

From Burden Reduction to Responsibility Redistribution: A Multi-Stakeholder Qualitative Study of China's Double Reduction Policy in Guangdong Junior High Schools

Ke Huang^{1,2,*}, Yan Xue^{2,3}, Nur Anisah Abdul Karim⁴, Shiou Yih Lee⁴

¹ Faculty of Applied Foreign Language, Guangzhou Huali University, Guangzhou, China

² Faculty of Education and Liberal Arts, INTI International University, 71800, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

³ Northwest University of Political Science and Law, Xian, China

⁴ Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, INTI International University, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

* Correspondence: Ke Huang (i24027570@student.newinti.edu.my)

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China's Double Reduction Policy (DRP) was introduced in 2021 to reduce excessive homework and regulate private supplementary tutoring. Yet reducing visible workload does not necessarily remove the competitive pressures that organize schooling, family decision-making, and students' progression. This qualitative study examines how the DRP was experienced by teachers, parents, and students and asks whether burden reduction was accompanied by a redistribution of educational responsibility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 participants from five public junior high schools across Guangzhou, Heyuan, Zhanjiang, and Leizhou in Guangdong Province: 20 teachers, 20 parents, and 20 students, including 20 matched parent-student dyads. Reflexive thematic analysis was the primary analytic approach. Meaning-unit coding, TF-IDF-assisted screening, co-occurrence inspection, and standardized differential keyword comparisons were used as supplementary procedures rather than substitutes for qualitative interpretation. Four interrelated findings were identified. First, formal tutoring dependence and some routine workload declined, while examination competition remained. Second, schools and teachers absorbed support functions previously purchased in the tutoring market, expanding demands for classroom efficiency, differentiated instruction, feedback, after-school services, and student wellbeing. Third, parents moved from routine tutoring consumption toward selective resource management, school communication, and home supervision. Fourth, this redistribution was socially unequal: family time, income, educational knowledge, local provision, and students' self-regulation shaped whether reduced tutoring became relief or a new form of risk. The article develops an educational responsibility redistribution perspective, arguing that policy evaluation should examine not only whether burdens fall, but also where work, anxiety, support, and self-management demands move after reform.

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Introduction

Private supplementary tutoring, commonly described as shadow education, has become a structural feature of many examination-oriented education systems. It expands alongside mainstream schooling because families seek additional instruction, diagnostic feedback, examination preparation, and perceived competitive advantage outside formal school hours (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Bray, 2023; Zhang, 2023). In China, the growth of shadow education has been closely connected with high-stakes progression, parental aspirations, and the interaction between public schooling and private educational markets (Zhang & Bray, 2017; Liu & Bray, 2022). These arrangements can generate benefits for some learners, but they also raise persistent concerns about academic burden, family expenditure, student wellbeing, and unequal access to educational opportunities (Entrich, 2020; Liang et al., 2022).

The Double Reduction Policy (DRP), introduced in 2021, represents a major attempt to intervene in this relationship. The policy sought to reduce excessive homework and restrict the expansion of commercial off-campus tutoring while strengthening the role of schools in compulsory education. The reform therefore addressed more than the number of assignments students completed or the number of tutoring classes they attended. By compressing a large private tutoring market and expanding school-based after-school provision, it potentially altered the allocation of educational work across institutions, teachers, families, and students. This makes the DRP an important case for examining how policy reforms reorganize the everyday division of educational responsibility.

Much of the early discussion of the DRP has understandably focused on direct policy outcomes: whether homework was reduced, whether commercial tutoring participation fell, whether families changed expenditure, and whether schools expanded after-school services. Such questions are important, but they can encourage a binary interpretation in which the policy either succeeds by reducing burden or fails because competition persists. Research on

shadow education already suggests a more complicated mechanism. Government restrictions may alter the form and location of private tutoring demand without removing the examination incentives and family aspirations that produced that demand in the first place (Lu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). Similarly, studies of academic pressure show that workload is only one source of stress; high-stakes examinations, social comparison, performance expectations, and uncertainty about future opportunities may remain even when daily homework becomes lighter (Luthar et al., 2020; Cheng & Lin, 2023).

A further limitation is that policy effects are often studied from a single stakeholder perspective. Teachers, parents, and students do not occupy the same position in the educational system. Teachers translate policy into classroom practices, assessment routines, homework design, feedback, and after-school services. Parents make decisions about tutoring, supervise learning, interpret school information, and mobilize household resources. Students experience the combined consequences of these decisions through learning routines, peer comparison, examination pressure, school support, and increasing expectations for self-management. Treating these perspectives separately can obscure how a reduction in burden for one group may create additional work or uncertainty for another.

The supplied doctoral study was designed precisely around this multi-stakeholder problem. It includes 60 participants from five public junior high schools in Guangdong Province, with equal numbers of teachers, parents, and students and 20 matched parent-student dyads. The schools were selected to represent contrasting educational contexts in Guangzhou, Heyuan, Zhanjiang, and Leizhou. Parent socioeconomic status (SES) was profiled using education, average monthly household income per household member, and occupation. This design makes it possible to examine not only shared interpretations of the DRP, but also how policy experiences vary according to stakeholder role, family resources, and local educational context.

The present article does not attempt to reproduce the full doctoral thesis. Instead, it reorganizes the dataset around one journal-level argument: the DRP is best understood not simply as burden reduction but as educational responsibility redistribution. This concept refers to the movement of educational work, decision-making, anxiety, support obligations, and self-management demands across actors when a policy constrains one established mechanism of educational support. In the present case, the decline of routine commercial tutoring created a greater need for schools to substitute instructional support, for parents to interpret and coordinate educational resources, and for students to manage more of their own learning. The concept is used as an empirically grounded interpretive model rather than as a claim that all burdens increased or that the policy failed.

This argument contributes to three literatures. First, it extends shadow education research by examining what happens after regulation, not only whether participation declines. Second, it contributes to educational inequality research by showing that policy-induced responsibility shifts interact with unequal family time, economic resources, educational knowledge, digital access, and local provision. Third, it adds a multi-stakeholder policy-implementation perspective by showing how the same reform can be experienced simultaneously as relief, institutional workload, household uncertainty, and learner autonomy.

The article addresses three research questions: (1) How did teachers, parents, and students experience changes in academic burden and educational support following the DRP? (2) How were educational responsibilities redistributed among schools, families, and students after the restriction of routine shadow education? (3) How did socioeconomic and contextual resources shape stakeholders' capacity to manage the responsibilities created or intensified by this redistribution?

2. Literature and Conceptual Background

2.1 Shadow education, regulation, and substitution

Shadow education refers to private supplementary tutoring that mirrors or supplements mainstream schooling. Its scale, form, and intensity vary across education systems, but its growth is commonly linked to high-stakes assessment, competition for selective educational opportunities, family aspirations, and perceived weaknesses or insufficiencies in mainstream provision (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Bray, 2023; Yu & Zhang, 2022). Because tutoring follows the formal curriculum and reacts to the incentives created by schools and examinations, it cannot be understood as an entirely separate market. Public and private educational practices interact, and parents often use tutoring as a strategy for managing uncertainty about academic progression (Zhang & Bray, 2017; Liu, 2023).

Regulation therefore creates a substitution problem. If a government restricts the supply of tutoring while the demand for academic advantage remains, families and schools may seek alternative forms of support. These alternatives can include school-based after-school services, online resources, informal tutoring, more intensive parental supervision, selective one-to-one support, or increased self-study. Lu et al. (2022) show how policy interventions can generate unintended changes in demand for supplementary education. Zhang et al. (2024) similarly emphasize that the DRP operates within a wider political economy of educational commercialization and resistance. From this perspective, the relevant policy question is not only whether formal tutoring participation decreases but which institutions and actors perform the educational functions that tutoring previously supplied.

The distinction between elimination and substitution is especially important for evaluating burden. A reduction in purchased classes may release time and lower expenditure, yet the academic function of those classes—practice, explanation, feedback, monitoring, and examination preparation—may still need to be fulfilled. If schools provide high-quality substitute support, regulation may reduce

inequality by weakening the advantage created by market purchasing power. If school capacity is uneven, however, the same regulation may increase dependence on family resources and informal alternatives. The effect of tutoring regulation is therefore relational: it depends on what replaces the market service and who has the capacity to secure that replacement.

2.2 Academic pressure beyond workload

Academic pressure is not reducible to hours of homework. The transactional model of stress and coping emphasizes that stress emerges through individuals' appraisal of demands relative to perceived resources for managing them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In highly competitive educational settings, examinations, rankings, peer comparison, parental expectations, and uncertainty about progression can remain salient even when routine workload declines. Research on high-achieving school environments has documented the wellbeing risks associated with sustained performance pressure (Luthar et al., 2020), while research with Chinese adolescents similarly links academic stress to wider psychological processes (Cheng & Lin, 2023).

This distinction matters for the DRP because the policy directly targets homework and tutoring but does not remove the role of examinations in educational progression. The supplied student interviews repeatedly differentiate between reduced tutoring-related comparison and continued concern about school examinations and entry to desirable senior high schools. In other words, the policy may reduce the visibility of some competitive practices without eliminating the evaluative structure that produces competition. The analytical challenge is therefore to identify how pressure changes in form, not merely whether participants report more or less of it.

2.3 Family resources, parental involvement, and unequal adaptation

Research on educational inequality has long shown that families differ in their capacity to convert resources into educational advantages. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) account of social and cultural reproduction draws attention to the ways economic resources, cultural knowledge, and social relationships shape educational

trajectories. In the context of shadow education, cross-national evidence shows systematic socioeconomic differences in access to private tutoring (Enrich, 2020). Parental involvement is similarly conditioned by SES, work schedules, educational knowledge, and available time (Sengonul, 2022).

Recent theorizing on parents' roles in shadow education is especially relevant because families do more than pay for tutoring. They search for information, evaluate providers, interpret school feedback, negotiate with children, compare risks, and decide whether additional support is necessary (Kobakhidze & Št'astný, 2023; Liu & Bray, 2022). Regulation can therefore transform parents from routine consumers of tutoring into more active educational managers. This shift may reduce direct expenditure but increase decision-making responsibility, especially when parents are uncertain about the adequacy of school support.

The original SES profiling in this study captures three dimensions of such capacity: parental education, household income per member, and occupation. The final parent sample contains six high-SES, nine middle-SES, and five low-SES participants. The qualitative data further show that time poverty, unstable work, transportation, digital resources, information networks, and local supply are important mechanisms through which these formal SES differences are experienced. Thus, the article treats SES not as a background demographic variable but as a set of resources that condition adaptation to policy change.

2.4 Learner agency and the redistribution proposition

A reduction in externally organized tutoring can create more space for student autonomy, but autonomy is not self-executing. Social cognitive theory emphasizes reciprocal relations among personal factors, behaviour, and learning environments (Bandura, 1986). Students' capacity to plan, monitor, seek help, respond to feedback, and persist under difficulty therefore depends partly on the supports available around them. Chinese educational research has likewise highlighted the importance of autonomy and motivational conditions in understanding student experience (Yu et al., 2018).

Bringing these strands together, this article proposes an educational responsibility redistribution perspective. The proposition is simple: when a reform removes or constrains one mechanism through which educational work is performed, the underlying functions may be redistributed rather than eliminated. Redistribution can involve labour (for example, teacher planning and after-school provision), anxiety (parental uncertainty about whether support is sufficient), decision-making (selective use of resources), and self-management (student planning and independent revision). Whether redistribution produces relief or new strain depends on institutional capacity and unequal resources. This perspective guides the reanalysis of the supplied dataset.

3. Method

3.1 Research design and setting

The study adopted an interpretivist qualitative design grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology. Its purpose was to understand how participants experienced and interpreted the

DRP within everyday educational contexts rather than to estimate causal policy effects. The methodological orientation was therefore consistent with the study's focus on lived experience, meaning, and the contextual interpretation of policy change. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to describe changes in workload, competition, tutoring, family decision-making, school support, and student development in their own terms.

Five public junior high schools were selected from four local contexts in Guangdong Province using criterion-based purposive sampling followed by maximum variation sampling. Guangzhou contributed two urban schools; Heyuan represented a non-metropolitan setting; Zhanjiang represented a coastal development-zone context; and Leizhou represented a county-level city context with relatively more constrained educational resources. All schools had implemented the DRP for a sufficient period for stakeholders to reflect on its effects and were able to provide access to teachers, parents, and students under the approved ethical procedures.

Table 1. Study sites and participant distribution

Context	School(s)	Teachers	Parents	Students	Total
Guangzhou	Guangzhou No. 5 Middle School; Guangzhou No. 41 Middle School	8	8	8	24
Heyuan	Yuancheng District Experimental Middle School	4	4	4	12
Zhanjiang	Junior Section, Zhanjiang Economic and Technological Development Zone No. 1 Middle School	4	4	4	12
Leizhou	Leizhou No. 2 Middle School	4	4	4	12
Total	Five public junior high schools	20	20	20	60

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.2 Participants and sampling

The final sample comprised 60 participants: 20 teachers, 20 parents, and 20 students. The 20 students were matched with the 20 participating parents from the same households, forming 20 parent-student dyads. Teachers were selected independently from the participating schools to provide variation in subject, grade, teaching experience, professional title, and school role. The matched family design allowed parent accounts of resources and decision-making to be interpreted alongside students' accounts of

learning experience without treating either account as a proxy for the other.

Parent sampling began with an initial pool of 40 parents. Participants were profiled using a three-component SES scheme covering parental education, average monthly household income per household member, and occupation. Each component was scored from 1 to 3, producing a total score from 3 to 9. Scores of 3–4 were classified as low SES, 5–7 as middle SES, and 8–9 as high SES. The final parent sample included six high-SES, nine middle-SES, and five low-SES parents. SES profiling was used to ensure

socioeconomic variation and to support interpretation of differences in access to tutoring and educational resources.

Table 2. Parent SES distribution

SES group	Scoring rule	n
High	8–9	6
Middle	5–7	9
Low	3–4	5
Total	—	20

3.3 Data collection and ethics

Semi-structured interview protocols were developed separately for teachers, parents, and students so that each group could address the dimensions most relevant to its position. Teacher interviews focused on classroom practice, homework, assessment, workload, school-based support, and professional adaptation. Parent interviews addressed work schedules, resources, tutoring, educational expectations, and involvement. Student interviews addressed peer competition, examination stress, homework, teacher feedback, school support, self-regulated learning, and personal development. Two education researchers familiar with the DRP reviewed the interview protocols, and minor revisions were made before formal data collection.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Education and Liberal Arts Research Ethics Committee at INTI International University before participant recruitment. The application was submitted on 25 June 2025 and received unconditional approval on 30 June 2025. Adult participants received information sheets and provided informed consent. Because the student participants were under 18, parent or guardian consent and student assent were obtained. Participation was voluntary, participants could decline questions or withdraw, and reporting used participant codes rather than names. The supplied materials do not report a separate numerical ethics approval identifier; the manuscript therefore reports the approving committee and approval date rather than inventing an approval number.

3.4 Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was the primary analytical approach, following the logic of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting described by Braun and Clarke (2021). The study treated sentences, clauses, or short response segments as meaning units. Coding prioritized contextual meaning over mechanical lexical frequency; conceptually equivalent expressions such as ‘outside tutoring,’ ‘extra classes,’ ‘private tutoring,’ and ‘shadow education’ could be consolidated when they expressed the same substantive idea.

The qualitative analysis was supplemented by computationally assisted procedures designed to support systematic comparison. Text preprocessing removed formatting noise and function words; lemmatization and semantic grouping consolidated related expressions; TF-IDF-assisted screening helped identify terms disproportionately salient in particular groups; and co-occurrence inspection supported interpretation of recurring concept clusters. Importantly, these procedures were not used to generate themes automatically. Candidate terms were checked against surrounding interview context and corrected manually, so the final ‘keywords’ functioned as interpreted meaning units rather than simple high-frequency tokens.

Cross-group comparisons used standardized frequencies because interview schedules and response volumes differed across stakeholder groups. The principal indicator was coded references per 100 responses: $\text{standardized frequency} = (\text{raw coded references} / \text{total responses in the group}) \times 100$. The teacher corpus contained 400 responses, the parent

corpus 520, and the student corpus 340. Participant-adjusted standardization and within-group shares were used as robustness checks where subgroup sizes differed. Pairwise differences and smoothed ratio measures were used as descriptive aids, not as inferential tests.

Across the full analysis, six integrated themes were retained: School-Based Substitution and Home-School Coordination; Teacher

Professional Transformation; Family Resources and Inequality; Learner Agency and Personalised Learning; Reconfigured Academic Pressure; and Wellbeing and Holistic Development. For the present journal article, these themes were reorganized into four higher-order findings centered on the responsibility redistribution argument. This reorganization does not change the original coding; it condenses the doctoral analysis around a narrower publication question.

Table 3. From original themes to journal-level analytic findings

Original theme(s)	Illustrative meaning units	Journal-level finding	Interpretive function
Reconfigured Academic Pressure; Wellbeing and Holistic Development	Examination pressure; peer competition; homework workload; physical health; interests	Visible burden fell, competition persisted	Distinguishes workload reduction from deeper competitive pressure
Teacher Professional Transformation; School-Based Substitution and Home-School Coordination	Teacher workload; homework redesign; differentiated instruction; feedback; after-school service	Schools and teachers absorbed displaced support functions	Shows institutional redistribution of educational labour
Family Resources and Inequality; School-Based Substitution and Home-School Coordination	Reduced tutoring dependence; work-schedule constraint; parental anxiety; school reliance	Parents became educational managers	Shows household redistribution of decision-making and uncertainty
Family Resources and Inequality; Learner Agency and Personalised Learning	SES inequality; learning resources; self-regulated learning; learning confidence	Adaptation capacity was unequal	Identifies resource and agency conditions shaping policy outcomes

.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The interview protocol was reviewed by two education researchers, and member checking was used with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of transcripts or preliminary interpretations. The study maintained an analytical audit trail documenting coding revisions, semantic consolidation decisions, formulas, source counts, differential indicators, visualization decisions, and later revisions. Numerical patterns were repeatedly checked against original quotations, contradictory accounts, and negative cases. These procedures are consistent with established guidance on qualitative trustworthiness and

member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Birt et al., 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

4. Findings

4.1 Visible burden decreased, but examination competition persisted

The clearest shared effect of the DRP was a reduction in the visibility of routine private tutoring and, for many students, a lighter day-to-day workload. Student accounts described fewer conversations about which tutoring classes classmates attended, less repetitive homework, and more time for rest or interests. This is consistent with the overall coding pattern in which reduced tutoring dependence and wellbeing-related meaning units were prominent.

Yet the same interviews consistently resisted a simple ‘pressure disappeared’ interpretation. Examination performance remained important because progression to desirable senior high schools continued to depend on achievement.

S01 captured the change in the arena of competition rather than its disappearance:

“Yes, a little. There are fewer conversations about tutoring than before. Most classmates now talk more about schoolwork and classroom learning instead of comparing different extra classes.”

— S01, student, Guangzhou

The statement suggests that market-based comparison became less salient while school-based achievement retained its importance. S08 described this remaining competitive structure directly:

“Competition is quite obvious because many students want to enter a good high school. Sometimes classmates compare scores, and that makes everyone study harder.”

— S08, student, Guangzhou

The differential analysis supports this interpretation. Peer competition and examination pressure were more characteristic of student discourse than parent discourse, while reduced tutoring dependence was much more salient for parents. Parents experienced the policy partly through decisions about whether to purchase services; students experienced it through everyday performance, feedback, and comparison. The decline of tutoring therefore changed what was compared, not the continued relevance of comparison itself.

At the same time, some students described a constructive shift from interpersonal ranking toward self-referenced progress. S12 explained, ‘Some students study much harder than others. I mainly compare my results with my own previous scores instead of thinking too much about other people.’ S19 similarly emphasized incremental improvement rather than constant ranking. These accounts indicate a potential wellbeing benefit: reduced tutoring comparison can create room for students to define progress in more individualized terms. However, such self-

referenced comparison coexisted with high-stakes examinations rather than replacing them.

Students also valued the recovery of time. S07 stated that one positive change was having more free time after homework, allowing rest or hobbies ‘without feeling guilty.’ In the wider dataset, physical health, interests, hobbies, and mental wellbeing formed a coherent theme of holistic development. Thus, visible burden reduction was real for many participants. The key analytical point is that relief in routine workload and diversification of student time occurred alongside persistent structural competition.

4.2 Schools and teachers absorbed support functions previously supplied by tutoring

The second finding concerns where educational support moved when routine tutoring declined. Teacher interviews showed a clear expansion of school-based responsibility. Teachers did not describe their role as merely assigning less homework. They described the need to make classroom learning more efficient, design fewer but more purposeful assignments, provide differentiated support, organize after-school activities, give more diagnostic feedback, and attend to broader student development. In the differential keyword analysis, teacher workload, teaching innovation, professional identity, differentiated instruction, and physical health were all more salient in teacher accounts than in parent or student accounts.

Homework reduction itself created new design work. T03 described the shift from quantity to quality:

“Homework design has probably become the most demanding part of my teaching. Years ago, preparing assignments mainly meant selecting enough exercises. Now I spend far more time deciding which questions are truly worth doing because every task should have a clear learning purpose instead of simply increasing practice.”

— T03, English teacher, Guangzhou

Similarly, T06 linked the policy environment to differentiated instruction:

“A great deal of my preparation now goes into designing activities for students with different learning needs. Rather than teaching everyone in exactly the

same way, I think much more about how to help students at different levels make progress together."

— T06, mathematics teacher, Guangzhou

The transfer of responsibility was particularly visible in after-school provision. T09 explained:

"My daily schedule has become more varied than it used to be. Besides teaching lessons, I spend additional time supporting students during after-school programmes and helping those who need extra academic guidance."

— T09, Chinese teacher, Heyuan

These accounts illustrate what the original analysis termed school-based substitution. The school increasingly became the first site for addressing learning difficulties that might previously have triggered private tutoring. This substitution was not limited to academic instruction. Physical education teachers described greater attention to health habits, participation, teamwork, and confidence, while other teachers reported more communication with families and greater responsibility for students' holistic development.

However, school-based substitution depended on capacity. T17, working in Leizhou, noted:

"Limited teaching resources sometimes affect the range of support I can provide. Even so, I try to adapt available materials so that every student can benefit."

— T17, Chinese teacher, Leizhou

This quotation highlights an important boundary condition. Shifting support from the market to schools can be equity-enhancing if schools have sufficient staffing, materials, time, and professional capacity. If those conditions are uneven, the same policy can redistribute responsibility toward institutions that are not equally equipped to absorb it. The city-level differential analysis in the original dataset reinforces this point: Guangzhou, Heyuan, Zhanjiang, and Leizhou were not treated as a ranking, but as contrasting educational ecologies in which school capacity, family resources, and local provision interacted differently with the policy.

The teacher findings therefore complicate the language of burden reduction. From the

perspective of students, less repetitive homework may represent genuine relief. From the perspective of teachers, producing that relief can require more professional judgement, individualized preparation, and service provision. The policy changes the composition of work: less reliance on volume-based assignments, but greater responsibility for the quality, differentiation, and accessibility of in-school support.

4.3 Parents shifted from routine tutoring consumption to educational management

The third finding concerns parental involvement. The parent interviews show that a reduction in tutoring participation did not mean parental withdrawal from education. Instead, involvement changed form. Parents increasingly described monitoring school progress, following teacher advice, deciding whether additional support was genuinely necessary, balancing children's fatigue against examination concerns, and coordinating time and resources. In the differential analysis, reduced tutoring dependence, family learning support, home-school communication, tutoring affordability, work-schedule constraint, and parental anxiety were all strongly associated with parent discourse.

P10 expressed a school-first decision rule:

"I don't think outside tutoring is necessary right now. As long as school support is enough, I would rather not add extra classes."

— P10, high-SES parent, Heyuan

This statement is significant because it does not reject supplementary education in principle. It conditions tutoring on the adequacy of school support. The parent remains responsible for judging whether the school is sufficient, monitoring the child, and deciding when market support is justified. P09 made a similar point while also emphasizing limited time:

"I work full time, so I don't have much time to look for extra tutoring. Usually I follow the teacher's advice. If the school can help with the main problems, then we don't really need to arrange many outside classes."

— P09, middle-SES parent, Heyuan

The policy therefore strengthened the informational role of school-family communication. Teacher feedback became a basis for household decisions about whether tutoring was necessary, whether a child was falling behind, and what kind of support should be prioritized. This helps explain why home-school communication was one of the most frequent meaning units in the overall coding.

Parental management also involved emotional uncertainty. P20, a low-SES parent with changing work schedules, described both reduced tutoring and continuing anxiety:

"My schedule changes a lot, so I can't promise to send my child to tutoring every week. Also, extra classes cost money. After the DRP, we do less of that, but I still worry a bit about whether less tutoring will affect grades."

— P20, low-SES parent, Leizhou

This account shows why parental anxiety should not be interpreted simply as resistance to reform. Parents could observe the reduction of tutoring, but they could not always directly observe whether school-based support would fully compensate for it. Their anxiety was tied to anticipated risk: whether a child would be disadvantaged if other families found alternatives, whether school support was strong enough, and whether less tutoring would affect progression. The policy reduced one visible burden while transferring more interpretive responsibility to households.

High-SES parents also faced time constraints, but they retained more choice. P01 described becoming 'more selective' rather than losing access entirely: outside tutoring had to be useful and fit the family schedule. This pattern appears in the original SES analysis as a shift from quantity to strategic selectivity. In contrast, lower-SES parents more often described tutoring as unaffordable, impractical, or locally unavailable. The difference was not simply whether parents valued education; it was whether they had sufficient resources to act on that value in multiple ways.

4.4 Redistribution was unequal: family resources and learner agency shaped outcomes

The fourth finding brings together SES and student agency. The original analysis showed that high-SES families retained greater capacity to choose among supplementary resources, digital tools, and selective tutoring, while lower-SES and time-constrained families relied more heavily on the quality of school support. P17 illustrates the accumulation of cost and work constraints:

"My work time changes, and our income is not very stable. Extra tutoring costs money, so we don't arrange much. After the DRP, I hope the school can help more, because outside classes are a burden for us."

— P17, low-SES parent, Leizhou

The quotation makes clear that reduced tutoring can be experienced as relief because it lowers financial and logistical pressure, yet it also increases dependence on public provision. The policy's equity effect therefore depends on the quality and accessibility of school-based substitution. If school support is strong, restricting market advantage may narrow gaps. If school capacity varies, families with fewer alternative resources may become more exposed to those institutional differences.

Family resources were broader than income. The interview and differential analyses identified work schedules, fatigue, transportation, parental education, information networks, digital resources, and local availability as mechanisms shaping adaptation. Middle-SES families frequently described practicality and time as important constraints; high-SES families were more able to retain strategic choice; low-SES families faced more cumulative trade-offs. These differences support interpreting SES as an adaptive resource structure rather than a single economic measure.

Students themselves were also active participants in redistribution. Reduced tutoring increased the importance of planning, self-monitoring, help-seeking, and use of teacher feedback. S02 described one such strategy:

"Planning my week before it becomes busy helps me use my study time more effectively and avoid leaving everything until the last minute."

— S02, student, Guangzhou

The student data included many examples of self-referenced improvement, confidence building, and independent study. These accounts suggest that the DRP created opportunities for learner agency. Yet the original analysis also identified 'new self-discipline pressure' as part of reconfigured academic pressure. When externally scheduled tutoring declines, students with established study routines may convert free time into productive autonomy, while students with weaker self-management may experience the same freedom as uncertainty. Agency therefore mediates policy effects but does not erase structural inequality.

The combined pattern can be summarized as conditional redistribution. The DRP reduces some marketized and routine burdens, but the benefits of that reduction depend on whether schools can provide substitute support, whether parents have time and knowledge to manage educational decisions, and whether students can use the greater autonomy effectively. Responsibility is redistributed across a system whose actors have unequal capacities to absorb it.

5. Discussion

5.1 From burden reduction to responsibility redistribution

The central contribution of this study is to reframe the DRP as a policy of responsibility redistribution as well as burden reduction. The data do not support a claim that the policy merely shifted every burden from students to adults, nor do they support the opposite claim that burden simply disappeared. Instead, the reform changed the mechanisms through which educational support and pressure were organized. Routine private tutoring became less central; schools and teachers were expected to provide more effective and differentiated support; parents became more selective and information-dependent educational managers; and students were expected to exercise greater self-regulation.

This perspective helps resolve an apparent contradiction in the findings. Students could simultaneously report less homework, fewer tutoring comparisons, more time for interests,

and continuing examination pressure. Teachers could support the goal of reducing repetitive workload while describing more demanding homework design and after-school responsibilities. Parents could welcome lower tutoring dependence while feeling uncertain about whether school support was sufficient. These are not inconsistent perceptions. They are different positions within the same redistribution process (Hanefar et al, 2026; Baskara et al, 2024).

The finding extends shadow education research by emphasizing post-regulation substitution. Existing scholarship shows that shadow education is embedded in examination structures and family strategies rather than existing as an isolated market (Bray, 2023; Zhang & Bray, 2017; Liu & Bray, 2022). The present study shows what this embeddedness means after a major regulatory intervention. When routine market provision is restricted, the functions of tutoring, explanation, practice, monitoring, feedback, and competitive reassurance, do not automatically vanish. They are partly absorbed by schools, partly reorganized within households, and partly internalized as student self-management.

5.2 School-based substitution is the key equity mechanism

A second contribution is the identification of school-based substitution as the mechanism connecting tutoring regulation to equity. The DRP can reduce inequality if public schools provide accessible, high-quality alternatives that reduce families' need to purchase additional support. The teacher and parent interviews repeatedly positioned classroom quality, after-school services, teacher guidance, and home-school communication as the new baseline for educational support. This finding is consistent with broader research showing that the distribution of educational opportunities depends not only on family purchasing power but also on the quality and accessibility of public provision (Enrich, 2020).

However, the same mechanism creates a capacity problem. Teachers in the study described additional planning, differentiation, guidance, and after-school responsibilities. The urban-county comparisons further indicated variation in resources and local educational ecology. A policy

that moves support from private markets into schools therefore requires sustained investment in teacher time, staffing, materials, and differentiated provision. Without that support, the policy risks transferring market inequality into institutional inequality: families with alternatives can compensate for weak school provision, while families without alternatives are more dependent on local school capacity.

This does not imply that tutoring regulation is ineffective. Rather, it suggests that regulation and public substitution should be evaluated together. Counting closed tutoring institutions or reduced tutoring participation captures only one stage of the policy mechanism. A more complete evaluation asks whether the educational functions formerly purchased privately are now available equitably through schools and whether the professional burden of providing those functions is sustainable.

5.3 Parental involvement becomes more interpretive and managerial

The parent findings also refine the literature on parental involvement. Research has often distinguished between direct academic support, communication with schools, and resource provision. Under the DRP, these forms became more tightly connected. Parents used teacher feedback to decide whether additional tutoring was necessary; work schedules constrained both supervision and access; and financial resources shaped whether families could retain selective options. Parental involvement thus shifted away from routine enrollment toward interpretation, coordination, and negotiation.

This supports the idea of ‘responsibilised’ parenting identified in research on Chinese shadow education (Liu & Bray, 2022), but the present study adds an important policy-specific nuance. Restricting tutoring did not necessarily reduce parental responsibility. In some families, it increased the cognitive and emotional work of deciding how much support was enough. This was particularly visible in parental anxiety about hidden disadvantage. The anxiety should therefore be understood as a policy implementation signal: it indicates uncertainty about whether school substitution is credible and whether competitive opportunity remains fair.

The SES analysis further shows that managerial involvement is resource-dependent. High-SES parents could respond to policy by becoming strategically selective because they retained multiple options. Low-SES parents more often depended on the school and local provision. Consequently, a policy that formally treats all families equally can still produce differentiated experiences because the capacity to manage educational responsibility is unevenly distributed.

5.4 Learner agency is both an opportunity and a new demand

A final theoretical implication concerns student agency. The DRP created space for rest, hobbies, school activities, and self-directed learning, and many students used that space productively. Accounts of weekly planning, self-referenced progress, confidence, and help-seeking show that students were not passive recipients of reform. This aligns with social cognitive perspectives in which learner behaviour interacts with environmental support (Bandura, 1986).

Yet greater autonomy can become a new performance demand. Students who previously relied on externally structured tutoring schedules may need stronger planning and self-monitoring skills after those structures are removed. The original coding captured this as new self-discipline pressure. Thus, learner agency should not be romanticized as a simple consequence of freeing time. It is a capability that requires routines, teacher guidance, feedback, and accessible resources. Policies that reduce external structure should therefore be accompanied by explicit support for self-regulated learning, particularly for students who have had fewer opportunities to develop those skills.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the long-term success of the DRP depends on a three-part support architecture: institutional capacity in schools, navigational support for families, and scaffolded agency for students. Responsibility redistribution becomes sustainable when these supports are sufficiently strong and equitable; it becomes burdensome when actors are expected to absorb new responsibilities without corresponding resources.

5.5 Policy implications

First, evaluations of the DRP should move beyond simple workload and tutoring participation indicators. Measures of teacher workload, quality of after-school provision, family confidence in school support, student self-regulation, and local resource gaps are necessary to understand the full policy mechanism.

Second, school-based substitution should be treated as a core equity investment rather than an auxiliary service. Differentiated instruction, accessible after-school support, and high-quality feedback are particularly important for students whose families cannot purchase alternatives.

Third, teacher sustainability should be protected. Reducing student burden through more thoughtful homework, individualized guidance, and expanded after-school services requires professional time and organizational support. Policy success should not rely on invisible increases in teacher labour.

Fourth, parents need clear, comprehensible guidance about learning progress and available support. Strong home-school communication can reduce uncertainty and prevent families from seeking unnecessary tutoring simply because they cannot judge whether school provision is sufficient.

Fifth, schools should explicitly teach self-regulated learning strategies. Planning, mistake correction, help-seeking, and self-referenced progress can help students use newly available time productively without turning autonomy into unmanaged pressure.

Finally, implementation should remain context-sensitive. The Guangdong sample contains meaningful variation between metropolitan, non-metropolitan, development-zone, and county-level settings. Resource allocation and after-school provision should be responsive to local capacity rather than assuming that the same formal policy produces identical conditions everywhere.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, it is geographically bounded to five public junior high schools in Guangdong Province. The maximum-

variation design strengthens contextual comparison but does not support statistical generalization to all Chinese schools. Second, the data are based primarily on self-reported interviews. Participants may underreport sensitive involvement in tutoring or interpret policy changes in socially desirable ways. Third, the design is cross-sectional and cannot determine how perceptions evolve as students move through different grades or as informal tutoring markets adapt over time.

Fourth, the study does not support causal claims about academic achievement or wellbeing. The supplied doctoral study explicitly notes the absence of longitudinal examination results, verified homework-time diaries, family expenditure records, teacher time-use logs, school budgets, staffing ratios, and repeated mental-health measures. The present article is therefore strongest in explaining how stakeholders understand and negotiate policy change, not in estimating long-term causal effects.

Future research should test the responsibility redistribution proposition across provinces with different educational ecologies, combine interviews with time-use and expenditure data, and use longitudinal designs to examine whether teacher workload stabilizes, parental anxiety declines, student self-regulation develops, or new forms of shadow education become institutionalized. Mixed-methods research could also examine whether the quality of school-based substitution statistically moderates the relationship between family SES and educational outcomes.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that China's Double Reduction Policy cannot be understood adequately through a simple question of whether academic burden fell. The policy reduced visible forms of burden for many students, especially routine private tutoring and repetitive workload, while leaving high-stakes examination competition largely intact. At the same time, it reorganized who carried the work of educational support. Teachers assumed more responsibility for high-quality classroom instruction, differentiated guidance, and after-school services; parents shifted toward

monitoring, communication, and selective resource management; and students faced greater expectations for independent learning and self-regulation.

The concept of educational responsibility redistribution captures this pattern. It does not imply that reform merely moves burden from one group to another. Rather, it directs attention to the institutional and social consequences of removing an established support mechanism.

Whether the DRP ultimately promotes equity and wellbeing depends on whether schools can substitute effectively for market provision, whether teacher responsibilities remain sustainable, whether families receive adequate guidance, and whether students are supported to develop agency. Policy evaluation should therefore ask not only 'How much burden was reduced?' but also 'Where did the remaining educational work, anxiety, and responsibility go, and who has the resources to carry it?'

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