked the elevation of the standing of home education from a "private matter" to a "national concern." The law affirms the legal recognition of the roles of the parent in child education and the necessity of providing social support for home education (Ministry of Education of China, 2022). To give full play to the role of home education in the healthy growth of basic education children, it is imperative to develop a reasonable understanding of home-school collaboration, clearly define the boundary of home education, and optimize the communication channels for home-school partnerships.

Establish an Appropriate Notion of Home-School Partnership

Suchomlinski (2021) argues that school or home education alone cannot accomplish the sophisticated task of cultivating a whole person. A scientific attitude towards home-school partnerships is of vital importance for the proper implementation of home education. The school management should see parents as an equal party in the home-school partnership. It is important that they listen to the opinions of parents when formulating home-school collaborative programs. The implementation of these programs must be based on the principles of mutual respect and prioritizing child development. Teachers should not see themselves as superiors and transfer instruction-related duties to parents. Also, school leaders should involve parents in school management decision-making for the optimal development of students (Jiang, 2019).

From the standpoint of parents, the stereotypical image of the school is that it is the holder of absolute educational authority. Parents tend to accept its requirements without reservation. Nevertheless, increasing research and practice have shown that rational coordination between the school and parent is crucial for healthy child growth (Wang, 2019). Parents should enhance their consciousness of educational involvement and actively exercise their right to supervise school operations, but in the meantime, have the courage to reject any unreasonable requirements of the school regarding specific instructional duties (Jiang, 2013).

Clearly Define the Boundaries between School and Home Education

The school is a specialized and formal educational institution. School education is a form of structured education that transmits knowledge and skills to students through class-based instruction. Home education, on the other hand, occurs among family members, is unique to each family, and is infused into everyday life. The distinction between the two forms of education determines the division of responsibility between them (Zhang, 2018). Both the teacher and parent must be aware of the boundaries when implementing home-school partnerships. It is important for the parent not to interfere with the teacher's instructional plan. The teacher must keep in mind not to transfer their job responsibilities to the parent. Some teachers may view parental involvement in correcting kids' homework as a proper form of home-school partnership. However, correcting students' homework is part of their instructional duties, which should not become a burden on parents. A workable way of communicating with parents about students' homework is to have conversations with parents after they have finished correcting it themselves to inform parents of the learning situations of their children at school and get an idea of the students' home learning (Guo, 2023).

At the same time, those parents with low home education capabilities may need the guidance of the teacher on child education. In this case, it is worth noting that the teacher must be thoughtful in giving advice to these parents to avoid imposing arbitrary opinions on them. They should listen empathetically to the parents and provide pertinent counseling to help them realize successful family education (Zhong, 2023).

Improve Communication Channels for Home-School Partnerships

An effective use of communication channels makes the home-school partnership better meet the school's needs and suit the features of home educa-

tion. Among the various channels in use, the digital platform and parents' meetings are the most popular means of communication between teachers and parents.

Proper Use of Digital Platforms

Teachers and parents favor digital platforms in the Internet era because they are not limited by temporal and spatial constraints. Nevertheless, the functions of digital platforms have not been properly utilized in home-school communication (Xi, 2018). The online parent group, the most widely accepted digital avenue between teachers and parents, has restricted usage, being mainly used by the teacher to announce assignments for students as well as praise or admonishments for certain individual students. The teacher dominates the online parent group, while parents passively receive information. The parent group can serve more meaningful purposes. For instance, using the online group, the teacher can engage parents in conversations over hot educational topics and exchanges of home education experience; listen to the latter's reactions to emerging issues at school; and share useful information about home education to improve parents' capacity in this regard. Along with the parent group, other Internet-based platforms, such as the class-specific public platform and Blogger, can be adopted for the aforementioned purposes (Liu, 2021).

Properly moderating online communication on digital platforms can help avoid pointless, time-wasting chats. Furthermore, it is important not to overlook the value of face-to-face interaction in addition to Internet-based communication. The combination of timely Internet-based communication and traditional in-person exchange can significantly improve the efficacy of home-school partnerships (Zhang et al., 2018).

Enhancing the Traditional Parents' Meeting

Traditionally, the parents' meeting provides important opportunities for teacher-parent and inter-parent communication (Yang, 2012). Nonetheless, there are shortcomings in current parents' meetings. Teachers typically dominate the meeting, with parents acting as the listeners. Students, the targets of their concern, are excluded from the meeting. It is imperative to make changes to its organization to enhance home-school communication. First, a moderate amount of student participation in the parents' meeting helps improve its relevance and parent-child understanding. Students should be permitted to give their comments on the home education they received to enable parents to understand their real feelings and consider home education from their standpoints. Second, the parents' meeting should be played out in a more equal fashion. With the teacher delivering speeches at the teacher's

desk, parents may somewhat feel distanced from the former. A more casual layout like the “round table meeting” can help create a harmonious atmosphere for more open conversations. Third, the parents’ meeting gives the teacher a good opportunity to understand students’ home education. Therefore, the meeting should allow parents ample time to express their views on education and fully respect the diverse notions of education among parents. That will facilitate the teacher’s providing pertinent advice on their students’ home education.

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