

Strategies for Improving the Teaching Quality in Middle Schools Under the Double Reduction Policy

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Abstract: The meaning of the term “reduction” in Double Reduction Policy implores teachers to reflect on their teaching process and improve teaching efficiency. Not only should the quantity be reduced, but so should the behavior. Having a comprehensive understanding of the students’ learning process is actually a form of science. Therefore, we need to study and enhance its development^[1]. In order to reduce the learning burden and increase the efficiency of classroom teaching, we must clearly identify the inefficient and ineffective behaviors in classroom teaching, so as to avoid the following situations: a lack of deep thinking, a lack of ability in lesson preparation, fragmentation of questions and answers, a lack of questions that highlight the key points, anticlimax teaching process, and the habit of running over time in class^[2,3]. On this basis, this paper elaborates the current education state and clarifies the basic requirements of effective classroom teaching. Meanwhile, to reduce students’ workload and increase the efficiency in carrying out assignments, much attention should be paid to optimizing assignment design and refining homework review and feedback. The purpose is to assign homework with an appropriate amount (achievable), precision (targeted), and suitability (personalized). Putting an end to the repetitious and unified training is not enough to improve the effect.

Keywords: Burden reduction; Quality improvement; Classroom teaching; Assignment design

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1. Introduction

When the Double Reduction Policy was announced, it was inevitable that some individuals were caught up in the misconception, stating things like, “Just to reduce the burden, if students’ academic load is reduced, they will have fewer opportunities to achieve good grades.” Therefore, the first step is to comprehensively and correctly interpret the Double Reduction Policy. The meaning of the term “reduction” in Double Reduction Policy does not signify its purpose, but rather a means or strategy to encourage teachers to reflect on the teaching process and improve teaching efficiency. We must clearly realize that the basic premise of burden reduction is never to sacrifice the quality of education or teaching^[4]. Additionally, learning is a scientific, methodical, regular subject with differentiated efficiency. Less homework will not affect the teaching quality if suitable approaches are used, and regulations are well-understood.

What we hope to reduce is students’ mental burden instead of their behavioral burden. What we want to reduce is the ineffective burden rather than neglecting the process of making efforts and developing. Only those educators who truly know how to increase efficiency will understand the true meaning of burden reduction. In other words, burden reduction is proportional to increasing efficiency^[5].

2. The current situation of teaching under the Double Reduction Policy

Not only should the quantity be reduced, but so should low efficient or inefficient educational behavior. Homework is merely one of the components of burden reduction. Various factors, throughout each sector in the entire teaching process, play a role in adding up to students' mental burden. It is a necessity to thoroughly "comb" the teaching process. Homework should not be altered in such a way that it seems sophisticated and interesting but fails to fulfil its original purpose. In that case, how to consolidate their knowledge and assist them in completing spiral escalation in the learning process ^[6]? The goal of efficient teaching lies in students' thorough understanding and in applying what they have learned to practice. In that case, the core issue of burden reduction is on how to improve the teaching level ^[7].

The concept of burden reduction is the direction and opportunity for modern education. Clearly, to reduce students' burden and increase their efficiency is not just about assignments, but also inclusive of classroom, self-learning, tutoring, and courses. In addition, it involves the evaluation system, communication between teachers and students, family-school communication, and other aspects. Among them, classroom teaching and assignments are the two most important aspects, which are crucial in helping students consolidate knowledge.

In terms of what is mainly related to schoolwork, assignment reduction stands out in the Double Reduction Policy. In fact, it is merely a relatively prominent point. Reducing burden and increasing efficiency should be considered in all links of teaching and learning process. For a long time, teaching has focused too much on teachers while neglecting the learning of students. Understanding students' learning is in fact a form of science that requires us to continuously study and stimulate it. If we can teach in accordance with scientific methods and measures, we will be able to achieve twice the results with half the effort, and eventually achieve the goal of burden reduction. However, discussing about improving efficiency without practical classroom teaching is as absurd as talking about toxicity without taking into account of the dose ^[8]. Therefore, the following section will discuss the role of classroom teaching and assignment design in burden reduction.

3. Classroom teaching

3.1. Ineffective and inefficient behaviors in classroom teaching

3.1.1. Lack of deep thinking

Weak thinking is manifested in situations where teachers only engage themselves in teaching. Teachers tend to neglect cultivating students' learning ability, especially the process of stimulating their thinking ability. Teachers pay little attention to the state of students and the learning results. What leads to this phenomenon is highly related to teachers' inadequate thinking ability and the lack of effective means to realize higher-level thinking patterns. Moreover, the fact that the idea of student-centered classroom has not been rooted in their minds is another reason ^[9]. Replacing students' thinking pattern with that of teachers seems to bring about a smooth teaching process, but it has no effect on improving students' overall literacy and ability.

3.1.2. Inadequate lesson preparation

Inadequate lesson preparation contributes to low classroom efficiency, which is mainly reflected in obscure teaching objectives, unclear links between classes, insufficient classroom presets, and blurry instructions. In particular, the methods for posing questions are insufficient to inspire realistic and in-depth reading, resulting in a failure to achieve deep learning. The arbitrary arrangement of tests during class often exaggerates the superficial aspect but disregards the significance of the content. In short, the emphasis of assessments is on mechanically memorizing knowledge, while students' competency is fairly negligible.

3.1.3. Fragmentation of questions and answers

The problem is manifested in many fragmented questions, such as “Isn’t it?”, “Right?”, or the problem is presented in superficial conversations without much thinking. There seems to be a strong interaction between students and teachers, but the truth is that this kind of interaction is in fact shallow. The thinking ability of students is not as skilled as it should be. The reason is that teachers do not have the capability to interpret texts and put forward effective questions that can stimulate students’ thinking at a higher level, neither are they capable of designing engaging activities that can motivate authentic learning. Unclear teaching objectives lead to a dilemma where each teaching link cannot correspond to the skills that students need. The real essence of effective questions and activity design lies in the direction where certain skills and quality can be cultivated.

3.1.4. Lack of questions that highlight the key points

The issue is embodied in the lack of clear key points or difficult points and rough design in teaching links. Moreover, simple questions are made more complicated, while teachers disregard those points that require further exploration. The source of this problem resides in the fact that teachers disregard students’ starting points and key points in learning. Without having a clear understanding of students’ learning situation, teachers have the tendency to make subjective judgments according to their previous teaching experience when preparing lessons. This issue is also attributable to the lack of mastery of curricular standards and examination criteria ^[10]. As previously stated, this will result in low classroom efficiency and the delay in class.

3.1.5. Anticlimax teaching process

It is manifested in the lack of summary in classroom teaching and assessment of teaching outcomes. The uneven arrangement of class structure results in a situation where teachers have too much curriculum content to finish, thus ending the class in haste. This problem is closely related to the aforementioned points ^[11]. Outwardly, the class finishes on time, but it does not provide students with the essence needed for digesting information, let alone a solid process of assessing students’ learning effect.

3.1.6. The habit of running over time in class

Some people believe that teachers are to blame for this occurrence, although it is actually a sign of classroom inefficiency. The inadequate preparation for class is the reason behind it. Running over time in class is the pinnacle of low classroom efficiency and also the epitome of problems in setting appropriate goals, comprehending key and difficult points, designing teaching links, and evaluating classes ^[12]. For example, if you have a whole day to explain something well, and you only need 10 minutes to prepare for it, this is plainly efficient.

3.2. Basic requirements for effective classroom teaching

3.2.1. Classroom with an appropriate starting point (class basis)

- (1) Fully interpret the content of the textbook, the intention of the course design, and the key points in the textbook.
- (2) Recognize the relationship between prior and new information.
- (3) Identify the overall cognitive levels and rules of students.
- (4) Familiarize with the knowledge and skill requirements that can be obtained from each chapter.
- (5) Master the methods of setting and writing learning objectives.

3.2.2. Student-centered classroom (class form)

- (1) Learn to maintain classroom discipline and ensure classroom order.
- (2) Give students enough time to think, practice, and demonstrate key issues.
- (3) Understand and guide students' listening effect via observation, patrol, reminder, evaluation, investigation, classroom practice, and other effective ways.
- (4) Learn to recognize the issues confronted by students in class and master the method of guiding the situation to promote teaching.
- (5) Make class summaries and use students' self-summary to improve their learning ability.

3.2.3. Classroom of reflection and enlightenment (class core)

- (1) Learn to design valuable questions to inspire students to think and reflect.
- (2) Allow students ample time to think clearly about the key points and to see the negative consequences of behaviors such as chatting, gossiping, and meaningless discussion.
- (3) Recognize the value of leaving blank space and waiting for students' thinking to improve and the realization of classroom effect.
- (4) Learn to encourage students to participate in the process of forming knowledge, methods, and emotions, as well as assist students develop their own understanding and viewpoints.
- (5) Assist students in establishing their knowledge systems and systematic methods by incorporating both prior and new information.

3.2.4. Achievements in an effective classroom (class effect)

- (1) Guarantee that at least 80% of students can master the key and difficult points.
- (2) Learn to use observation, inquiry, investigation, and assessment to determine the level to which students learn from the class, and then make adjustments in teaching accordingly.
- (3) Learn to design typical examples and after-class assignments according to the teaching objectives as well as the key and difficult points to assess the learning effect of students.
- (4) Make full use of class summary, guide students to sort out information, encourage them to practice self-summary.
- (5) Identify the issues that students are confronted with when completing their tasks, and devise a strategy for achieving the goal through evaluation and commenting on common issues.

3.2.5. Value-led classroom (ultimate goal)

- (1) Know the learning habits that students should develop from different subjects, and guide them to cultivate those habits gradually by teaching in stages (independence).
- (2) Master classroom evaluation, enrich language for classroom evaluation, and use teacher's evaluation to motivate and inspire students to learn (confidence).
- (3) Comprehend the aesthetic and educational function of the subject, so that students can feel, understand, and finally pursue the truth, goodness, and beauty through classroom teaching (humanity).

4. Assignment

4.1. Optimizing the assignment design

4.1.1. Selecting and refining the content

Teachers must complete the assignment ahead of time in order to determine the coverage, difficulty, and gradient of the questions. With a unanimous opinion, the lesson preparation group releases the assignment.

The content should be consistent with the curriculum standards and teaching objectives. It should also be scientific, with an appropriate difficulty level and clear requirement. The assignment design should

correspond to students' cognitive levels, which means that it should be cognitively challenging and stimulating for deep learning. The answers to the questions should also be scientific, logical, and understandable. The proportion of memorization, comprehension, application, and other aspects should be reasonable. Memorization should be necessary, whereas mechanical repetition should be avoided. Heavy workload without careful selection should be eliminated indiscriminately. As for the liberal arts category, mechanically copying tasks should be reduced to tasks aiming at determining whether basic knowledge has been fully mastered. As for the science department, endless practices should be ceased and transformed into summative work ^[13,14].

4.1.2. Controlling the total amount of time

For example, the total amount of time for assignments in one day is 90 minutes for five subjects (Chinese, mathematics, English, physics, and geography). In that case, the time for Chinese should be as such (in minutes):

$$90 \times \frac{120}{120 + 120 + 120 + 70 + 50} = 22.5$$

The total amount of time is flexible based on the arrangement of each subject and students' self-learning time. Teachers should work together to arrange the assignments and encourage students to complete their training in a limited amount of time ^[15].

4.1.3. Setting different layers of assignments

- (1) Basic homework: low-level difficulty; every student is required to complete the homework.
- (2) Stratified homework: different levels of difficulty according to students' capacity; lower-level students need to complete the basic homework, whereas higher-level students need to complete a set number of advanced tasks after completing the basic homework.
- (3) Flexible homework: a challenging and elective assignment for students; the main purpose is to stimulate students' desire to explore further.
- (4) Personalized homework: assignments that are designed for certain individuals or groups, whose purpose is to magnify students' strengths and overcome their weaknesses with personalized guidance.

4.2. Checking and evaluation

(1) Checking in time

In principle, marked homework should be distributed to students before the next class. The earlier it is distributed, the better. In this way, it will be more convenient for teachers to comment on the homework and students to correct their mistakes.

(2) Checking with standards

The standards should be consistent with those previously published. Full and comprehensive checking is necessary, whereas incomplete and erroneous checking is not permitted. Self-correction and self-evaluation by students are likewise discouraged. Teachers should use red pens to mark students' homework, make clear and unified symbols, write neatly, as well as ensure correct and exact annotations. In addition, they should use plain, clear, encouraging, and inspiring language to make comments. Homework checking should be graded and dated. For students, they are required to timely correct the wrong answers, and the amended homework should be immediately checked the second time. Face-to-face checking is required for some students.

(3) Evaluating in a scientific way

All assignments must be evaluated using the “Grades and Comments” system, which implies that the evaluation must include not only objective and fair scores, but also supporting comments based on facts, a positive attitude toward grades, and euphemism pointing out the faults. In this way, teachers can assist students in correcting their mistakes and clarifying their learning direction via scientific evaluation.

(4) Recording down common problems

It is crucial to analyze common incorrect answers in students’ homework and then record down their corrections, novel ideas, and solutions in a timely manner. These typical examples will serve as the basis for the following comments.

(5) Defining responsibilities

It is strictly prohibited to ask parents to check their children’s homework. However, it is acceptable to advise parents to check if their children have completed their homework and to assess the quality of their work on weekends, which is a good way to learn about their children’s learning status.

(6) Guiding the correction of mistakes

It is discouraged to mechanically repeat more than 10 times; hence, it is recommended that students are guided to classify incorrect responses to document approaches and rules, but not to solve the questions word by word. Blindly copying answers should also be avoided.

4.3. Feedback and comments

(1) Feedback

Feedback on previous assignments should be given before the new lesson or in the evening during students’ self-studying period. The feedback should include praising students who finished their homework on screen to make a more intuitive impression on other students. Students whose quality of homework is particularly high or who have made progress should be praised and encouraged in public. Through mutual appreciation and comparison, students will gain inspiration from those fine examples. For students with poor performance, feedback should be given in the form of rating or listing error types anonymously, in order to protect their self-esteem and help them identify their own problems.

(2) Comments

Teachers can give comments in various ways, such as through collective comments, individual explanations, and other approaches. Centered on classical methods and typical fault causes, teachers should provide targeted feedback in a timely manner. They should also pay attention to groups who have similar problems and categorize them, so as to respond to those problems quickly. Moreover, it is important to focus on students’ ability to infer other questions from a similar one. It is a good idea to encourage students, whose assignments are outstanding, to demonstrate their ideas, through which other students will be encouraged and teachers will also learn about the strengths of their students in the process of dealing with the questions. Students can exhibit their reasoning process for common erroneous reasons, allowing them to correct their mistakes along with their thinking habits.

(3) Adjustments in teaching

Adjustments and improvement should be made to the teaching content and strategy based on students’ completed assignments. This would contribute to consolidating and strengthening the knowledge that students have not completely grasp in the process. It is also beneficial to correcting mistaken thinking patterns. Teachers need to be proficient at reflecting on the mistakes made by students to determine if those mistakes are due to the lack of knowledge or the defects in classroom teaching. In that way, teachers can then make timely adjustments in teaching.

5. Conclusion

In summary, we should not sacrifice or lower the quality of education to realize burden reduction. Only by implementing the Double Reduction Policy can teaching quality and efficiency be enhanced along with students' physical and mental health. Students can achieve many learning results within a limited time if they combine burden reduction with quality improvement, striving for both burden reduction and quality improvement. Policies may change, but the way of evaluating survival by quality will not; times may change, but all development-friendly standard will remain intact. We have lived through a changing history; hence, we are familiar with the taste of change, and we are constantly aware of the future because we have taken education seriously.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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