A Review of Empirical Studies of the Effects of Double Reduction Policy

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Abstract: The Double Reduction policy represents a significant educational reform endeavor of the Chinese government to alleviate the overly heavy burdens of homework and off-campus training for compulsory education students. Using the method of literature review, this study surveys the existing empirical research on the effects of the policy on the students, parents, and teachers to find that it has a positive effect on student all-round development by reducing their academic burdens, whereas it also faces challenges, such as less ideal after-school services, persistent education anxiety in the parents, and increased workloads for the teachers. The study improving proposes recommendations for implementation, including enhancing the digital educational resources, strengthening home education guidance, and bolstering teachers' well-being via multi-agency efforts.

> Science Insights Education Frontiers 2025; 27(2):4517-4531 DOI: 10.15354/sief.25.re496

How to Cite: Zeng, Y. (2025). A review of empirical studies of the effects of Double Reduction policy. Science Insights Education Frontiers, 27(2):4517-4531.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy, Policy Outcomes, Literature Review

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Conflict of Interests: None

Funding: No funding sources declared.

AI Declaration: The author affirms that artificial intelligence did not contribute to the process of preparing the work.

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Introduction

THE ONEROUS academic burdens in Chinese primary and secondary education have negatively affected the physical and mental development of the students as well as the quality of China's compulsory education. Ma and Yang (2015) classify student academic burdens into three categories: (i) time- and energy-consuming burdens induced by school curricula and off-campus training; (ii) excessive cognitive burdens caused by unscientific instructional methods and arrangements; (iii) psychological burdens from overly frequent tests and the attendant performance rankings. The Chinese educational authorities have made a lot of efforts to alleviate student academic pressures, such as implementing curricular reforms and strengthening in-service teacher training to optimize pedagogical methods to mitigate students' cognitive loads and setting limits to the incidence of tests and exams while also prohibiting the public ranking of test results in compulsory students (Cheng, 2018). However, disproportionate homework and off-campus training burdens remained the pronounced, persistent issues at the compulsory education level (In China, compulsory education consists of primary and junior secondary education). These burdens deprived students of their leisure time and their selfmotivation in learning as well (Zhou & Qi, 2022). Furthermore, out-ofschool tutoring adds financial pressure to parents by increasing home educational expenses, and excessive homework exacerbated the workloads of the teachers, who needed to spend a lot of time marking student homework and explaining the marking results to them.

To address these issues, the central government of China released the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Compulsory Education Students (also referred to as the Double Reduction policy) in July 2021, which emphasizes the importance of strengthening the role of the schools as the primary education institutions and regulating the off-campus training and tutoring services and underlines the significance of high-quality after-school services for student holistic development and healthy growth (State Council of China, 2021). In response to the Double Reduction policy, regional governments have also advanced a series of moves to alleviate academic burdens on students. For instance, a portion of schools in Zhejiang Province try to control the volume of homework, stratify and individualize assignments, and give prompt feedback by employing digital tools, thereby improving the efficiency and effects of homework (Lin et al., 2022). Despite high expectations for the policy's outcomes, several challenges have arisen during its implementation. For example, the popularization of after-school services has largely increased the teachers' working hours and duties (Long et al., 2021). Additionally, certain researchers noted that the Double Reduction policy was not the first of its

kind in the recent history of Chinese education. Prior academic burden reduction programs have typically gone through a cycle as follows: "excessive burden \rightarrow reduction \rightarrow renewed burden \rightarrow repeated reduction" (Zhou & Qi, 2022). The current program has instigated concerns in academia for the consistency and endurance of its execution.

Since the policy's release nearly four years ago, many empirical studies have been conducted to examine its outcomes. By reviewing these empirical studies, this article seeks to investigate the effects of the policy on student learning, home education, and teacher well-being. Using the search words "Double Reduction policy," "academic burden reduction measures," "primary and secondary school students," "parents of compulsory education students," "primary and secondary teachers," and "compulsory education," we searched for literature in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and finally obtained 17 empirical studies relevant to our research topic. Based on their research findings, this survey summarizes the achieved outcomes and analyzes the existing challenges of the program, with a view to providing implications for further optimization of its implementation.

A Brief Overview of the Double Reduction Policy

The overarching goal of the Double Reduction policy is defined as enhancing students' school-based learning by improving the teaching quality and service level of compulsory education schools and systematically regulating training and tutoring services of private institutions (State Council of China, 2021). To reach this goal, the policy proposes the following measures:

- The schools lighten students' homework burden by controlling and coordinating the total amount of homework and aligning the difficulty of homework with the curriculum standards. No written homework is to be assigned to first and second graders; homework completion time for third to sixth graders and junior secondary students should not exceed 60 and 90 minutes, respectively. The teachers should be encouraged to assign stratified, personalized, and flexible homework to the students. Additionally, the students should be given adequate homework completion direction to ensure that primary school students can basically complete homework, and junior secondary school students finish doing most homework on the campus.
- The schools elevate the level of after-school services by pooling resources available to broaden the spectrum of after-school activities (including homework tutoring, physical exercise, mental health education, club activity, etc.) to meet diverse needs of the students. After-school services should finish no earlier than the

general off-work hour of the local workers, with extended care services available if needed. It is mandatory for the school to develop a detailed after-school service scheme that explicitly lay out service content and forms and not to deliver new lessons during after-school sessions. The teaching staff should be the primary providers of after-school services, while retired teachers and professionals from outside the school can also be engaged to help with these services. Furthermore, the schools can leverage community resources and public venues to enrich their after-school services, and local education authorities have the responsibility to sponsor the development of high-quality digital educational resources as free offerings to the students.

- Heighten regulation of private training and tutoring services. Private training institutions are prohibited from conducting advanced teaching or organizing "subject-based" training programs (for subjects included in the national compulsory education curriculum like Chinese language, mathematics, and English) during national holidays, weekends, or winter or summer breaks; non-subject-based training institutions, such as those offering training on martial arts, painting, musical instruments, or programming, are not allowed to provide subject-based training services. Local authorities shall not approve additional subjectbased training institutions targeting compulsory education students. Existing subject-based training institutions are to be uniformly registered as non-profit organizations and are prohibited from going public for raising funds. Educational authorities are responsible for creating registration and monitoring systems to supervise teaching materials of these institutions and prevent illegitimate advertising and vicious competition in the training sector.
- Narrow inter-school disparities in educational quality. Regional governments are accountable for supporting the development of education groups and urban-rural education communities to close gaps between compulsory education schools. Local educational authorities need to direct schools to improve their teaching arrangements and management to optimize students' learning outcomes within the school. Senior secondary school admission should take account of both the student's results in the entrance examination and their comprehensive competence. Schools and teachers should not be solely evaluated by the progression rates in students. The school district's performance in implementing the Double Reduction strategy is treated as an essential measure of their compulsory education work, with the after-school service participation rates in students and the reduction in home expenditure

on off-campus tutoring being incorporated as significant indicators in the evaluation framework.

Other supporting moves include increasing funding for after-school services and teacher compensations; encouraging family-school-community co-education and accelerating the construction of community centers for home education guidance; heightening regulation of training service advertisements targeting school-age children, with prohibition of their appearance in mainstream media and public places.

The Policy's Effects on Students

The effect of the Double Reduction program in easing the burden of homework and the impact of after-school services on student development are the topics receiving the most discussions in the "Double Reduction" literature, as the compulsory education students are the direct subjects of the program. According to the research findings of the studies included in this review, the program is significantly effective in reducing academic burdens on the students (Ning & Yang, 2022; Jin, 2022; Liu & Zhao, 2022; Zheng, 2024). Research also demonstrates the positive impact of after-school services on student holistic development; yet, students' satisfaction with these services is lower than expected (Wang & Chen, 2024; Fu & Zhang, 2023; Liu, Z., 2023; Yin, 2023; Gong, 2022).

In the wake of the policy's introduction, the volume and difficulty of homework have both significantly decreased in primary and secondary students, leading to the increase in their leisure time. The drop in the quantity of homework results in alleviated academic pressure in the students (Jin, 2022); the lowered difficulty of assignments helps diminish their aversion to homework while enhancing their senses of fulfillment in doing it, successfully mitigating their learning anxiety (Ning & Yang, 2022). Nevertheless, some students in certain regions claimed that they had not experienced any reduction in homework burdens, with some even reporting increased academic pressure (Zheng, 2024). That may be because some students need to do homework assigned by their parents despite the reduction in assignments from their teachers, and some parents even utilize the increased free time of their children to enroll them into more off-campus tutoring programs. Another reason may be that among higher-grade students who are preparing for the school progression, the quantity and difficulty of homework remain basically the same as before the introduction of the policy.

Furthermore, most of the studies included suggest that after-school services have positive impacts on student all-round development. As per Zhaofeng Liu's (2023) investigation, the majority of students polled reported the significant difference the after-school services made to their personal growth, such as the increased capacity for independent completion of

homework and the development of favorable habits. Fu and Zhang' (2023) research findings demonstrate that after-school services are a major contributing factor in students' physical and mental health development. Yin (2023) focused on investigating the benefits of after-school sports to find that student participants experienced noticeable improvements in BMI, body fat percentage, lung capacity, endurance, strength, and reaction, though with gender differences in physical flexibility and explosive power enhancement. Despite their benefits revealed by research, student satisfaction with oncampus after-school services is lower than expected. While a small number of schools have deployed colorful, engaging after-school programs (Gong, 2022), most schools confine the arrangements and delivery of after-school services within their campuses, seldom utilizing external resources, such as science museums, youth palaces, museums, and other education bases, or online resources to diversify their offerings (Wang & Chen, 2024). As a result of the limited choice of after-school activity, some students even prefer doing homework to participating in those monotonous club or outdoor activities in after-school sessions (Ning & Yang, 2022). These findings underscore the necessity of exploring better-designed, more innovative afterschool services to better serve the diverse needs of students.

It is noteworthy that students' misconceptions of the policy and the term "burden reduction" can compromise the outcomes of the program. According to Jin's (2022) study, a portion of students equated "burden reduction" to "zero burden," rarely paying serious attention to written assignments from their teachers, which end up in severe declines in academic achievements. Hence, it is important for the school and teachers to help their students develop proper understanding of the purpose of the policy, which is to get rid of repeated, ineffective work to allow them to devote more time to their interests and to all-round competence development, rather than simply reducing learning tasks. In the meantime, the teachers should also educate their students to cultivate appropriate learning methods and habits to increase active engagement in on-campus learning.

The Policy's Impacts on Home Education

The implementation of the Double Reduction program has not only brought reforms to school education but has also considerably affected home education. Studies included in the review have investigated the effects of the program on parental education anxiety and home education expenses, as well as parents' perceptions of the program's outcomes. Their research findings reveal that the strategy has mitigated education anxiety in the parents to varying degrees and reduced the families' out-of-school education expenses (e.g., Liu, 2024; Liu, J., 2023). The majority of parents showed positive attitudes towards the policy and recognized its significance for compulsory

education enhancement (e.g., Shi et al., 2022; Ding, 2021). Nonetheless, because the program brought changes to the students' study routines and habits, a portion of the parents struggled to adapt to the new pattern of home education in the short term, feeling concerned about the program's prospects (e.g., Ning & Yang, 2022; Liu & Zhao, 2022).

First off, the Double Reduction program has a noticeable impact on parents' involvement in child learning. The provision of after-school services, particularly the on-campus homework tutoring, has significantly lightened the burden of homework tutoring on parents, thereby reducing their education anxiety (Liu, 2024; Ding, 2021). In Gong's (2022) investigation, approximately 70% of the parents surveyed reported the program had mitigated their education anxiety, whereas it was not the case for the rest. This may be because homework completion is only one of the educational concerns in the parents, who are, meanwhile, suffering worries of child school progression and academic competition. In the meantime, the program's introduction has resulted in less use of off-campus training services in a portion of the parents, although a sizeable number of them feel the need to adhere to the prior out-of-school tutoring arrangements, with some of them even enrolling their children into more private tutoring programs since the latter have more spare time in the wake of the policy's release. According to Junyan Liu's (2023) survey, among parents who were paying for off-campus tutoring, 28.2% would continue to use the chosen programs, and 9.5% intended to enroll their children in additional courses. Pang et al.'s (2025) study finds that parents' socioeconomic status (SES) mediates the effect of the policy on home expenditure on off-campus tutoring. Specifically, the Double Reduction program is effective in reducing out-of-school tutoring expenses of middle and low-SES households, but without significant effect on those of high-SES families.

Regarding their perceptions of the Double Reduction program, the parents rate the provision of after-school services as the most valuable among all its moves. Most parents are satisfied with the outcomes of after-school services, claiming that they are beneficial to the children's learning and day-to-day life by assisting with the diversification of interests and cultivation of favorable behavioral habits (Shi et al., 2022; Ding, 2021; Gong, 2022). On the other hand, parental views vary on the outcomes of other moves like homework burden reduction and strict regulation of off-campus training services. Some parents said that the eased homework burden and reduced out-of-school training participation allowed their children to spend more time on rest, physical exercise, and interest development, facilitating their all-round growth (Liu & Gao, 2024; Ning & Yang, 2022), whereas others are concerned that reduction in academic workload and limited access to private tutoring may lead to declines in student academic performance, potentially hindering children's academic advancements (Liu & Zhao, 2022).

Researchers also analyzed the reasons for these worries: (1) A considerable number of students, lacking the self-regulation ability, may not use the increased leisure time for productive activities but instead, spend it on ones that can easily induce addictive behavior, such as social media browsing and online gaming (Ning & Yang, 2022). (2) Many parents relied heavily on off-campus training services because of their inability to provide their children with proper tutoring at home (Liu & Zhao, 2022). The limited access to off-campus training as a result of the execution of the Double Reduction strategy, in a certain sense, poses higher requirements for home education, imposing psychological pressure on this group of parents, who may have to seek for more private training opportunities for their children. (3) With the tradition of exam-focused education in China, some parents see the heavy loads of homework and extra tutoring after school as the key pathways to academic success (Jia et al., 2023), thus feeling uneasy about the program's moves to reduce the academic burdens on children.

The Policy's Impacts on Teacher Well-Being

The Double Reduction strategy raises the standards for teachers' work, and the across-the-board implementation of the program is somewhat at the expense of their well-being. First, the provision of after-school services increases teachers' working hours and workloads, and the reduction in homework assignments requires greater instructional design capacity, adding complexities to their responsibilities (Zhou et al., 2024). Particularly among homeroom teachers, longer working hours and increased administrative duties have subjected them to greater pressure in comparison with regular teachers. According to Liu and Zhao's (2022) investigation, one-third of homeroom teachers polled reported lowered intention to continue with the role after the program's introduction. Furthermore, in schools that have the issue of uneven teacher staffing, certain teachers are required to provide tutoring irrelevant to their specialties in after-school service sessions. For instance, Chinese language teachers may be assigned to supervise art clubs. Additional workloads like this render them more prone to professional burnout, and such a way of staffing the after-school services undermines the outcomes of after-school activity (Wang & Chen, 2024). Second, the teachers received insufficient compensations for the additional workloads induced by the Double Reduction program. According to Ding's (2021) investigation, the majority of the teachers surveyed claimed their responsibilities after-school services are disproportionately undercompensated, with only 9% being happy with the current level of compensations, pointing to low satisfaction of the teachers with the rewards they get for their engagement in after-school services. Similar findings have been documented by other studies (Liu & Zhao, 2022; Zhou et al., 2024;

Gong, 2022). Although many researchers had raised their concerns for the funding issue and proposed relevant measures before the across-the-board implementation of the program (Yu & Yang, 2022), the schools and educational authorities still failed to provide adequate support for the teachers in the enactment of the program. Moreover, the school's immature management system for after-school services has compromised the teachers' work efficiency in these services (Shi et al., 2022) while also disrupting their regular teaching responsibilities and professional development. Third, the teachers' longer working hours in the school means reduced time for their own families. As an adult family member, the teacher has their own home education issue and other household responsibilities. The increased workplace burdens under the Double Reduction policy make it more difficult for the teachers to strike the balance between work and home commitments (Zhou, 2024).

Despite the challenges of the program's implementation, the teachers have identified themselves with its goals and fully realize its significance for student all-round development (Shi et al., 2022). Still, they hold mixed views of the specific practices in the execution of the policy in the face of issues like increased workloads and low compensations. The schools and education departments should actively explore solutions to issues like these.

Discussion

The review of Double Reduction literature reveals that the policy has produced positive effects in certain areas. Homework burden alleviation makes the development of non-academic competence in students possible; mitigated parental education anxiety has led to the reduction in home expenditure on child out-of-school training. On balance, the education community is getting closer to the realization of the policy's ultimate goals.

On the other hand, the Double Reduction program, as a major educational reform endeavor, faces a lot of challenges. There are conflicts between the traditional pursuit of exam-focused education and academic achievement-first education and the program's advocate for prioritizing student competence development and healthy growth (Zhou & Qi, 2022), which caused much confusion among the students and parents at the initial stage of the program. A considerable number of the parents had the worry that the reduction in homework and off-campus tutoring might negatively affect child academic performance and school progression; some students were at a loss what to do with the increased free time as a result of the drop in learning tasks. In addition, the Double Reduction program has elicited additional work burdens to the teachers, who have not received proper compensations and support correspondingly. This is not favorable for encouraging active engagement in the program in the teachers or ensuring

the sustainable development of the strategy. In response to these challenges, we propose the following recommendations:

Strengthening Educational Technology Use: Increasing the provision of digital educational resources and intelligent learning tools can help improve the availability and diversity of learning materials for compulsory education students, assisting with the development of self-directed study ability and comprehensive competence in them. It can also diminish parents' worries about their children's academic success. Developing digital technology-enabled home-school co-education tools to offer services like online specialist consultations and live-streaming thematic activity will lead to the increase in parental confidence in school education. Furthermore, intelligent homework design and assessment tools can be used to optimize the procedure of assignment management, supporting the creation of personalized tasks and automation of marking and diagnostic feedback (Ke et al., 2022), which may contribute to the alleviation of the teachers' workloads.

Enhancing Home Education Guidance: Helping parents develop scientific notions of education is beneficial to the enactment of the program. First, it is important to guide parents to look at the value of education from the perspective of holistic development, raising in them the awareness of inherent individuality and uniqueness in children, the harm of the utilitarian attitudes towards children's test scores, and the importance of cultivating extensive personal interests and favorable learning habits (Bian & Zhang, 2022). Second, parental education on knowledge about child development can prevent parents from being misled by illegitimate recommendations from those mercenary training institutions, such as advanced learning (requiring children to study materials intended for the next grade or even next education phase), teaching materials with inordinately high levels of difficulty, and over interference in children's autonomous learning. Third, it is advisable to boost the effects of home education guidance by using a diverse variety of devices, such as the parental school, parents committee, and dedicated phone line or e-mail address, which can potentially assist parents in releasing their education anxiety (Yu & Yao, 2022).

Alleviating Teachers' Work Pressure via Efforts of All Stakeholders: To sustain the program's implementation, the school and education department should adopt the flexible working-hour policy to increase the flexibility of teachers' schedules and ensure they enjoy adequate rest. In the meantime, it is imperative to elevate the teachers' compensations to heighten their identification with the program as well as their job satisfaction. It is also important to educate parents to comprehend the division of responsibility between home and school education and respect teachers' role as professionals. At the community level, all sectors ought to be mobilized to support the advancement of the program with their respective resources,

particularly public institutions like youth palaces and adolescent activity centers, which can be deeply engaged in providing diverse after-school services to assist student all-round development.

Conclusion

The article analyzes the impact of the Double Reduction policy on compulsory education students, their parents, and teachers by reviewing relevant empirical studies. The program is effective in alleviating student academic burdens and is well-received by the majority of the parents. While it brings positive changes to the educational ecology, it fails to pay adequate regard for the teachers' well-being, which constitutes a potential threat to its sustainability. Handling issues that arise in the enactment of the program warrants the joint efforts of the schools, families and the community. Relentless efforts to improve the program will culminate in a significant elevation of the teaching and service standards of compulsory education schools.

The study's literature search may not be sufficiently exhaustive, which can compromise the generalizability of its conclusions. Also, the study is confined to examining the outcomes of the Double Reduction program and challenges of its implementation from the standpoints of the students, parents, and teachers, without delving into systemic issues, such as the coordination between various measures, optimal allocation of educational resources, and evaluation and supervision mechanisms. Issues like these are pending further research.

It is noteworthy that prior empirical studies in the literature primarily adopt the questionnaire survey as the data collection method, which raises issues like the representativeness of the sample and objectivity of the data. We suggest that future research use more integrative approaches that blend the interview, case study, experimental study, and more to enhance the objectivity and generalizability of research findings. Furthermore, most studies included in the review draw on samples from developed regions without paying enough attention to underdeveloped areas. Certain researchers have observed that despite its mandatory nature, the program's implementation in underdeveloped regions is less ideal than expected due to factors like backward economic conditions, inadequate fiscal funding, and a dearth of supporting policies (Shi et al., 2022). Hence, more specialized investigations targeting the program's enactment in underdeveloped areas and comparisons of its outcomes across different regions are needed in the future.

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Received: January 11, 2025 Revised: February 27, 2025 Accepted: March 13, 2025