

The Lower Secondary Education Policies in China of the 21st Century: The “Double Reduction” and Vocational General Streaming (GVS) Policy

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Abstract:

This literature review analyses two significant education policies in China at the beginning of the 21st century: the “double reduction” and the vocational general streaming (GVS) policy. It uses Bourdieu’s sociological model to analyze its impact on social class equality and empirical evidence to support whether students’ mental health improves due to the policies. The study suggests that the “double reduction” policy while reducing students’ psychological stress, has somewhat increased social inequality, and it is argued that the GVS policy has not been reformed on a large scale, taking into account the current situation of vocational education in China.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy, Vocational Streaming, Social Inequality, Educational Reform, Mental Health

1. Introduction

According to Schneider (2011), lower secondary education is often structured around a more subject-oriented curriculum that introduces theoretical concepts in various areas after primary education (Schneider, 2011). Until 2019, with over 109 million elementary school students, 74 million high school students, and 34 million university students, Mainland China has the biggest education system in the world (Statica, 2020, as cited in Coghlan, 2023). In Mainland China, secondary education serves the dual purpose of preparing high achievers for college and producing a trained labour force (Zhang, 2017). At the beginning of the 21st century, China enacted several educational

policies, such as *The Decision on Speeding up Minorities Education* (2015) (Li & Li, 2019), *The Thirteenth Five-year National Plan (2016-2020) for Education by the MOE* (2017) (Li, 2016). Under these policies, Mainland China has achieved significant strides in providing top-notch education, renowned for its high standards and fierce competition. However, it also creates various unintended problems, for example, the underground recovery of the private tutorial industry because of the “double reduction” policy (Wu, 2024). Recent studies have documented how minority groups frequently experience discrimination within the educational system, with an emphasis on the differences in educational access and quality across various locations, notably between

urban and rural areas (Zhang et al., 2015). Moreover, studies of the policies mostly outline their proper impact on the future and how they can be put into practice. Few studies, however, have evaluated these education policies considering the social tensions that already exist in China, such as class and the mental health problems associated with adolescent learning pressures. Analyzing these policies can help advance conversations on social justice and educational fairness in China, especially regarding working-class versus middle-class children. It can also show how curriculum modifications and assessments impact students' mental health and general well-being. Furthermore, the United Nations published 17 sustainable development goals in 2015, including achieving high-quality education until 2030 in a global context. It has been reported that since 2015, there has been little progress toward the goal of education, with only 58% of pupils globally having attained a minimal level of reading competency by 2019. Also, the inequalities, prevent millions of people from accessing education, particularly in underprivileged and disadvantaged areas, which brings to light several elements other than the COVID-19 pandemic effect on international schooling (United Nations, 2024). Thus, global education is facing a dilemma at the beginning of the 21st century, and the evaluation and study of China's education policy may find a solution to this dilemma and inspire the emergence of new, more efficient solutions that will help people achieve equitable and high-quality education and promote lifelong learning globally, including in China, by the year 2030. This study will build on two significant reforms made in China at the beginning of the 21st century, the "Double Reduction" policy and the separation of vocational education from general high school education. It will also discuss their impact on social equality and students' mental health and development. It will first present a brief overview of the background and content of the "double reduction" policy. Secondly, it will analyse the impact of the "double reduction" policy on different classes of families, using Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, field and capital. Then, it will briefly outline the GVS policy and evaluate it again through Bourdieu's theoretical framework while also analyzing and discussing whether the current state of vocational education in China is sufficient to support such a large-scale reform.

2. The Impact of "Double Reduction" Policies on Social Equality and Psychological Pressure on Secondary Education Students in Mainland China

On July 24, 2021, China launched the "Double Reduc-

tion" Policy, formerly called *Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and Off-Campus Training Burden of Students in Compulsory Education*. This strategy focuses on two key areas to help primary and secondary school students feel less stressed about their studies: less homework and after-school tutoring regulations (Ministry of Education, 2021). The policy restricts the amount of homework students give to foster a more balanced workload that permits leisure and personal growth. It also aims to rein in the rapidly expanding tutoring sector by outlawing for-profit tutoring in core subjects, which lessens the financial strain on families and slows the commercialization of education. Additionally, the policy pushes schools away from an education system solely focused on exams and toward a student-centered approach that respects each student's unique learning requirements and fosters a wider range of interests.

The policy has indeed produced many results since its implementation. Zhang et al. (2022) proposed that China's school system uses the "double reduction" policy to partially offset the educational resources of low-income households (Zhang et al., 2022). This is because the policy has forced a reduction in the number of extra-curricular tutorial institutions, resulting in the flow of quality teaching resources that would otherwise be taught in tutorial institutions back to public schools. As a result, various students from working-class families can enjoy the same quality of education in public schools without paying high tuition fees for remedial programmes in private tutorial schools. According to Chen (2022), the average annual cost of extracurricular education for each secondary education student is 9211 CNY or 12.84% of the family's disposable income. After the policy has been imposed, during compulsory schooling, families may save an average of 90,000 CNY because tutorial sessions were outlawed (Chen, 2022). Furthermore, as the "double reduction" policy requires schools to reduce the amount of homework given to students, there has been a massive reduction in the amount of time students spend doing homework after school. This gradually reduces the pressure on students who are already under a lot of academic pressure, giving them more time for relaxation and recreation and reducing unnecessary psychological problems. After psychologically assessing 28,398 middle school and primary school students for anxiety and depression using Patient Health Questionnaire and Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale, Wang et al. (2022) revealed that after the implementation of the "Double Reduction" Policy, there was a notable general drop in anxiety and depression (Wang et al., 2022).

However, as Tang (2023) mentioned in the study, the "double reduction" policy in China's mandatory education

may not lessen educational disparity. Still, it may make it more difficult for average families to get resources, thereby preserving affluent families' class advantages (Tang, 2023). The "double reduction" policy hasn't changed the general demand for better education as parents realize they need after-school tutoring to keep their kids from falling behind if test-taking pressure persists. Thus, given the strong demand and profitable business, several organisations have already discreetly started offering private tuition services again. As a result, the for-profit tutoring sector has evolved into a black market where agents and teachers communicate with parents in secret via WeChat groups or other platforms (Wu, 2023). As there is no market regulation in the black market, the influx of demand increases the price of private tuition, making it unaffordable for children from low-income working-class families to pay the high tuition fees.

Moreover, as a framework for interpreting complex education-social relations, Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of habitus and capital can be used as a sociological model for analysing the impact of the "double reduction" policy on social class. According to Reay (2015), habitus is frequently defined as the mutual structure of the individual and the social ties they are entangled in. Despite being applied haphazardly in organizations, it is more valuable as a generative structure when integrated within a relational understanding of the agency-structure divide (Mutch, 2003). Social, economic, and cultural capital, on the other hand, are products of habit and serve to reinforce it. As such, they mold educational experiences and impact the social mobility of low-income individuals. These ideas create a framework for individual activity that eventually establishes a person's social class when combined with the field of practice (Bourdieu, 1984). Wu (2023) proposed that many tuition firms have experienced financial hardship, insolvency, and market value losses because of the "double reduction" strategy. This has led to layoffs and interrupted initial public offerings (IPOs) preparations (Wu, 2023), which has somehow resulted in many relatively poor families being unable to provide their children with quality educational opportunities under the "double reduction" policy. Working-class families cannot teach their children more knowledge and skills because of a lack of cultural capital. For example, According to Regelio et al. (2023), parents with low levels of education found it difficult to deconstruct, clarify, and comprehend the teachings in self-learning modules. They also encountered challenges related to gender roles and the cost of implementing modular distance learning (Regelio et al., 2023). Thus, due to the low educational attainment of the parents, they are unable to properly tutor their children at home on the premise that they do not have the financial capital to pay

the high tutoring fees in the black market, which makes it even more difficult for children from ordinary families to achieve better academic results.

On the other hand, middle-class parents are expected to have more social and cultural capital. They can give their children more guidance in their studies and careers. For example, they provide social connections and cultivate attributes recognized by the middle-class while being more actively involved in their children's employment quest (Liu, 2015). This will result in students and families from poor or underdeveloped areas being even more deprived of educational resources. Even though some teachers who were previously in private institutions will return to public schools due to policy pressures, and the pressure on students to do schoolwork will become less and less with the implementation of the "double reduction" policy, parents and teachers will be increasingly anxious because all schools will not be able to fully guarantee efficient and high-quality teaching and learning activities (Yin, 2023). Therefore, it can be surmised that under the influence of the "Double Reduction" policy, the gap of educational inequality in Chinese society will gradually widen in the future and it is believed that the policy will not be able to promote equality as expressed in the original intent of the policy in short run.

However, even though Bourdieu's theory can give insight into the analysis of the "double reduction" policy, its shortcomings cannot be ignored. It is believed that Bourdieu's framework is deterministic, with objective structures creating culture, which then defines practice and repeats those patterns. This restricts the theory's potential to go beyond the conflict between subjectivism and objectivism (Jenkins, 1982). Thus, this represents a critical analysis of the "double reduction" policy under which individual agency succumbs to structural influences, e.g., social class. However, it is undeniable that the "double reduction" policy gradually changed the structure in some ways, as mentioned previously in this chapter.

3. The General and Vocational Streaming Policies in Mainland China

According to Shan (2023), the general and vocational streaming (GVS) policy refers to the action that planning and controlling the ratio of lower secondary school graduates entering secondary vocational institutions and ordinary senior secondary schools (Shan, 2023). The process of GVS in China dates to 1985. The Communist Party of China's Central Committee released several educational reforms on May 27, 1985; it is proposed that "... is necessary to meet the manpower shortages of skilled

technicians and professional scientists and engineers. The intention is to enroll half of all secondary school students in such (technical and vocational) schools” (Lewin & Hui, 1989). However, until 2021, China has begun to enforce a similar streaming policy, which requires vocational high schools to have a similar number of students as vocational high schools. According to data from the Ministry of Education (MOE), in 2020, the number of students enrolled in senior secondary education will be 416,32,030, and the number of students enrolled in secondary vocational education will be 166,33,658 (MOE, 2021). From 2021, the number of students enrolled in senior secondary education falls to 26050291, which is 11.05% of all students, while the number of students enrolled in secondary vocational education is 13118146, or 10.69% of the total number of students. The difference between the two is 0.36% (MOE, 2022).

As a result, GVS did close the gap between the two regarding enrollment numbers and population bases. However, it is suggested that the current state of vocational education in China is inappropriate for supporting such a massive reform. First, the current vocational education system makes it difficult for students to obtain real-world experience. Older equipment in many vocational schools is not being replaced and is not being purchased compliantly. Therefore, it cannot support teaching and learning tasks sufficient to support students’ practical skills. For example, according to one of the interviewees in Chen’s (2024) study, it is believed that “...what the school teaches is still more theoretical, and if we talk about practical application, I might need to get my hands dirty and tinker a bit more.” (Chen, 2024). More specifically, it is suggested that 90% of vocational students in China do not improve their skills, behaviour problems are common, and school-related factors do not predict skill improvement or student dropout rates (Yi et al., 2018). However, in Beijing, the training provided by vocational education will not be too far out of step with the career itself. Still, for students in the county, this obsolescence is just too hard to shake (Lai, 2021). According to Qiu (2022), at the end of 2021, China’s urban resident population stood at 910 million, with county and county-level city urban areas accounting for nearly 30 per cent of the country’s urban resident population (Qiu, 2022). As a result, a significant portion of the population will not be able to obtain an excellent education for students in vocational education. Thus, on the premise that vocational education cannot produce large-scale, high-quality human resources, the GVS policy undoubtedly fails to consider the inherent or pre-existing, long-standing problems of the education system itself.

In addition to the backwardness of the teaching apparatus

and methods, the inequalities in the vocational education system have put the reform process far behind. For example, the regional disparity. It mainly stems from another system, China’s household registration system. This system prevents many poor or underdeveloped students from pursuing quality education resources in big cities or developed areas. Even after graduating from middle schools in other towns, immigrant kids are still not permitted to sit for the senior high school admission test in the cities where they have been adopted. Regardless of their performance or preferences, migrant students are often denied access to higher levels of education because of this exclusion (Ling, 2015). Similarly, the streaming of vocational education means that more students will enter the path of vocational education from general secondary education, but many factors present in the vocational education environment create a cultural reproduction that makes many students live in an environment of uncertainty and contradiction that prevents them from breaking out of their original predicament. For example, the lack of cultural or economic capital exists in some students’ families. In fact, according to Pun and Koo’s (2018) study, many of the kids shared how their parents had to pinch pennies and save money to send them to technical school in the hopes that they wouldn’t wind up like them and work in factories or tiresome, unskilled professions (Pun & Koo, 2018). In many vocational institutions, “learning” is considered shameful. Lai’s (2021) report revealed that students in vocational schools are “in school but not attending school...” and learning spaces are scarce in schools for those who wish to learn. For example, the library closes early and does not have much seating, and the closed campus prevents students from accessing study space outside (Lai, 2021). Thus, students from less favourable family backgrounds, which are common in vocational education in such an environment, are likely to inherit the culture and habitus of the school and develop a kind of class and cultural reproduction. However, as suggested by Ling (2015), vocational education is an alternative for “losers” in examination-oriented education in China. It may be argued that the policies that have this impact employ schools to perpetuate a vulnerable and exploitable underclass, but the schools’ cultures and the students who attend them have no role in this class reproduction (Ling, 2015). The GVS is, therefore, unfavourable for students from the perspective of social equality under the Bourdieuan analysis.

4. Conclusion

The research concludes the relevant literature on the “double reduction” policy and the GVS policy. It revealed the “double reduction” policy reduces the amount of school-

work for students, thereby effectively reducing anxiety and depression among students. Moreover, the mandatory restriction on the operation of extra-curricular tutorial institutions has led to the return of outstanding teachers to public education institutions, which has increased the quality of in-class learning and reduced the expenditure of some families on extra-curricular tutorials, thereby reducing economic pressure. However, from Bourdieuan's theoretical view, the "double reduction" policy increases social inequalities e.g., the working class has less access to educational resources, but the middle class can rely on cultural and social capital to raise children on top of the government's restriction on extra-curricular tutorials. Bourdieuan's theoretical view can also be used to understand the impact of GVS policies on students e.g., cultural reproduction in Chinese vocational education institutions can leave a significant proportion of students unable to participate in high-paying careers even after they have been educated, thus exemplifying the shortcomings of GVS policies.

Admittedly, the study has its limitations. For example, the study should consider the differences between local administration and national legal regulations. The accuracy and efficiency of local implementation of national regulations varies from region to region, so it is not possible to accurately state that the results of the study can be extended to all regions of the country. Moreover, the study mainly cites findings and reports from other scholars and may not fully capture the socio-economic conditions and educational status of all regions in China. Future research could use longitudinal studies to track the long-term effects of education policies on students, or further assess the effectiveness of education policies by comparing differences in educational outcomes resulting from the implementation of policies in different regions of China.

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