

‘Reduction’ or Restrain? Social Reproduction in China’s Compulsory Education under the ‘Double Reduction’ Policy

Jiahui Tang^{1,a,*}

¹*Faculty of Social Science & Public Policy, King’s College London, 57 Waterloo Road, London, SE1 8WA, United Kingdom*

a. jiahuitang1998@hotmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The ‘double reduction’ policy was issued in 2021 in China as a means of reducing students’ schoolwork and restricting extracurricular tutoring, thereby alleviating students’ pressure and promote education equality. This paper investigates whether this policy eases educational inequality and promotes social mobility, or it reinforces social reproduction and intensifies social stratification. This paper begins with a brief introduction to China’s compulsory education and the background of the ‘double reduction’ policy. Afterwards, core and related theories of social reproduction are introduced and critically analysed. According to the theories and the context, it is examined how reproduction occurs through China’s compulsory education. Subsequently, a review is conducted of the current impact of this policy, particularly on the acquisition of educational resources by students from different backgrounds. Schools, families, and tutoring institutions are considered the main fields where reproduction take place. It turns out that the ‘double reduction’ policy to students, appears not only as a burden-reduction mechanism, but more like a restriction that hinders the acquisition of necessary assistance by ordinary families while ensuring the availability of high-quality resources for elite families, thus marginalising education resources, privatising education, and perpetuating class privileges among elite families.

Keywords: double reduction policy, social reproduction, shadow education, compulsory education, education reform

1. Introduction

The Nine-Year Compulsory Education Law of 1986 in China provides school-age children with compulsory education including a six-year primary school education and a three-year junior high school education without tuition fees. Equal access to compulsory education contributes to social equality. Yet there still have been disparities in access to educational resources and opportunities, since compulsory education differs in quality and quantity from school to school. Meanwhile, to meet the needs of parents and the society, schools had assigned lots of homework to strengthen students’ skills and to improve their grades. Furthermore, parents tended to seek tutoring institutions for their children to ‘win at the starting line’ [1]. The competition over educational resources had intensified and expanded the arena to extracurricular classes.

In response to this situation, several regulations were introduced to reduce schoolwork, alleviate family anxiety, and ease the competition. This had, however, increased the demand for and the

development of off-campus tutoring services, further adding to students' study pressure. As a result, China implemented the 'double reduction' policy in July 2021. Along with the reduction in schoolwork, after-school tutoring is banned. This policy is aimed at reducing students' academic pressure, improving their physical and mental health, and promoting their all-round development. The gap between students from different backgrounds is expected to be narrowed.

2. Social Reproduction in Education

A brief overview of reproduction theories is presented in this section as a theoretical framework for further investigation of reproduction in the specific context.

2.1. School as a Mediator

Contemporary social reproduction theories are typically grounded in Marxism social reproduction theories. Education disadvantages experienced by the inferior classes are attributed to the nature of school education and its relationship to social hierarchies [2]. In this sense, schools are viewed as a field producing skilled labour to meet economic demands and strengthening the social structure with distinct hierarchies, instead of a platform with equal access to education. This is consistent with the idea of Parsons, that schools inculcate specific attitudes, values, and beliefs in students, the future labour force, thereby ensuring a stable social order [3]. In this regard, Althusser's viewpoint is noteworthy, which posits that ideology is reproduced through 'Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)' [4]. Education functions as the predominant ISA where schools and families, reproduce ideology and values, thereby accelerating reproduction of social hierarchies.

2.2. Family as the Other Field

Bourdieu's contribution complemented the definition of reproduction. Firstly, Bourdieu agreed that reproduction occurs through schooling, where pupils are taught and trained to internalise hierarchically organised patterns of norms and values [5]. School serves as a mediator, preserving the existing social order and reproducing power relations among different classes. Secondly, he added that apart from school, family is the other pivotal field where educational resources can be cultivated and transmitted [6]. Parental involvement in their children's education and provision of resources contribute to reproduction and the transmission of social status. In addition, similar to the term ideology, Bourdieu used 'habitus' to demonstrate the relation of individual decisions and social reproduction [7]. When faced with educational decisions, individuals subconsciously evaluate the prospects of academic success based on their life experience. Families with richer experience, resources, and connections tend to set higher expectations and provide abundant resources for their children to successfully achieve the goals. Further, cultural capital disparities will be systematically reflected in students' academic credentials. In this way, students may be placed in the same social position as their parents. Meanwhile, economic capital is not neglected despite Bourdieu's focus on culture and consciousness. Bourdieu claimed that capitals people possess, including cultural capital, economic capital, and social capital, can be converted into another form under specific circumstances [6]. On the basis of Marxism social reproduction theories, Bourdieu introduced complementary explanation that reproduction is not only caused by economic factors, but also triggered and maintained due to cultural and social factors. The field of family is highly emphasised.

3. Reproduction of Inequalities in China's Compulsory Education? Egalitarian or Elitism

Based on the theories and the specific social context, this section examines how reproduction manifest in China's compulsory education system. An analysis of the reproduction of different social groups is conducted, considering the fields of family, school, and extracurricular classes.

3.1. Support from the Family

In China, socioeconomically advantaged families always provide high-quality education resources and a comfortable learning environment for their children, which facilitate students' academic success to a certain extent. The study conducted by Hong and Zhao indicates that family income is closely related to children's access to books and private tutoring [8]. That is to say, children may gain a priority in receiving high-quality educational resources due to the family's superiority in support and resources. Furthermore, regional differences also exist, as children of Ph.D-holding couples are offered free admission to university-affiliated kindergartens and schools in several China's developed regions [9]. This has promoted talent mobility, yet at the same time, it has enabled children from higher intellectual families to have broader access to high-quality education than their competitors. As a result, differences in family backgrounds led to differences in the access to resources. Inequality in the acquisition of education resource had resulted in the intergenerational transmission of capital and the intensification of social reproduction.

3.2. School Choice and Schooling

School can function as a mechanism through which inequalities are reproduced and exacerbated [5][10][11]. Despite the classification of elite schools and common schools no longer exists in China's compulsory education, elitism and unequal educational structures persist in practice. School choice and education are deeply intertwined with the opportunities one has and the educational resources one may access in the future. Schools in China vary greatly and those with professional teachers, extensive learning resources, advanced facilities, and relatively higher miscellaneous fees, particularly private schools, are still subconsciously perceived as 'elite' institutions. The upper class, as Bourdieu proposed, are motivated by their habitus, and tend to choose high-quality resources for their children. Elite schools with abundant resources, though costly, are accessible to them. Yang's study also reveals that students with superior family backgrounds are more inclined to attend elite schools [12]. High-quality resources always favor those from privileged backgrounds, ensuring their priorities and increasing their opportunities. A hidden dual structure of elite and common schools in the compulsory education system appears to have reproduced and exacerbated class divisions in society.

3.3. Shadow Education

Extracurricular tutoring, also called shadow education, was prevalent in China before the implementation of the 'double reduction' policy. Nearly half of Chinese middle school students had participated in extracurricular classes [13]. However, the supplemental support and extra resources students received from shadow education varied with students' different family backgrounds. As Bourdieu suggested, cultural capital and economic capital are interconnected [6]. It has been found that high-income families in China invest more in extracurricular tutoring for their children [14][9]. In other words, these families generally deemed high-quality tutoring a worthwhile investment that would in turn equip their children with an advantage in fierce educational competition. Meanwhile, they can utilise their social network to find a professional tutors. In contrast, families with less capital were blocked by the cost of high-quality tutoring. Extracurricular participation is

higher among students from elite schools than in common schools, and supplementary tutoring is more prevalent among students with higher grades. Due to the monopolization of educational resources by the wealthy, educational inequality and social stratification were exacerbated.

These findings not only imply that school perpetuated the family-based class structure, but also indicate that educational competition expanded beyond family and school. Extracurricular class is an additional arena through which social reproduction had maintained and reinforced [9]. Competition around shadow education placed an academic pressure on students and a financial burden on their families.

4. The ‘Double Reduction’ Policy: ‘Reduction’ or ‘Reproduction’?

This part investigates the influence of the ‘double reduction’ policy on social reproduction and on students’ acquisition of educational opportunities and resources in the fields of family, school, and extracurricular class.

4.1. Reproduction of Class Privilege Through Family

Even though the ‘double reduction’ policy has reduced the amount of time and energy students spend on schoolwork and extracurricular activities, it has exacerbated family-based competition for opportunities and resources, widened disparities between students from different backgrounds, and aggravated the reproduction of inequalities.

Firstly, working families lack the time, energy, competency, and capital to devote to their children’s education, whereas affluent families pay more attention and time to their children’s education [15]. Due to the fact that the policy has restricted tutoring services, parents previously relied on tutoring to assist their children in making up for academic deficiencies are now at a loss.

On the other hand, the policy did not radically cut off demand for the service of personal tutoring. High-quality extracurricular resources appear to be reserved for elite families, instead of disappearing. Wealthy Chinese families can still hire personal tutors at home at a high cost [15]. Meanwhile, the scarcity of supplementary resources has indirectly resulted in tutoring costs rising to a level that may be prohibitively expensive for ordinary individuals to afford. High-quality resources can be tailored to meet the needs of affluent families. Others may find it difficult to afford a personal tutor for their children at home.

Moreover, well-off parents enable their children to participate in a variety of cultural activities, nurture them and motivate them to develop in all aspects of their lives. A highly contrasting situation is that impoverished families in some distressed areas in China may afford nothing beyond the free nine-year compulsory education, nor have they benefited from this policy.

To sum up, the less advantaged groups turn out continuing to be marginalised by educational resources in the absence of family advantages. In contrast, high quality resources are monopolised by a minority and gradually privatised. China’s compulsory education system seems to retain the intrinsic pattern of reproduction that is closely related to social class.

4.2. Replication of Intergenerational Inequality in School

The ‘double reduction’ policy has intensified family-based inequalities in students’ access to school resources. Elite families with substantial cultural resources and economic assets often place high expectations on their children and provide them with as many educational opportunities as possible. However, students from less privileged backgrounds, particularly those living in poor neighbourhoods, are often forced to attend schools with limited resources [16]. For them, schools are the primary source of learning resources and may be the only available. A further problem is that students who encounter difficulties with the school curriculum or find themselves academically

behind their peers may not be able to receive the additional support they require. The reduction in both schoolwork and study time as well as after-class support has put some students in an awkward situation. There were students who have limited access to sufficient educational resources and necessary academic assistance [1]. Family-based inequality is still reflected in the education system and reinforced under the ‘double reduction’ policy.

4.3. Reinforced Privatisation and Reproduction of Social Stratification

In addition to family and school, after-school classes can be considered an additional field that facilitates cultural reproduction. Shadow education could have been beneficial for students who lag behind peers and enabled them to receive necessary assistance [17]. However, the ‘double reduction’ policy restricts students from receiving any supplementary instruction and resources after class.

Furthermore, personal tutoring services are unlikely to disappear completely [18]. In the absence of fierce competition among students and a continued demand for supplementary resources, shadow education can still survive as a private service and conceal its tracks from the public. Families’ investment in children’s education, especially private tutoring, is the catalyst for the growth and privatization of the private tutoring industry [19]. The ‘double reduction’ policy has indirectly stimulated the increase in the cost of private tutoring. Nevertheless, students from well-off families appear to suffer fewer adverse effects since their parents can afford one-to-one tutoring at home [15]. As a consequence, private tutoring would be available only to certain groups of students and exclude others, aggravating educational inequality and class privilege.

In conjunction with school education, extracurricular tutoring contributes to the reproduction of family-based inequality, and the ‘double reduction’ policy appears to exacerbate the situation. Even though this policy aims to reduce the burden and promote social equity, the gap between students from different backgrounds in the acquisition of high-quality educational resources and supplemental assistance has widened. Under the policy, as it turns out, class privilege is intergenerationally transmitted, resources are privatised, and inequality is reproduced.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this essay is to examine social reproduction in China’s compulsory education under the ‘double reduction’ policy. The investigation of social reproduction in contemporary China is echoed with Bourdieu’s concepts of reproduction. Reproduction of the accessibility and availability of resources occurs according to different family backgrounds. The family-based privileges as well as inequalities has been further strengthened through school education and extracurricular tutoring. Furthermore, the ‘double reduction’ policy appears to have further exacerbated the disparities. Despite its focus of reducing study burden, it overlooks the actual needs of underprivileged groups for necessary supplemental learning resources and encourages the flow of opportunities to the elite groups, thus making high-quality resources and tutoring services exclusive and expensive. Consequently, social mobility has been restricted, existing family-based inequalities have been exacerbated at school and after school, and social reproduction has continued.

China’s social context is complex, and this paper merely analyses the impact of this policy based on the theoretical framework of social reproduction theories. In this regard, its disadvantages appear to outweigh its benefits. It is the fact that education policy is not a flawless panacea, but the impact of the ‘double reduction’ policy is indeed worth our further consideration and investigation. It is essential that parents and teachers realise that the ‘double reduction’ policy does not imply a reduction in their responsibilities toward students’ education [20]. Families and schools can work together harmoniously to assist students in setting positive attitudes and prospects, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and providing them with the necessary support as much as they need.

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