

# Research on the Relationship Between Double Reduction Policy and Fertility Intention

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## ABSTRACT

China's fertility rate is below the world average and people's willingness to have children continues to decline. The high cost of education and the "education fever" has played an important role in influencing people's fertility intentions. It is easy to see that the "double reduction" policy has been given the mission to solve education-related problems and thus increase the fertility intentions of Chinese people. This paper investigated the relationship between the "double reduction" policy and fertility intention in Chinese society. It examined two aspects of the impact of the "double reduction" policy on education anxiety and education cost. By adopting the qualitative research method, this research analyzed 12 responses. This research suggests that the effectiveness of the "double reduction" policy is controversial. Detailed conclusion, discussion and suggestions are given at the end.

**Keywords:** *Fertility Intention, "Double Reduction" Policy, Education Anxiety, Educational Cost*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On July 24, 2021, the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education [1], which is referred to as the double reduction policy. "Double reduction" means effectively reducing the burden of heavy homework and off-campus training for students in compulsory education. Undeniably, the burden of education cost and intensive education anxiety is also an important factor in the low desire to have children. It is believed that the "double reduction" policy can directly reduce parents' financial burden on education.

Data from the seventh census show that China's total fertility rate for women of childbearing age is 1.3 in 2020, a figure that falls below the warning line of 1.5. China's total fertility rate is less than half the world average and much lower than the average of developed countries. This is a shocking number, sparking public concern about China's fertility rate. Without a doubt, high fertility cost plays an essential role in the low fertility rate[2]. Before the implementation of the double reduction policy, education in China tended to be "Nei Juan", or in English, involution. Chinese students undertake a lot of pressure from the educational competition and need to bear a lot of homework and off-campus tutoring. In order to

provide better education and future for their children, parents will unconsciously fall into the vicious circle of education anxiety, followed by increasing education costs and pressure. This paper explores whether the double reduction policy can help reduce the cost of childbirth and alleviate educational anxiety, and whether the double reduction policy can help increase people's willingness to bear children.

## 2. THE BACKGROUND OF THE "DOUBLE REDUCTION" POLICY

Since July 1955, when the Ministry of Education issued the first "burden reduction order", namely the "Instruction on Reducing the Excessive Burden of Primary and secondary school students", nine burden reduction orders have been issued at the national level alone. The "double reduction" policy continues the foundation of the burden reduction policies of the past decades and aims to emphasize the importance of school education. It is worth mentioning that the "double reduction" policy is not simply a burden reduction policy, its reform intensity and coverage exceed all other burden reduction policy in history [3].

In recent years, even though education reform in China has developed vigorously, there are still some outstanding problems, especially in the compulsory education stage, which is from primary school to middle

school. On the one hand, the phenomenon of “utilitarianism” in education is serious. Some schools, parents and students have over-emphasized intellectual education and attached importance to scores. The short-sightedness and utilitarianism of education are particularly prominent. On the other hand, due to the massive influx of capital, there are more and more kinds of after-school training institutions, which are expanding in scale and increasing in risk. Violations of laws and regulations are also prominent. Some institutions set up expensive training, and through various means such as advertising hype, creating and increasing parents' tension, deepening the “internal” education of the society, resulting in increasingly heavier financial burdens on parents, extracurricular training tasks and psychological anxiety of students, creates a growing negative burden, and distortions beyond “campus”. It seriously affects the development of students' physical and mental health, hinders the overall improvement of students' comprehensive quality, causes the imbalance of education ecology, and deviates from the essence and original intention of education. In this context, the state has issued a comprehensive “double reduction” policy to reduce the burden of students in compulsory education, standardizing educational management, establishing correct educational values, and implementing the fundamental task of moral cultivation, so as to fully implement the Party's educational policy and promote the all-round development and healthy growth of students.

What is often overlooked is that, in addition to the above-mentioned ostensible purpose, the “double reduction” policy has a profound, more macroscopic mission. There are three mountains weighing on the present generation, housing, health care and education, and the double reduction policy involves two of them at once. It not only successfully solves the social phenomenon of the high cost of children's education but also provides a solution to the problem of school district housing, which is particularly prominent in housing. This, in turn, can directly lead to an increase in fertility and the implementation of the three-child policy.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### ***3.1 Qualitative method - interview***

The main question that needs to be addressed in this research is whether the fertility intentions of Chinese couples of childbearing age will be affected by the implementation of the double reduction policy. At the same time, a hidden question contained in this research question is whether the double reduction policy will reduce the cost of education for parents and thus the cost of childcare or not. This research will also contain some more sensitive questions that will require communication and trust-building between the researcher and the

respondents. The qualitative research method enables researchers to gather data from in-depth insights on topics.

Due to the COVID-19 situation, the interviews were conducted online through video phone calls. The topic of the interviews is about fertility intention and education plans related to the “double reduction” policy, which is about an individual's value, and questions that need to be discussed could be rather private and sensitive. Also, answers could be affected by many different causes, such as personal background, environment and financial status. Therefore, in this research, the in-depth interview method was adopted. In addition, semi-structured interviews were outlined as a method used in data collection and analysis.

#### ***3.2 Data collection***

Because of time and geographic constraints, the most effective option was to conduct online video and audio interviews using WeChat. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, depending on the interviewee. Interviews were performed carried out informally and individually. Interviewees were all Chinese and the interviews were all conducted in Chinese as well. This intention was to allow the interviewees to be more familiar and comfortable with the language structure and context, which greatly facilitated interviewees' understanding of the questions. Before each interview, a brief description of the interview format was given to the interviewees. Encouragement from the interviewer during the interview process also boosted the interviewee's confidence and shared desire. All interviews were recorded and meaningful parts of the interviews were transcribed.

#### ***3.3 Sampling***

Considering that the “double reduction” policy is the latest policy released to reduce the burden of education, there are some people who do not know its connotation and details. Therefore, the respondents' knowledge of the “double reduction” policy is an important consideration in the sampling process. Besides, regardless of gender, the respondents were all aged between 25-35 years old. As people from this age group are more interested in any policies related to childbearing and education, also they are more likely to have fertility consideration. The diversity of the sample was one of the key considerations in the sampling process, considering that individuals' fertility intentions and educational plans for the next generation are influenced by their environment, income level, education level, and other factors. After several attempts, a total of 12 samples were selected. All respondents were contacted from social media, or online forums. In terms of respondents' occupations and household incomes, most were from urban middle-class

groups, with a few from small towns or lower-income rural households.

#### **4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

The fertility willingness of couples of childbearing age has become a decisive force in current and future fertility levels in China [4]. This study explores the impact of the double reduction policy on fertility intentions in two main ways. The purpose of the double reduction policy is to examine whether the double reduction policy reduces educational anxiety and educational costs, and whether the changes in educational anxiety and costs have an impact on people's willingness to have children.

##### ***4.1 “Double Reduction” Policy and Education Anxiety***

The anxiety of parents is always closely related to the academic burden, and the regulation of "reducing burden" and its effect shut. Parents are concerned about their children's education, and there is a certain degree of anxiety [5]. To investigate whether the “double reduction” policy would alleviate parents' education anxiety, it is necessary to know where parents' education anxiety comes from.

The results of the study showed that most of the respondents were victims of education anxiety. Only two respondents indicated that it is more important for their children to grow up happily, and they do not worry too much about their children's academic performance, much less feel anxious about their education. Among those who suffer from educational anxiety, parents' concern about their ability to provide the necessary help for their children's learning was the most common cause of education anxiety. One respondent made it clear that "it is difficult for us parents to tutor our children in their studies just by our ability. " The second most frequently mentioned reason is that there is so much competitive pressure nowadays that parents are worried that their children will be pushed out if they don't work hard. This competitive pressure, on the one hand, comes from the peer pressure of their children, on the other hand, the booming extracurricular tutoring industry.

At this point, a critical question arises: Has the “double reduction” policy eased parents' educational anxiety? It must be admitted that the “double reduction” policy has remedied the chaos in China's education industry and parents no longer need to be influenced by the education industry's advertising [6]. In this respect, parents are no longer "forced" to send their children to tutoring classes. However, parents also mentioned that with the “double reduction” policy in place, they would be more concerned about their children's academic performance not being guaranteed since extracurricular classes would no longer be an option. In addition, some

parents mentioned that the “double reduction” only subtracted part of the overly competitive situation, but the underlying problem of why there is educational anxiety has not been addressed. One respondent said, "After the ‘double reduction’ it might just not be as stressful, but it's still stressful. It depends on what the parents do. The obvious thing around me is that I used to know who had enrolled in maths classes and who had enrolled in English classes, and now it's straightforward online classes and one-on-one classes." It is easy to see that although the “double reduction” policy has a certain effect on education anxiety, the deep-seated problems do not disappear because of it, many parents still feel anxious about education.

##### ***4.2 “Double Reduction” Policy and Educational Cost***

Another issue that is closely related to the double reduction and can affect fertility intentions is the cost of education. The cost of raising children is undeniably a key factor influencing fertility intentions. Parents generally believe that education is the cost of childcare that they are most willing to spend money on. One of the respondents said that since they had a child, they must do their best to raise the child well. Although the “double reduction” policy has banned the extracurricular tutoring industry, as mentioned above, many parents will shift the direction of education to a relatively more hidden form of tutoring, which are online classes, one-on-one teaching, or home tutors. This more covert form of tutoring actually increased the financial burden on parents, as such courses are usually much more expensive. Parents with lower incomes said that this phenomenon makes it difficult for them to afford extracurricular tutoring for their children. Meanwhile, parents with middle- and high-income said they are willing to save money elsewhere and invest in their children's education.

Another interesting topic that occurred during the interviews is education equality. China has a large development gap between urban and rural areas, and one problem that is difficult to solve with “double reduction” policy is the issue of education equity between regions. At the same time, this issue is also an important factor that affects families' education expenditure. Two of the respondents were migrant workers who had moved to the city and whose children had originally stayed in their hometown, which is part of a less economically developed area. In the interview, they mentioned that they planned to bring their children to school in the city where they work because there are better educational resources there. However, this plan requires financial support, and they are under a lot of pressure. Similarly, this lack of integration of educational resources under the influence of the “double reduction” policy also raises the concern of parents in less economically developed areas. As mentioned earlier, the double reduction policy

emphasizes schooling and brings education back to the school itself. One interviewee mentioned that he was concerned that without extracurricular classes, his child wouldn't be able to receive an adequate quality education in a township elementary school which would leave his child too far behind compared to children in the city. The "double reduction" policy also widened educational inequality between classes. Even uneducated business tycoons can still pay for one-on-one tutoring of their children, and engaged higher education parents can also use their working time for child tutoring. But ordinary parents in ordinary professions lose the opportunity to tutor their children, because they do not have the ability and time to tutor their children.

### **4.3 "Double Reduction" Policy and Fertility Intention**

Finally, the question at the core of this study is whether the double reduction policy will affect people's decision to have children. Some respondents said that even with the "double reduction" policy, children still face a lot of competitive pressure, and they hope that they can put all their resources into one child. This means that the effect of "double reduction" on reducing student stress is still limited. Parents' concerns about the high competitive pressure on their children are still not dispelled, and they will not have more children for this reason. One respondent who has not had any children said that the reason he will have children in the future will only be because of the traditional concept, but he feels that the cost of childcare is still very high and does not want children to bog down as much as he does, so even if he wants children, he will only have one. However, one respondent, who is a Ph.D, said he would be willing to have two to three children and that he would personally tutor the children at home. Since the "double reduction" policy made after-school tutoring classes almost disappear, his high level of education turned out to be an advantage in parenting to ensure that the children's academic performance would not be compromised. His answer also confirms that the double reduction policy actually increases the requirements for parents, and explains why some people's willingness to have children has not increased as a result of the double reduction.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

To achieve the goal of increasing people's willingness to have children, the "double reduction" policy must accomplish at least two goals, alleviating educational anxiety and reducing the cost of education. But the effectiveness of the "double reduction" policy is controversial. For low-income families, and for parents whom themselves do not want to get involved in the spiral of educational anxiety, the "double reduction" policy is relatively effective, giving them a valid reason to stop sending their children to extracurricular classes.

However, for middle- and high-income families and parents who value their children's education, the impact of the "double reduction" is only limited to the fact that they can no longer explicitly send their children to more affordable extracurricular classes.

The existence of the "double reduction" policy has indeed reduced the pressure on students and families, but it has also further exacerbated the imbalance in educational resources, widened the gap between rich and poor, and further solidified the class. And the quality of educational resources and teachers in big cities is not equal to those in rural areas, which is the key problem that "double reduction" does not solve.

To reduce the burden on families through the policy of reducing the burden, to enhance people's willingness to give birth, a "double reduction" policy is far from enough, but also needs more supporting reforms to change the serious educational anxiety, the high cost of education phenomenon. Education needs to return to school education itself, why parents worry that they can't tutor their children, and why children's academic performance needs extracurricular classes to be guaranteed, are the issues that need to be addressed from school education itself.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This research shows that people's fertility intentions are weakly affected by the "double reduction" policy. The main reason is that the "double reduction" policy has a limited effect on reducing education costs and education anxiety. At the same time, the "double reduction" policy also increases educational inequality, and in this way, the "double reduction" policy even solidifies class and increases educational expenditures. One of the limitations of this research study was the constitution of the sample. Factors affecting fertility intention and education plans for the next generation can be diverse. The majority of respondents in the sample were in the higher education bracket and were from the 25-35 age range. This might have biased the sample. When studying the effect of double reduction on fertility decisions, taking into account a wider range of income, education, age groups, and the difference between rural and urban areas would make the study more convincing. Researchers need to continue conducting empirical research to ascertain the factors that contribute to high educational costs and intensive educational anxiety among parents in the Chinese context. It is also worth mentioning that the impact of the "double reduction" policy on the issue of educational equity also deserves more in-depth study and research.

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