

Navigating the Challenges of Compulsory Education: A Critical Examination of China's Double Reduction Policy

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Abstract. The article focuses on China's "Double Reduction" policy announced in 2021, which aims to ameliorate the high mental pressure of students associated with massive homework and limit tutoring services, thus mitigating high education anxiety and expenditure. The policy focuses on China's nine years of compulsory education, and the article is written in the form of content analysis with literature reviews and policy analysis. By decoding the policy terms and interpreting existing literature, the article offers insight into the impact of such a ground-changing policy. The result of the analysis is that although the policy effectively alleviates educational anxiety and costs, it also exacerbates social divisions and damages the quality of compulsory education. The new educational policy of China aims to magnify the gap between different socioeconomic statuses. Research argues that when addressing social issues and mental health issues, it should not come at the expense of education. The article calls for a balanced and careful approach to dealing with educational problems, and suggestions to mitigate the potential challenges, like gradually reducing assignments step by step and making asynchronous video lectures available for students nationwide, have been offered.

Keywords: The Double Reduction policy; compulsory education; social division; socioeconomic status.

1. Introduction

Education is considered an important cornerstone of national development, and compulsory education is a core component of it. According to data [1], 45% of elementary and junior high school students were enrolled in various forms of after-school academic support, which is a mundane phenomenon in society. However, this phenomenon not only has an impact on the educational influence of traditional schools but also has negative effects such as shortening the time for parents to communicate with their children, over-emphasis on knowledge acquisition, and less emphasis on the cultivation of comprehensive literacy. This leads to a lag in the development of students' communication skills, and it takes more time to adapt to college and even society [1].

The Double Reduction policy refers to the Chinese policy announced in 2021 that reduces homework for compulsory education and prohibits tutoring. The policy aims to reduce students' academic burden, improve their mental well-being, and reduce family expenditure on tutoring.

Existing research on the new education policy has an emphasis on economic influences. From the perspective of the economic impact on the education industry, existing studies have pointed out the arbitrary nature of the double reduction policy. Comprehensive research on extra-curricular institutions and teachers shows that they are under great depression and high job-losing numbers. Other issues related to the lack of recognition of traditional teachers have been addressed as well [2]. At present, the main research focuses on comparative analysis in the economic field, lacking in-depth analysis of the double reduction policy's impact from other perspectives.

The main method of this study is to analyze and interpret existing literature to argue about the influence on the actual teaching and learning experience and the degree of implementation of the policy, thus analyzing the influence. By analyzing both the achievements and accompanying new issues of the policy, this paper aims to analyze the policy objectively. With some insights into the influence, this paper will put an emphasis on the policy's negative side and offer suggestions for how to deal with it.

The author argues that while the policy effectively reduces educational anxiety and cost, new problems like enhanced unequal distribution of resources arise, and the policy offers challenges to the enforcer of compulsory education, the teachers. Education quality is as important as mitigating social problems or promoting mental health, thus, a policy adjustment that can take into account all aspects is urgently needed.

2. Case Description

The Double Reduction policy refers to reducing homework after school and reducing extra-curricular lectures outside school. Elementary school students are supposed to have homework that can be done within an hour and ninety minutes for junior high school students. The institutions should assign homework more wisely and have fewer quizzes and exams [3]. The policy aims to respond to concerns related to students' physical health and mental wellness. Through protecting students' rights to take a break and preserving their time after school, the policy has been made to address these issues. Another purpose is to reduce the burden on parents. They wish the next generation a better life than theirs. As a result, time and money have been spent investing in a child's education, tutoring, for example. The Double Reduction policy views seeking tutoring as the quality of school education being unfulfilling. Thus, the policy argues that the instructors should assign efficient homework to students that ideally can fulfill the educational purpose while taking a limited amount of time for the students to finish it, daycare services should help the parents who leave the workplace late, and tutoring institutions should be restricted [3]. Students' excessive homework burden, the tutoring burden leading to extra family education expenses, and corresponding emotional labor on parents are expected to be mitigated on an annual basis, and the results of the policy are expected to be highly effective with more time passes. The ultimate goal is to enhance citizen's overall educational satisfaction [3].

Before the announcement, China's education system created an enormous amount of pressure. Students are burdened with heavy academic burdens, including extensive homework, exam preparation pressures, and leisure time filled with extra-curricular classes for a supplement, leading to widespread anxiety and mental stress, which can even lead to health problems [4]. At the same time, the level of differences between cities and villages and between prestigious individuals and pedestrians has caused inequality in educational opportunities. It is presented in a situation where cities have an affluent amount of resources with multiple choices while poor areas like villages or farms do not get a chance to choose what education they receive [5]. Despite the number of educational resources, the current education system and parents in both places all have a similar preference for academic achievements and future job prospects, which has led to increasing pressure on students. More than 30% of students were asked to be in the top ten percent of the class of their year, almost every Chinese student is seriously considering applying to universities, and more than 80% of them were expected to become white collar with high salary [6]. The warming yet exhausting fact is that in order to make the next generation have better lives, families continue to invest an enormous amount of money and time in education, anxiously hoping that their children can have ideal, promising, and high-income careers.

In the present, the enforcement of the policy has some achievements. The government has issued a series of policy documents to limit students' homework load and largely restrict their class time outside school, thus reducing students' academic burden. The removal of extra-curricular lectures outside school aims to reduce the financial burden of education on students from poor families [3]. By restricting tutoring services, the money was automatically saved for those families. In addition, the policy emphasizes quality education, focuses on cultivating students' comprehensive qualities, promotes innovation and creativity, makes the curriculum more diverse, and focuses on skills and knowledge beyond subjects. To achieve this goal and implement the policy, teachers are expected to have high expectations. They need to reasonably arrange students' homework and ensure the quality of teaching as much as possible while reducing the amount of homework. They need to complete

some assignments at school and assign more scientific and meaningful homework. This matter is very difficult and challenging, and there are no specific instructions in the government policy approval. On the one hand, teachers and schools have greater subjective initiative. On the other hand, the instructors are facing great challenges in assigning homework, making it less while maintaining education effectiveness.

The government announcement puts forward requirements for reducing the educational burden on students and families. Arguments such as "improving the quality of compulsory education" have been raised but have not been fully resolved. The Double Reduction policy, while actively reducing stress and economic cost on the one hand, utilizes compulsory education to solve some social and mental health problems on the other hand. With less homework and restricted tutoring services, yet the exams for entering senior high schools and universities remain highly competitive, it is only reasonable to argue that the Double Reduction policy has an emphasis on dividing students into two streams of higher education: the college vocational education and the traditional higher education, going to a university.

3. Case Analysis

Potential questions and concerns arise about the possible new educational purposes. First, reducing academic burden may lead to a decrease in the quality of education, affecting students' academic preparation and overall quality. Although instructive suggestions like doing assignments in school and leaving homework wisely have been offered, the improvement of education quality cannot be achieved overnight. This requires the coordinated efforts of policies, education scholars, schools, teachers, students, and their families to gradually realize it. The announcement of the double reduction policy did not provide much buffering response time, but it also put forward high requirements, such as assigning homework wisely, making it difficult to quantify the specific inspection implementation.

While policies aim to reduce educational inequalities, implementation may be weak, allowing inequalities to persist across regions. The privileged middle-class and upper-class individuals will do whatever they can to ensure that their children are competitive; at the same time, in rural areas, working-class children will have free arrangements because of the reduced workload time. Although tutoring is prohibited, how they use their time after school can make a huge difference between students from different social classes. From a different aspect, the policy may lead to the survival and development difficulties of tutoring institutions. Strict restrictions were a catastrophe for tutoring institutions and related fields, creating an enormous amount of experienced teachers without jobs.

With the amount of homework being reduced, the quality of compulsory education faces great challenges, and the questions fall into how long it take for teachers to become adaptive to the new policy. Something more consequential is that Chinese students are far from self-regulated learners, yet studies have shown it to be an efficient method [7]. For individuals, spending their time effectively can build their human capital, thus becoming more competitive in the future labor market or other scenarios. By making education less intense with less homework yet keeping selective exams, the policy clearly has a preference for the dominant groups of people with power and resources. With affluent resources, rich interpersonal networks, and high cultural capital, those individuals can find an advantage in resuming tutoring within their family or seeking outside in their networks.

Conflict theory has been used as the theoretical framework to interpret the double reduction policy. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, who were known for their conflict insights, argue that education is nothing but a shield for the upper class to preserve their socioeconomic status [8]. In practice, the double reduction policy has taken away the right to practice tutoring, yet tutoring is not completely unavailable. As previously argued, some highly educated parents can teach their children, and social networks can ease the difficulty of finding a tutor. On the contrary, those individuals incapable of tutoring their children became more anxious and worried. Thus, the author argues that the double reduction policy is magnifying the advantage of highly educated, prestigious individuals. The sudden restriction of tutoring will take more time to save money for families who have already assigned part

of their income to the field of child education. More gradual steps and procedures should be taken to realize the goal of saving educational costs.

As an education policy, the double reduction policy does a great job of alleviating social problems, while there is much more that can be done as an education policy. For a country with a huge population, the quality of compulsory education is the pillar that ensures national development. A sudden reduction of homework and cancellation of tutoring is considered radical and advanced at this stage. The originally planned investment in children's education will not be immediately changed due to policy changes, and one should adhere to the principle of natural development: let time do the job.

Reducing homework for compulsory education is not the best option. It is worthwhile to let students be able to arrange their own time and learn materials voluntarily, but it cannot be done without decades of socialization and research. Research shows that the time spent and quality of homework are associated with one's academic performance in school [7]. It is counter-intuitive to have a time requirement for homework regardless of individual differences like the pace of writing or the working environment. With fewer assignments, a conflict theorist will argue that the dynamic of socioeconomic status will play its role in stratifying students, mirroring the social class cycle in society. As previously argued, how an individual spends their time is closely associated with human capital growth. The individuals with more resources can choose the path they find satisfying, while others will adhere to the only path they have. For instance, the rural and urban resources gap will result in urban students developing coding techniques while the rural students are going through the textbook. While urban students are doing their assignments on a big flat desk, the students in rural areas are studying in way worse environments. With less homework and no access to tutoring, the students will be polarized, being forced to learn on their own and find more practice themselves or being ranked out. The advantage of privileged students with affluent backgrounds should not be ignored, and it is irresponsible to ask schools to provide education on the one hand while cooling out some students on the other hand during the compulsory education stage. With highly educated parents committed to education, it is easier for privileged students to have high academic achievement and less likely to be cooled out by the school system.

4. Suggestions

The Double Reduction policy effectively reduces the cost and largely alleviates mental problems by giving students more time on their own. However, potential problems like magnifying social stratification and harming the quality of education should be dealt with.

It is recommended to reduce homework gradually rather than draw a hard line and announce it. Teachers are able to investigate methods to assign less homework while maintaining education quality. Homework is highly associated with one's academic achievement, and it should be treated carefully with deep concerns [9]. Formalism is supposed to be avoided by encouraging teachers to participate in seminars and gather first-hand data on the effectiveness of the experimental homework they assign. With reliable data, combined with records of quiz scores and homework completion times, efficient teaching methods can be found to improve student learning effects.

Another suggestion aims to deal with the education quality issue. Teachers with a good reputation for their pedagogy or style should be encouraged to produce broadcast recordings and asynchronous lectures. Those materials should be used to promote communication between institutions to solve the problem of uneven educational resources and make it available for students to watch to promote voluntary learning [10]. The huge benefit comes with a low cost. For students who wish to review the material, it is a great opportunity for them to follow not just their instructor but teachers from another school so students can learn the same material from different approaches, thus promoting the learning experience.

Finally, it is recommended to resume tutoring services with limitations on the amount of time it takes and the tuition fee it requires. Tutoring can create a more comprehensive and in-depth learning experience as a supplement to school education. The tutoring service should be regulated strictly to

prevent students from becoming overly dependent on tutoring. The teaching content of tutoring should be standardized to ensure consistency with school teaching content and promote the all-round development of students.

5. Conclusion

The author argues that the "double reduction" policy, while alleviating educational anxiety and costs, may intensify social class differentiation and adversely affect the quality of compulsory education. To deal with potential challenges, the article puts forward some suggestions, including reducing homework gradually, promoting the communication among teacher community, making full use of technology for communication and learning, and restarting tutoring under surveillance.

The article has certain limitations. First, the argument proposed in the article mainly relies on qualitative literature and theories in the ideal stage. The support from empirical data and in-depth research is relatively limited. Secondly, the article has a strong emphasis on the impact of the policy itself, with relatively insufficient consideration of the actual implementation of the policy, possible problems, and solution strategies. A more comprehensive policy analysis should include in-depth research at the policy implementation stage to better understand the actual effects of the policy. Thirdly, the understanding of the distribution of educational resources is a highly complex issue, and the arguments may not be comprehensive. The article emphasizes its importance to students' future, yet there is still room for further in-depth discussion on salient aspects determining one's future. These limitations suggest that digging deeper into these aspects may help improve the comprehensiveness and depth of the text.

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