

Factors Influencing Parental Educational Anxiety in Primary Education under the "Double Reduction" Policy

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Abstract: In 2021, China introduced a policy of the so-called Double Reduction, which decreased the amount of homework and limited after-school tutoring to enhance the well-being of students and develop them in a balanced manner. Nonetheless, although students can be relieved in some way, the policy has also brought a lot of anxiety to parents of children attending primary school who fear that their children will not be competitive enough and able to achieve success in their education. The adults are more concerned with the competitiveness of their children in the future, they are confused about their role in assisting with learning and they are not sure about the new social and school expectations. This paper examines the factors behind this anxiety, with the suggestion that it is a result of a combination of systemic, social and psychological factors. The study forms theoretical framework that investigates the incongruity between the holistic goals of the policy and the ongoing high-stakes examination system, the intensification of resource inequalities and the phenomenon of social comparison, and the threat of parental self-concept and self-efficacy. This paper explains how these factors perpetuate parental anxiety through an examination of the available literature, the ways in which these factors are perpetuated and through empirical research. The results show that there are more structural anxieties caused by systemic misalignment and competitive stratification than policy shocks at first. The research concludes that the reduction of this anxiety takes a multi-level effort that must be concerted beyond the technical execution of burden reduction. It requires the ultimate reevaluation of the evaluation systems, the dedication to the fair distribution of the resources, and the societal transformation of the ways of defining the success of the educational process and the roles of the parents, which will guarantee the sustainable and healthy growth of students, going in accordance with the initial vision of the policy.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy, Parental Educational Anxiety, Primary Education, Influencing Factors, Educational Equity, High-Stakes Examinations.

1. Introduction

In July 2021, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council promulgated the "Opinions on further reduction of homework burden and off-campus tutoring burden to students in compulsory education of China and, to put it lightly, the Chinese landscape of compulsory education did seismically shift. This historic order, which is commonly referred to as the policy of the Double Reduction, is the most aggressive government action in decades to put the end to the culture of academic overwork and the commoditized shadow education system. The main provisions of the policy were to place a strong restriction on amounts and hours of homework assigned, to completely regulate the subject-tutoring institutions that were profit-driven and to improve the quality and efficiency of the in-school schooling. Its general objective is to correct an educational ecology that is thought to have been distorted under hyper-competition, to encourage the holistic moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and work growth of students, and to reduce the financial and emotional strains on families.

The short term impacts of the policy were radical. Thousands of tutoring schools were either closed down or converted, homework assignments were literally diminished, and after-school programs were introduced in schools in large numbers. But beneath this veneer of success, there is a more subtle and difficult truth, the transference and transformation

of anxiety on students to the parents [1]. As children get a break in the immediate academic drills, they are getting fixated by their parents in a deep-rooted educational anxiety. This worry is typified by the overriding fear that their children will fail to develop the essential competitive advantages in an unpredictable future, that they are deeply disoriented with respect to their own roles in the education of their children without the clear measurements provided by scores and rankings, and that the underlying principles of social mobility via education have not disappeared, they have only gone under.

The history of academic investigation of educational anxiety has a long history, commonly centering on the stress manifested by the student, or the overall pressures of parents through the pre- "Double Reduction" paradigm of extraordinary competition. Previous studies have successfully reported the relationship that exists between the examination pressures and psychological distress of parents [2]. A more recent body of literature has also started to examine pre-implementation parental perceptions and adaptive behavior after the implementation of the policy [3]. However, there is still a major gap. There is a lack of multi-dimensional, interactive analyses, which disaggregate the multi-dimensional and interacting factors that maintain and increase parental educational anxiety in this new age [4]. The overarching research questions that are described in this paper are thus complex. What are the major causes of parental educational anxiety in the policy to be called Double

Reduction? What is the interaction between institutional constraints, social dynamics and individual psychologies that precipitate and perpetuate this anxiety? What is the cause of anxiety that continues (even intensifies) when in a place that is supposed to reduce stress?

This paper aims at answering the answer to these questions by building a holistic framework of analysis. It goes beyond a shallow diagnosis of policy resistance to the form of inquiry into the structural and psychological roots of parental apprehension. At the micro-level it considers the dilemmas that need to be resolved on daily basis by parents but at the macro-level it puts these experiences in a wider institutional and social context. This study will establish the main points of pressure and intricate relationships between them by creating a theoretical framework and combining the results of various recent studies and professional discussions by people. This research aims at broadening the academic knowledge base of the unintended effects of educational policy changes, to present an effective evidence-based framework of explaining modern parental practices, and to give practical implications to policy makers, educational practitioners and the society at large. In the end, this paper can assist in creating a more efficient support framework and approach that could help to achieve the noble objectives of the policy of Double Reduction that should promote a healthier, fairer, and sustainable educational setting to all students.

2. The Realistic Dilemma of Parental Educational Anxiety under the "Double Reduction" Policy

2.1. The Dilemma of Policy Adaptation and Comprehension

A huge issue arises as a result of the inability to comprehend and accommodate the new policy. Throughout the years, parents had the notion that one had to study hard and compete all the time to be successful. This is compared to the big change as the Double Reduction policy. It decreases homework and exams during the early years in school. Nevertheless, the most significant tests the Zhongkao and Gaokao have not evolved. These tests are still highly competitive and academic-oriented. This gives misleading impressions to parents. The government instructs them to subscribe to a less rigorous type of education. However, simultaneously they observe that the exams that will determine the future of their child are still the same. This places the parents in a very tricky situation. They are compelled to take a new vague direction and at the same time fearing they may not pass the crucial tests when their children come along. Such ambiguous expectations cause parents to be always nervous and uncertain. They are not sure whether to trust in the future benefits of the policy or go back to the old and stressing procedures that they are familiar with.

2.2. The Dilemma of Resource and Opportunity Inequality

The inequality of resources and opportunities has complicated the policy comprehension. This policy aimed at ensuring that education becomes equitable and that the tutoring industry is shut down so that rich families no longer have an upper hand. However, rather than alleviating concerns regarding equity, the crackdown has aggravated them in a certain way. The elimination of tutoring centers,

which were large and low-cost, has not prevented parents to demand additional academic help. Instead, it has relegated tutoring into the shadows and made it even more selective and, in many cases, more costly, only accessible to a few families. Wealthy families that have large sums of economic capital may easily slide into the closed and costly environment of individual one-on-one tutoring, often employing former tutors of schools that are no longer in existence [5]. It is also these families that tend to have more cultural capital and can thus, easily direct the learning of their children at home or they can develop the non-academic abilities that are becoming one of the most prized in admissions procedures that are selective. However, the families, which belong to less privileged socioeconomic strata, have their choices drastically limited. The lack of the cheap, but potentially traumatizing, alternative of group tutoring classes makes them think that their children are falling behind in a new, silent competition. This evident and tangible hierarchy exacerbates the fear of middle and income-deprived parents, who feel that there is a narrowing of the opportunity window and that the system has become more fair on paper but in reality has strengthened the privilege [6]. The anxiety is thus no longer maintained by the expensive tutoring classes, but rather in the more stressful process of competing in a cloudy and non-accessible shadow market.

2.3. The Dilemma of Shifting Educational Roles and Self-Efficacy

The third critical dilemma is on the changing roles of education and the ensuing parental self-efficacy crisis. The "Double Reduction" policy pays direct explicit reference to the idea of renewing and strengthening family education which puts parents in the role of primary co-educators. Nevertheless, a huge amount of parents believe that they are incredibly unprepared to undertake this task [7]. The cause of this inadequacy has two origins. To start with, not all parents possess the necessary pedagogical knowledge, skills and, most importantly, time to engage in the learning process of their children in basic academic subjects. Second, and, maybe, more psychologically effective, the effect of the policy on standardized homework and frequent testing is that it eliminates the main feedback mechanisms which parents had developed to cope with. The endless flood of points, rankings in classes and graded work gave a sense of an objective, measurable number of their child academic status and their own success as parents. Without such measures, most parents complain that they feel blind and have no way of knowing the real progress of their children and how they measure up with their peers. This deprivation of easy feedback causes a drastic loss of parental self-efficacy, the idea of the ability to change the performance of their child in school successfully [8]. This is an internal crisis that occurs as anxiety, self doubt and most times, the more fighting between the family as parents attempt to achieve a new demanding role that lacks a clear direction of where to go, or even a good gauge of achievement. This has been a major cause of stress and anxiety to most of them because the manager of external resources has to shift into the role of a lead guide to the main educational process.

3. Theoretical Analysis of the Influencing Factors of Parental Educational Anxiety

Conceptual Framework of Parental Educational Anxiety under Double Reduction

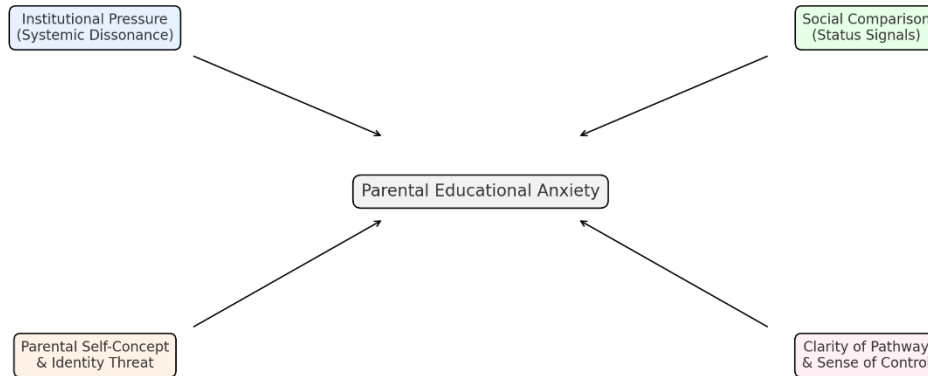


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Parental Educational Anxiety

3.1. Institutional Pressure and Systemic Dissonance

Institutional factors present the greatest source of parental pressure, as there is a fundamental misalignment based in the education system itself. In the view of institutional theory, organizations and individuals operate within a field consisting of formal rules and informal, taken-for-granted norms. In that sense, the "Double Reduction" policy represents a significant shift in the formal regulatory space, but has not yet displaced the established normative and cultural-cognitive pillars supporting the high-stakes examination system as the dominant system of social selection. Parents, as rational agents in this field, are responding to the most powerful and consequential institutional signals for their children's future. While the policy attempts to signal care for children, the entrenched system's high stakes of the Zhongkao and Gaokao convey an even stronger message - only academic success in a thin range of subjects represents success in education and life chances. This misalignment produces a decoupling, where decoupling is a working assumption that sees a "disconnection" between the stated intentions of a policy and the operational pressures parents are feeling. The anxiety experienced by parents is, therefore, a rational response to this institutional contradiction. They fear that their children will be disadvantaged in the ultimate competition if they fully embrace the new, process-oriented ethos of "Double Reduction." This is not merely a perception but a reflection of a genuine structural misalignment, making anxiety a logical and widespread outcome.

3.2. Social Comparison and the Amplification of Anxiety

Another important factor that contributes to the growth of parental anxiety is the influence of social forces, which social comparison produces. The Social Comparison Theory, which was advanced by Leon Festinger, states that there is an inherent tendency in personality to compare its own opinion and capabilities with those of other people in times where objective criteria are unclear. The way the so-called policy of Double Reduction generates this kind of ambiguity is by

eliminating easily visible indicators such as regular class standings and standardized test results. Social comparison emerges in this vacuum of objective data although it becomes more charged and subjective. Parents become more dependent on a proxy and signals to evaluate the position of their children. They question the position of their children in the after-school programs in school, their performance in the non-academic activities, and the performance of peers as reported through informal groups or the social media such as WeChat. These sites are the effective boosters of anxiety, in which the selective presentation of children achievements in art, sport, or other quality education endeavors brings in a pervasive feeling of relative deprivation [9]. The sight of children of other parents appearing to be doing remarkably well in this new, uncharted place sends the parents into a panic of their own child losing out in a redefined, yet no less fierce, contest.

3.3. Parental Self-Concept and Identity Threat

Parental educational anxiety is fundamentally connected to the psychological threat to their identity and self-concept. In western societies, the link between a child's ability to succeed in school is coupled with, but more often than not, intertwined within the values held by each parent, their social standing, and their performance of family duties. The policy of the Double Reduction is one that squarely criticizes this established parental identity. The new policy may come as a rejection of the life they have worked so hard to provide and a danger to their social status to parents who have internalized the notion that their key role is to make sure that their academic achievement is through diligent supervision and provision of resources. This results in what is referred to as identity threat. This crisis of meaning and self-worth is caused when formerly practices considered good parent (for example, the over-involved tutoring schedule, drilling the homework) are disallowed or impossible [10]. Besides, there is the ability of the policy to create a state of cognitive dissonance which is a condition of psychological conflict that occurs when two inconsistent beliefs are held or behavior is incongruent with beliefs. The parents would, on the one hand, be able to agree with the objectives of the policy in the intellectual level, and, on the other hand, be emotionally attached to the old practices,

which results in inner struggle and stress. It is not only the future of the child that the parent is anxious about but also about one of the most crucial social roles the parent plays in life and what he or she considers his or her success [11]. There is a challenge of developing a new, improved parental self-concept grounded in holistic well-being and not on academic measurements, and this is a major psychological hindrance and a potent cause of the current anxiety.

3.4. A Framework for Analyzing Parental Educational Anxiety

Synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, we can construct an analytical framework to understand the formation and variation of parental educational anxiety. This framework, as shown in figure 1, proposes that the intensity of a parent's anxiety is a function of their position within a conceptual space defined by two key dimensions: the perceived clarity of the educational pathway and their perceived sense of control within that pathway. The clarity of

the educational pathway refers to how well-defined, predictable, and trustworthy the route to long-term success appears to be under the new policy. The sense of control refers to the parent's belief in their own capacity, through economic, cultural, or social resources, to effectively navigate this pathway and influence their child's progress.

Within this framework, we can identify four conceptual quadrants of parental experience as shown in figure 2 below. The first quadrant is low clarity and low control. Parents here do not understand the new rules and feel unable to help their children succeed. They often come from poorer backgrounds with fewer resources. As a result, they feel very anxious, helpless, and even hopeless [12]. The second quadrant is low clarity but high control. These parents are also unsure about the right path, but they have money and resources to act. They deal with their anxiety by doing many things at once, finding new information, paying for secret tutoring, or pushing their children into extra skills. Their stress comes from the high cost and effort of trying to manage everything themselves [13].

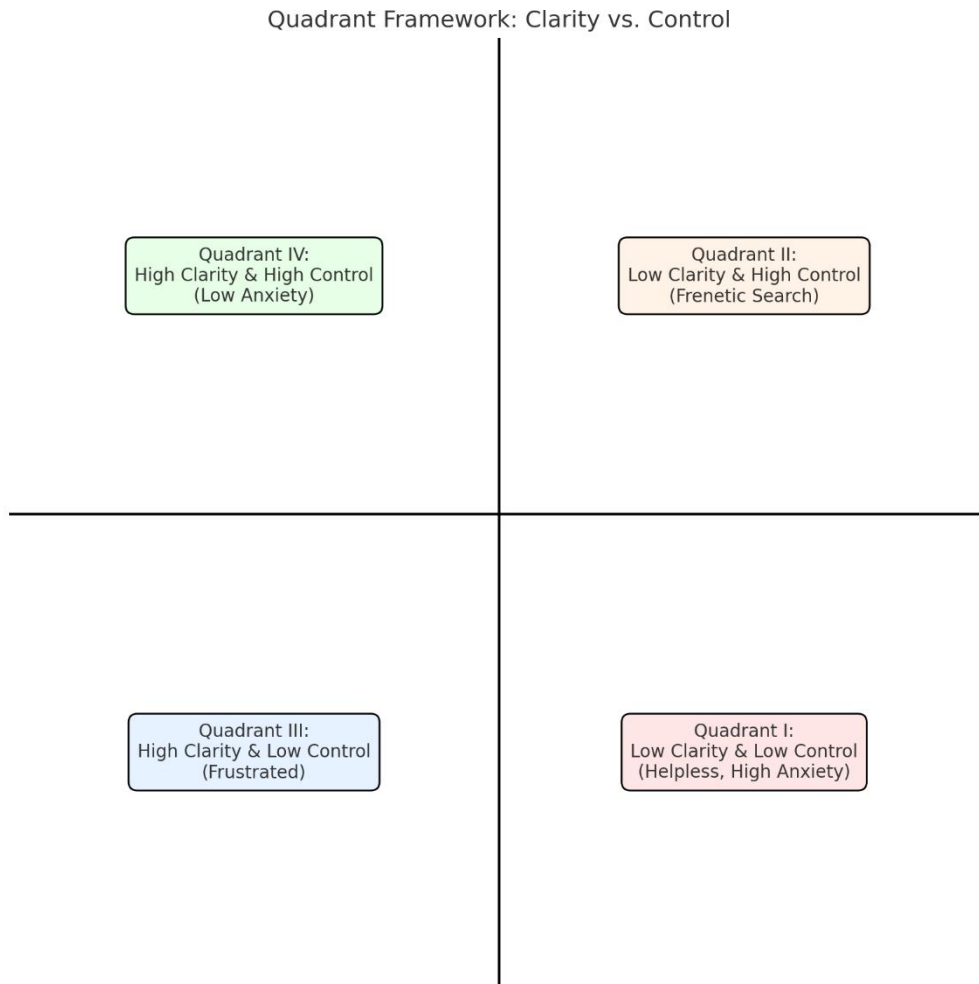


Figure 2. Quadrant Framework: Clarity vs. Control

The third quadrant is characterized by high clarity but low control. Parents in this context may think they know what the requirements for success are, but they did not feel they were able to meet them. This could describe the parents of the pre-policy era who understood the exam system, but did not have the economic means to afford tutoring, or today, the parents who understand the policy's family education expectations but do not have the time or skills to facilitate. Their anxiety is characterized by frustration and a sense of being trapped [14]. Lastly, the fourth quadrant is the high clarity and the high control. It is the least anxiety-provoking state, which is

characterized by a sure knowledge of the requirements and a sense of empowerment to fulfill them. The final aim of the "Double Reduction" policy is to develop a new variant of this quadrant on the basis of comprehensive development and equal school resources, which however has not yet been massively achieved in this state. This framework can be used to explain why the reduction of burdens does not have a positive influence on anxiety; in the case of many parents, the policy transfers them to a high-clarity, high-pressure state to a low-clarity, anxious state, without sufficiently raising their true sense of control and without clarifying the larger rules of

the game.

4. Case Analysis of Enterprise Innovation Strategy Orientation Choice

4.1. The Proliferation of the "Underground Tutoring" Economy

Among the most conspicuous is the mushrooming of a tutoring economy, one which exists in the shadows and is secretive. This has created a strong market despite the presence of the official ban, including one-on-one in-home tutoring, small discrete classes conducted in private apartments and online tutoring at high prices with tutors at the banned institutions. This is a direct expression of institutional pressure and system dissonance as it was described above. The parent that practices such practices will be found in the low clarity and high control quadrant. They are skeptical that the formal so-called Double Reduction channel will see them passing the high-stakes exams, but they have the means to make things work. The fear of their children being less competitive in the system of exams that will remain the same is what makes them avoid the policy and thus, they create the same stress the policy was aimed to rid them of [1]. The case is a strong representation of how stress is not just about the daily workload but it is actually about the long-term placement within an imagined stable competitive pecking order. It also emphasizes the resource inequality, because this adaptive approach is mostly within the domain of the wealthy, hence increasing the anxiety of the un-affluent who are unable to afford their options, and are fearful of being left behind in this new and obscure game of competition [2].

The government restrictions failed to lower the demand, but shifted the services to underground spaces and increased the prices. These lessons can be obtained by wealthy families and omitted by other families. The lessons are managed via secret networks and private contacts, making it hard to regulate the underground tutoring market. In a way, this demonstrates that many parents no longer trust the state's educational model. Besides, families with wealth are leveraging their wealth to buffer their children from the risks of policy change. Also, families with wealth validate that unless the exam system changes, parents will always work behind the scenes to provide an opportunity for their children. For this reason, policies cannot stop parents from competing.

Families unable to access this covert tutoring market face tremendous anxiety. They know secret lessons are occurring, but they cannot pay for them. This creates deep worry and anxiety. Parents feel education is now effectively two tiers illustrated by the public system with the domestic policy of "Double Reduction", but a private system ultimately dictates children's future possibilities. Most parents feel private system simply relocated the actual competition course to a venue capable of being purchased only by the wealthy. Parents feel helpless and disenfranchised. Given this, their anxiety stems from trying to comprehend the new policy as well as knowing their children will miss out on this vital ticket to success. Thus, education anxiety is now about money as well as test performance. In the end, this widens the gap between rich and poor families and intensifies inequity in education.

4.2. The "Quality Education" Arms Race

A second prominent case is the rapid intensification of investment in non-academic or "quality education" activities. With academic supplementation becoming more opaque and risky, many parents have redirected their resources and energies toward areas like programming, robotics, sports academies, art classes, and debate clubs. As an example, the victory of one child in a robotics competition or a piano certificate provokes anxiety in another group of parents who have to follow suit or even surpass this achievement [3]. However, instead of eliminating the burden of finances and time, they have simply been transferred. This example shows how anxiety may be transformed and adjusted to new situations. It is also representative of a crisis of parental self-concept; in making sure that their children achieve high performance in these conspicuous non-academic areas, parents are trying to recreate their own identity of successful parents in a new system, demonstrating their value and the potential of their child, the other, but equally competitive ways [4].

4.3. Increased Parent-Child Conflict and Communal Tensions

A third case is the rise in parent-child conflict related to home learning and the heightened tensions within parent communities. With the reduction of school-based homework, the home has become the primary site for academic reinforcement, a role for which many parents are unprepared. Lacking pedagogical skills and clear guidance, and suffering from a loss of self-efficacy, parents often resort to nagging, yelling, and coercive methods to get their children to study, leading to increased domestic strife [5]. These parents often fall into the low-clarity, low-control quadrant, and their anxiety manifests as frustration and conflict within the family. Likewise, online parent chat groups have become hotbeds of anxiety. Here, vague rumors about school policies, unverified claims about other children's achievements, and shared frustrations amplify collective unease [6].

5. Conclusion

The "Double Reduction" initiative is a significant attempt to alleviate academic burden and focus on health in China's educational system. This research, however, demonstrates that its introduction has produced new anxieties in parents, and this anxiety is a reasonable reaction to a variety of issues parents in China face, and is not a sign of parental irrationality. The data in this study sheds light on three sources from which this anxiety originates. First, there is a strong tension between the policy emphasis on holistic learning versus the unchanging, examination focused educational system that still determines a child's future. Second, as the policies have not offered various standards, left with the same standards as before, parents look to social media and peer networks in which children are compared to each other if school-aged children are learning as well. Third, parents are taking on more responsibility for their child's education, but often times they are not accustomed or trained, or feel as if they do not have the support they need, and this can diminish their confidence and sense of identity as a "good parent" if it does not work or if they feel inadequate as parents. The structure of the research looks at parents' comprehension of the new system and their feeling of agency within it. In a way, it enables us to better understand how two parents could have

strikingly different levels of anxiety.

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