

The Dilemma of China's Education Policy

An Analysis of the Double Reduction Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the dilemma of China's education policy. Its main problem remains the unevenness of educational resources, with the double reduction policy as a case study focusing on the economic and social sustainability issues associated with education policy. By focusing on the drawbacks of the three-child policy and the privatization of education, this article points out that the double reduction policy has reduced the cost of education and the pressure of child-rearing on parents by reducing extra-curricular tuition and the academic pressure on students. It also alleviates the problem of uneven educational resources at the root, as the double reduction policy has allowed developed cities to reduce the content of after-school tuition, making the gap between urban teaching resources and rural teaching resources to a certain extent narrower, typically in the form of elite education and out-of-school tuition courses. This paper first sketched the history of the development of education in China, particularly the process of privatization of education; the second part aims to illustrate the necessity for the double reduction policy based on a content analysis of official government records and a literature study of relevant research, discussing how economic development, social stability, and the three-child policy contributed to the introduction of the double reduction policy. This is followed by an analysis of the negative outcomes of the policy and provides insights for further educational research. It is pointed out that in the long run, the double reduction policy is not feasible by relying only on restricting extracurricular providers and reducing the amount of homework for students, as more important is the enhancement needed in teacher assessment.

Keywords: Chinese education policy, Educational disparity, Private education, Education marketization

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper employs a Chronosystem to analyze four spheres related to China's double reduction policy: ideological motivations at the political sphere, teacher evaluation at the professional level, policy reform at the institutional sphere, and socio-cultural influences on parents in both the rural and urban spheres. Urie Bronfenbrenner established the ecological systems theory in 1979, which contains Micro-system, Meso-system, Exo-system, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem, to explain how their immediate and surrounding environment affects the way children grow and develop. The chronosystem is made up of environmental and transitional events that take place throughout a child's development, adding some useful temporal dimension, showing the impact of change and constancy on children's environments, such as changes in family structure, addresses, parents' employment status, and

huge social changes such as economic cycles and wars [1].

As a socialist country, a highly centralized power since the founding of the People's Republic of China, ideology and economic needs at different times have determined the direction of education to a large extent. This is supported by Murphy and Johnson: in China, the dominant approach to education and development is not generated by a single dominant group, but rather by different interests from various fields such as education, politics, social work, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) [2]. However, the curriculum represents a consensus of theories and values of educators and scholars and is revised in response to economic demands and political requirements [3].

Therefore, before starting to analyze the backdrop under the Double Reduction Policy, it is vital to draw an overview of education and development since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and

the education policies that have been changed with it. In addition, the Double Reduction Policy is an education policy guideline jointly issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of China's Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council on 24 July 2021, the full title of which is "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training on Compulsory Education Students", also called the Double Reduction Policy [4]. The policy aims to improve the overall quality of school education, reduce excessive learning burdens, protect students' health, reduce parents' burdens and anxiety, reduce social inequities, further regulate, and standardize out-of-school training (both online and offline), and strictly enforce the Compulsory Education Law, the Protection of Minors Law and other education sector laws and regulations. As the policy intent revolves around the phenomenon of educational inequity, particularly the issue of privatized educational institutions, this article will also highlight the history of the privatizations of education in China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The historical background of Chinese education and development

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, a highly centralized education system was established to emulate that of the Soviet Union to achieve rapid industrialization and capital accumulation. By classifying students into academic and vocational categories, students with scholarly and scientific competencies received the overwhelming share of investment in education [5]. Indeed, during the early 1960s, President Mao called for the establishment of quality schools [6].

However, during the Cultural Revolution, when hyper-egalitarianism and the achievements of socialism were considered superior to scientific academic knowledge, the college entrance examination was abolished and the education sector was restructured to focus less on elite teaching and more on basic peasant education [5], such as numeracy, and recognize the texts of Mao's theories. Although Han argues that the Cultural Revolution had undeniable benefits for the development of rural China, such as the development of rural education through the teaching of industrial and agricultural skills and the vigorous development of food production and agricultural side-line activities in some villages [7], it is also a fact that the Cultural Revolution caused a blow to the overall development of education in China and a decline in educational standards. To make matters even worse, during the climax of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, teachers stopped teaching for fear of 'struggle sessions', which means a high risk of physical and psychological harm if they continued teaching [8].

2.2. Development of Chinese education marketization

As the radicalism of the Mao era waned in the 1970s, and especially at the beginning of the 1978 economic reforms, the Chinese government and educators realized that education was vital in economic development [2]. Changes in the political environment led to changes in the education system and policies, such as the reinstatement of university entrance examinations and the reinstatement of the priority school system to continue the development of high-quality elite education [5], and the abolishment of the state monopoly on education thanks to the privatization of education [9]. Also, international observers and Chinese planners both indicate that this nexus between education and economic well-being is likely to reinforce because, in the long view, a successful economic development relies on China moving up the manufacturing chain to global production and diversifying towards services, a process that requires a more consistent, proficient, and experienced workforce [2].

The reform and opening have changed China's centrally planned economy to a market economy combined with government moderation, and such policies have not only affected the economic sector but have also had a very significant effect on education [9]. On a more specific note, China's shift to a market economy has also seen a fundamental change in the labor system, replacing lifelong employment with contractual systems to promote economic growth [10]. Moreover, marketization and privatizations led to the reintegration of education with the economy, with sweeping changes in terms of student access, curriculum, and financing. From 1985 to 1995, the Chinese government continued to devolve responsibility for the management of school affairs and all related decision-making to the local level [11] [12]. It is also owing to China's transition from a lifelong employment system to a contract labor system that education has become one of the largest markets in China [10]. As a result, schools can hire and fire teachers by themselves based on qualifications, experience, and performance. Although this has produced more quality educational resources, Niu identifies that 'temporary teachers' are a precarious employment group, mostly moving from poor rural areas to affluent urban centers, leading to a widening gap in the quality of teachers between urban and rural areas and a further deepening of inequality in educational resources [13].

Under this circumstance, the economic reforms have created serious social security problems, and cuts in government subsidies have created a major financial burden, including housing issues, healthcare issues, and education. All of them are no longer covered by the pursuit of welfare under high egalitarianism. Although the Chinese government has recognized the need to enhance the quality of the economy and the population

by boosting the development of education, due to the limited financial capacity [14], the central government was unable to carry the primary responsibility for financing and providing education as it had during the Mao era [15]. Thus, the policymakers began to permit the non-state sector and citizens to engage in financing and providing education, which was the initiation of the privatization of education in China [16].

Furthermore, education in China began a new process. By 1986, a period that had a major impact on education in China, with the enactment of 16 relevant education laws, including the nine-year compulsory education, implied that the state started to pay attention to the problem of uneven education between urban and rural areas [17]. However, high dropout rates from elementary education and inequitable access to high-quality education in rural areas remain prevalent [18].

In the context of privatization of education, the education market has sprung out and many schools and agencies have been established on market-oriented principles and practices [9]. For one thing, this in turn has exacerbated educational inequalities and once again widened the gap between rural and urban educational resources. More concretely, people of cities are capable to pay for high-quality educational services, engage extracurricular tuition institutions, and enroll in higher-quality educational programs, but people from rural China have fewer educational options and less access to high-quality education [9]. This is also proved in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 Results which illustrates that people in cities are more capable to pay for high-quality educational services, engage extracurricular tuition institutions, and enroll in higher-quality educational programs, but people from rural China have fewer educational options and less likely to access to high-quality education.

For another thing, it is undeniable that China needs market-based education to provide more financing for education, but needs to balance this with social equality at the same time, especially when there is too much industry disorder in education private agencies. According to a survey conducted by the Shanghai Municipal Women's Federation in 2005, it was found that 25% of household expenditures among those with children aged 18 or younger were spent on education. In addition, a survey conducted by the People's Bank of China in 2004 revealed that children's education was the primary purpose of savings [9].

It is parents' excessive pursuit of their children's education that has prompted the emergence of extracurricular education, even though urban parents are mostly willing to buy educational advantages for their children regardless of the huge economic burden they bear in the competitive dynamics of university entrance exams and the labor market [9]. This has contributed to the extremely rapid growth of educational training

institutions, extracurricular classes, which have become a crucial aspect of the marketization of education in China [9].

Such a large growth of private educational agencies has also been accompanied by the unreasonable phenomenon. For instance, in 2004, the National Auditing Department uncovered numerous cases of corruption, overcharging, and corrupt practices involving many education sectors across the country [9].

3. THE DOUBLE REDUCTION POLICY

Based on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development survey [19], for these phenomena of educational disorder, the statements in the national education plan are essential factors that the central government had developed the objective to strengthen its educational monitoring capacities well before 2006. In July 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China published a double-reduction policy referring to reducing the burden of homework and the burden of out-of-school training for students in compulsory education [4].

Economic prosperity, social stability, and the three-child policy all led to the establishment of the Double Reduction Policy from a chronosystem standpoint. Firstly, in terms of economic development, the higher the quality of education, the faster the economic growth [20]. Hanushek and Woessmann conducted research and affirm the importance of high-quality education and provide clear informative policy insights: The higher the quality of education, the higher the expected economic growth [21]. Meanwhile, the research shows that education outcomes are mostly related to the share of education expenditure in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and this result stimulates governments to invest more in the education sector [21].

Secondly, on the issue of social instability. To promote economic development, China has opened the education market, but it has widened the geographical gap between the economically developed eastern cities and the less economically developed areas in the center and west [9]. A large number of tuition institutions proliferated, accompanied by unreasonable fees and other phenomena. More importantly, educational inequality is growing, with urban students often having greater access to high-quality extra-curricular tuition programs and out-of-school tuition agencies. Conversely, most rural families cannot afford to pay for out-of-school tuition and are falling behind. The inequalities in education and the disparities in education fees brought about by market-based education have prompted the central government to re-examine its approach to education development.

Thirdly, closely tied to the Double Reduction Policy is the aging problem, which is also correlated with the three-child policy. In the official document of the Double Reduction Policy, there are three parts divided from the general requirements, the guiding ideology, working principles, and working objectives. From all three fields, the policy is committed to highlighting alleviating parents' educational anxiety. The government continues to encourage citizens to have children, and the double-reduction policy is one of the ways the government has developed to protect and reduce the pressure on parents to raise children by setting after-class tutoring for free in school as well suppressing unreasonable expenses for out-of-school tuition.

Overall, all these three aspects are needed for the sustainable development that China is currently pursuing. Economic strength, maintaining social stability, and addressing the aging population are all in line with China's rapid economic development and the necessity for the government to work towards eliminating the urban-rural divide in the process of urbanization and industrialization.

4. DIFFICULTY IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Buddin and Zamarro show that teacher quality is an indispensable determinant of student performance [22]. Meanwhile, the Double Reduction Policy aims to reduce extracurricular tuition organizations, which places a greater demand on school teachers' professional knowledge and expertise, but there is no matching teacher assessment system, and the old teaching qualification test method is still applied. In other words, if the double reduction policy needs to be continued, one of the biggest problems is the overly one-dimensional way in which teachers are being evaluated in China.

Also, since 2000, China's basic education has undergone a series of reforms, with a focus on curriculum reform requiring a fundamental change in teaching methods from heavy reliance on textbooks and a spoon-feeding pedagogy to one that encourages teachers to teach in a variety of styles and allows students to participate more in the classroom [23]. However, Brock points out that the main weakness of this curriculum reform is the lack of training for teachers [23].

In contrast, So and Park indicate that the Roh Moo-Hyun administration in South Korea, a fellow country under the Asian education system, began to crystallize the government's interest in teacher quality management [24]. In the Lee Myung-Bak administration that followed, a legal basis for regular assessment of teacher competence by other teachers, students, and parents was established, as well as a manual of criteria for measurement [24]. Also, in the Park Geun-Hye administration, a statement emerged about the teacher

self-monitoring system, a government-sponsored classroom analysis lab that was established to improve classroom quality through teachers' documentation and analysis of their classrooms [24].

Hence, in the case of teacher quality and the assessment of teacher quality, a range of ancillary measures need to be developed, rather than introducing a separate double reduction policy within just cracking down on after-school tutoring institutions.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, prior to the 1978 reform and opening up, the concepts of class struggle and anti-imperialism were still prominent conceptions and ideologies in political and social life, while the economy and education were giving way. The ideological principle of egalitarianism limited economic development also limited the progress of education in China as a whole, but the reform and opening-up policy of 1978 was a breakthrough. Despite the Chinese government's attempts to dilute the educational stratification caused by the privatisation of education following such market-oriented reforms through the development and revision of education policies, such as the double reduction policy, there are still existing gaps in the establishment and implementation of education policies. In particular, the gap in educational resources between children from wealthy families, typically those from the urban middle class and elite, and those from rural areas will remain unchanged.

But it can be seen from the 1970s to the present that the direction of education policies formulated in China, ranging from the nine-year compulsory education to the formulation of the double reduction policy, still revolves mainly around alleviating the problem of uneven educational resources between urban and rural areas. This is due to two factors: firstly, the unequal economic development resulting from China's rapid economic growth after the reform and opening-up has exacerbated regional differences in the educational attainment of different population groups. On the other hand, the privatizations of education and changes in the employment system have produced an increasing number of excellent and high-quality educational resources, such as high-quality online classes and extra-curricular tutors, which are often more easily accessible to students in urban areas.

This paper contends that the widening education gap is closely linked to the income distribution gap between the rich and the poor and that the focus of the double reduction policy is on curbing the gap between high-quality out-of-school programs and preventing the gap between students in developed cities, who are more affluent and can afford to pay for training and have access to more educational resources, and those in rural areas,

who are relatively less well-off. However, in the long run, it is not feasible to rely on restricting extra-curricular providers. Specifically, the double reduction policy mentions the need to reduce the number of students attending extra-curricular tuition providers by increasing the number of teachers tutoring students in school, but it does not specify a method for assessing teachers. How can schools and inspection authorities measure whether teachers are competent to do the work required by the policy? How can teachers achieve high-quality tutoring for students despite large class sizes? While the double reduction policy aims to be extremely meaningful in alleviating inequalities in educational resources, the implementation of the policy needs to be strengthened in terms of teacher assessment.

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