

A Look at China's Efforts to Promote Education Equity and Reduce Academic Pressure on Students and Their Families

Our Center at UCLA has the good fortune to involve the talents and experiences of a variety of students. Included in the group this year was Jin Wen, an international student coming from China. She brought us up-to-date on her country's recent changes in education policy.

Past government policy and the social norm for Chinese families has been to put great emphasis on children's academic achievement. As Jin reported to us: "Chinese kids are involved in the fierce competition of entering good colleges from the first day of school. This popular social norm is called *Involution*. Many people use this term to describe peers competing for limited resources in ways that result in a decline in the individual's benefit-to-effort ratio."

Here is how *Involution* is discussed on the website for the Oxford China Review:

In 2020, Chinese netizens widely popularized a once-obscure academic term: neijuan, or involution. Frustrated by never-ending competition over limited opportunities and working lives with little perceivable value, people from all walks of life interpreted the concept according to the various pressures in their own lives. From university students failing to find employment to mothers struggling to keep up with their children's educational rat races, neijuan resonated with a nation contending with decelerating economic growth and massive inequalities.

<https://blog.oxchina.net/seminar-introduction-involution/>

Jin further reported that:

"Parents' anxiety about their children being out-competed by other children due to limited high quality education resulted in the rapid expansion of the private tutoring industry. In recent years, thousands of after-school institutions emerged with the help of the internet (especially online tutoring after COVID), and families felt it was almost a necessity for children to attend such institutions to avoid falling behind in academics. A constant bombardment of advertisements for tutoring exacerbated parents' anxiety.

The explosive growth of the tutoring sector created a vast market, forcing many families to invest in tutoring training either willingly or under peer pressure. The educational cost of raising children has become so high that most families have only one child, creating problems now that the government wants parents to have more children to relieve the challenges of a rapidly aging population.

Along with an overemphasis on test scores, the demands of heavy schoolwork and tutoring have raised concerns about students' physical and mental health. As a result, the government has implemented multiple education policies, with a hope of freeing families from the economic burden of educating a child, protecting the physical and mental health, and enhancing equity. A major example is the powerful and aggressive recent *Double Reduction* policy. It is just under implementation throughout the country."

The Double Reduction Policy

On July 24, 2021, the General office of China Central Committee of the CPC and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued new educational guidelines named the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Burdens of Homework and Off-campus Training for Students During the Period of Compulsory Education*. It is widely referred to as the "double reduction" policy.

*The material in this document builds on work done by Jin Wen as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2021.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Here's how the *chineselearning* website described the policy on Sep. 8, 2021:

How Will China's "Double Reductions" Affect Students This Year?

<https://www.chineselearning.com/blog/how-will-chinas-double-reductions-affect-students-this-year>

In China, this year's back-to-school preparations are looking a little different.

1. China's New "Double Reduction" Policy – Just like in years past, on the first day of school in China this year students will be required to submit their summer homework. Also, parents and head teachers will start to chat in WeChat groups and make sure everyone is clear on class requirements. In the past, much of this discussion focused on helping children arrange after-school remedial classes. However, that is changing this year.

Recently the Chinese government issued a new education policy, the "double reduction" policy. This policy calls for reducing students' amount of homework, and for effectively banning (or at least drastically reducing the number of) after-school training classes. What does this mean, practically, for Chinese students?

-Reduced test pressure – China's school system is notorious for an emphasis on examinations. That changed, however, when final exams for primary school Grades 1 and 2 were removed this year, and examination standards were implemented for other grades, meaning that students are only tested on what they are taught according to the standard curricula of standard difficulty. Additionally, exam results are not publicly ranked and published, and parents and students will be informed more privately of results.

-Average workloads will be reduced – In addition to forbidding homework to be assigned to first and second-year primary school students, the average amount of written homework assigned from third to sixth grades of primary school is not supposed to exceed 60 minutes, or 90 minutes for junior high students.

-Schools cannot set up "advanced" classes – Compulsory education schools will not be allowed to set up "advanced" classes under any name, nor can they adjust students' classes or seats according to examination results.

2. Why were these changes made? The Chinese government hopes that by reducing the emphasis placed on exams overall, and written homework at young ages, students will be free from pressure to place all their focus, time, energy, and money on simply getting grades. Hopefully this will help them develop healthier lifestyles by getting more sleep and exploring more activities, as well as reduce the pressure on parents to pay for classes for their kids to keep up with everyone else academically. There's no telling how things will turn out this year, but with all that's going on in the world students are excited about trying something different!

In an article in the *International Education News*, Bian (2021) summarized the key points of the double reduction policy as follow:

- Reduces the amount and time of school homework (specific time limits for written homework were listed for different grades).
- Provides after school care for students by requiring schools to offer after-school services (such as extracurricular activities and evening self-study) to keep students in school until parents get off from work.
- Strictly regulates private tutoring, including banning tutoring during weekends and winter/summer breaks, forbidding tutoring companies from going public, and preventing school teachers from providing any tutoring service.
- Outlaws frequent formal exams and rankings in schools.

Jin reported that: “The official statement made by the Chinese government explained that the double reduction policy was intended to free students from pressure to place so much of their focus, time, and energy on achieving good test scores. By reducing the emphasis placed on homework and exams, students are expected to get more sleep and explore more activities. The government also touched upon reducing economic burdens for parents to pay for after-school classes as a necessity for keeping up with everyone else academically.

Beside reducing financial burdens, it also is anticipated that the policy will reduce problems such as parent-child conflicts about homework, student anxieties, difficulties related to picking up and dropping off children, and more.

Some critics of the policy have suggested the government has a hidden agenda, ‘an underlying wish of nudging up a lagging birthrate with reducing the cost of child-rearing’, therefore promoting the change from a one-child to the ‘multiple children policy’ (Bian, 2021).”

Some Reported Observations after the First 100 Days

Jin found and shared the following reports (see reference list):

“To ensure enforcement of the policy, local governments have been encouraged to report violations and infractions. This has caused some conflicts among local stakeholders, but the evidence is that the policy has been effectively enforced over the past months.

In an interview, a high school teacher in Shanghai indicated the view that students' pressure has been reduced significantly since the policy took effect. Why? The amount of homework for junior high school students has been significantly reduced. The after-school services in most schools are divided into two levels. During the first-level after-school service, students can basically complete 70% of their homework. The second-level after-school service arrangements in some schools also fully reflects the ‘Comprehensive Development policy,’ which offers activities involving arts, sports, science and technology, and labor for all students. After returning home from school and on weekends, many students have more time and space of their own, and can choose to develop their own hobbies, participate in voluntary services, and spend time with family and friends.

Reports in the press indicate that many parents say that their children are happier than before, and communication with them is easier. At the same time, fierce competition remains for acquiring the best scores, the best schools, and the best educational supports and resources, and the demand for after-school tutoring unabated. Parents are anxious about risking their children's future.

With students no longer going to training classes after school, the number of training institutions is plummeting. In Beijing, for example, the reduction rate of offline discipline-related unlicensed institutions is 98%, and the reduction rate of original training institutions is 60%. The number of compulsory education training institutions in Shanghai was reduced by 21.73%, and the number of employees was reduced by 35,000 (Minnews, 2021).”

Related Policies Implemented to Enhance Education Equity

Jin emphasized that several other policies have been involved in the government's efforts to enhance educational quality and equity: (1) a policy that changed who could enroll in local schools, (2) a policy for how students are chosen for enrollment in a school, and (3) a policy for rotating principals and teachers to different schools.

(1) *Designated School Districts.* Prior to the double reduction policy, a policy was implemented designating that only residents of houses in circumscribed neighborhoods could send their children to schools in that locale.

Jin notes that *the policy brought on a buying spree for "school district houses," with families spending exorbitant amounts to move to locales with the best schools.*

(2) *Student Enrollment.* To counter the ensuing inequities produced for poor families by the rush to purchase houses in districts seen as having the best schools, the government implemented a "random draw" law for enrollment.

Jin notes that, as the random draw law goes into effect, *families that paid for expensive houses face the conundrum of whether to relocate if they were selected for another school far away. If many do, the heavy traffic which the policy was meant to relieve would again come back. Also, house prices that were inflated because they were located in "good school districts" will be depressed. Since few families who bought significantly inflated properties were exceptionally rich, many went into debt because they just wanted their children to get the best education. The result is that many middle-class families are experiencing greater stress and financial burden.*

(3) *School Staff Rotation.* The government also has moved to mitigate public discontent over the amassing of the "best staff" at the "best schools." Under the rotation policy, teachers and principals are required to move to other schools so that students in different areas of the city have equal access to high quality education from experienced educators. Li Yi, the deputy secretary of the Beijing Municipal Education Commission and a spokesperson for the Municipal Education Commission in Beijing announced that all principals, vice principals, and teachers who are more than 5 years away from retirement and who have served in the same school for 6 years should be rotated to a different school.

Jin notes that *the rotation policy will be stressful and burdensome for those affected. She points out that many staff live close to their assigned schools and often their own children attend the school. Thus, staff relocation will separate them from current colleagues and affect their families. In addition, it will increase commute times and traffic costs.*

Concern About Teacher Overwork

The "double reduction" policy is designed to make schooling better for students, but *what about the teachers?* Jin reports: From morning self-study to the end of after-school service, some teachers' working hours at school are close to 12 hours, and their workload is rising linearly. They are in a state of overload every day. Jin's view is that teachers also need a "double reduction" policy – to reduce working hours and to reduce excessive tasks aside of teaching, "because we need to distinguish teachers from baby-sitters."

Jin's Concluding Comments

“The sole purpose of the China's double reduction policy is to achieve education equity and improve the quality of education and teaching in schools. The policy also was intended to reduce the financial burden of parents.

On the bright side, the policy is having a positive impact by freeing students from the burden of too much written homework and the pressure of examinations. Students have more free time to develop their own hobbies and extracurricular activities. With innovative courses added, students are able to choose courses based upon their personal interests and so are more engaged. With the implementation of after-school services, homework can be completed while at school, and immediate consultations with teachers are available. This reduces the pressure on parents with respect to tutoring their children.

For primary school students, the policy implements transitional courses to facilitate admissions and emphasizes development of good study habits and active learning. All this is well and good.

However, for middle and high school students facing tremendous pressure to enter higher education, the question remains: *How will their grades be affected when off-campus training is cancelled?* Parents are worried that without the guidance of after-school institutions, students' grades will decline. They want a balance between educational equity and their child's advancement.

Moreover, it appears pressure on teachers is increasing. For example, the after-school services require teachers to work longer hours and spend more time and energy innovating courses. To counter this, schools may have to offer flexible working schedules and reduce unessential tasks.

In addition, the earlier “Zero-starting point teaching” policy has increased the pressure on elementary teachers. The policy states that all teaching should assume first grade students begin at zero proficiency; this is intended to make kindergarten a more positive experience. At the same time, from 1st grade on, elementary teachers are expected to ensure students finish elementary school well prepared for the demands middle school and beyond.

So, it is clear more work has to be done to enhance the quality and equity of our schools. As the current policies are evaluated, the focus needs to be on continuous improvement that enhances the positives and minimizes the negatives to the benefit of China and its people.

We still have a long way to go and much to learn.”

Note: Compulsory education in China includes six years of primary school education, typically starting at the age of six and finishing at the age of twelve, followed by three years of junior secondary education (junior middle school).

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While it doesn't have updates beyond June, 2021, the presentation of *Education in China* provided by the China Education Centers does offer a useful overview –
<https://www.chinaeducenter.com/en/cedu.php>

Also not up-to date but useful is Wikipedia's presentation of *Education in China* –
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_China

Following China's "Double Reduction" Policy - Observations on MH

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Introduction:

Ten months following the launch and implement of China's "double reduction" policy, under the influence of the COVID-19 spread and updated government policies on lockdowns, China's "double reduction" policy seemed to develop into a direction which people never thought of in summer 2021, when the pandemic was thought to have reached an end. In March 2022, China updated its anti-epidemic measures, which carried out strict and mandatory quarantines for people in several major cities in China. As a result, school instructions and teachings in major cities were given remotely. Due to how the "double reduction" policy was mainly targeted to people in big cities, this follow-up paper will be analyzing the policy in two time periods - before March 2022 (when schools were still offering in-person classes) and after March 2022 (when remote instructions began). In addition, this paper includes results from surveys which were sent out to the public in November, 2021 (for staff, students, and parents) and May, 2022 (for students and parents). In order to make the results more accurate, data were cleaned before finalizing results and generating the visualizations. However, this survey might still be subject to convenience sampling because the subjects were not randomly selected. These surveys were designed for people in different social roles (staff from tutoring institutions, students, and parents) to answer about their feelings before and after the policy, and they contain some free-response questions and one or two rating questions. For the staff's survey, the rating question asks about their job plan, and for the students and parents survey which was distributed two times throughout the time period covered in this paper, they were asked two rating questions for their happiness scores before and after the policy's implementation.

Erase of An Entire Industry?

The tremendous blow on the education and institution industry brought by the "double reduction" policy is not to be underestimated. "During this year's winter break, K9 (note that the compulsory education policy in China is 9 years) business stopped responding to national policies, and New Oriental had the quietest winter vacation since its establishment." Yu Minhong, the owner of New Oriental - China's biggest outside-school institution, posted in his social media account earlier in 2022.

Previously known as the most famous and profitable private educational institution, New Oriental issued a Hong Kong stock announcement on Feb.22, 2022. According to the report, the interim performance report showed that New Oriental had a net loss of 5.5 billion for the six months ended November 30, 2021. Moreover, New Oriental, the former "leader" of private education institutions, donated desks, chairs from their former complexes, ended rental leases, and began to switch to live broadcasts to bring goods. Following the sudden reinforcement which obliged education institutions to close overnight, there seems to be a drastic blow to the private

education industry, especially to after-school institutions who were once the "top class" in the industry. All tutoring related activities seemed gradually stalled during the half-year implementation of the "double reduction".

MH of Staff from Tutoring Institutions (before March, 2022)

Moreover, this policy not only brought negative influences on owners of the education institutions, but also affected most staff in these industries. According to Jenny Ma, a previous employee in an education institution and a volunteer who I interviewed with, "working in an education institution now is just enduring. Only thing is whether you could not endure the company and the salary to the point to voluntarily resign, or you stay until the company needs to lay off its staff. In fact, even before the implementation of the 'double reduction' policy, employee turnovers were fairly frequent. However, before the policy implementation, some employees were too reluctant to leave this industry because of its pay. After the implementation of the 'double reduction', people like us started to think about the future development prospects of the education institutions, and thus we would want to leave and find new opportunities in other industries." In addition, Jenny Ma reflected that her resignation from such institutions was indeed providing herself a new perspective with life and giving herself a break. She noted that her past two years working in an education and training institution had a working schedule of two days off work for ten days. Jenny was too busy to care about her own physical and mental health that even when having meals she had to reply to messages. After getting off work at ten o'clock in the evening, she also needed to hold meetings. She commented that she has made appointments for a physical examination and a mental counseling, to ease herself from the work intensity. Therefore, when talking about what she felt the policy influenced her mental health, Jenny Ma stated that it gave herself a reason to explore more and freed herself from binding with this industry.

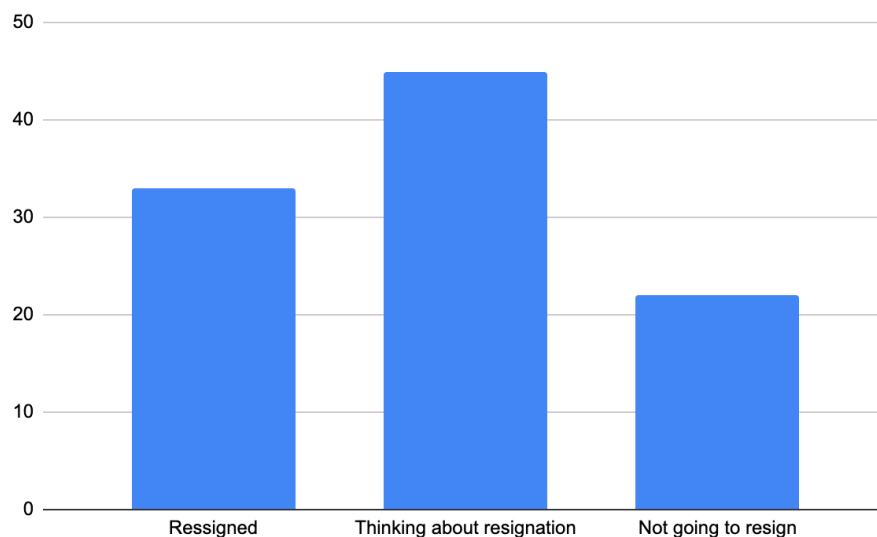


Figure 1 The distribution of tutoring institution staff's employment plans

(anonymously collected)

According to the survey result, figure 1 represents the percentage of tutoring institution staff's employment status or plans after the "double reduction" policy's implementation. This result shows that about 78% of personnel who are currently or previously in the industry want to leave this industry. Although this survey result suffers from bias with limitation of sample numbers (only 34 valid answers), we have reasons to believe that this big proportion is influenced by the policy's implementation.

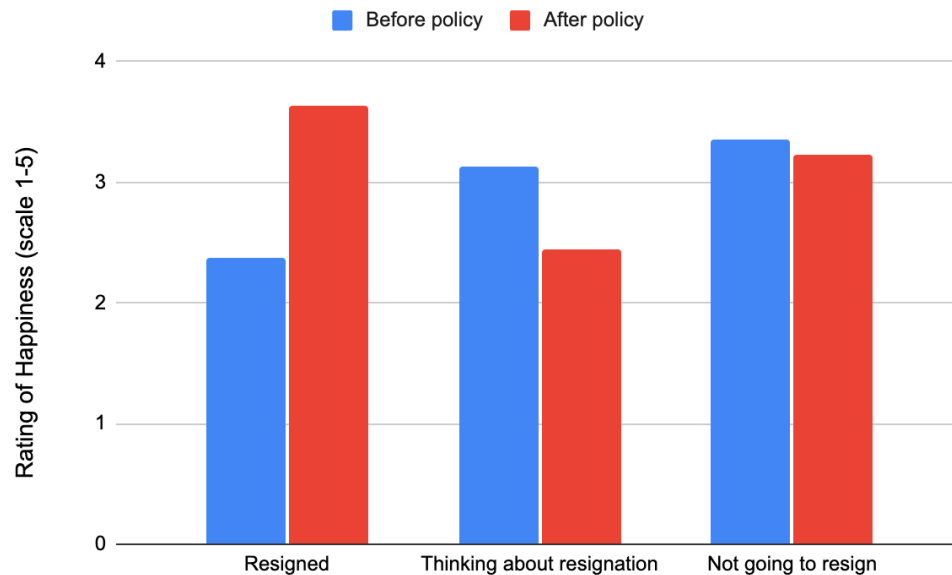


Figure 2 Ratings of Happiness Scores from staff represented in Figure 1 for before and after the policy's implementation

MH of Staff from Tutoring Institutions (after March, 2022)

Things seem to have changed after the implementation of the lockdown policy in March. Although policies vary nationwide for different cities, most students were required to take classes remotely. Although a substantial number of education institutions closed down after the implementation of the policy, those that survived were revitalized following this new lockdown policy change.

Recapping the regulations for the "double reduction" policy, it had three main specific measures for after-school institutions:

1. Disciplinary tutoring institutions are not allowed to go public for financing, and capitalized operations are strictly prohibited.
2. Strengthen normal operation supervision.

The excessive influx of capital put into education institutions should be strictly controlled, the financing and fees of education institutions should be mainly used for training business operations. Unfair competition in the form of fictitious original prices, false discounts,

and false publicity for the promotion of business should be strictly prohibited. Lastly, monopoly in the industry should be resolutely punished in accordance with laws and regulations Behavior.

3. Tutoring institutions are not allowed to hire school teachers for high salaries (note that there was an earlier law regulating that one cannot be employed at the same time in the institution and at school).

Any person engaged in teaching subject courses must have corresponding teacher qualifications. Charging items and standards of the education institutions should be formulated with regards to factors such as the market demand and training costs. It is strictly forbidden to hire foreign personnel who are located abroad.

As a result, tutoring institutions who did not meet the policy and have no qualifications have closed down one after another. For these legalized and formal institutions, their tutoring activities were resumed after classes switched online. Since the “double reduction” policy regulated that education institutions are not allowed to hold classes during the weekend, in-person tutoring was almost frozen. However, due to the difficulty of regulating online tutoring and censoring their tutoring hours, private education institutions and tutoring activities are switching to “an underground industry”, as reflected from one of the survey answers I collected. According to another interviewee who does not wish to disclose her name, she felt lucky for staying with the job that she loved - teaching kids, and she felt happier teaching online after the policy change. Due to time limitations, I did not collect a survey for happiness score measuring staff satisfaction with the policy after March. However, according to multiple people I talked with, they have felt much happier and more confidence with their MH after the policy change.

Focus of Tutoring Institutions Moved Online, students' MH

Ten months into the implementation of the “double reduction” policy, changes and measures have settled inside and outside schools. However, opposite to how strict and efficient the implements were when the policy was carried out, its effectiveness and duration does not seem to last long. According to Zekai Sun, a middle school student in Jinan, provincial capital of Shandong, he commented that the “double reduction” policy was just a “formalist move” based on his personal experiences. “We still had monthly exams, renamed as ‘Adventure with Knowledge’. We used to have three days for five subjects to be tested, but now they are all back-to-back exams which need to be squeezed to finish in one day. Moreover, it was said that class rankings are forbidden to reduce students’ pressure, it was just being announced in another form.” He explained that they used to have class ranks posted on the front wall in their classroom, but now, instead of informing the students, teachers would send this information through text messages or chat groups directly to their parents. Also, he illustrated that instead of explicitly showing numbers as class ranks, ranks are announced as bit ratios which are the ranks over the class size. “With my mom paying close attention to how I performed on each exam and everyone else’s parents doing the same, I do not think anyone would appreciate this policy”, complained Zekai. However, when asked what he rated for his happiness scores before and after

the policy, he said that he rated 1 point higher for how he felt after the policy was implemented. “Although I do not see much improvements in the exam policies after the “double reduction” policy, we were indeed assigned less homework”, Zekai admitted.

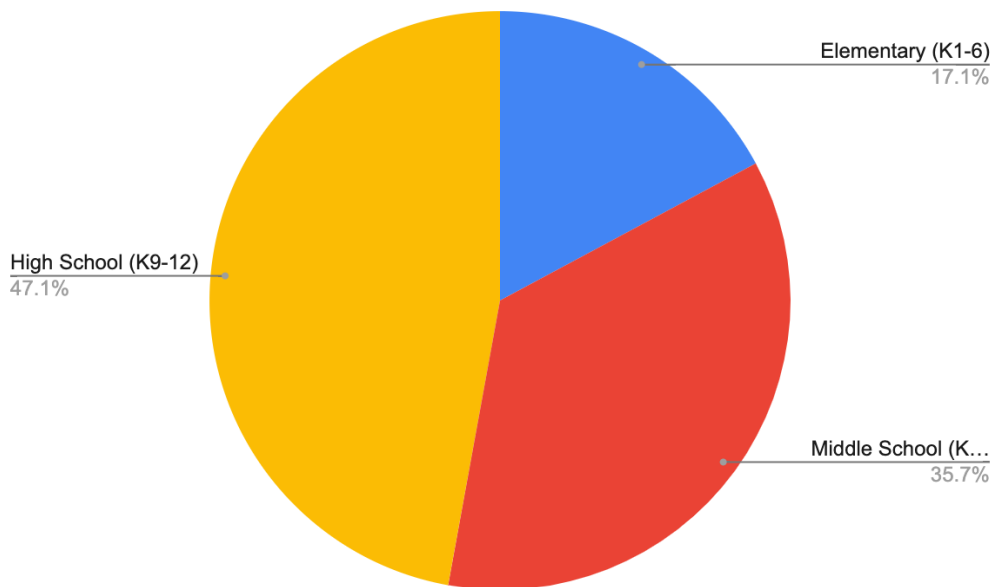


Figure 3 Distribution of volunteers who answer the survey by education level

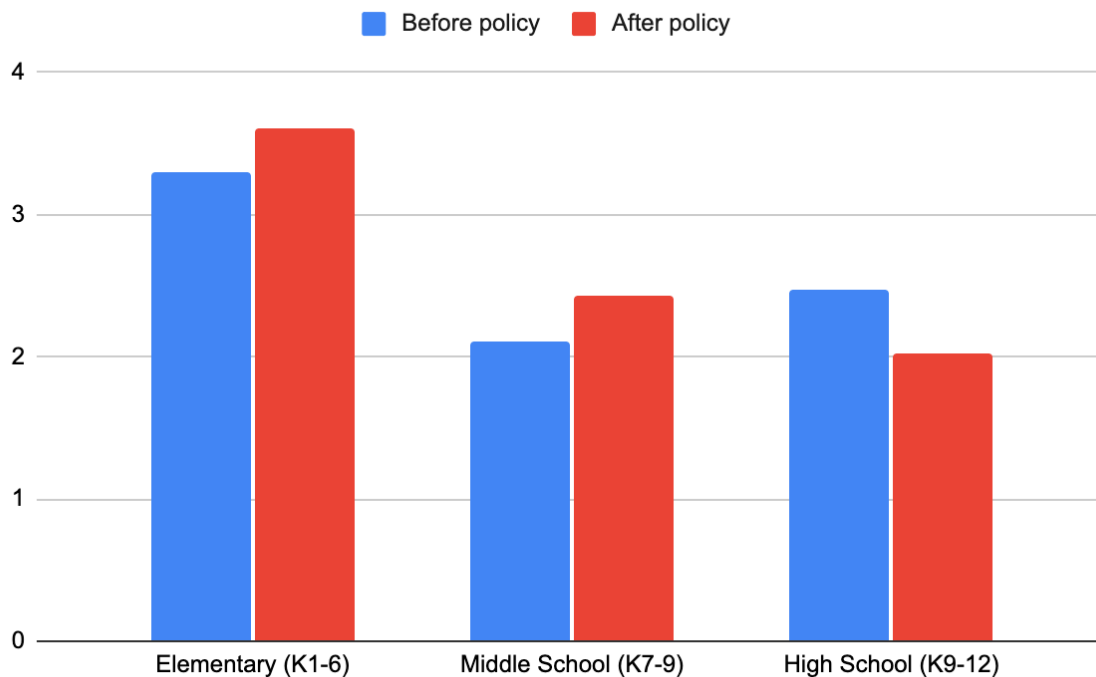


Figure 4 Ratings of Happiness Scores from students presented in Figure 4 for before and after the policy’s implementation

According to the surveys I collected from students who are under the influence of the “double reduction” policy from elementary school (n=12), middle school (n=25), high school (n=33) students, results have shown that the “double reduction” policy has increased elementary and middle school students’ self ratings of happiness scores. Zekai’s ratings were consistent with the survey results that middle school students have reported an increase in happiness score ratings. According to Ruiming Lei and Chunhua Zhu, two elementary school students in Shanghai, they have also commented on how the reduction in homework load made them happier, and those are also consistent with the survey results.

However, for high school students, the situation was reversed. Unlike students from lower education levels, happiness score ratings have dropped quite significantly for high school students. This result might be caused by the high academic pressure posed on Chinese high school students because they are facing the college entrance exams at the end of their high school life, which only happens once a year and which largely changes/determines their life. Considering the importance of the college entrance exams, the “double reduction” policy seems to put more pressure on high school students, because they were no longer reassured with tutoring institutions which might bring them academic help beyond the classroom. Moreover, under the influence of the lockdown policy and learning remotely, it is nearly impossible to equate the education efficiency of in-person instructions with remote classes. Anxiety of high school students under this special time period is not to be underestimated.

Additionally, several survey answers have disclosed that after-school institutions have developed organized APPs for remote tutoring purposes.



Figure 5 Screenshots of a major online tutoring App

Shown above are some screenshots inside an online tutoring App. The picture on the left is the main page of the APP, with subject areas marked on the top of the screen showing Mathematics, English, Chinese, etc., and the red images are promotion codes appealing customers to buy their online courses. Courses in different subject areas, different quarters, and those for different grades are organized below. The picture on the right is the advertising on AppStore. This finding illustrates that the “double reduction” policy did not fully erase the tutoring industry, but these institutions revitalized with the new lockdown policy. According to the survey answers, most parents disclosed the popularity of such Apps, implying the mode change of tutorings.

MH of parents who were influenced

Different from the observations made after the policy’s implementation after 100 days on the increased level of anxiety for parents, this issue seems settled six months later. According to the survey results, the happiness scores for parents for all three education levels’ kids (parents of K1-6, K7-9, and K10-12) all remained nearly the same when asked to make comparisons for before and after the policy’s implementation. Moreover, although all parents reported to have become used to or remained unchanged with the “double reduction” policy taken into effect, their answers to the free response interview questions gave various reasons for staying calm.

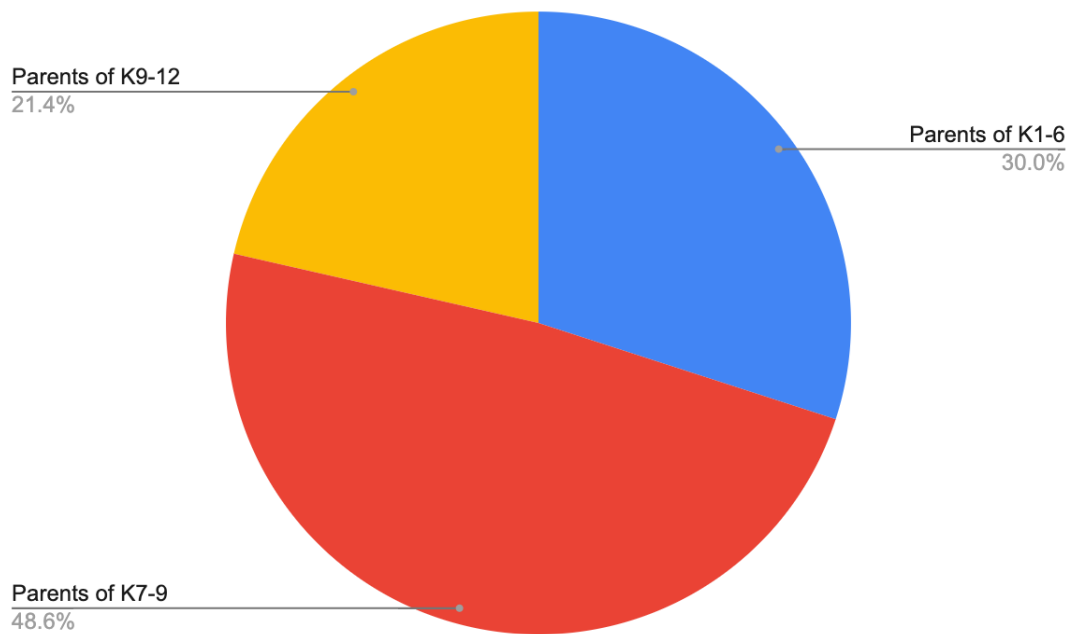


Figure 6 Distribution for parents who answered the survey based on children's education level

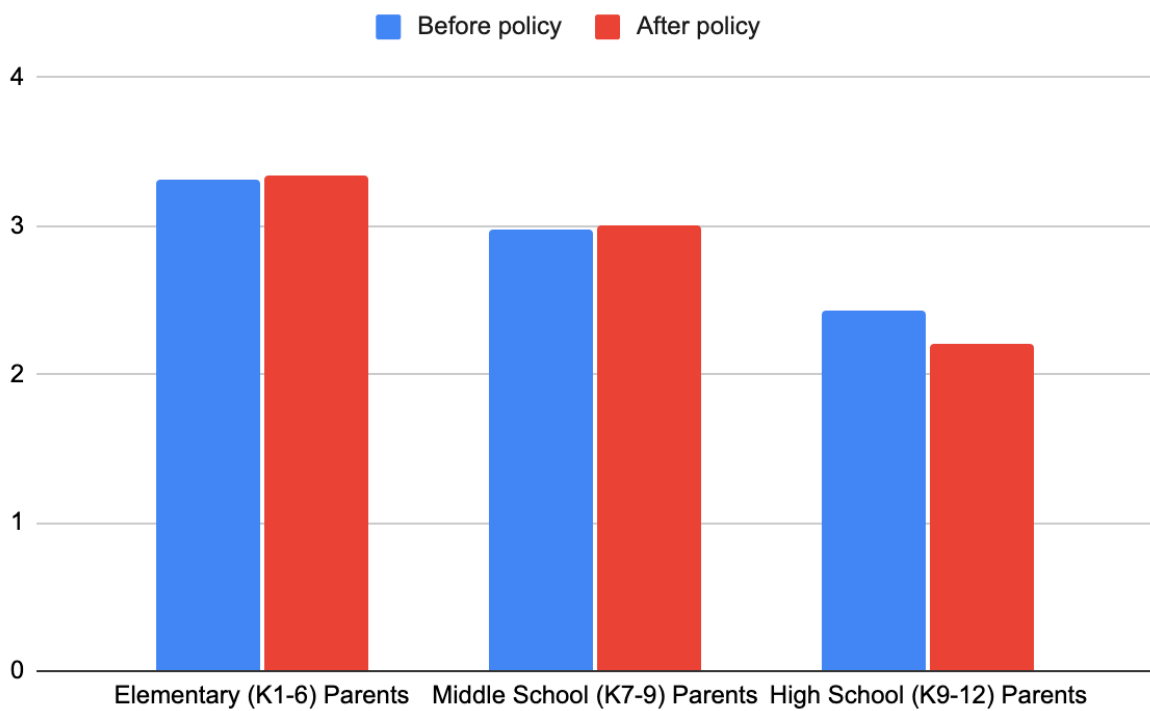


Figure 7 Ratings of Happiness Scores from parents presented in Figure 4 for before and after the policy's implementation

According to Hongmei Liu, mom of a 9-year-old girl who is about to complete her third grade, she admitted that she felt uncomfortable when the policy took into effect. “I answered calls from multiple institutions saying my daughter’s subject tutoring sessions were to be moved to weekdays,” Hongmei complained, “I canceled most of them for my daughter because I just did not think it right to cram institution hours after a long day at school.” She admitted that she had some resistance in her heart towards this specific measure, but she still felt that there was a positive trend led by the policy. She explained that she’s not the kind of tiger parent that is particularly anxious about her children’s test performances. Hongmei also stated that parents around her have the same attitude toward their children - not to stress too much about what they will achieve. “When there are sounds like this all around, there is not so much anxiety”, Hongmei Liu wrote. Moreover, according to another parent who did not want her name exposed, she reported that her happiness score was elevated after the policy’s implementation. However, according to Meng Wang, parent of Zekai Sun, a middle school student, does not feel exactly the same. Although her son is not facing the tremendous pressure brought by the college entrance exam, he has to prepare for the high school entrance exam, which is also of much importance. The high school entrance exam would determine whether Zekai Sun could go to a privileged high school, which in some ways equates if he would end up going to a good university. “If the education system of entrance exams remains unchanged, I do not think the ‘double reduction’ policy would mitigate parents’ anxiety level in any circumstance,” said Meng Wang, “parents who care about their children’s future and who wants their children to end up in privileged high schools would still send their children to tutoring institutions by all means, and this whole industry turning ‘underground’ is the best evidence.” Meng Wang’s statement matches survey data outputs and I found similar comments in surveys collected from middle school parents. Consistent with what my last paper reported, what the “double reduction” policy aimed at, redistributing education resources, might be reversed because the rich would hire expensive tutorings to ensure their children’s education is not getting downgraded, while the poor could not enjoy the discount of accessible tutoring institutions. According to Meng Wang, parents like Hongmei Liu who are still elementary school parents could just be the ones who have not felt the pressure of the exam-oriented education system, because they are just “not there yet”.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the lockdown policy in response to the pandemic has soothed tensions for both parents and tutoring institutions. Even though the lockdown policy has not called off yet, everyone is pretty clear with the future picture of how the current tutoring environment would remain online and slowly recover. Just like what Meng Wang indicated, students' academic pressure is not easily mitigated without the reform of China’s education system. While students still need to depend their life upon one single exam, such policies of reducing workload, abandoning private education institutions would have minimal effect on improving people’s mental health, because they only treat the symptoms but not the root cause.

Citation

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