

A study of Double Reduction Policy in China

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Abstract: The education disparity between urban and rural China has always been a factor with a lasting effect on society. People are eschewing vocational education for manufacturing and labor in favor of higher education in China as a result of the country's national admission test system for higher education. At all levels, a trend toward a shortage of skilled labor is becoming more and more obvious. The Chinese government implemented a double-drop policy for the education sector in 2021 to try to change this scenario. This strategy has a significant social and economic impact, has severely hurt the traditional school sector, and has caused changes in the educational landscape.

1. Introduction

Over the last five decades, China has established one of the largest education systems internationally, with educational investment equaling 4 percent of the country's GDP. Adult literacy has increased since the 1980s, and university enrolment has risen since 60 percent of high-school graduates in China gain access to university every year ^[1]. Despite the educational gains and the government efforts to ensure quality and even distribution of education resources, the rural-urban education disparity has been widening ever since the evolution of education in China. Students in urban areas receive a higher quality of education than those in rural areas, which affects those going onto higher education. According to the urban-rural inequalities in China's higher education study by Li Mei and Yang Rui, only 20%-30% of students come from rural areas. In an environment with limited educational resources, it is more difficult for rural students to achieve excellent grades than urban students. And they are often stopped by high tuition fees and living expenses ^[2].

This part will discuss the reasons that have led to this wide rift in China's academic landscape that claims to be equal for every child in the country. The government at various levels is responsible for financing education institutions in China, and fully sponsors lower and middle schools to provide nine years of full-time education. However, many studies that focus on the inequality between rural-urban education performance in China show that the central government of China has spent less (2.5 percent of its GDP) in developing the rural education sector which is far below the large expenditure on compulsory education in the urban areas in 2004. In the mid-1990s, the government ended free higher education for all students in the country, as well as guaranteed employment after completion of higher learning. Henceforth, students had to pay for college and university fees, which are expensive and often higher than the family's income, and so affording tuition fees is a challenge. These financial difficulties often force students to drop out of school and give up on their academic dreams. Studies show that 70-80 percent of urban residents go onto postgraduate studies, whereas the low funding in rural areas results in poor educational quality and slows down the growth and development of educational institutions in terms of performance and structure.

Since 1977, shadow education has grown as a lucrative business in China. Shadow education refers to supplementary educational activity offered outside of regular schooling ^[3]. From 2003 to 2013, more than half of China's compulsory education students engaged in shadow education services ^[4]. In order to offer themselves a competitive advantage while applying to higher school, many students in China have come to rely on shadow education. Children in rural areas, who do not receive education of the same calibre as children in metropolitan areas, have benefited greatly from

shadow schooling. Parents who have sent their kids to live with relatives in the country can only put their faith on covert educational organisations to monitor their kids' development ^[5].

As part of a wider attempt to address the quality of compulsory education nationally, and to curb the rapid development of shadow education, the Chinese Central Government issued educational guidance, and a document called the Double Reduction Policy (DRP) in July 2021, also known as the Double Mitigation Policy. The DRP is the latest guideline issued by the Chinese government to address educational reform in recent years, with the aim of reducing the pressure of studying at school and the expectation of extra tutoring outside of class for students in compulsory education. The main guiding ideology is to prioritise school education as the main way for students to learn, and to combat the academic input provided by non-school institutions, thereby reducing the stress on students in the Chinese educational environment. While the policy's objectives are clear, its execution is producing some effects that are at odds with the development of educational quality as a whole.

2. Major factors of rural-urban gap

Educational inequality between urban and rural areas in China has developed into a structural problem. Although the government has formulated policies to promote educational equality and encourage wider social classes to receive higher education, more schools are opened in cities due to the link between urban and rural development and construction planning and educational resources. However, due to the poor economic situation, the rural population cannot enter the city to obtain the admission qualification, so the enrollment rate of rural students is far lower than that of urban students [6]. The problem of entry barriers is just the beginning of a gap in China's education.

2.1. Education resources

Rural schools including vocational colleges are full of fresh graduates employed cheaply as teachers, who often lack knowledge and experience, and are teaching in congested classrooms with mixed levels and age-groups. These fresh graduates receive low salaries which results in high staff turnover ^[7]. This lack of experienced educators and stimulating spaces for learning in rural areas contrasts with the educational opportunities for urban students, who enjoy the luxury of fully furnished classrooms, up-to-date technology in large spaces and well experienced teachers. This inequality contributes to China's rural-urban education gap ^[8].

2.2. Household registration policy(Hukou Policy)

The Hukou educational policies in China restrict students who have relocated from a rural area to the city from joining urban schools, which confines them to private schools which charge high tuition fees ^[9]. While urban residents have access to a full pre-university education and then to higher education, and lucrative employment opportunities, urban migrants are unable to support their children through schooling and higher education. This forces many city migrants to send their children back to rural schooling which is inferior. In reality, income levels for rural regions are three times less than the urban areas but educational fees are not adjusted accordingly. Due to increased poverty levels in the rural areas of China, most parents are forced to migrate to the cities for financial reasons, to fund their children's education life ^[10]. It can be seen that a low-income family results in a child receiving a low quality of education, by studying in a rural school with inadequate facilities, poorly trained teachers, less technological resources and less opportunity, and by being in a large mixed ability class. Therefore, rural students stand much less chance in academic excellence compared to their urban competitors ^[11].

2.3. The gap between urban and rural education is widening

Most rural areas are comprised of low-income earners, which slows down the economic growth of the area and has a direct effect on the education sector. Few financial contributions will be made towards the development of rural schools, so classes will be congested and in a poor condition. Due to rural students being restricted from enrolment in urban public schools, those rural students who

are performing well are denied the empowerment and opportunity of educational opportunities ^[12]. Students in the rural areas often opt to drop out of schools and seek employment as a result of rising living costs and having to support the family. Studies show that there is a huge disparity in the number of graduates from urban and rural areas, as students in rural areas take many years to complete their education, or do not graduate, due to financial constraints ^[13]. Statistics show that 38 percent of rural students are not able to complete their educational journey, which results in their being disadvantaged when seeking employment, compared to their urban peers.

Rural to urban migration is increasing, especially to the cities of Shanghai and Hong Kong. Between 1990 and 2010, 164 million people migrated to cities in search of well-paying jobs, the majority of whom were unskilled and were forced to work in poorly paid casual jobs. With these large migrations, educational issues have become more prevalent. Educational establishments continue to discriminate against rural students who have moved to the city, which aligns with the Hukou governing policy. Therefore, urban migrants often fail to secure access to formal education opportunities for their children ^[14]. Children who have migrated to the city are often forced to return to a rural location for education, or to attend an informal and unregulated urban school, which causes instability in their lives and perpetuates the divide in educational opportunities available. According to education laws approved by the central government in 2004, every child is entitled to an equal education. The government has failed to protect the urban migrant's right to an equal education, which has caused the majority of children to rely on schools established by fellow migrants which lack well-trained teachers and adequate facilities. Adequate schooling should be provided according to the governing laws protecting the right of education to every child or youth ^[15].

3. The Double Reduction Policy

Prompted by the above environmental conditions, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-campus Training of Students in Compulsory Education", which is the Double Reduction Policy.

3.1. Education spending

The DRP focuses on being of benefit to parents and students. The policy mandates some practical guidelines, such as schools should not set assignments that take more than 90 minutes to complete, non-essential examinations should be reduced, and schools are prohibited from requiring parents to complete and correct homework. The policy clearly states that it is necessary to alleviate parents' anxiety about education and reduce the cost of parents' investment in education. The birth rate in China continues to decline predominantly, partly due to the financial commitment of having a child, with the investment in a child's education being the main factor. Institutions which offer out of school tuition are often extremely expensive due to their reputation ^[16]. The strategy seeks to address the social phenomena of China's ageing population and the requirement that Chinese families not incur excessive fees throughout the era of obligatory schooling. Due to the intense competition for admission to universities and parents' desire to give their children the best possibilities, shadow schooling has become very popular, even in the basic years.

While the DRP is having some positive impacts by changing the education market environment and school education, it has caused the emergence of unregulated shadow education companies. The policy prohibits institutions from providing subject-based tuition to students enrolled in compulsory education, and financial investment into the training industry is strictly controlled. Since the implementation of DRP, shadow educational institutions have been forced to close or transform. This has the intended effect of eliminating the investment ordinary families previously had to make into shadow education, and reduces the academic pressure on students. The overall aim is that the Chinese government hopes to improve the overall quality and equality of education in schools, so that students can receive a more holistic education.

3.2. The solution of education industry

To achieve the goal of a more rounded education, the DRP encourages off-campus training institutions to transform, and offer liberal arts classes, which include non-disciplinary courses such as sports, dance, and art. It is hoped that students may become more intrinsically motivated in their education to develop themselves, rather than being driven by parents and the employment pressure of the social environment. It has been shown that students' mental health is of vital importance in keeping attrition rates low, and students with a higher happiness index will be more willing to choose to join a higher level of study, such as undergraduate or postgraduate courses^[17]. The influence of social class taught by parents and instructors, wherein academic achievement is related to social standing, will be lessened by working to create a generally equitable learning environment where kids' values are nurtured and they can pursue subjects according to their preferences.

3.3. The goal of DRP

The DRP aims to restructure educational standards, so attainment is no longer based only on high scores and selection criteria is broadened beyond grades. The higher education application process is changing to consider applicant's aptitudes in a wider sense, including achievements beyond the purely academic. In 1977, the current examinations system was established whereby Chinese universities calculated test scores in the admission process, and this has profoundly affected the Y and Z generations. In the past 44 years, university has been the goal of many students, and in order to achieve the opportunity of a higher education, children and their families put themselves under intense pressure. In this academically oriented educational and social environment people are prejudiced against vocational schools. After such a well-established and long-term system of evaluation and with emphasis on higher education, people think that graduation from a renowned university is vital to secure employment.

In the past system, children with slightly lower academic grades chose a vocational education, which often led to employment associated with less salary and less status, such as an electrician or a plumber. Students who chose this path were limited in what they could achieve in society, and experienced prejudice by being perceived as 'lower statuses'. The implementation of DRP has the potential to effectively reduce social discrimination against a vocational education, and improve the learning interest and happiness index of vocational students. In terms of long-term effects, DRP can therefore improve the treatment and social status of social blue-collar workers. In addition, DRP attempts to address the issue of students wanting to attend only schools which have the reputation of high admission rates to known universities. Historically, parents have chosen a school according to the established record shown by that school for successful enrolment in higher education. In theory, DRP can reduce the element of competition, by making the pathway to higher education more universal, and thereby encouraging students to apply to a broader range of schools. The opportunity for a higher education will encompass those children who excel in academics, and others who are skilled in less academic areas, with less emphasis on their family's social status.

3.4. New problems derived from DRP

Although DRP can effectively reduce household spending on education, the mandatory elimination of shadow education is problematic. Since 2020, China has implemented very strict restrictions on population movement, including restricting students from entering and leaving schools because of Covid-19. Due to this pandemic, most tuition has moved from face-to-face to being delivered online. Since the implementation of DRP, shadow institutions have re-invented themselves as online tutoring institutions, and they are well-placed in the market to offer comprehensive e-learning resources and tuition. This causes a conflict between the educational services of traditional schools, and illegal shadow institutions in a market where the pandemic is ongoing and forcing the continuation of online learning. The highly competitive nature of education still exists, as changing this could be a lengthy process, and therefore students still try to engage in shadow education, particularly online. Online shadow institutions can provide a more personalized service, and offer individualized support, which would help to explain why more than 70% of

parents continue to be willing to purchase additional educational services, despite the enforced changes by the DRP. Currently, many families continue to believe that the main goal is for their children to gain the academic advantage so they can gain admission to prestigious universities and with the amount of school and college places available considerably less than applicants, the competition remains fierce.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, DRP is leading to some unexpected results, such as an unregulated shadow education market with even higher tuition fees, the increased pressure on school teachers, a significant number of redundancies in the industry and a wider gap in education equality. It is still not clear whether DRP can effect change in underlying beliefs about social status, education and competitiveness. Legislation which supports educational development would be beneficial to scaffold the change, as well as to guide and monitor the management in the education sector. Teachers are at the heart of this change and are important in leading the process to develop China's educational system.

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