

# The Implications of the “Double Reduction” Policy on School Choice in China Based on Capital Theory

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**Abstract:** Framed with Bourdieu’s capital theory, this article examines how different kinds of capital affect school choice after the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy in China. The considerable disparities in capital causes difference in choice of schools, which is one of the causes of educational inequality. The article tentatively concludes that the “Double Reduction” policy promotes educational equity by restricting the use of capital by the privileged class. However, in the long run, the policy cannot alleviate the educational inequity, because it simplifies the complex struggle and compromise among different types of capital.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu’s capital theory; China; “Double Reduction” policy; School choice; Educational equity

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## 1. Introduction

School choice refers to the practice of parents selecting their child’s school rather than sending them to the school which they are geographically assigned based on their place of living <sup>[1]</sup>. This phenomenon has become more prevalent in many countries worldwide over the last three decades as neoliberalism came to prominence in the 1980s <sup>[2]</sup>. According to David Harvey <sup>[2]</sup>, neoliberalism suggests that the most effective approach to promote the well-being of humans is to liberate individual entrepreneurial skills and freedom within an institutional framework characterized by substantial private rights and free markets. As a result, the responsibility of policy designers is to establish and maintain an institutional structure conducive to such behaviors. To some extent, the choice was taken as a neoliberal imperative <sup>[3]</sup>. Despite the disparities in the region, history, and culture, most advocates of such policies claim marketized education can give parents more options to meet their various needs. Based on this view, school choice was employed as an effective solution to alleviate educational problems in many nations.

However, the various critics arose about the reducing education into a market consumption <sup>[4-6]</sup>. It was argued that this policy promotes educational inequality. According to the National People’s Congress of China, every student should go to a school near the places where their residence is registered before middle school. Although school choice is not legally permitted, some parents discover ways to get around the tightly controlled admissions system to enroll their children in schools that do better academically or have more resources. Hence, in China, school choice is not a solution to educational problems but a natural outgrowth and a complicated problem.

In 2021, China implemented the “Double Reduction” policy. The new policy effectively alleviates the school choice problem and promotes equitable distribution of educational resources. But while it does limit the privilege of some people, the root cause of school-choosing is the lack of quality of education resources

and their misallocation, which is much harder to detect. Hence, through Bourdieu's theory, this study analyzes the hard-to-restrict school-choosing in China to explain why the "Double Reduction" policy could not boost education equality as planned.

## 2. Bourdieu's capital theory

In this research, capital, as a key concept, facilitates the interpretation of different decisions made by families from different backgrounds in the field of school choice. Bourdieu<sup>[7]</sup> conceptualizes capital as four types: economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital. The first one means the material assessment, which is tangible goods that can be traded by money. The second one, social capital, means network and social circle, like friends and classmates. Cultural capital tends to be described as some spiritual treasure, which is manifested in three forms<sup>[8]</sup>: the embodied state (personal cultivation and taste), the objectified state (books and paintings), and the institutionalized state (honors and diplomas). The institutionalized state of cultural capital is also known as symbolic capital, which refers to be admitted by rules, the worldview of dominants. Different from symbolic capital, the habituated and systematic negation of the values, actions, and options are described as symbolic violence. Those four can transform into each other and synthetically decide one's position in the field. In reality, capital is never distributed equally.

There are another two terms related to the capital theory. The first term is "field," which means a bounded area of social space, with its own internal rules, a network or configuration of relations between capital and positions. One's position in a particular field depends on how one obtains, utilizes, and explores capital treasured by the field. Individuals in a field internalize the rules manifested by an individual's *habitus* and create recognized practices based on the norms<sup>[9]</sup>. It bridges the internal and external worlds and links one's past and present. Overall, *habitus* interacts with field and capital, both temporally and spatially.

## 3. The fight of capital in the field of China's school choice

Economic capital is the decisive force in school choice in China. Families who want to choose schools will pay a school choice fee (*zhexiaofei*), which is treated as an educational endowment and can be used at the school's discretion. Parents will be inevitably involved the field of school choice, whether they plan to choose a school or not because parents who tend to choose a school for their children encroach on the limited number of places available, which should have belonged to other children. Differences in capital place children of various classes in the selection of schools in distinct positions.

It is commonly acknowledged that there is a unique relationship between the middle class and education, with the middle class being more reliant on educational credentials than other social classes<sup>[10]</sup>. School choice fees are an integral part of this investment, and many high-quality schools also place a high value on academic performance. As a result, children from this class attend many tuition classes and read more educational materials (cultural capital) to improve their learning outcomes. Another reason for the higher position of the middle class in school choice is the higher level of education of their parents in general (symbolic capital). It widens the gap in family capital even further, as some parents can answer their children's problems themselves and are more knowledgeable about how to educate them.

While children from middle-class families step up in this field, rural or economically disadvantaged families fall victim to educational inequity. The lack of various capital makes it challenging for them to excel academically or get access to a key school. Hence, they are stuck in ignorance, both in the field of school choice and in society. In the long run, children of vulnerable groups gradually believe that they are not good at learning, inadvertently enduring symbolic violence and further internalizing it as part of their *habitus*. Education is supposed to provide a ladder for social mobility, but school choice has made social mobility insurmountable in China to some extent.

In many countries, school choice policies are designed to allow the market to play a role in education to rationalize the allocation of educational resources and provide more educational choices. However, in the research of Bourdieu's theory from Bathmaker <sup>[11]</sup>, diversification is a type of diversion that guides a segment of the population along a simple but ultimately less rewarding path. Rural children tend to choose less competitive schools <sup>[12]</sup>. Those children from low-income families or rural areas choose vocational schools due to their relatively poorer academic performance fall in the trap of dominants who have the right to make rules in this game, and their almost doomed failing life is subjected to symbolic violence. That reveals that these policies benefit privileged Chinese families and the government.

To promote equity in education, China has implemented the "Double Reduction" policy in 2021. Nevertheless, the issue of school choice is a complex social derivative, with different families making different choices as a result of the interaction of capital, *habitus*, and field, and a single policy alone will not relieve the contribution of school choice to educational inequity. In the long run, school choice still frequently exacerbates existing social class disparities.

#### **4. Short-term impacts of the "Double Reduction" policy in school choice**

As the new policy has been in place for a relatively short period, it is not yet possible to produce objective data. Therefore, in this section, arguments are cited from what is happening in China to explore the impact of the new policy on school choice from the perspective of schoolteachers (public and private schools) and parents and children (middle class and above, rural and working families).

As the passive party in school choice, schools are affected differently depending on their nature and quality of teaching. Prior to implementing the "Double Reduction" policy, public schools were subject to a great deal of competition for students from private schools. With a great deal of financial autonomy, private schools employed highly experienced teachers at high salaries and can provide well-established, state-of-the-art infrastructure and diverse content options <sup>[13]</sup>. Following the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy, the return of students to public schools was evident, while private schools suffered a setback in enrolment. The non-focused public senior high schools, on the other hand, have gone from previously under-enrolling students to being able to meet their enrolment targets.

The schoolteachers are also affected due to dramatic change in student numbers. The salaries of public-school teachers are increasing along with their workload; meanwhile, private school teachers are at risk of losing their jobs, and competition is fierce. When the number of students increases, teachers' workload in public schools naturally increases as well. However, the "Double Reduction" policy also claims a limitation on students' workload. The increase in teachers' workload is mainly due to after-school activities subsidized by the local government. The reduction in the number of pupils in private schools should by right ease teachers' workload, instead, the opposite has happened. Teachers in private schools do not have it easier as they are competing fiercely for the limited number of places available to them through their students' performance because under-enrolled schools evidently do not need so many teachers, leading to unemployment.

Additionally, the quality of student intake is balanced, as most of the students are enrolled close to where they live. Children from those high-income families tend to do well academically <sup>[14]</sup>. Children from average economic level families are now prevented from entering key schools through like school choice fees. That balances out the original difference in student numbers and intake quality, and also narrows the gap between key and non-key schools, thus reducing the anxiety of parents who cannot choose schools <sup>[15]</sup>.

As the involved parties in the act of school choice, parents and children make different choices because of disparities in capital <sup>[16]</sup>. With the implementation of the policy, some parents who would have used their capital to choose schools must go to the schools allocated to them, thus bridging the gap between families of students. Furthermore, children at lower income levels continue to go to the school they are allocated,

whether it is a priority or a non-priority. Nevertheless, this is beneficial in that, as mentioned above, access to schools based on residence reduces the gap between schools, which means that otherwise considered poor schools can achieve better academic results by absorbing more children from privileged families, thus promoting equity in education for all.

Through the analysis of these effects, we see that the “Double Reduction” policy has had a positive effect on promoting educational equity and limiting the use of capital by the privileged class. However, this is only a short-term effect. In the long run, the “Double Reduction” policy will have a minimal effect in alleviating the problem of school choice.

### **5. Long-term implication of the “Double Reduction” policy in school choice**

In the long run, the “Double Reduction” policy cannot alleviate the educational inequity brought about by school choices dominated by middle-class families and even expand the unequal distribution of educational resources, thus allowing class entrenchment, because it tries to simplify the complex struggle and compromise among capitals only by limiting school-choosing behaviors while ignoring the deeper reasons behind the act. While school choice fees are banned by the policy, other forms of capital will replace the economic capital that used to dominate school choice. Social capital is playing an increasingly important role in it. Although school choice is banned, privileged families can still achieve the goal of choosing a school with a higher quality of education for their children. For example, a normal university professor managed to send her son to a key senior school that was not in her area of residence because many of her past students were teachers at that school. Besides, key schools also rationalize school choices by setting up several programs, such as, Elite Students Program (students who achieved some awards or performed outstandingly in school), Transient Students Program (students who study at a school on a temporary basis), to accept students who do not live in the area. Furthermore, cultural and symbolic capital are also influential. Middle-class and above families with more cultural and symbolic capital tend to place more importance on their children’s education (*habitus*) and are thus willing to overcome difficulties of school choice caused by the “Double Reduction” policy. However, for rural and working-class families, school choice becomes a battle of comprehensive capital rather than economic capital alone, which is more challenging for them to obtain. In the end, the intention of sending the child to a key school has to be eliminated, then many low-income families who could have paid school choice fees to enable their children to receive a better-quality education will voluntarily give up

The “Double Reduction” policy on school choice clearly states that students must attend school close to their residence. Some wealthy families will simply buy property (economic capital) near a key school to qualify for admission in some areas where the policy is strictly enforced, and social capital cannot work. In this way, economic capital is not restricted but even amplified. If school choice fees already strain the disadvantaged family, the purchase of a house is then an almost unattainable luxury. Rural or low-income families will stay in ordinary schools and suffer symbolic violence from the policy as they become trapped in a vicious cycle of low education - low income - low social status.

In the field of school choice, the middle class sets the rules, and it is they who have the capital cherished. It could be argued that school choice is a game for middle-class families and that the “Double Reduction” policy restricts only those families and children who possess less capital or are at a disadvantaged position. This seemingly fairer policy is, in essence, a massive act of symbolic violence against the public by denying their possibility of pursuing educational equity.

The main reason for choosing schools is to pursue higher-quality educational resources and thus to achieve better academic performance. The policy, which restricts school choice, appears to promote equity but does not really alleviate the problem. The right approach is to provide more quality education and reconsider how to define “good” education and excellent academic performance.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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