

# Redefining Education in China: Cultural and Social Impacts of the Double Reduction Policy

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## Abstract

*The Double Reduction Policy, implemented in China in July 2021, aims to reduce students' academic burdens, alleviate financial pressures on families, and address systemic educational inequities. By restricting extracurricular tutoring and regulating homework, the policy emphasizes holistic development, creativity, and emotional well-being over exam-oriented practices. This study applies Cultural Historical Activity Theory, Cultural Critical Discourse Theory, and Bernstein's (2000) theoretical concepts to analyze the policy's cultural and social impacts on students, teachers, and parents. The findings reveal that the policy reconfigures roles within the educational ecosystem: students are encouraged to pursue self-directed and creative learning, teachers take on expanded responsibilities as agents of systemic reform, and parents shift from passive supporters to active collaborators. Bernstein's concepts of classification, framing, and pedagogic discourse highlight how the policy redefines boundaries, regulates educational practices, and reshapes identities. Despite its transformative goals, resistance persists, particularly regarding reduced academic competition and adapting to redefined roles. This study underscores the policy's dual role as systemic reform and cultural intervention, offering insights into balancing tradition and modernity while providing a framework for global equity-driven reforms.*

**Keywords:** Double Reduction Policy, Education in China, Cultural and Social Impacts.

## Introduction

Education in China has long been defined by intense competition, fueled by a deeply ingrained exam-oriented culture and an expanding private tutoring industry. This environment has placed significant academic pressure on students and financial burdens on families, creating widespread educational inequalities. In response to these challenges, the Chinese government implemented the *Double Reduction Policy* in July 2021, a reform designed to alleviate students' academic burdens by reducing homework and strictly regulating extracurricular tutoring. Beyond its practical implications, the policy symbolizes a profound cultural shift, emphasizing holistic development and redefining the roles of schools, parents, and teachers in the educational ecosystem.

At its core, the *Double Reduction Policy* seeks to address educational equity by prioritizing the public welfare of education. It aligns with traditional Confucian principles of moral education and self-cultivation while integrating modern goals of fostering innovative talents and reducing reliance on market-driven education. By centralizing education within schools and curbing the influence of private tutoring, the policy aspires to return education to its essence: nurturing well-rounded individuals prepared for societal contributions.

Despite its ambitious objectives, the policy's implementation has brought complex sociocultural impacts. For students, the reduction in academic burdens offers opportunities for self-directed learning and extracurricular engagement. Parents, however, grapple with anxieties about their children's future competitiveness, while teachers face increased workloads and evolving responsibilities. This paper explores the cultural and social dimensions of the *Double Reduction Policy* through two key research questions:

- How does China's Double Reduction Policy function as a cultural intervention in the context of educational reform?

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- What are the sociocultural impacts of the Double Reduction Policy on students, parents, and teachers, particularly in relation to their roles and interactions within the educational system?

Through this analysis, the study aims to uncover how the policy redefines education in China, reflecting broader societal transformations while navigating the interplay between tradition and modernity. By examining its cultural symbolism and sociocultural outcomes, this paper provides critical insights into the policy's role in shaping China's educational landscape and its implications for equity, innovation, and holistic development.

## Literature Review

This literature review examines the theoretical foundations and contextual studies essential for analyzing the cultural and sociocultural dimensions of the Double Reduction Policy (henceforth, DRP). It begins by presenting Cultural Historical Activity Theory (henceforth, CHAT) as a framework to understand the systemic interplay between education and cultural transformation. This is followed by an exploration of Cultural Critical Discourse Theory (henceforth, CCDT), which provides insights into how discourse shapes and reflects the policy's ideological and cultural underpinnings. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive lens for examining the policy's broader impact and significance.

CHAT offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how human activities evolve through interactions within cultural and historical systems. Originally developed by Vygotsky and later expanded by Leontiev and Engeström, CHAT emphasizes the role of mediation by cultural tools, rules, and community in shaping individual and collective activities (Engeström, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). This theory is particularly valuable for analyzing educational reforms like China's *Double Reduction Policy*, as it highlights the dynamic interplay between systemic structures and individual agency. By using CHAT, we can explore how the policy's implementation reshapes educational practices and influences the roles of students, teachers, parents, and schools. One of CHAT's core principles is the concept of the activity system, which views human activities as composed of interconnected components such as subject, object, mediating tools, community, rules, and division of labor (Engeström, 2001). In the context of DRP, this framework allows us to examine schools, students, parents, teachers, and extracurricular institutions as parts of a larger system that mediates educational practices. The policy itself acts as a tool that redefines objectives, reshapes stakeholder roles, and redistributes responsibilities within this system. For instance, the reallocation of focus to in-school learning and after-school activities demonstrates the systemic reorganization intended to promote equitable educational outcomes and reduce reliance on private tutoring. Another key aspect of CHAT is its emphasis on contradictions—internal tensions within an activity system that drive change and innovation (Engeström, 2001). DRP directly addresses several contradictions inherent in China's education system. One significant tension is the disparity between the comprehensive curriculum offered by public schools and the supplemental role of private tutoring in preparing students for high-stakes exams. By extracurricular pressures and enforcing regulations on private institutions, the policy seeks to resolve the conflict between societal demands for academic excellence and the broader need for student-centered, equitable education. For example, the reduction of homework hours addresses parental concerns about overburdened students while reinforcing the idea that schools should provide sufficient educational resources. CHAT also emphasizes the mediation of activities by cultural tools and artifacts. In education, these tools include policy documents, teaching methodologies, and assessment frameworks, which shape how stakeholders interact with the system (Vygotsky, 1978). DRP mediates activities by reconfiguring these tools—for example, through the introduction of diversified after-school programs, enhanced classroom instruction, and regulated homework practices. These measures aim to redirect the focus from rote memorization and exam-oriented practices toward holistic development, reflecting broader societal goals such as fostering creativity, critical thinking, and moral growth in students.

Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of community and the division of labor in shaping activity systems (Leontiev, 1978). DRP redistributes roles and responsibilities across stakeholders, empowering schools and teachers as the central agents of education while reducing the influence of private tutoring. This shift realigns the focus on institutional accountability, where schools are tasked with

improving classroom efficiency and providing quality after-school services. Meanwhile, parents' roles transition from academic supervisors to supportive collaborators in their children's holistic development, reflecting a cultural shift in home-school dynamics. For example, the policy encourages parents to focus on emotional and moral guidance rather than simply ensuring high academic performance, thereby fostering a more balanced approach to education.

By applying CHAT to DRP, it becomes clear that this reform represents more than just an operational adjustment; it is a systemic transformation embedded in China's socio-political context. The policy's objectives—to reduce academic stress, promote equity, and encourage holistic development—embody cultural values rooted in both traditional Confucian ideals and contemporary global educational trends. At the same time, CHAT provides a framework to analyze the ongoing adaptations and struggles of various actors within the education system as they navigate new roles and expectations. For instance, teachers face increased demands for professional development and classroom innovation, while parents contend with anxieties about their children's academic competitiveness in the absence of private tutoring. Together, these dynamics illustrate the complexities of implementing systemic educational reforms and the potential for CHAT to uncover the intricate relationships between cultural values, policy initiatives, and human activity. Complementing CHAT's systemic focus, CCDT examines how language and narratives construct cultural norms, societal practices, and power dynamics within the context of the Double Reduction Policy. CCDT provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how discourse shapes, reflects, and sustains cultural norms, social practices, and power dynamics within a society. Emerging from Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA), CCDT emphasizes the interplay between language, communication, and their sociocultural and historical contexts (Fairclough, 1992). Unlike traditional linguistic approaches, CCDT extends its focus to include the broader societal structures and ideological underpinnings that influence discourse. This makes it particularly relevant for examining transformative policies like China's *Double Reduction Policy*, which seeks to alleviate academic pressures while fostering educational equity and holistic development. By analyzing the policy's language and the narratives surrounding it, CCDT reveals the deeper cultural shifts and power relations that it embodies. At its core, CCDT posits that discourse is not merely a reflection of social reality but an active agent in constructing it. DRP, for instance, functions as a discursive artifact that encapsulates the ideological goals of reducing educational inequality and returning to the Confucian ideal of balanced personal development. This alignment with traditional values is evident in the policy's rhetoric, which emphasizes collective welfare, national harmony, and moral education. However, CCDT also uncovers the simultaneous promotion of state-centered control over education. For example, the framing of the policy in government speeches and media coverage positions public schools as the primary agents of reform while subtly marginalizing the role of market-driven private tutoring. This discursive construction shapes how stakeholders—students, parents, and teachers—perceive and respond to the policy, reinforcing its ideological vision while creating new social dynamics.

Through the lens of CCDT, DRP illustrates how discourse functions as a medium for cultural and ideological construction (van Dijk, 2001). The policy signifies a shift in China's educational discourse from an exam-centric narrative to one that prioritizes holistic development and equity. Government narratives frame the policy as a moral intervention to reduce societal disparities, thereby embedding cultural values of fairness and collective well-being. However, this construction also reaffirms the state's authority over education by curbing private tutoring and reallocating responsibility to public schools. The emphasis on centralized control reflects a broader strategy to align educational reforms with national goals while addressing systemic inequalities. For example, the promotion of after-school programs within public schools serves to counterbalance the reduced reliance on private tutoring, symbolizing the state's commitment to equitable resource distribution. CCDT also highlights the role of power and hegemony in educational discourse. According to Fairclough (1992), discourse not only reflects but actively maintains or challenges power relations. In the case of DRP, the state employs discourse to reassert public schools as the central agents of education while reducing parental autonomy in choosing supplementary resources. This redistribution of educational power reshapes stakeholder roles, positioning teachers and schools as gatekeepers of equity and holistic development. For instance, policy mandates that regulate homework and extracurricular activities signal a deliberate shift from market-driven solutions to state-led reforms. However, this hegemonic discourse is not without resistance. Parents who rely on private tutoring for their

children's competitive advantage express concerns about the policy's potential to undermine academic achievement, creating a counter-discourse that challenges its promises of fairness and reduced stress. Similarly, teachers voice resistance through complaints about increased workloads, highlighting tensions between policy objectives and practical implementation. The capacity of CCDT to analyze resistance and counter-discourses adds another dimension to understanding DRP. While the official discourse promotes the reduction of academic burdens as a universal benefit, it also generates anxieties among stakeholders about unintended consequences. Parents' concerns about their children's ability to remain competitive in a high-stakes exam culture exemplify this resistance. Likewise, teachers' struggles with additional responsibilities, such as after-school services and increased parental communication, reveal how policy narratives can clash with practical realities. These counter-discourses not only challenge the dominant rhetoric but also shed light on the complexities of policy implementation and stakeholder adaptation.

Adding to CHAT and CCDT's emphasis on discourse, Basil Bernstein's theoretical concepts provide valuable insights into how the Double Reduction Policy (DRP) reshapes educational practices, redefines power dynamics, and transforms stakeholder identities. Bernstein's *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity* (2000) frames the DRP as a sociocultural reform. Central to Bernstein's theory is pedagogic discourse, comprising instructional discourse, focused on transmitting knowledge and skills, and regulative discourse, which governs norms and values. The DRP shifts emphasis to regulative discourse by promoting moral education, equity, and holistic development, recalibrating societal expectations and aligning education with broader cultural and national priorities. Bernstein's notions of classification and framing further explain these changes. Classification, or the boundaries between knowledge domains, has weakened under DRP, integrating extracurricular activities and creativity into public education while reducing exam-focused learning. Framing, or control over pedagogic processes, has strengthened, with centralized authority mandating teaching methodologies and regulating homework and tutoring. This reflects the state's use of education as a tool for embedding equity and collective welfare. The policy also redefines stakeholder identities. Students are repositioned as active learners, fostering agency and belonging, while teachers take on roles as facilitators of both academic and holistic development. Parents transition from academic supervisors to collaborators in their children's education. These shifts reflect Bernstein's view of pedagogy as shaping identity through regulative discourse, aligning individual roles with a collective vision of societal well-being. The DRP illustrates education's role in symbolic control, addressing inequities and redefining success. It functions both as a practical reform targeting systemic inefficiencies and a cultural intervention fostering new norms and identities. This duality highlights the complexities of large-scale reform within entrenched systems, offering a nuanced perspective on the transformative potential of the DRP.

In conclusion, this literature review demonstrates the complementary strengths of CHAT(CHAT), CCDT, and Basil Bernstein's theoretical concepts in analyzing the Double Reduction Policy (DRP). CHAT provides a systemic framework for understanding how the policy reconfigures the roles, tools, and relationships within the educational ecosystem, highlighting the cultural and structural transformations that underpin these changes. CCDT offers critical insights into how the policy's discourse constructs and sustains ideological narratives, revealing the power dynamics and cultural values embedded in its implementation. Bernstein's work further enriches this analysis by examining how pedagogic discourse mediates shifts in educational practices and stakeholder identities. His concepts of classification and framing elucidate how the policy weakens traditional boundaries of exam-oriented education while strengthening state control over pedagogic practices, reflecting its dual function as systemic reform and symbolic control. Moreover, Bernstein's focus on identity formation illuminates how DRP transforms the roles of students, teachers, and parents, fostering new cultural and professional identities aligned with holistic development and equity. Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced exploration of the policy's cultural and sociocultural dimensions, capturing the systemic reorganization of education, the discursive and ideological shifts it represents, and the symbolic control it exerts. By bridging structural, discursive, and symbolic analyses, this study offers a comprehensive lens to evaluate the transformative potential of DRP and the challenges faced by its key stakeholders.

## Methodology

### *Subjects*

This study engaged participants from three primary stakeholder groups affected by DPA: students, teachers, and parents. These participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives across various socioeconomic and geographic contexts in China. The study sample consisted of 75 participants, including 25 students, 25 teachers, and 25 parents, selected to ensure balanced representation across gender, urban and rural locations, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The students, aged 12–16 and enrolled in primary and middle schools, provided insights into their learning behaviors, attitudes toward educational reforms, and extracurricular activities. Teachers, representing public primary and middle schools across various subjects, offered perspectives on pedagogical changes, expanded responsibilities, and systemic challenges introduced by the policy. Parents, as guardians of primary and middle school students, shared their experiences in adapting to the policy's demands and their evolving roles in supporting their children's education. The participants were selected from urban and rural primary and junior secondary schools in nine cities—Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Zhengzhou, Changzhi, Weihai, and Nantong. These cities were chosen because they are designated as national pilot cities for the DRP, serving as key testing grounds for the policy's implementation. For the student sample, aged 12–16, random selection was carried out from the school's total roster, focusing on 5th and 6th grade primary school students and junior secondary school students. Stratified selection was then applied, considering gender, academic performance, and school type (urban or rural), resulting in a final sample of 25 students. For each selected class, the student with the ID number 2 was chosen, and if absent, the student with the ID number 3 was selected as a replacement. Teachers, who were invited to participate voluntarily, represented both primary and junior secondary schools. The sample included educators from various subject areas, such as Chinese, mathematics, English, science, arts, and physical education. Selection was based on factors such as school location (urban or rural) and years of teaching experience (novice, intermediate, or senior teachers), ensuring diverse professional perspectives on the DRP's impact. Parents, also chosen voluntarily, were selected to reflect a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Stratification was applied based on geographic location and children's grade levels, ensuring the sample represented different social strata and experiences with adapting to the DRP.

### *Data Collection Methods*

Data were collected using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the policy's sociocultural and systemic impacts. Document analysis was conducted on policy documents, government reports, and official school communications to contextualize findings and trace the policy's intended goals, leveraging CHAT and CCDT to identify systemic contradictions and ideological shifts embedded in the policy's framework. Semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and parents explored their experiences, perceptions, and adaptations to the policy, with questions addressing changes in learning habits, teaching practices, and parental roles. Additionally, questionnaires were distributed to the same groups to gather quantitative data on key indicators such as hours spent on learning, teaching workload, and parental involvement in educational activities. These included Likert-scale questions to capture trends in perceptions and behaviors related to the policy.

## Results and Discussion

### *Textual Analysis of DRP: Cultural Intentions and Systemic Shifts.*

DRP serves as a cultural intervention, redefining both ideological and practical elements of China's education system. Issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, the policy represents a deliberate effort to align educational practices with national priorities of equity, quality, and holistic development (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). The policy explicitly states its aim to

“alleviate the excessive academic burden on students and reduce the prevalence of after-school tutoring,” highlighting its focus on both structural reform and cultural transformation. By employing CHAT and CCDT, this analysis uncovers how the policy reshapes traditional educational practices, mediates systemic realignment, and constructs new cultural narratives that challenge entrenched norms (Engeström, 2001; Fairclough, 1992). The policy’s systemic realignment is evident in how it redistributes roles, reshapes objectives, and introduces mediating tools to reform the educational activity system. The policy mandates that “primary and middle schools shall enhance the quality of classroom teaching, ensuring that students master key knowledge during school hours” (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). This directive shifts responsibility for academic success from private tutoring institutions back to public schools, thereby restructuring the division of labor within the education system. Schools are tasked with not only improving instructional quality but also providing diversified after-school programs to support students’ holistic development. For instance, the policy promotes the establishment of “after-school services offering extracurricular activities, including sports, arts, and technology,” to foster a more balanced and enriching learning environment. These measures symbolize a shift in cultural priorities, from a narrow focus on academic competition to an emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, and social adaptability (Vygotsky, 1978; Engeström, 2001).

Contradictions within the exam-centric culture are central to the policy’s transformative goals. CHAT highlights these contradictions—such as the over-reliance on private tutoring as a compensation for systemic inefficiencies—as catalysts for systemic change (Engeström, 2001). The policy’s directive to “reduce excessive homework” and limit tutoring hours directly confronts these inefficiencies, challenging the cultural narrative that equates academic success with relentless study. Revised homework guidelines act as mediating tools that prioritize quality over quantity, ensuring that “homework is tailored to students’ individual needs and completed independently” (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). This reflects a broader cultural shift toward valuing self-directed learning and holistic development over rote memorization and examination performance. Such measures exemplify how the policy uses contradictions as levers for systemic evolution, paving the way for a more equitable and sustainable education system.

Through the lens of CCDT, DRP functions as a discursive artifact that constructs new cultural narratives rooted in both traditional values and modern ideals. The policy explicitly invokes Confucian principles, stating that education should “cultivate morality, nurture talents, and serve the development of individuals and society” (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). This alignment with Confucian ideals of moral education and societal harmony situates the policy within a culturally familiar framework while embedding progressive goals of equity and innovation. Government discourse portrays the policy as a moral intervention to reduce inequality, framing public schools as custodians of fairness and societal responsibility (Fairclough, 1992). For example, the emphasis on “strengthening the role of public education as the main provider of quality learning resources” challenges the commodification of education, reducing parental reliance on private tutoring as a pathway to social mobility. This discursive strategy reinforces the state’s authority over education while promoting a collective vision of equity and shared responsibility.

However, CCDT also reveals resistance to the policy’s discourse, particularly from parents and educators. Many parents express anxieties about how reduced access to private tutoring might impact their children’s competitiveness in a system still heavily influenced by high-stakes exams. As one parent quoted in a government report stated, “Without tutoring, how can we ensure our children excel in entrance exams?” Similarly, educators have voiced concerns about the increased demands placed on them to “deliver quality teaching during school hours and provide personalized after-school services” (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). These counter-discourses highlight the tensions between the policy’s equity-focused rhetoric and the practical challenges of implementation, underscoring the need for systemic support to address stakeholders’ concerns (Fairclough, 1992). The sociocultural impacts of DRP are equally significant, as it reconfigures the roles and interactions of students, teachers, and parents within the educational ecosystem. For students, the policy attempts to redefine success by shifting the narrative from academic performance to holistic development. The directive to “increase time for physical exercise, arts, and extracurricular activities” symbolizes this cultural shift, emphasizing the cultivation of well-rounded individuals who can thrive in diverse contexts (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). DRP

intends for such transformation by showing how students are repositioned as active participants in their learning, engaging with collaborative activities and community resources rather than being confined to exam preparation. These changes aim to nurture creativity, emotional resilience, and social skills, reflecting the policy's broader vision for education. Teachers, meanwhile, are expected to undergo a dual transformation as both agents and subjects of reform. The policy requires teachers to “innovate teaching practices” and “provide after-school tutoring to support diverse learning needs,” fundamentally altering their roles within the system. This redistribution of labor can be framed by CHAT as a systemic realignment, where teachers become mediators of the policy's goals, balancing academic instruction with the facilitation of holistic development. However, CCDT reveals the challenges teachers face in adapting to these expanded responsibilities, particularly in the absence of sufficient resources or training. As one teacher noted, “We are expected to do more with less—managing larger class sizes while also delivering individualized attention” (Fairclough, 1992). These tensions underscore the need for institutional support to enable teachers to fulfill their redefined roles effectively.

For parents, the policy represents a cultural shift from being academic enforcers to becoming supportive collaborators in their children's education. The directive to “encourage parents to engage in their children's emotional and moral development” aligns with Confucian ideals of balanced personal growth, emphasizing the importance of family in shaping character and values (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). However, CCDT highlights the anxieties many parents feel about reduced tutoring options, reflecting a lingering reliance on exam-centric practices as a pathway to success. This resistance reveals the cultural inertia that complicates efforts to transition toward a more holistic model of education, even as the policy's discourse seeks to normalize these changes. Finally, the policy addresses structural inequities by prioritizing public schools as equitable providers of quality education. The directive to “reduce the financial burden of after-school tutoring” and ensure “equal access to quality educational resources” reflects a commitment to bridging disparities within the system (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). CHAT frames this as a restructuring of the activity system to mitigate resource inequalities, while CCDT analyzes how the policy's discourse legitimizes these measures by embedding values of fairness and collective welfare. Nevertheless, the persistence of socioeconomic disparities underscores the complexities of achieving these ideals in practice, highlighting the ongoing need for systemic investment and cultural engagement.

In conclusion, DRP functions as both a systemic reform and a cultural redefinition, seeking to harmonize traditional values with contemporary educational needs. By employing CHAT and CCDT, this analysis reveals how the policy reshapes China's educational landscape, challenging entrenched norms while navigating the complexities of sociocultural adaptation. The policy's transformative potential lies in its ability to balance ideological aspirations with practical realities, addressing stakeholders' concerns while fostering a more equitable and holistic vision of education. This transformative vision of DRP naturally extends to its impacts on students, reshaping their educational experiences and developmental trajectories; the topic to which we will now turn.

Additionally, Bernstein's (2000) theoretical concepts deepen the analysis of DRP by shedding light on the mechanisms of symbolic control and the ways pedagogic discourse mediates cultural and systemic shifts. The policy's systemic realignment is evident in how it redistributes roles, reshapes objectives, and introduces mediating tools to reform the educational activity system. The directive to “enhance the quality of classroom teaching, ensuring that students master key knowledge during school hours” (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021) exemplifies Bernstein's concept of framing, where the state exerts greater control over the educational process. By centralizing responsibilities within public schools, the policy strengthens the framing of pedagogic practices, regulating how and what knowledge is transmitted. Furthermore, Bernstein's notion of classification highlights how the policy weakens traditional boundaries between formal and informal education by integrating extracurricular activities and holistic development into the school curriculum. This shift reflects a deliberate effort to recalibrate the symbolic value of education, prioritizing creativity, critical thinking, and social adaptability over narrow academic success. Bernstein's concept of pedagogic discourse complements this perspective by distinguishing between instructional and regulative discourse. The policy's emphasis on reducing homework and limiting tutoring hours signifies a shift toward regulative discourse, which aims to instill cultural values of equity and balanced development.

Revised homework guidelines, for example, prioritize quality over quantity, ensuring that “homework is tailored to students’ individual needs and completed independently” (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021). This reflects a broader cultural shift from rote memorization and examination performance to self-directed learning and holistic growth, aligning with Bernstein’s symbolic control to reshape societal expectations.

### *Impacts on Students*

DRP redefines student engagement in education by shifting the cultural narrative from a singular focus on exam performance to a broader emphasis on holistic development. CHAT provides a lens to analyze how the policy mediates changes in students’ roles, tools, and interactions within the educational system. By reducing reliance on homework and private tutoring, the policy positions students as active participants in their learning rather than passive recipients of information. This shift is reflected in a student’s comment, “I now spend less time doing repetitive exercises and more time on group discussions and hands-on projects,” illustrating the increasing emphasis on collaboration and experiential learning over rote memorization. Such changes align with CHAT’s framework, where educational tools and practices act as mediators that redefine students’ engagement and foster agency within the learning process (Engeström, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Bernstein’s (2000) concept of classification further enriches this analysis by highlighting how the policy weakens traditional boundaries between academic and extracurricular domains. By integrating interactive activities, arts, and physical education into the curriculum, the policy reframes what counts as valuable knowledge and skill. This shift reflects a deliberate effort to disrupt the dominance of narrowly defined academic competencies, promoting a broader and more inclusive understanding of student success. Simultaneously, Bernstein’s idea of framing illustrates how the policy strengthens the regulation of pedagogic practices within schools, ensuring that students’ engagement with diverse learning opportunities aligns with the overarching goals of equity and holistic development.

CCDT provides another dimension for understanding how the policy constructs new cultural narratives around education. The discourse surrounding the policy emphasizes traditional Confucian values like moral development and collective welfare while embedding modern priorities such as innovation and equity. This dual narrative is apparent in a student’s reflection: “It feels less about getting top marks now; instead, it’s about understanding and applying what we learn.” Such comments underscore the discursive shift from a grade-centered model of success to one that values holistic competencies. The policy’s language, framing schools as custodians of fairness and equity, further reinforces this redefinition of educational success (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001).

Bernstein’s distinction between instructional discourse (focused on transmitting academic knowledge) and regulative discourse (emphasizing moral values and social norms) adds depth to this discussion. By shifting the focus from grades to well-rounded development, the policy prioritizes regulative discourse, embedding cultural values like creativity, equity, and collaboration into the educational narrative. This redefinition aligns with the policy’s aim to balance traditional academic goals with modern developmental priorities. At the heart of these changes is the policy’s commitment to addressing systemic inequalities. By curbing the dominance of private tutoring, which disproportionately benefits wealthier students, the policy seeks to create a level playing field. A student from a less affluent background observed, “Without the extra tutoring, I don’t feel left behind anymore because we all get the same opportunities in school.” This comment reflects the policy’s success in reducing disparities by prioritizing equitable in-class learning experiences. CHAT captures this systemic reorganization as a transformation of the activity system, where resources are redistributed to empower public schools and reduce dependency on external tutoring. This intervention resonates with the broader sociocultural goal of enhancing access and fairness within the education system (Engeström, 2001). Bernstein’s (2000) framework of symbolic control further contextualizes these efforts to reduce inequities. By centralizing educational authority within public schools, the policy asserts the state’s role as the primary custodian of fairness and equity. This centralization limits the influence of market-driven practices like private tutoring, redistributing cultural and economic capital more equitably across the student population.

However, the policy's implementation is not without resistance. Some students expressed concerns about reduced academic competition, with one stating, "I'm worried if not having extra classes will make me less prepared for exams." Such apprehensions reflect the tension between the policy's holistic objectives and the deeply ingrained exam-oriented culture. CCDT highlights this resistance as a counter-discourse that challenges the policy's rhetoric of equity and holistic development. This discourse underscores the practical challenges students face in navigating a transitional educational landscape, where traditional metrics of success continue to hold significant sway (Fairclough, 1992). The policy also redefines how students manage their time and engage with extracurricular activities. A student shared, "I finally have time for hobbies like painting and playing sports, which I never had before." This newfound emphasis on balance aligns with the policy's goal of promoting well-rounded development, echoing traditional Confucian ideals of harmonious personal growth. CHAT interprets this shift as a recalibration of the activity system, where students' schedules and priorities are reorganized to include creative and physical pursuits, fostering a broader range of skills and competencies (Leontiev, 1978; Engeström, 2001). Bernstein's (2000) insights into how regulative discourse frames student identity are particularly relevant here, as these new priorities encourage students to view themselves not just as academic achievers but as multifaceted individuals with diverse talents and interests. Despite these cultural and systemic shifts, the policy's success hinges on reconciling its ideals with societal expectations. While students are gradually adapting to the reduced focus on exams, the pervasive belief in academic competition remains a significant barrier. For instance, some students remarked that without private tutoring, they feel "less competitive" compared to peers who still manage to access such services informally. CCDT frames these tensions as part of the policy's ongoing negotiation with societal norms, highlighting the complex interplay between ideological aspirations and entrenched practices (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001).

### *Impacts on Teachers*

As key agents of change, teachers have experienced profound shifts in their professional roles and responsibilities under DRP, positioning them at the forefront of systemic and cultural transformation in China's education system. These changes are deeply intertwined with broader cultural and systemic shifts, as analyzed through CHAT and CCDT, which highlight teachers' critical contributions, the innovative practices they adopt, and the challenges they face in navigating this transformation. Bernstein's (2000) theoretical framework further deepens this analysis by illuminating how pedagogic discourse mediates these changes, reshaping the classification and framing of teachers' roles within the system. Teachers serve as mediators of systemic reform, navigating a reconfigured educational activity system that assigns them the responsibility of streamlining curricula while maintaining instructional quality. One teacher explained, "When we design the curriculum, we first cut out the redundancies to ensure that each class is focused and the time is used more efficiently." This dual role as knowledge providers and curriculum designers aligns with the policy's emphasis on efficiency and core content comprehension. Bernstein's concept of classification helps explain how the policy weakens traditional boundaries between curriculum design and classroom instruction, empowering teachers to take on dual responsibilities as both designers and implementers of knowledge. This shift reflects a systemic recalibration that promotes integration and adaptability in teaching practices.

Simultaneously, teachers have embraced interactive teaching methods such as group discussions and cooperative learning, which foster engagement and collaboration among students. As one educator noted, "Through group discussion and interactive teaching, students' participation has increased significantly." These practices represent a cultural shift from traditional lecture-based models to dynamic, inclusive spaces where students actively construct knowledge, reflecting CHAT's principle that tools reshape activity systems. Bernstein's concept of framing complements this perspective by highlighting how the policy tightens control over pedagogic practices, ensuring that teachers adopt innovative and interactive strategies that align with the state's broader objectives of fostering creativity and collaboration.

The policy's redefinition of teacher evaluation criteria further illustrates its systemic impact. Shifting the focus from test scores to holistic student development, teachers are now assessed on their ability to innovate homework design and foster meaningful after-school activities. One teacher shared, "We conduct regular assessments and adjust the teaching content and strategies according to the feedback to ensure that every

student can keep pace with the course.” This aligns with CCDT’s emphasis on constructing new cultural narratives and professional benchmarks. Bernstein’s distinction between instructional discourse and regulative discourse enriches this analysis, revealing how the policy extends teachers’ roles beyond knowledge transmission to include the promotion of cultural values such as equity and emotional well-being. By embedding regulative discourse into teacher evaluations, the policy redefines success in teaching, emphasizing its moral and developmental dimensions alongside academic outcomes.

Technology integration has also become central in classrooms, with tools like multimedia courseware and videos enhancing engagement. Teachers use these tools to mediate innovative teaching strategies, reflecting progress and accessibility in education. Bernstein’s concept of symbolic control helps contextualize this shift, showing how the state’s focus on technological tools reinforces its authority over educational practices while presenting innovation as key to pedagogic reform. The policy’s expanded responsibilities, including after-school services like homework assistance and extracurricular programs, pose additional challenges for teachers. Collaborative learning models, such as peer-supported learning, foster mutual support but increase teachers’ workloads, raising concerns about burnout and job satisfaction. Despite the policy’s transformative potential, contradictions arise as teachers struggle to balance new responsibilities with existing expectations. CCDT highlights this resistance as a counter-discourse against the policy’s rhetoric of equity and stress reduction. CHAT frames these tensions as contradictions within the activity system, where innovation coexists with systemic limitations. Bernstein’s analysis of tensions between regulative and instructional discourse further underscores these challenges, as teachers must reconcile expanded cultural goals with practical demands on their time and resources. Cultural tensions complicate the policy’s impact as teachers manage parental anxieties over reduced academic pressure. Bernstein suggests these tensions reflect shifting symbolic control, as the state attempts to realign parental expectations with its vision of balanced, equitable development. The policy repositions teachers as agents of cultural change, embodying its aspirations for progress and equity. However, their resistance and adaptation highlight the difficulty of aligning ideological goals with practical realities. As teachers learn new technologies and rethink their teaching approaches, Bernstein’s exploration of identity formation is relevant, as they are required to adapt their professional roles to meet the policy’s demands for holistic student development.

In conclusion, DRP reshapes teachers’ professional identities, marking a transformative moment in the educational landscape. While the policy offers opportunities for innovation and holistic development, it also emphasizes the need for ongoing support and dialogue. Through CHAT, CCDT, and Bernstein’s theoretical concepts, this analysis reveals teachers’ pivotal role in mediating systemic reform and cultural realignment. The next section will explore how DRP has similarly redefined the roles and experiences of parents, positioning them as active participants in the evolving educational system.

### *Impacts on Parents*

DRP has also profoundly reshaped parental roles in education, fostering significant behavioral, attitudinal, and conceptual transformations. Parents have transitioned from passive supporters of their children’s education to active participants in their holistic development. Using CHAT and CCDT as analytical frameworks, this analysis situates these shifts within broader systemic and cultural redefinitions, reflecting the policy’s dual function as a practical intervention and cultural recalibration. Bernstein’s (2000) concepts of classification, framing, and pedagogic discourse further deepen this analysis by elucidating how the policy reshapes the boundaries of educational roles and the cultural values parents are expected to embody. The reduction in after-school tutoring services has compelled parents to assume increased responsibility for their children’s academic activities, a shift that CHAT interprets as a redistribution of labor within the educational activity system (Engeström, 2001). Parent A highlighted this shift, stating, “Now that there are fewer cram schools, we have to spend more time on their studies.” This reallocation of duties signifies a structural adjustment, where parents not only supervise homework but also incorporate new mediating tools such as tutorial books and online platforms to fill gaps left by reduced external supports. These adjustments underscore CHAT’s emphasis on how cultural tools mediate activities and reshape roles within a restructured system (Vygotsky, 1978; Leontiev, 1978). Bernstein’s concept of classification helps explain how the policy weakens the traditional boundary between formal schooling and family education, requiring

parents to adopt active roles traditionally associated with teachers and external tutors. This realignment reflects a broader cultural shift toward collaborative and holistic educational practices.

Simultaneously, CCDT reveals how policy discourse actively reconstructs parental identities, positioning them as collaborators in fostering holistic development. The government's narrative encourages parents to align with the policy's goals of equity and quality by reorienting their focus from competitive academic achievement to comprehensive child development. Parent G exemplified this ideological shift, observing, "Now, I am more concerned with the overall development of my children, not just with their academic performance." This transition reflects a recalibration of educational priorities, wherein CHAT situates the "object" of the activity system as moving beyond test scores to encompass creativity, emotional well-being, and moral growth. Bernstein's idea of regulative discourse complements this perspective by highlighting how the policy embeds cultural values, such as moral and emotional development, into parental practices, thereby redefining their roles within the educational ecosystem. Meanwhile, CCDT highlights the role of Confucian ideals in legitimizing this broader vision, constructing a discourse of collective welfare that aligns with both traditional values and contemporary educational trends (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001).

The redefinition of the home as a primary educational space has further expanded parental responsibilities. Parent K's assertion, "Family is also a part of education," illustrates the symbolic and practical elevation of family as an integral part of the educational ecosystem. CHAT frames this transformation as a structural shift in the community component of the activity system, emphasizing the interconnected roles of parents, teachers, and schools in nurturing children's academic and emotional growth (Engeström, 2001). Bernstein's framing concept adds depth to this analysis by showing how the policy regulates and standardizes parental involvement, ensuring alignment with the broader goals of holistic development. Additionally, parents are increasingly attuned to their children's mental health, reflecting broader cultural changes in perceptions of well-being. Parent J shared, "Now, I will communicate with him regularly to learn about his emotional and psychological state," indicating a shift from academic monitoring to holistic engagement. CCDT contextualizes this as a discursive shift where mental health becomes central to policy narratives, aligning parental practices with broader ideological goals of balanced education (Fairclough, 1992). Despite these transformations, the policy has generated significant challenges for parents. The redistribution of labor often creates tensions, as parents struggle to balance work and educational responsibilities. Parent A acknowledged, "Now [I] also have to find time to help the children, [and I] feel a little difficult." CHAT identifies these tensions as contradictions within the activity system—inevitable points of friction that can drive systemic innovation but also expose gaps in policy implementation (Engeström, 2001). Bernstein's concept of symbolic control helps frame these challenges, as parents are tasked with upholding the values and priorities established by the state while simultaneously navigating their own constraints and anxieties. Parents' adaptability in forming mutual learning networks and leveraging community-based resources exemplifies their resilience. Parent C remarked, "We often discuss how to help our children learn in our WeChat group, especially some learning tools and methods." Such collaborations represent the emergence of new mediating tools that address systemic contradictions, reinforcing CHAT's emphasis on the dynamic interplay between individual agency and systemic structures.

CCDT adds depth to this analysis by highlighting how counter-discourses challenge the policy's dominant narratives. While the policy emphasizes reduced academic pressure and holistic development, some parents express concerns about the long-term competitiveness of their children, particularly in a high-stakes exam-oriented culture. Parent E noted, "After the academic stress eased, we did start to pay more attention to our children's mental health. In the past, we were always busy with our child's study, rarely considering his emotional fluctuations." This reflects a counter-discourse that negotiates between cultural expectations of academic excellence and the policy's ideological emphasis on well-being. Bernstein's (2000) focus on identity formation sheds light on how these tensions affect parents, as they are required to navigate a dual identity: fostering holistic growth while ensuring their children remain competitive in a traditional educational landscape. Collaboration between parents and schools has also intensified under the policy. Parent C stated, "We will also be more active in the parents' meeting organized by the school to communicate with teachers and other parents and exchange learning experience." CHAT interprets this as

a reconfiguration of the “rules” and “community” components within the activity system, fostering greater alignment between home and school in achieving shared educational goals. CCDT complements this perspective by analyzing how these collaborative practices reinforce the policy’s cultural narrative of collective engagement while subtly redistributing authority from private tutors to public institutions. Bernstein’s classification concept further explains this redistribution by emphasizing how the state redefines educational roles, transferring responsibility from private entities to public and familial institutions.

## Conclusion

DRP marks a significant cultural and systemic intervention in China’s educational landscape, striving to alleviate academic pressures, address educational inequities, and promote holistic development. By limiting homework and extracurricular tutoring, the policy not only restructures traditional educational practices but also redefines the roles and interactions of students, teachers, and parents within the system. Through the lens of CHAT, CCDT and Basil Bernstein’s theoretical concepts, this study highlights how the policy operates as both a systemic reform and a cultural redefinition. For students, the policy shifts the focus from exam-oriented success to fostering creativity, critical thinking, and emotional resilience. Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing further illuminate this transformation. By weakening the traditional classification between academic and extracurricular domains, the policy integrates diverse learning experiences, such as arts, sports, and hands-on projects, into the mainstream curriculum. Simultaneously, it strengthens the framing of pedagogic practices by centralizing control within schools, ensuring that students engage with a balanced, structured learning environment. These changes enable more equitable learning opportunities, although deeply ingrained cultural norms tied to academic competition continue to present challenges. Teachers are repositioned as key agents of reform, tasked with balancing expanded responsibilities and adopting innovative pedagogical approaches. Bernstein’s concept of pedagogic discourse provides insight into how the policy redefines their roles. Teachers are now required to mediate both instructional and regulative discourses, aligning academic goals with broader cultural values of equity and holistic development. While this transformation underscores their pivotal role in systemic realignment, it also introduces tensions surrounding workload and resource allocation, reflecting the systemic contradictions inherent in large-scale educational reforms. Parents, meanwhile, transition from peripheral supporters to active participants in their children’s education, reflecting broader cultural shifts toward collaborative and holistic educational practices. Bernstein’s idea of symbolic control sheds light on how the policy repositions parents as collaborators in fostering emotional and moral development. By blurring the classification between formal schooling and family education, the policy aligns parental roles with Confucian ideals of balanced personal growth while embedding modern priorities of equity and innovation. Despite its transformative goals, the policy reveals systemic contradictions and cultural resistance, particularly concerning reduced academic competition and shifting traditional metrics of success. Bernstein’s framework highlights how these tensions emerge from the interplay between instructional and regulative discourses, with counter-discourses challenging the policy’s ability to fully redefine educational priorities. These challenges underscore the complexity of implementing equity-driven reforms within entrenched societal structures. However, the policy’s emphasis on equity, collaboration, and comprehensive development provides a valuable framework for rethinking education in modern China.

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