

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Double Reduction Policy in Alleviating Student Pressure

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Abstract: The Chinese government launched the Double Reduction Policy in 2021, which aims to reduce the excessive academic burden on primary and secondary school students by limiting homework and regulating extracurricular tutoring. The policy was implemented in response to growing concerns about the immense academic pressure students face, which has led to widespread anxiety, sleep deprivation and mental health problems. This paper explores the effects of the double reduction policy on students' academic stress and its limitations. The findings show that although the double reduction policy has achieved some success in reducing students' learning burdens both in and out of school, increasing sleep time, and alleviating anxiety and depression, its effectiveness is limited by the variability of after-school services in schools and the persistence of parents' demand for tutorials. In addition, social prejudice against vocational education and the competitive nature of higher education admissions have not alleviated students' academic pressure. This paper argues that more efforts are needed in the equitable distribution of educational resources, increased recognition of vocational education, and adjustment of parental expectations to reduce students' pressure further.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy, Social Policy, Student Pressure, Shadow Education.

1. Introduction

Private supplementary tutoring, also known as shadow education, not only hinders educational fairness and prevents the country from selecting truly innovative talents but also creates excessive academic pressure on Chinese families. Since the enactment of China's Double Reduction Policy, there has been a significant reduction in the burden of both in-school coursework and out-of-school or after-school training on students. This policy aims to maintain equity in education by restricting private tutoring while reducing the existing financial burden on families and the physical and psychological burden on students. However, despite the clear restrictions given by the Government, its implementation still needs to improve its effectiveness. In this paper, the pressures students face in pursuing higher education are categorized into three groups: pressures exerted by schools and institutions, pressures exerted by parents and families, and pressures exerted by social structures. Then, based on previous government documents and studies, the paper will use overview studies and qualitative analyses to discuss the extent to which the Double Reduction Policy has been effective in alleviating students' stress and to identify factors that may influence the policy's effectiveness in alleviating students' burdens.

2. Literature Review

Shadow education is a product of the neoliberal wave of educational reforms created in response to intense standardised testing in a dynamic marketplace. McChesney suggests that neoliberalism is the policy and process of allowing a relatively small number of private interests to control as much as possible the life of a society in order to maximise their profits [1]. As a result, private supplementary tutoring has proliferated in an increasingly marketised educational environment and has become one of the substantial service industries in China. China, on the other hand, is imbued with Confucianism, which values education and personal diligence and believes that learning is the most essential way to change the existing class. The combination of cultural beliefs and neo-liberal ideology has prompted families to invest heavily in private supplementary tutoring to ensure their children stay ahead of tough competition [2].

The majority of the curriculum in shadow education is modelled on what is taught in schools and changes as schools change[3-4]. Corporations or individuals provide shadow education for profit, and this privatisation renders it unfairly inaccessible as a commodity. It also means that families from more advantaged backgrounds have access to more educational resources through the channel of shadow education, in which case the continuing widening of the gap between the rich and the poor makes the disparity in education between different classes of families more and more apparent as the socio-economic development of the society grows. Wealthy families have access to better educational resources and better teachers, causing the fairness of education to be invaded [5]. Conversely, for less affluent families, the rising costs of private supplementary tutoring become a financial burden, leading to significant resource waste. Not only that, surveys have shown that the extracurricular private supplementary tutoring that Chinese students engage in has further lengthened their study time. In 2018, Chinese students in Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang spent up to 57 hours a week studying, the second longest among the 79 participating countries or economies[6]. This is a side note that heavy academic tasks encroach on students' extracurricular time, exacerbating the physical and mental burdens. Studies have shown that students' academic stress or anxiety comes from excessive coursework, exams, time pressure, and parents' and teachers' expectations [7]. In China, traditional Confucian values contribute to greater academic stress compared to students in Europe and the United States, with potential adverse effects on their well-being [7-8].

Such a state of affairs goes against the original intent of China's educational selection and has led the Government to resolve to implement the Double Reduction Policy. Since 1949, the Chinese Government has attempted to alleviate the problem of overburdening students with schoolwork by issuing several documents. However, the Double Reduction Policy is the most restrictive of them all in terms of extracurricular training organisations, with requirements that include measures to reduce the burden of schoolwork on students both in and out of school, to shift the focus of teaching and learning away from the outside of the institution, and to set up a series of mechanisms for after-school services in schools to supplement teaching and learning.

3. Effectiveness of the double-decrease policy in reducing sources of student stress

3.1. Pressure exerted on children by academics

After implementing the Double Reduction Policy, students' learning load in and out of school was significantly reduced. The Double Minus Policy played a role in alleviating students' anxiety and depression, agreeing that less homework, more extracurricular activities, more time spent with parents, and less academic stress were protective factors against poor mental health. Chinese adolescents show a higher prevalence of symptoms of depression and anxiety relative to adolescents in other regions. Comparing students' depression and anxiety levels reported before and after the policy's

implementation, there was a slight reduction in students' mental stress, as evidenced by a decrease in the percentage of depression from 9.9% to 9.4%, and a decrease in the percentage of anxiety from 7.4% to 7.1% [9]. Although surveys have shown that the proportion of students with depression and anxiety disorders has decreased since the implementation of the double-decrease policy, some students continue to experience persistent or new-onset mental health issues, expressing concerns about potential regressions in their grades or inability to maintain their previous performance levels due to the lack of private supplementary tutoring [10].

Schools have taken up the responsibility of after-school counselling for students, such as evening study sessions and after-school care services, to alleviate the burden on parents. Although they no longer need to take private tuition, their learning hours are shifted to within-school hours, and the lengthening of school hours may enhance students' sense of burnout towards school. Schools have a certain amount of independence in the content and form of their after-school services, and the double reduction policy will not interfere with or restrict this independence too much but only to ensure the individualisation of schools and students [11]. This means that not all schools can provide the same quality after-school services. Even under the influence of teaching schedules and the pressure to advance to higher education, after-school services may still be centred on curriculum tutorials, causing stress to students. In fact, family spending on private tutoring outside of school has remained high, and private tutoring institutions have adopted different forms of providing parents with subject training, which makes government supervision more complicated [12]. Therefore, students are likely to continue to participate in these underground extracurricular tutoring without reducing the extracurricular burden, and the cost is higher than before the double reduction policy.

While the Double Reduction Policy has somewhat alleviated the superficial pressure on students' academic performance, it does not fundamentally address the underlying competitive pressures driving students to higher levels. The policy's provisions for after-school services, although well-intentioned, face limitations. Not all schools have the resources to provide high-quality extracurricular activities, and inadequate arrangements could extend students' school hours unnecessarily, potentially increasing their stress. The restriction on extracurricular organisations in the policy has caused parents and students to remain anxious and actively seek underground private supplementary tutoring.

3.2. Pressure exerted on children by parents

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes not only the transformative role of education in altering social class but also the filial piety that children owe to their parents, which includes meeting parental expectations. Due to the influence of China's one-child policy in the 1980s, most Chinese parents put all their expectations and pressures on one child, which puts a heavier burden on the only child to fulfil their parents' expectations [13]. Parents value the need for education and consider entry into higher education crucial to their children's future. Consequently, the primary expectation of parents is that their children achieve excellent academic results and gain admission to prestigious universities. Surveys show that 90% of parents in China want their children to be able to enter university, with 65% wanting their children to be able to enter 985 and 211 universities. However, according to the results of China's education statistics in 2021, while the acceptance rates for 211 and 985 universities are approximately 5% and 2%, respectively, which shows that there is a vast reality gap between the expectations of Chinese parents' goals and the acceptance rate [13].

The double reduction policy has kept the competitive nature of the college entrance examination the same. As long as the college entrance examination continues to be judged solely based on scores, the fundamental issue of excessive stress among parents and students is unlikely to be resolved. Peng and Dang argued that parental investment in out-of-school tutoring is not the leading cause of students' academic burden but rather the intense academic competition among students [14]. Without

private supplementary tutoring to compensate for the lack of classroom learning, the academic burden after school is shifted to the students themselves. In order to meet their parents' expectations, students can only spend longer time after school to make up for the lack of shadow education.

The academic gap between students due to socio-economic disparities is likely to widen following the implementation of the double reduction policy. The policy aims to bring the learning needs of students back to school and home and to make the cooperation between teachers and parents more critical. As pointed out in the policy document, the Government should assist in building up the concept that "the family is the first school in life and parents are the first teachers of their children" and guide parents to establish a scientific concept of child-rearing and set appropriate expectations. However, even if parents lower their expectations, their demand for after-school programmes will remain high. Surveys show that 87% of parents are unwilling to give up after-school training, and 37% are willing to hire private tutors to tutor their children. Before implementing the Double Reduction Policy, most parents accepted external training providers for their universality, and some low- and middle-income families could afford to pay the fees. As after-school tutoring shifts to private tutoring, the differences in educational resources brought about by differences in family income widen [11].

For students with higher socio-economic backgrounds, the pressure from parents may be heavier than for students from other backgrounds. Firstly, parents have a persistent need for shadowing education and are likely to opt for one-to-one live-in tutors for their children's schooling. Secondly, parents with high socio-economic status have higher academic expectations of their children. The more educated parents are, the more they recognise the importance of education and relatively higher academic expectations for their children [15].

3.3. Pressure exerted on children by society

One of the objectives of the Double reduction policy is to promote educational equity by allowing for the natural streaming of students. The proper functioning of society requires human resources in different fields, so educational streaming is necessary. The reasons why most Chinese families are reluctant to send their children to vocational education when they have other options can be categorised into several.

Firstly, there is the social status factor, where vocational education is still regarded as an inferior form of higher education, an informal version of higher education, and a higher education exclusively for low-scoring students [16]. This perception fosters a stereotypical view of vocational education students as individuals who do not study hard enough or lack the intelligence to succeed in academic settings, leading to limited career prospects. These labels form a kind of invisible discrimination, and most families are unwilling to accept such stigmatisation and thus require their children to study harder in order to avoid entering vocational education.

The second is the impact of income factors. Nowadays, China's labour market is flooded with many fresh graduates every year. At the same time, the supply of jobs exceeds the demand, and the limited number of positions makes it difficult for fresh graduates to find a job that matches their abilities. On the other hand, employers believe that employees with academic degrees have better trainability and learning potential [17]. This makes it easier for graduates with academic degrees to secure white-collar positions that require high skills and receive higher salaries. The academic thresholds set by companies for hiring make parents and students further aware of the importance of education. The increasingly strong link between high academic performance and employment prospects leads many families to continue pressuring their children to gain admission to prestigious universities. This transfers the anxiety created by the social structure to the child in the form of the family.

Finally, the poorer learning environment and educational resources of vocational schools are also a reason for parents' resistance. On the one hand, society generally holds a stereotypical view of

vocational schools, associating them with students who exhibit poor behavior and lack motivation, and parents are worried that their children will be adversely affected by such an environment; on the other hand, compared with ordinary high schools, vocational schools generally have problems of loose management and lack of resources, and insufficient teachers, equipment, and practical training opportunities, which make it difficult to provide high-quality vocational courses [18]. These issues contribute to the perception that vocational schools are less organized than ordinary high schools.

Before the double reduction policy, China's education system required approximately 50% of students to enter vocational schools based on their rankings in the secondary school examination—a policy that was widely resisted by parents [19]. The desire to enter regular high schools and the prejudice against vocational schools have pushed more and more students to participate in shadow education. It may be worthwhile for policymakers to consider the experience of vocational education development in Germany, where the main reason for the popularity of vocational education is the even distribution of income. In Germany, the average annual salary of university graduates is around 30,000 euros, while skilled workers earn about 35,000 euros [20]. Suppose the salary and social status of vocational education graduates can be improved. If the salaries and social status of vocational education graduates in China could be improved, public perceptions of vocational education might shift, influencing the preferences of parents and students. This change could enhance the effectiveness of the double reduction policy in achieving its original goal of reducing pressure on students.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the double reduction policy has partially succeeded in reducing students' academic burdens and alleviating symptoms of depression and anxiety to a certain extent. However, its effectiveness is still limited by several aspects. Firstly, the quality and form of school after-school services cannot be standardised. The services provided by some schools have failed to reduce students' stress effectively, and on the contrary, they may increase the sense of burnout brought about by school hours. Second, the high expectations of parents and the fierce competition in education have led to the continued demand for tutorials outside schools, resulting in a thriving underground tutorial market, which not only undermines the effectiveness of the policy but also exacerbates the inequality in education resources. In addition, the social stereotype of vocational education and the unequal income distribution have made parents and students more inclined to pursue higher academic education, further increasing their pressure on the competition for higher education. Therefore, while the double reduction policy has alleviated some superficial academic pressures, further improvements are needed in the equitable distribution of educational resources, the enhancement of vocational education's social status, and the adjustment of parental expectations to address the root causes of students' psychological burdens.

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