

Double Reduction Policy in Chinese Education: Promises, Outcomes, Perspectives

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Abstract The educational system of China has traditionally been heavily focused on exams, placing a significant academic burden on students and financial pressure on their parents, while also increasing teachers' workload. The goal of the Double Reduction Policy (DRP) introduced in 2021 was to alleviate some of these societal tensions. Since this is a newly implemented policy, there has been no comprehensive evaluation of its short-term outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the projected goals of the DPR, and the tensions in the implementation process from the perspective of the five major stakeholder categories — students and their parents, teachers and schools, local authorities, and private tutoring institutions, as well as evaluate short-term outcomes of the policy from the stakeholders' perspectives. The study also aims to propose strategies to address and balance these interests and concerns. The findings from a systematic literature review reveal a complex interplay of resulting benefits and challenges for internal and external stakeholders. The DPR has impacted students, parents, teachers, local authorities, and private tutoring institutions. While the policy has shown positive effects on student well-being and alleviated financial pressures for non-wealthy families, it has also intensified socioeconomic disparities and increased teacher workload. Furthermore, the deeply

ingrained cultural emphasis on academic achievement among parents has raised questions about the core values and long-term implications of the policy for access to and quality of education. These outcomes highlight the need for adjustments to align policy expectations with stakeholder needs.

Keywords Chinese education, shadow education, double reduction policy, education involution, stakeholder theory

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China, as the world's most populous country, has seen a tight race among its young population for better job prospects and recourses, creating a tough academic environment and inevitably imposing high stress on students, their parents, and teachers [Jin, Sun, 2022; Xue, Li, 2023]. China's education system has long been exam-centered. This single-minded focus on examination scores as the standard of evaluation has put students and parents under immense pressure, neglecting students' holistic development and cultivation of innovative capabilities [Zhang, Bray, 2021]. Consequently, in recent years, with parents placing greater emphasis on their children's education, extracurricular training institutions have proliferated, forming a vast tutoring market. These institutions usually provide exam-oriented tutoring, intensifying students' extracurricular learning burden, and increasing financial pressure on families [Liu et al., 2024]. Gradually, the market of after-school training institutions has remarkably grown to about 87 billion yuan [Dai, 2023].

The reason why such institutions became popular in China is rooted in Confucian traditions. Chinese parents believe that success of their children can be achievable only through their participation in extra tutoring, endless homework, and more hours of study to keep up with peers [Chen et al., 2021]. China has been one of the leading countries in East Asia with the largest markets for shadow education [Lu et al., 2023]. The metaphorical term "shadow education" was coined by Stevenson and Becker [1992] to describe private supplementary education activities that occur outside a formal education system and aim to help students pass exams successfully and obtain better educational resources. The initially positive idea of helping students to gain success has turned out to aggravate economic pressures on low-income families and intensify inequality in society [Zhou, Su, Wang, 2017]; it also caused students' high academic stress and serious problems with their mental and physical development [Yan, 2022].

However, China is not the only country in the region to contribute to the long-term existence of shadow education by putting students under high-risk examination pressure [Lu et al., 2023]. Other Asian

education systems, including Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia, also suffer from the dramatic growth of the shadow education industry and must provide timely policy response. For example, shadow education has been a challenge to public education in South Korea since the 1960s. As early as 1968, the South Korean government, aiming to rectify educational issues, implemented the system called “High School Equalization Policy”, which exempted junior high school students from exams and allowed enrollment based on residential proximity. In 1973, the policy was extended to high schools. However, instead of improving the situation, the policy led to worsening the conditions of private tutoring. In 2000, the South Korean government went further and imposed a comprehensive ban on all forms of extracurricular tutoring and private academies [Lee, Lee, Jang, 2010]. However, the policy appeared to be ineffective. Subsequently, parents continued hiring teachers for one-one tutoring at higher prices as they believed that their children were unable to go to college without shadow education [Lee, Lee, Jang, 2010; Ji, 2022].

The widespread growth of shadow education worldwide has sparked concerns about the fairness and quality of education, frequently questioning the dominance of the formal education sector [Hamid, Khan, Islam, 2018]. As a result, governments around the world have started to regulate private tutoring within their educational frameworks. In this regard, China has introduced a series of policies since 1955, which have imposed detailed regulations on schools in terms of the quantity and quality of homework. However, students’ learning burden kept getting heavier [Song, Yang, 2014]. In response to the excessive academic pressure on students, in July 2021, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued *the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework on Students in Compulsory Education and the Burden of Out-of-School Training* (from now on referred to as the “Double Reduction” policy), which strives to facilitate the mitigation of academic stressors and decrease the scholastic workload to reduce the burden on students, create a system of high quality basic education, and further safeguard educational equity.

The “Double Reduction” Policy (DRP) is a relatively new government program with a strategic approach to both homework and extracurricular training in compulsory education. The major purposes of the DRP are as follows: improving school education and teaching quality, promoting the all-round development of students, providing after-school service to meet students’ basic needs, and regulating behaviors of off-campus tutoring institutions¹. Schools were required to

¹ Ministry of Education (2021) Notification of the general office of the Ministry of education on the enrolment of secondary vocational schools in 2021: http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A07/moe_950/202104/t20210406_524618.html (accessed 28.08.2015).

switch from the purely exam-oriented approach to one that would enhance students' comprehensive literacy, focusing not only on the development of students' intelligence, but also on the cultivation of their personality and generic skills, such as critical thinking and creativity [Tian, Yuan, 2024]. The long-term goal was to transform the school evaluation system from test score based to a comprehensive quality evaluation, which would consider students' abilities, attitudes, and other dimensions, reflecting students' learning outcomes and development of their potential [Ibid.]. These measures were supposed to reduce the popularity of private tutoring.

Although the idea of lightening the academic burden and rampant commercialization pressure in the education sector looks promising for the main stakeholders, the short-term outcomes are contradictory. As recent research shows, many parents feel anxious about this policy as they worry that reducing the burden of schoolwork and off-campus training will affect their children's academic performance, which in turn will disadvantage their future studies and employment [Yu et al., 2022]. The DRP was expected to reduce the after-school burden for primary and secondary school students to a certain extent so that they would have more time to participate in sports and other free-time activities and comprehensively develop morality, intelligence, physical beauty, and laboriousness [Xue, Shi, 2022]. However, some researchers believe that the policy resulted in a deficiency of academic resources [Jia, Peng, 2022]. When students encounter academic challenges towards the end of the school day, there is an absence of supplementary teacher support. The extended time available for students after school may be advantageous for those with effective self-management skills yet detrimental for individuals lacking self-disciplinary abilities [Ibid.]. The DRP, which aims to reduce the amount of homework and after-school training for students enrolled in formal education, has had a major national impact by outlawing the after-school private tutoring sector, employing over 10 million people [Zhong, Park, 2023]. However, in turn, the elimination of after-school services has led to prolonged working hours for both elementary and secondary school teachers, consequently augmenting their workload [Zhu et al., 2023]. These interim findings suggest that the judgments about its effectiveness are not univocal and promises set by the Chinese government may fail to meet the expectations of the main stakeholders of this policy. Considering the DRP is a newly implemented policy and the existing research on this policy is currently at the level of theoretical analysis combined with some empirical evidence touching separate categories of stakeholders of this policy, more extensive exploration of possible paths for the policy is needed to understand the effects of this policy. Therefore, this study is aimed at analyzing the promises of the DRP and evaluating its short-term outcomes for the major stakeholders.

The study is based on two theoretical underpinnings. First, we rely on the concept of Educational Involution to describe the premises of the policy in the Chinese context. In academic literature, the concept of “education involution” refers to a situation in which an education system is extremely competitive and demanding and yet does not necessarily produce strong academic outcomes [Chen, Zhao, 2024]. It explains that an over-investment of efforts, time, and resources in education can lead to low returns and no quality improvement [Wang, Xiao, 2023]. In China, educational involution is a key driver of stress and inefficiency in the educational system, whereas the DRP has been proposed by the Chinese government as a direct response to that overburdened environment. Second, the study utilizes the Stakeholder theory [Donaldson, Preston, 1995; Reynolds, Schultz, Hekman, 2006] to identify the main stakeholders or parties affected by the DRP, describe their needs, interests and influences and the relationships with these stakeholders to estimate the short-term effects of the policy.

1. Theoretical underpinnings

1.1. Educational involution

The term “involution”, coined by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, is often used to describe things that repeat to evolve but become more complex [Hou, Pan, 2023]. With regards to “Education involution” in the Chinese context, it is used to describe competition for academic success of students urged by their parents. However, the outcome is the opposite as such competition leads to burnout without expected educational benefits. First, parents are obviously anxious and spend more on family education, resulting in an overburden of household expenditure and energy. Second, businesses enter the off-campus tutoring market, and exacerbate educational anxiety among parents [Zhang, 2021]. The whole education field demonstrates features of marketization, profit-pursuing, and competitiveness. Third, students’ course load and academic pressure increase, but the quality of education does not obviously improve [Chen, Zhao, 2024]. The DRP seeks to address these issues by reducing the amount of homework and prohibiting certain types of off-campus tutoring. The policy tries to reset the educational system by reducing extraneous pressures, focusing more on quality learning and holistic development, and aiming for long-term benefits rather than merely increasing competition. By doing so, it aims to relieve the pressure that leads to involution and refocus students on a more balanced and meaningful learning experience and establish good education ecology [Zhang, 2021].

1.2. The stakeholder theory

The stakeholder theory postulates that companies should consider the interests and well-being of all parties affected by their actions. As they are interconnected with a variety of groups, decisions should be

made with consideration of how they impact each group [Reynolds, Schultz, Hekman, 2006; Stoner, Freeman, 1999]. According to Stoner and Freeman [1999], stakeholders can be classified into the following two categories: internal and external. Internal stakeholders are those who act within the organization, such as owners and employees. External stakeholders are those that interact directly with the organization, for example, customers or suppliers. The theory suggests that by considering the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, an organization can create long-term value and achieve sustainable success [Reynolds, Schultz, Hekman, 2006]. Although the stakeholder theory was created as a managerial theory and is mainly used in strategic management research and business practices, it has the potential to be included in educational research as well. The main reason for this is that many education institutions are now operating as quasi-commercial organizations and their success depends on their ability to adopt efficient management approaches. Therefore, stakeholders at different levels can influence the quality of education and foster students' development [Langrafe et al., 2020]. In an education system, students and their parents can play the role of external stakeholders, while teachers, local authorities, and private tutoring institutions are internal stakeholders. With regards to the DRP, it is important to understand the interests of students and their parents as well as those of teachers, local authorities, and private tutoring institutions to maximize the results of the policy.

Bringing the stakeholders theory in education and placing it in the context of the DRP, this study has got two broad aims. The first one is to highlight the interests and concerns of major stakeholders of this policy in the Chinese education system, i.e. students, their parents, teachers, local authorities, and private tutoring institutions. The second aim is to propose strategies for addressing and balancing these interests and concerns as well as evaluating the short-term outcomes of this policy and providing some recommendations for improving the policy.

2. Methodology

This research utilizes the systematic literature review approach, which is a comprehensive and structured method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research on a specific topic or question. It typically includes clearly defined search criteria, rigorous screening and selection processes, and a systematic analysis of the findings from the selected studies. The goal is to provide an unbiased, comprehensive overview of the existing literature and to identify gaps, patterns, and areas for further research or development [Muka et al., 2020].

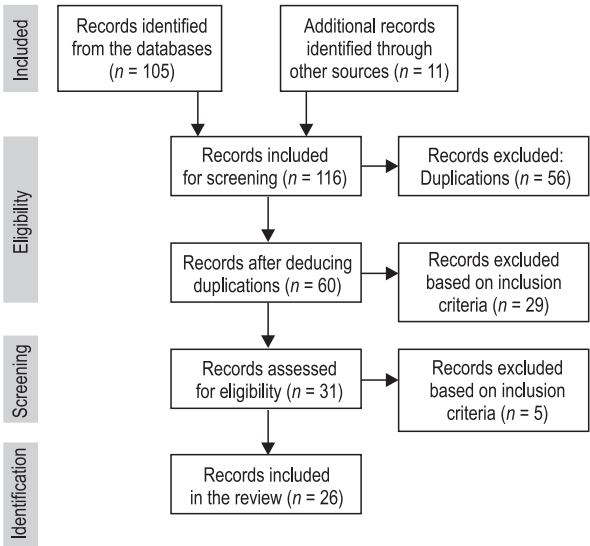
This study employs a structured systematic review by strictly following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines [Moher et al., 2009]. PRISMA entails

four steps: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The flow diagram in Fig. 1 illustrates how these four steps were administered in this study. The second author performed the data search and selection process. The first author monitored the process and conducted quality appraisal by employing Remington’s framework [Remington, 2020], which included examining the inclusion and exclusion criteria, methodological rigor, investigating any bias, and, ultimately, enhancing the reliability of the results.

2.1. Data search and selection

According to the workflow of PRISMA (Fig. 1), the second author searched scholar.google.com, Scopus and Web of Science Core database to identify peer-reviewed articles that examined the expectations and the short-term outcomes of the DRP in China. At this initial stage, we adopted a combination of the following keywords in the first identification process: “Double Reduction Policy” AND “Effects of the DRP” OR “Outcomes of the DRP” OR “Impacts of DRP” OR “Influences of DRP” AND “China”. This search yielded a total of 105 articles. In addition, the second author also included another set of 11 articles from the references listed in the initially searched articles.

Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram adapted from [Moher et al., 2009]



In the screening phase, the second author read the titles of the 116 articles to examine whether the identified papers were relevant to the research purpose of this study. Through this process, 56 duplications were identified and removed, resulting in 60 articles included in the second round of screening. The second author then used the following inclusion criteria, confirmed by the first author, to review the abstract of each article: (1) the studies focused on Chinese educa-

tional context; (2) the articles investigated the impacts of DRP on addressing the education involution for various stakeholders in the short-term; (3) the articles were written in English; (4) the journal had a formal peer-review process indexed in Scopus or Web of Science; (5) the article was published between 2021 and 2024. This process excluded 29 articles from the analysis. In the eligibility check, the second author scrutinized the text of the remaining 31 articles based on the inclusion criteria and further removed 5 articles. Eventually, 26 articles were eligible for the systematic review. A member checking process was conducted by the first author to ensure the accuracy of the process.

2.2. Data analysis

The second author analyzed the 26 selected articles. She initially categorized these articles into five distinct groups based on the stakeholder theory [Donaldson, Preston, 1995; Reynolds, Schultz, Hekman, 2006]: students; parents; teachers and schools; local authorities; private tutoring institutions because the DRP has significantly impacted these stakeholders during its implementation. Thus, this categorization allowed for an in-depth exploration of the specific impacts of the DRP on each stakeholder group. Within each group, the analysis was further carried out using the thematic synthesis method proposed by Lucas et al. [2007]. This method is particularly effective in identifying common elements and features within a dataset, enabling researchers to generate themes that can capture the core patterns of the data. Accordingly, thematic synthesis enabled the second author to produce a context-specific interpretation of the short-term influences of DRP in the given context and extract themes that can reflect the impacts of the DRP on different stakeholders. These themes not only reveal the specific impacts of DRP policies in China but also provide a theoretical basis for subsequent research. Since thematic synthesis is effective in identifying common themes, which may unintentionally omit heterogeneity across different studies [Lucas et al., 2007], the textual narrative method was employed to complement the weaknesses of thematic synthesis. The capacity of textual narrative to illuminate diversities has garnered widespread acknowledgement [Ibid.]. This method enabled us to conduct a more thorough examination of how the DRP has reshaped the educational landscape in China, while also capturing the distinct features within each stakeholder group. During the data analysis stage, the two authors had several meetings to discuss the initial themes and confirm the finalized ones.

3. DRP and stakeholders: Prospects and short-term effects

3.1. The DRP impact on students

The DRP has introduced substantial changes to children's academic experience, mental health, and leisure activities. While the policy implies benefits for students, such as reduced academic pressure and

enhanced mental well-being, there are some challenges tied to socioeconomic disparities and personal skills of students, for example, the management of increased free time, which questions the effectiveness of the policy.

The DRP stipulates that elementary school Grades 1 and 2 should refrain from assigning written homework, as this can be effectively integrated into school consolidation exercises. Additionally, for elementary school Grades 3 to 6, the average completion time for written homework should be less than 60 minutes, while for junior high school, that should be less than 90 minutes². As the results of existing studies show, the reduction in academic workload implied by the DPR correlates with measurable improvements in adolescent mental health. Wang et al. [2024] observed a significant decline in depressive symptoms (from 12.1% to 9.2%) and anxiety (from 8.9% to 6.2%) among adolescents. The contributing factors include less homework, more extracurricular activities, enhanced parental interaction, and improved sleep patterns. However, risk factors persist, especially for female students, those exposed to adverse life events, and individuals affected by the lingering social constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic [Wang et al., 2024].

While the DRP encourages parental engagement in children's education, its effectiveness varies significantly across socioeconomic backgrounds. Zhong and Park [2023], along with Jiang and Wang [2021], note that children in suburban and rural areas, particularly those of migrants, face distinct challenges. For these "left-behind" children, limited parental availability and lower educational resources hinder consistent academic support, especially as they progress into junior and senior high school. Researchers highlight that family socioeconomic status also affects students' access to after-school tutoring support. Students from affluent, urban backgrounds often access academic tutoring earlier than those from rural or lower-income households. As students progress through the educational system, the gap narrows, but the differences in access to quality tutoring persist [Xue, Shi, 2022]. These disparities highlight the socioeconomic divide in the benefits children receive from reduced academic pressures [Jiang, Wang, 2021; Xue, Shi, 2022; Zhong, Park, 2023].

The policy may result in a deficiency of academic resources. When students encounter academic challenges towards the end of a school day, there is an absence of supplementary teacher support. Those challenges are especially pronounced in test preparation, where a lack of extra help can cause students to lose focus on their studies and have a negative impact on test results. Students accustomed to

² Ministry of Education (2021) Notification of the general office of the Ministry of education on the enrolment of secondary vocational schools in 2021: http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A07/moe_950/202104/t20210406_524618.html (accessed 28.08.2015).

scheduled classes may need more preparation for independent living. Before the DRP policy was introduced, students had a rigid schedule that did not allow them to relax or indulge in games. Nevertheless, extended time available after school may be advantageous for students with effective self-management skills, yet detrimental for those lacking them. The latter category may allocate excessive time to other activities or video games detrimental to their well-being [Yan, 2022].

Despite the initial intention of alleviating stress and pressure on students, the policy inadvertently exacerbates the challenges students face, mainly when the progress of their peers is not readily apparent. For instance, before the introduction of DPR, numerous students used to enroll in remedial classes alongside their classmates to ensure they remained on an equal footing academically. However, the transition to independent study at home may engender concerns about lagging behind in the course, which contributes to increased complexity. Not only does this outcome amplify academic pressures, but it also potentially impedes innovative thinking, further intensifying stress levels among students. This phenomenon introduces an added layer of complexity to the educational landscape, potentially intensifying challenges for students in fulfilling their academic responsibilities [Zhao, 2024]. Furthermore, the pressure on students to engage in extracurricular activities outside the classroom has increased [Liu et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024], and these activities may demand more time and energy. Therefore, despite the original intention to reduce academic stress, the actual effect of the policy may be augmentation of the overall burden on students in both academic and social realms.

3.2. The DRP impact on parents

The DRP has had a transformative yet complex impact on Chinese parents, targeting both the financial and psychological burdens linked to competitive educational practices in China [Zhang, 2021]. While the policy primarily aims to reduce household expenditures on private tutoring and alleviate parental anxiety, recent research illustrates nuanced outcomes, reflecting the challenges in shifting deeply rooted educational priorities and parental attitudes towards education in the context of the DRP.

Economically, the DRP is expected to lessen household financial burdens by reducing reliance on costly extracurricular “shadow education” [Zhong, Park, 2023]. This aligns with government initiatives to support population growth through the three-child policy and promote equity and quality of education [Ibid.]. However, the traditional preferences for exam-oriented instruction persist, with many parents viewing high academic achievement as crucial for securing admission to prestigious schools, a pathway broadly regarded as vital for social mobility and future success. Consequently, despite regulato-

ry limits on private tutoring, parents often continue to seek alternative academic support, through unofficial channels, for example, hiring private tutors to deliver one-on-one tutoring, with the purpose of enhancing children's in-school academic performance [Zhang, 2021; Zhao, 2024].

The DRP has also created other side effects that intensified families' economic burdens on education. For example, Xue and Li [2023] argue that the DRP can potentially increase inter-school disparities and education quality gaps because many parents prefer high-quality schools to pre-DRP era ones as they want their children to receive better education and learning support, and this will lead to an increase in school district housing prices. Furthermore, the tightened market demand for private tutoring creates extra burden for low-income and multi-child families, placing them as a disadvantaged group in academic competition compared with wealthy and one-child families [Zhang Zhuang, Liu, 2021].

While the DRP aims to reduce parental anxiety [Yu et al., 2022; Zhong, Park, 2023], empirical research findings suggest that it has actually intensified that. The research by Jin and Sun [2022] reveals that, despite the decrease in access to private tutoring, parents report higher levels of concern as their children's academic progress is becoming less obvious to them. This concern is particularly acute among well-educated and wealthier families, where parents are more attuned to the competitive academic landscape and fear their children may lag without supplementary resources [Chen et al., 2022; Lu, Zhou, Wei, 2022; Zhao, 2024]. This reinforced parental anxiety causes increased household educational expenditures in private tutoring in order to counteract perceived risks to children's academic performance, which contradicts the objectives of the DRP [Jin, Sun, 2022].

With off-campus tutoring declining, schools have become central in academic support through after-school programs and personalized learning services [Xue, Li, 2023]. This shift allows schools to cater to diverse student needs; however, it also challenges parents who previously relied on private tutoring as a form of academic reinforcement. Parents demonstrate three major concerns in this regard. Firstly, they are worried about the quality of after-school services, and fear losing control over academic progress through the group-oriented and non-individualized approach [Jin, Sun, 2022]. Secondly, school-based after-school support emphasizes foundational education and children's balanced development, while parents often seek exam-focused skills to address testing and admissions pressures, leading to a trust gap and driving parents to pursue additional educational resources [Zhang, 2021]. Finally, the school-led after-school programs also disrupt education consumption habits of Chinese parents, who have to switch from the previous strong reliance on private tutoring to the new model, resulting in adaption challenge [Xue, Li, 2023].

**3.3. The DRP
impact
on teachers
and schools**

The DRP has introduced transformative shifts in the roles and responsibilities of schools and teachers, reorienting educational support towards in-school services, thereby diminishing students' dependency on private tutoring. This realignment has broadened the function of schools and increased the requirements for teachers, which has been underscored by recent studies on the policy's implications [Xue, Li, 2023; Zhong, Park, 2023].

The DRP has stimulated significant shifts in the role of Chinese schools as education providers. Schools have evolved from institutions focused primarily on academic instruction into comprehensive service providers tasked with addressing diverse educational and social needs. Schools now encompass subject teaching, academic support, after-school care, and a variety of enrichment programs, aiming to alleviate academic pressures on students and reduce parental reliance on external tutoring [Xue, Li, 2023; Zhang, 2021; Zhong, Park, 2023]. By offering extensive after-school programming, schools have helped reduce household education costs, ease parental concerns, and foster a balanced learning environment, which aligns with the DRP's broader objectives. This shift has re-centered educational support within schools, positioning them as key agents in addressing societal concerns around educational equity and holistic development [Xue, Li, 2023; Zhang, 2021; Zhong, Park, 2023].

However, with the new roles taken by schools, teachers now bear the additional task of designing differentiated assignments and facilitating after-school activities that cater to diverse student needs. As noted by some researchers [Liu, 2022; Wang, Fan, 2023; Xie, Qian, 2024; Yang, Wen, 2022], teachers are tasked with creating individualized lesson plans and assignments that accommodate varied academic abilities while still adhering to the DRP guidelines that prohibit ability-based tracking. This layered instructional approach requires teachers to maintain high academic standards without contributing to student stress, which expands teachers' workload and responsibilities, particularly as they manage both academic and extracurricular tasks in their continuously extended workdays.

The DRP's focus on reducing homework burdens has shifted expectations from quantity to quality, demanding that teachers carefully design assignments that support learning without overwhelming students [Ding, Zhang, 2024]. Xie and Qian [2024] highlight that teachers now face challenges in balancing workload and evaluation quality due to limited time and resources, often struggling to align the DRP expectations with curriculum standards.

The DRP demands for reduced homework and better education have placed significant physical and emotional strain on teachers, who report heightened stress from prolonged hours dedicated to after-school services, lesson planning, supervision, and continuous communication with parents [Wang, Fan, 2023]. This intensified

workload, especially challenging for those with caregiving responsibilities, coupled with stagnant compensation and limited societal recognition, has led to reduced job satisfaction and a pervasive sense of undervaluation [Liu, 2022; Wang, Luo, Yang, 2022; Wang, Fan, 2023]. Many teachers complain about inadequate structural support and resources to manage these expanded roles, leaving them overextended, frustrated, and demotivated. This imbalance poses a challenge to the long-term success of the DRP, as teacher morale and motivation are crucial for sustainable implementation of the policy.

The evaluation of the short-term impact of the DRP on schools and teachers points to broadening the role of schools and heightening the demands placed on teachers, reshaping schools into service-oriented educational systems and significantly increasing teachers' responsibilities, causing difficulties in work-life balance, personal well-being, and lower job satisfaction.

3.4. The DRP impact on local authorities

The DRP has placed significant responsibilities on local authorities in China, positioning them as key players in implementing and adapting this wide-reaching educational reform. While the DRP aims to mitigate academic pressures and educational inequality, the nuances of its implementation across various regions have exposed challenges related to resources, governance, and equity. The DRP has led to substantial regional differences in how the policy is implemented. Economically developed areas, such as Shanghai and Beijing, have been able to introduce comprehensive after-school support and adjust academic requirements, such as reducing English examination burdens in primary education [Zhong, Park, 2023]. For example, Shanghai's "5+2 model" provides two hours of after-school service on weekdays³, while Beijing's rotation of school leaders and teachers aims to equalize educational resources across schools [Yang et al., 2024]. However, in less-developed regions, e.g., rural or suburban, authorities are often limited to providing free online learning resources to bridge gaps, which may not adequately meet the educational needs of students [Xue, Li, 2023]. These discrepancies emphasize stronger reliance on school-based resources, which can further exacerbate the existing disparities in availability and quality of education in different regions.

The shift away from private tutoring produced within the DPR has inadvertently intensified socioeconomic disparities in access to education and its quality [Ibid.]. High-income families in urban areas can continue accessing private educational resources, while lower-income and rural families have become more dependent on local public edu-

³ Shanghai Education Committee (2021) Notification on Shanghai primary and secondary school curriculum plan for school year 2021 and its description: <https://www.shyp.gov.cn/shypq/yqyw-wb-jyjl-jyyw-kcjxb/20211013/393955/122f433ee82d6d5d9cdb7da4a5f7b87c.pdf> (accessed 28.08.2025).

cation, where resources and teaching quality may be insufficient. This dynamic has placed additional pressure on local authorities to address the above disparities while working within their financial and structural limitations. In many regions, the need for high-quality after-school programs and infrastructure has forced local governments to reallocate resources and prioritize certain areas, often leaving rural schools under-resourced [Ibid.].

The DRP is a significant element in China's "common prosperity" agenda, which seeks to reduce educational inequalities by centralizing control and expanding public school resources⁴. Local governments are required to comply with policies that limit private spending on education, reduce foreign educational influences, and shift the focus toward Chinese cultural education. In some cases, private schools are converted to public schools, thereby reducing tuition fees and broadening accessibility. The intent is to counterbalance the advantage held by high-income families, but local authorities lack resources required to effectively manage this transition and ensure that public schools can absorb additional students while maintaining quality [Yuan, 2022; Zhong, Park, 2023].

The DRP focus on strengthening public school education has led to intensified competition for high-quality schools, particularly in affluent areas. Families who can afford to move to school districts with reputable public schools are increasingly doing so, driving up local housing prices and unintentionally linking educational access to residential locations. This trend has posed challenges for local authorities, who must navigate the growing socioeconomic divide while managing the pressure on popular school districts and ensuring equitable access to quality education [Xue, Li, 2023].

Local authorities have faced increased operational demands as they work to align the DRP with the existing educational frameworks. For instance, some regions have introduced time limits on students' Internet use to prevent online gaming addiction, while others have developed new curriculum guidelines to comply with the DRP standards⁵. In regions with limited infrastructure, these requirements present challenges, as local authorities must enforce policies that require additional resources and oversight. The need to implement these policies effectively has demonstrated the disparity in regional capacity and resources, with wealthier areas better able to meet extensive requirements of the policy.

⁴ Ministry of Education (2021) Notification of the general office of the Ministry of education on the enrolment of secondary vocational schools in 2021: http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A07/moe_950/202104/t20210406_524618.html (accessed 28.08.2015).

⁵ China's National Press and Publication Administration (2021) Notification on preventing minors from indulging in online games: <https://www.nppa.gov.cn/nppa/contents/279/98792.shtml> (accessed 28.08.2015).

In summary, the impact of DRP on local authorities is multifaceted, with regional disparities in resources and infrastructure shaping the effectiveness of its implementation. While the policy promotes educational equity and matches the national goals of “common prosperity”, its success depends largely on local governments’ ability to adapt and distribute resources effectively.

3.5. The DRP impact on private tutoring institutions

The DRP has had profound implications for China’s private tutoring industry, compelling it to adapt significantly to a highly regulated educational landscape. Designed to reduce academic pressure on students and ease financial burdens on families, the DRP enforces stringent controls on private tutoring institutions, particularly those offering academic-focused programs.

These restrictions prohibit non-licensed institutions from offering academic training, mandate qualification standards for tutors, and enforce content supervision to ensure agreement with socialist educational values [Lu, Zhou, Wei, 2022; Xue, Li, 2023]. It also imposes regulations to limit the operating hours for academic tutoring, prohibiting tutoring sessions on holidays and evenings, and restricting the advertising of tutoring services. Additionally, foreign teachers are barred from participation, and tutoring institutions are prohibited from providing overseas courses. These measures are intended to redirect the focus of out-of-school education towards a more ideologically controlled and nationally aligned system.

Regulatory control showed positive short-term outcomes in line with the objectives of the policy. For example, recent empirical research findings indicate that since the introduction of the policy, the demand for academic tutoring has been decreasing significantly, especially in core subjects like Chinese, Math, and English [Liu et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024]. However, this short-term influence can be temporal and debatable due to several reasons.

Survey data indicates that, despite these policy controls, approximately 87% of parents express continued interest in external academic support, with 37% willing to pursue one-on-one tutoring as an alternative to group classes, underscoring the persistent demand for supplemental academic services, driven by parental expectations for academic success and making the industry go “underground” [Xue, Li, 2023; Zhang, 2021; Zhao, 2024]. This shift has introduced new dynamics into the tutoring market, creating a viable niche for institutions to survive in the shrinking market. Liu et al. [2024] argue that due to this trend most Chinese families, including those from lower social layers, hire college students or live-in nannies, to fulfill their academic expectations because they believe that despite being costly, this investment is essential.

The DRP has forced private tutoring institutions to pivot from academic-focused tutoring to non-academic areas, such as arts or

sports, and general skills development, particularly to cater to high-income families seeking better social and cultural capital for their children [Liu et al., 2024]. This shift represents a strategic adaptation, allowing institutions to circumvent restrictions on academic subjects while meeting the evolving market demands. For example, the leading institutions like New Oriental and TAL Education, previously centered on test preparation, have diversified into adult education and non-academic courses, capturing a new segment of consumers interested in broader developmental opportunities. This transition is not only a survival strategy for these institutions, but it also reflects the emerging trend where high-income families substitute academic support with diverse extracurricular activities [Zhong, Park, 2023; Liu et al., 2024].

The DRP has directly impacted tutors by reducing work hours, income stability, and overall employment opportunities within the sector [Yang et al., 2024]. In response, some tutors have shifted to industries outside education, while others have turned to informal or private tutoring arrangements to maintain income despite policy restrictions. Additionally, some tutors choose the “underground” methods to continue offering academic support, often organizing small, private sessions, or rebranding their services to evade policy scrutiny. Yang et al. [2024] highlights regional disparities in policy implementation: developed regions, such as Beijing and Guangdong, have enacted comprehensive support measures, including reemployment assistance and retraining opportunities for displaced tutors. In contrast, inland regions offer comparatively limited support, compounding the financial and employment challenges faced by tutors. These disparities highlight the need for regionally tailored support systems, as tutors in less supported areas face greater barriers to adapting their careers within the DRP framework.

The analysis of the DRP confirmed that it has effectively reshaped the private tutoring landscape in China, enforcing regulatory constraints that have reoriented the sector towards non-academic development and personalized tutoring formats. The persistence of high parental expectations and resilience of parental demand for academic support reflect the strength of academic-oriented cultural values in China. This indicates that strict formal regulation may inadvertently push tutoring institutions and tutors toward informal, less-regulated operations. The growth of informal tutoring highlights the ongoing challenge policymakers face in balancing regulatory controls with the persistent cultural and societal pressures for supplemental academic services [Yang et al., 2024].

4. Discussion

The analysis of the promises and the short-term outcomes of the DRP on internal and external stakeholders of this policy suggests that while the DRP strives to foster a more equitable, mentally healthy, and less

financially burdensome educational environment, its implementation poses challenges, which undermines success of short-term outcomes of the DRP for most of its stakeholders. When considering primary external stakeholders, namely students, it is important to acknowledge that while the DRP has had a positive impact on children by reducing academic stress and improving mental health, its benefits are influenced by the following factors: family socioeconomic status, resource availability, and students' ability to manage their time effectively [Jiang, Wang, 2021; Zhao, 2024; Zhong, Park, 2023]. While the policy offers children a more balanced lifestyle by reducing amount of homework, the management of increased free time requires structured guidance so that potential risks could be mitigated. As many researchers stated, the success of DPR in supporting holistic child development will depend on addressing these disparities and fostering responsible use of leisure time [Zhong, Park, 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Xue, Shi, 2022; Yan, 2022; Jiang, Wang, 2021].

With regards to the second main category of external stakeholders, parents, the analysis shows that although financial pressures have eased for some families, deeply ingrained cultural emphasis on academic achievement remains influential in parental decision-making; therefore, the value of the DRP is questioned. The prevailing belief of Chinese families is that success in high-stakes examinations equates to victory in life, and this causes parents to invest more in their children's education. Nevertheless, the prohibition of cram schools has hindered access to additional education for children from ordinary families, while affluent parents continue to involve private tutors in their children's instruction [Xue, Li, 2023]. This finding suggests that the short-term impact of the DRP is favorable for non-wealthy families. However, it remains uncertain what the long-term implications of the DRP will be for these families when their children have to compete for opportunities in higher education alongside those from affluent families.

The short-term effects for the largest category of internal stakeholders — teachers and schools — have turned to be quite opposite compared to the promises of the DRP. Teachers had to take all responsibility for students' mental health, parental expenses and worries and make sure that they are cultivating a well-rounded learning environment that aligns with the broader goals of the DRP. Apparently, the reduction in students' workload has led to a significant increase in teachers' workload as they have to manage both academic and extracurricular tasks, with their working days continuously lengthening. Therefore, support and additional resources should be provided for teachers, accommodating the needs and well-being of those charged with the implementation of the policy [Xue, Li, 2023; Zhong, Park, 2023; Liu, 2022; Xie, Qian, 2024; Wang, Fan, 2023].

After implementation of the DRP, socioeconomic disparities in educational access and quality have intensified and become ob-

vious for the local authorities. The DRP has amplified the visibility of pre-existing inequalities, particularly between urban and rural areas, highlighting the need for ongoing support and region-specific strategies to achieve the intended outcomes [Zhong, Park, 2023; Xue, Li, 2023; Yuan, 2022].

With regards to private tutoring institutions, they suffered the most in the initial phase of the DRP. However, in the later stages, they managed to adjust themselves to the requirements of the policy and reoriented the sector towards non-academic development and personalized tutoring formats. The main reason is the value system of Chinese families, with high parental expectations and resilience of parental demand for academic excellence of their children, and this will not let private tutoring institutions disappear in the near future.

The shortcomings of the DRP are partially explained by Chinese cultural values rooted in Confucian traditions, which place high value on education as a means for social mobility [Chen et al., 2021]. Chinese cultural heritage contributes to the phenomenon of “educational involution,” wherein intense academic pressures persist without corresponding educational advancement and students’ are involved in constant academic race to get an opportunity to advance their socioeconomic status. Despite positive intentions of the DRP, Chinese parents keep experiencing considerable anxiety, particularly concerning their children’s learning attitudes and prospects of university or college admission, which further intensifies educational involution [Yu et al., 2022]. This anxiety illustrates the conflict between the policy goals and parents’ aspiration to maintain competitive advantages, compelling some of them to seek additional educational resources despite the constraints the DPR imposes on “shadow education” [Ibid.]. Such actions involuntarily sustain the cycle of educational intensification, undermining the policymakers’ objective to alleviate undue academic pressure.

To eliminate these shortcomings, as the stakeholder theory proposes [Donaldson, Preston, 1995; Reynolds, Schultz, Hekman, 2006], it is important to balance the interests of all stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, tutoring institutions, and local authorities. They all should work together on achieving the mutual goal and learn to trust each other. Analyzing the similar case in South Korea, we can see that there, the DRP was not successful either as it could not solve the fundamental social problems of the country, nor did it consider the needs of society; however, it blindly suppressed training institutions [Lee, Lee, Jang, 2010].

To effectively balance the interests of all stakeholders and ensure the success of DRP, a multifaceted approach is essential. For students, the policy aims to reduce academic burdens and promote holistic development by limiting homework and regulating off-campus tutoring [Xue, Li, 2023]. This requires schools to enhance the quality of

in-class teaching and provide diverse after-school services that would cater to students' individual needs [Ibid.]. For parents, it is crucial to address their educational anxiety by engaging in transparent communication about goals and outcomes of the policy, as well as by providing resources to support their children's learning at home [Yu et al., 2022]. As teachers play a pivotal role in implementing the DRP, their workload should be managed, and professional development opportunities should be offered to improve instructional quality and reduce reliance on off-campus tutoring [Liu, 2022]. Besides, tutoring institutions should adapt to the new regulatory environment by shifting their focus from academic tutoring to non-academic, interest-based programs, in accordance with the objectives of the policy [Liu et al., 2024]. In addition, local authorities should ensure equitable distribution of educational resources across urban and rural areas and provide support for teachers and schools to improve the quality of education [Xue, Li, 2023]. By addressing the concerns and needs of each stakeholder group, the DRP can achieve its goal of creating a more equitable and sustainable educational system.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the short-term outcomes of the DRP reveal a complex interplay of burdens and challenges for internal and external stakeholders, impacting students, parents, teachers, local authorities, and private tutoring institutions. The policy has caused beneficial changes in student well-being and relief of financial pressures for non-wealthy families and shown the ability of private tutoring institutions to adapt to new requirements. On the other hand, it has also intensified socioeconomic disparities and increased teacher workload, necessitating adjustments to balance interests of multiple stakeholders. Additionally, the deeply ingrained cultural emphasis on academic achievement among parents has raised questions about the value of the policy and its long-term implications for educational access and quality, emphasizing the need for ongoing support and region-specific strategies.

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