

Multi-Dimensional Analysis of China's "Double Reduction" Policy

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Abstract: Under China's "Double Reduction" policy, although the educational pressure has somewhat reduced, the mechanism of talent selection through examinations still exists, which means competition remains, leading to the internalization of education. This article analyzes the challenges faced by the "Double Reduction" policy from historical and current perspectives. The reasons for the internalization of education are examined and four recommendations for the further implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy are presented.

Keywords: China; "Double Reduction" policy; Educational reform; Internalization

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1. Background and purpose of the "Double Reduction" policy

China has a long-standing tradition of examination culture and a strong sense of academic achievement, stemming from its historical role as the birthplace of imperial examinations. Besides, China's competitive examination system, notably the intense competition for prestigious educational resources in elite schools, is well-known, often characterized by phrases like "a thousand soldiers and ten thousand horses crossing a single-log bridge" in the context of the college entrance examination (*gaokao*). Thirdly, the Chinese education system heavily emphasizes examination scores, resulting in significant academic pressure on students. This, combined with the prevailing belief in the primacy of test scores and intellectual education, has led to a proliferation of supplementary education institutions even before the "Double Reduction" policy, contributing to the phenomenon of educational internalization. Fourthly, the high-pressure educational environment has become a factor affecting the country's demographic structure. In 2020, China's birth rate hit its lowest point since 1978, standing at 0.852%, highlighting the urgent need to alleviate the burden of family education and reduce the pressure on young people in raising children ^[1].

2. The essence of the "Double Reduction" policy

The "Double Reduction" policy consists of two main aspects: improving the quality and efficiency of school

education and regulating and promoting healthy educational training.

2.1. Enhancing the quality and efficiency of school education

The primary objective of the “Double Reduction” policy is to enhance the quality of school education. Only by providing high-quality educational services and enabling students to learn effectively within the school environment, can the demand for extracurricular training be reduced. Primary and secondary schools should comprehensively strengthen and optimize homework management, after-school services, and examination management to shape a system that provides quality educational services within the school. Classroom teaching is a routine educational activity in schools and a crucial element in improving the quality of compulsory education. Enhancing classroom efficiency is a fundamental means to ensure educational quality. Teachers should fully grasp the rhythm of classroom teaching and adapt to changes in students’ attention through flexible and diverse teaching methods, teacher-student interaction, and situational shaping, aiming to improve classroom efficiency. This approach can reduce the need for students to engage in extensive post-class review and consolidation, avoiding the scenario where “one minute of distraction in the classroom results in one hour of post-class tutoring.”

2.2. Regulating and promoting healthy educational training

Subject-based extracurricular educational training is a focal point of the “Double Reduction” policy’s governance efforts. Under the dominance of capital, extracurricular educational training institutions, driven by profit motives, employ various means to attract customers and expand their operations. They not only offer various enrichment and exam preparation courses under the pretext of strengthening fundamentals but also provide advanced training as a selling point to give students an edge. The consequence of this approach is the exacerbation of the culture of supplementary classes, where students engage in endless tutoring, leading to growing parental anxiety. Consequently, China has taken policy measures to prohibit extracurricular educational training institutions from engaging in profit-driven, harmful market competition, prevent them from excessively exaggerating the value and utility of educational products to consumers, and restrict exorbitantly priced training courses. The strict regulation of the time, methods, and means of extracurricular educational training aims to ensure that such training follows educational principles and promotes the healthy growth of students ^[2].

3. Challenges in the implementation of the “Double Reduction” Policy

After the “Double Reduction” policy reached grassroots levels, it showed significant results. However, students and parents realized that even though the educational pressure in primary, middle, and high schools had decreased, the emphasis on exam scores, especially in the context of *gaokao* persisted. Consequently, various forms of extracurricular training continued privately, and in some cases, a cat-and-mouse game developed between these activities and government regulations.

Wealthier families had multiple avenues to access extracurricular training resources. The initial intention of the Chinese government in banning extracurricular training institutions was to prevent educational resources from becoming commodities subject to financial competition. However, in the reality of high market demand, the prices for private education and training surged due to the perceived risks involved. As a result, there was an overwhelming demand for tutoring teachers, and various forms of tutoring emerged. For instance, affluent families would hire teachers to conduct lessons at their villas, a practice known as “home tutoring.” They would also hire teachers under the pretense of other roles, such as relatives, nannies, or cleaners, to provide tutoring to students at home. The training locations were highly flexible and could be in suburban homes or even in

mobile vehicles. It was challenging for education authorities to effectively supervise and curb the diverse forms of tutoring activities, especially among economically stronger families, which hindered the effectiveness of the “Double Reduction” policy. Additionally, dissatisfaction arose among families below the middle class as private education and training became exclusive to the wealthy due to soaring prices. Educational resources for families below the middle class were severely deprived. This shows that a blanket ban on extracurricular training institutions not only failed to achieve the original goal of educational resource equity but instead exacerbated the competition for educational resources.

3.1. Reasons for the challenges faced by the “Double Reduction” policy

From a historical perspective, China has a strong emphasis on and reliance on the examination system, influenced by the culture of imperial examinations (*keju*). It places significant importance on exams and often considers exam results as the primary, if not the sole, criteria for accessing educational opportunities. As a result, Chinese society places great emphasis on academic achievement, and obtaining high-quality educational resources through exams has become a societal consensus. Pursuing admission to prestigious schools has also become a common goal among students, indirectly contributing to the continued high academic pressure. China’s historical influence from the imperial examination system has fostered a value system that places a premium on education and academic achievement. From a contemporary perspective, *gaokao* in China has demonstrated a strong “baton effect,” overshadowing the essential purpose of education in promoting holistic development while emphasizing exam scores. This has directly contributed to the phenomenon of educational internalization. The unrelenting pressure in the Chinese education system is fundamentally rooted in the baton effect of *gaokao*, which continues to be significant despite a reduction in academic pressure during compulsory education stages.

The prevalence of extracurricular tutoring institutions is a visible manifestation of educational internalization, prompting the Chinese government to take strong measures against them. However, the government’s approach has largely focused on suppressing extracurricular tutoring without addressing the deeper-rooted anxiety about social stratification. Disparities in social status and income among different professions are substantial, and no student wishes to be redirected into less prestigious fields. Thus, regardless of government efforts to suppress extracurricular tutoring, Chinese society still perceives education characterized by internalization as the optimal path for upward social mobility.

The author believes that the crux of these issues lies in the substantial disparity between mental and manual laborers following educational stratification. Students redirected into regular education in high school primarily focus on academic subjects and have the opportunity to enter prestigious universities through *gaokao*, gaining social recognition, higher salaries, and greater job prospects. In contrast, students in vocational education primarily focus on acquiring professional skills, with limited chances of entering university, resulting in comparatively lower wages and conditions. Consequently, students’ prospects and opportunities are asymmetrical after educational stratification. In the eyes of the Chinese population, the returns on regular education far exceed those of vocational education. Therefore, families continue to send their children to tutoring classes, hoping to secure admission to regular high schools through the secondary school entrance examination (*zhongkao*). Thus, it becomes evident that there is no fundamental basis for educational stratification in Chinese society, and the main path for upward social mobility continues to be admission to prestigious schools. The alignment of students’ goals fuels the intensity of exam competition, making it challenging to change the high-pressure state of Chinese education. As such, the “Double Reduction” policy can only serve as a temporary solution, rather than addressing the root causes of the issue.

4. Four recommendations for further implementing the “Double Reduction” policy

4.1. Establishing policy support for the legitimate participation of multiple stakeholders in basic education to achieve rational allocation of educational resources

As the “Double Reduction” policy gradually enters more complex territory, the pressures from various parties can impact the overall policy implementation. In a survey of “Double Reduction” policy attitudes among parents of students in the national compulsory education stage, 87% of parents expressed anxiety about their children’s education, and 73.2% found it challenging to provide effective guidance to their children. These responses reflect parents’ concerns about the quality of education currently available ^[3].

Regarding extracurricular training institutions, the “one-size-fits-all” and “clearance city-wide” measures have achieved temporary success, so supporting policies should now be introduced. These policies should establish standardized management guidelines for legitimate and compliant educational training institutions, considering them as supplementary forces to in-school education rather than adversaries.

For social organizations, active participation in this major transformation of basic education is crucial. Mobilizing the enthusiasm and initiative of grassroots organizations, stimulating local educational vitality, creating a conducive educational atmosphere, and extending high-quality educational resources to every student should be actively pursued ^[4].

4.2. Tailor-made supporting policies for “Double Reduction” based on local conditions

Firstly, there are differences in economic development and educational levels among provinces and cities, and the content of the “Double Reduction” policy should also vary accordingly. In regions with higher educational levels, the challenge is to meet the demands for personalized education. Relying solely on government and school efforts is insufficient. It is essential to legally and flexibly engage diverse social entities in education. In areas with relatively limited educational funding, teaching staff, and resources, bringing in high-quality external teachers and resources to supplement the schools, mobilizing the enthusiasm of businesses and social organizations to participate in basic education development, and creating platforms for urban-rural teacher exchange and resource sharing can help “Double Reduction” policy become an opportunity for local basic education development, accelerating progress in regions with weaker educational levels.

Secondly, in the governance of non-subject institutions, principles of reasonable guidance and categorized governance should be followed. In regions where non-subject education resources are abundant within schools, precautions should be taken to prevent non-subject education from becoming the next battleground for academic competition. In regions with a severe shortage of non-subject teaching staff and resources within schools, encouragement and guidance should be provided for external resources to supplement internal education efforts. Additionally, an objective assessment of the sources of student academic burdens should be conducted. Regional and grade-level differences can affect the extent and sources of academic burdens, so local policy designs should be adapted to local conditions and dynamically changing, rather than following a uniform national standard.

4.3. Transforming educational mindsets throughout society

Parents should develop correct parenting perspectives and create a healthy family education atmosphere. Students, guided by both schools and parents, should cultivate good learning habits and methods, embrace the concept of lifelong education, and avoid seeking quick and easy learning paths. Schools, parents, and students should fundamentally change their thinking and break away from the idea of “solely pursuing high scores.” Education should shift from an exam-oriented approach to one that emphasizes holistic development and

effectively bridges secondary and higher education, laying a solid foundation for nurturing top-notch innovative talents.

On one hand, parents need to understand their responsibilities and obligations and address their children's developmental issues in the right way while patiently and equally communicating with them to hear their thoughts. During the educational transition at the middle school level, parents should have the correct perspective that "regular high school" and "vocational high school" are simply different paths. In a socialist country where the people are in charge, both paths can lead to a bright future, and it is not necessary to force children to improve their scores through additional pressure after classes. Instead, parents should choose the path that best suits their child's development and strive for personalized and character-focused education.

4.4. Reducing quantity while improving quality

In essence, the number of tasks and the time taken to complete them are only the surface manifestations of academic burden, while students' psychological and emotional experiences constitute its core. Therefore, "quantity reduction" only treats the symptoms, while "quality improvement," which focuses on improving students' mental and emotional states, addresses the root cause. Firstly, compared to "quantity reduction," the "quality improvement" approach pays more attention to students' learning experiences, including cognitive states, emotions, and behavioral tendencies. "Quality improvement" is about focusing on the micro-level domains where academic burdens occur, aiming to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of school teaching, improve students' learning efficacy, and enrich their journey in learning, thus truly alleviating their physical and mental burdens. Secondly, when considering the ultimate goal of student development in the context of reducing academic burdens, "quantity reduction" represents a passive "do-nothing" approach, rooted in the linear thinking and complacency of educators. It can only temporarily address immediate challenges and does not contribute significantly to the overall optimization of education and the long-term benefits for students. Besides, "quality improvement" is a proactive "action-oriented" approach that reflects educators' forward-looking vision and proactive mindset, incorporating reduction efforts into the continuous improvement of education and the long-term development of students. In summary, reduction efforts should not be fixated on the illusion of a one-time "quantity reduction" but should continuously explore the path of "quality improvement" ^[5].

5. Conclusion

China's "Double Reduction" policy has succeeded to some extent in reducing the educational burden on students and families but has also faced several challenges. The fundamental reasons for these challenges lie in China's society, which places a strong emphasis on exam scores and faces issues related to educational stratification. The deep-rooted culture of *gaokao* and the pursuit of academic success create a belief among students and parents that exam scores are the only path to success. Additionally, disparities between different professions lead most people to still aim for admission to regular high schools during the junior high school entrance examination.

Last but not least, the "Double Reduction" policy requires collective efforts from the entire society to change perceptions of education from a singular focus on exam scores to a more comprehensive approach emphasizing quality education. Parents need to clarify their responsibilities and obligations, guiding their children to view different educational paths in a balanced way, seeking not just high scores but also personalized and character-based education. Only through collaborative efforts from various parties can China's education system truly undergo reform and improvement, laying a solid foundation for nurturing more innovative talents.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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