

A Critical Exploration of China's Double Reduction Policy: Policy Enactment and Teacher Perspectives

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Abstract: This study focused on how primary school teachers understood and enacted the policy in practice within the context of China's Double Reduction Policy. Based on the Policy Enactment Framework proposed by Braun et al. (2011), this study explored teachers' understanding, experiences, and perceptions of the Double Reduction Policy through interviews with six primary school teachers from diverse educational resource contexts. The study found that teachers' perceptions of the policy are multifaceted. Although the Double Reduction Policy might alleviate educational inequality caused by after-school tutoring, the variations in its enactment across different regions and school contexts may, in practice, exacerbate certain forms of educational inequity. Teachers were limited agents constrained by multiple factors, including school contexts and the different tensions exist. This study also highlighted the tension between policy objectives and China's exam-oriented culture, as manifested in teachers' ongoing balancing act between reducing student burdens, promoting holistic development, and maintaining examination results. Finally, this study suggested that future policy reforms need to consider schools' actual contexts more fully, provide teachers with adequate support for policy enactment, and take a deeper consideration of China's existing education system to achieve more contextually adaptive policy enactment.

Keywords: Policy Enactment; Double Reduction Policy; Critical Policy Analysis; Educational Reform; Teacher Perspectives.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

For many years, there has been increasing attention in academic and policy fields on issues related to student performance, educational accountability, and the pursuit of equity in learning opportunities [1]. Educational competition among students is becoming increasingly intense. There are some particularly outstanding problems. One contributing factor is the overwhelming academic pressure faced by students, which has resulted in the widespread growth of after-school tutoring organisations [2]. The underlying reason for this phenomenon is China's highly competitive examination system, which subjects students to pressure from standardised examinations as early as primary school [3]. A lot of parents, particularly those with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to allocate resources to private tutoring in order to enhance their children's academic achievement [4]. In China, excessive academic burdens and the rapid expansion of the after-school tutoring industry are widely regarded as important factors undermining educational equity and student well-being [5]. Therefore, it is essential to propose a policy that can effectively alleviate students' academic pressure and educational burden.

On the other hand, the persistent and remarkable disparities in development between urban and rural areas, as well as across different regions in China, have resulted in further differences in the distribution and quality of educational resources among schools [6]. Schools in economically developed areas or those with abundant resources are able to provide students with higher-quality classroom instruction and more diverse after-school support. Schools in less resource-abundant areas, however, generally face problems such as poor teaching conditions and weak teaching staff. This imbalance in educational resources not only limits the academic development of some students but also poses a

long-term challenge to the realisation of educational equity and the practical enactment of educational policies [7]. According to the United Nations [8], achieving inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education is the core goal of global education reform under Sustainable Development Goal 4. Therefore, promoting policies to reduce students' academic workload and regulate tutoring can help reduce the uneven distribution of extracurricular educational resources, alleviate educational inequality caused by differences in family background, and ultimately promote overall educational equity.

In view of the facts stated above, the Chinese government continues to introduce policies intended to alleviate the study load of primary and secondary school students and regulate after-school tutoring [9], especially with the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy in 2021. However, despite repeated government initiatives, the long-term impact of exam-oriented education and competitive pressures has limited the effectiveness of these policies in practice, sometimes even leading to the unintended consequence of increasing rather than alleviating the burden [10].

1.2. The Context of the Chinese Education System

China's shift from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy began with the reform and opening up policy introduced in 1978. This transition brought about marketisation tendencies in the education sector. Some elements with neoliberal characteristics gradually entered the Chinese education system, including the marketisation and privatisation of education, performance-oriented evaluation systems, and competition-based resource allocation [11]. With the introduction of market mechanisms, China has not completely abandoned the leading role of the government, which will still intervene in the market when necessary. This is consistent with Ong's (2006) [12] theory of "neoliberalism as exception", which argues that market logic may be within

certain limits to promote efficiency within the range of national strategic goals while maintaining strong government intervention in essential areas.

Within this context, the marketisation of education has facilitated the rapid rise of the after-school tutoring industry [13], with after-school tutoring gradually becoming an indispensable part of Chinese students' routine. This has not only exacerbated the pressure on household education spending but also expanded educational inequalities between urban and countryside and regions, laying the groundwork for the subsequent introduction of the Double Reduction Policy. Moreover, because of the prolonged impact of exam-oriented education and the high expectations parents hold for their children's academic success, after-school tutoring has increasingly become an integral aspect of students' daily routines in China. By 2021, the scale of China's after-school tutoring industry had exceeded 800 billion CNY, with over 137 million students participating in various types of tutoring, and this trend continues to grow [14]. This has not only intensified the pressure on family education expenditures but also widened educational inequalities between urban and countryside and regions, which laid the foundation for the subsequent introduction of the Double Reduction Policy.

According to the *Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan* [15], the current compulsory education stage (grades 1 to 9) in China focuses on cultivating moral character as its fundamental goal, aiming to nurture well-rounded socialist inheritors who are developed in terms of morality, intelligence, physical fitness, and aesthetics. Quality education has been promoted, aiming to enhance students' comprehensive quality through long-term ability training, knowledge acquisition, reflection, and personality development [16]. At the same time, this plan also emphasises students' physical and mental development, clearly requiring the strengthening of physical exercise and mental health education courses and indicators to promote the formation of good living habits, a sound personality, and a positive mental state among students.

Although recent educational policies have emphasised the importance of strengthening students' quality education, China's education system remains heavily influenced by exam-oriented education and exam culture, with a strong focus on exam performance [17]. This is particularly evident during the middle school to high school transition, where students are divided into different streams after the middle school entrance exam, leading to a stratification of learning opportunities [18]. This reveals a significant disparity between the intended aim of education and its actual practice.

1.3. The Introduction of the Double Reduction Policy

The Double Reduction Policy is a national policy, and there are various interpretations of its reasons for introduction and objectives. At the same time, the actual enactment of this policy varies across regions and school contexts [19]. In July 2021, both the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinion on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and After-School Tutoring for Students in Compulsory Education*, with the goal of significantly alleviating students' heavy workload from homework and after-school tutoring during compulsory education [15]. The overall requirements of the policy reinforce the central role of schools in education and deepen the regulation of the after-

school tutoring institutions.

The Double Reduction Policy targets students in grades 1 to 9 of compulsory education. The policy explicitly requires schools to reduce students' homework and academic pressure while ensuring teaching quality. It stipulates that primary school students in grades 1 and 2 shall not be assigned any written assignment, the mean time spent by students in Years 3 to 6 completing written assignments shall not exceed 60 minutes. The mean time spent by middle school students completing written assignments shall not be more than 90 minutes. Schools are also required to provide additional after-school care services for students. Additionally, the policy imposes strict regulations on after-school subject-based tutoring institutions. For example, subject-based tutoring during the compulsory education stage is not allowed on weekends, holidays, or other non-working days, and subject-based tutoring institutions are not allowed to engage in capitalisation operations or financing [20].

Regarding the Double Reduction Policy introduction, Qian et al. [21] conducted a narrative analysis of three explanations for the policy and its timing. Narratives from different angles reveal the complex and diverse causes and objectives behind the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy. In the enactment of the policy, different objectives and considerations often intersect with each other, demonstrating the enriching process of policy enactment.

According to this policy, the goals are reducing homework and tutoring burdens, support students' overall development and well-being, and reduce educational inequalities from urban-rural, regional, and socioeconomic disparities by promoting more equitable in-school learning support [15,21].

From the perspective of the global power struggle narrative, the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy is seen as a way for the country to strengthen its control over the education market. By regulating and standardising the after-school tutoring industry and institutions, the Double Reduction Policy is seen as a form of ideological vigilance on the part of the government, which is linked to its political goal of strengthening ideological and value guidance [21,22].

From the perspective of demographic change, the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy is closely associated with China's reducing birth rate and the high cost of family education, which have led to a decrease in fertility intentions. By reducing educational competition and the financial burden on families, the country attempts to improve family fertility and childcare environments, thereby supporting the implementation of national population strategies [21].

1.4. Significance of the Current Study

Current studies on the Double Reduction Policy have primarily concentrated on its broader effects, or the perspectives of parents and students [23,21]. In contrast, research on teachers as direct enactors of the policy, their understanding of the policy, and their practical experience remains relatively insufficient [24]. Thus, this study will focus on primary school teachers and policy enactment, exploring the understanding and perspectives of primary school teachers from different backgrounds on the Double Reduction Policy and their experiences in this policy enactment. This study will provide first-hand experience from teachers to inform policy optimisation.

Existing research indicates that the process of the introduction of this policy has not been entirely smooth

because of different factors, such as social pressure and the utilitarian nature of education, and the differences between policy calls and social reality [23,25,26]. Exploring the effects of the Double Reduction Policy from different perspectives can facilitate its enactment. This study examines primary school teachers' understanding of the policy and their enactment practices, aiming to enhance understanding of how to improve the policy's effectiveness. Therefore, it seeks to provide further support for students' development, alleviate their academic burden, promote their physical and mental health, and advance discussions on educational equity, thereby offering insights for educational reforms in similar developing countries.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, I will review and organise the literature closely related to the topic of *The Double Reduction Policy Enactment and the Perspective of Primary School Teachers* of this study from various perspectives, with the aim of providing background support for the three research questions of this study. Since the topic of this study is primary school teachers' understanding, experiences and enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, with a focus on its enactment in different specific school environments, the literature review in this chapter will mainly focus on the following four parts. First, briefly introduce the Heuristic Device of this study, the Policy Enactment Framework. Then, based on previous literature, I will discuss the role and position of teachers' agency in the enactment of policies. Third, this sub-point will analyse how the institutional framework of education policy under neoliberalism, combined with China's unique educational context that incorporates neoliberal elements and exceptions, shape teachers' working environments and professional identities under the Double Reduction Policy. This will be examined through the view of performance evaluations and the marketisation of education (after-school tutoring) and so on. The fourth sub-point will focus on the fundamental characteristics of China's education system, particularly the highly dominant policy-making mechanisms (which means the dominant feature of China's education policy-making is the leadership of the Party and the government). In addition to significant disparities in educational resources and policy enactment conditions across regions (urban-rural, regional) and different school types (key school, non-key school, and weak school). Finally, I will summarise and point out that existing literature mainly focuses on the institutional design for policy enactment or effectiveness evaluation of this policy, but few studies have explored the subjective experiences, perceptions and actual responses of school teachers. This gap highlights the need to understand how teachers perceive, negotiate, and enact the policy in diverse school contexts. This study will fill this research gap and provide policy reform with more perspectives and experiences from frontline teachers.

2.1. Heuristic Device: Policy Enactment Framework

This study adopts the Policy Enactment Framework developed by Braun et al. (2011)[27] as a heuristic device to explore and interpret the variations in how the Double Reduction Policy is enacted across different schools. In this framework, policy enactment is emphasised as a creative and interactive process of reinterpretation, in which the school

context plays an important role [27,28]. This implies that policies are not received uniformly within schools but are reconfigured and transformed by four distinct contextual dimensions: situational, professional, material, and external [27]. At the same time, schools and teachers do not possess complete flexibility and agency in policy enactment; their practices are still largely constrained by multiple factors such as policy texts, regulatory mechanisms, and performance [29]. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy may vary depending on the context. This part will present the four contextual dimensions of the framework.

In Situational Contexts, factors such as geographical location, historical background, student composition, and social image of a school influence how the school interprets policies. For example, under China's Double Reduction Policy, the geographical distance between urban and suburban schools, the imbalance in student composition and social reputation between key primary schools and weak primary schools, and parents' school choice behaviour all constitute the basic conditions for policy interpretation and enactment [30].

Professional Contexts refer to variables within the school, such as teachers' values, educational beliefs, experience, and the roles they play within the school. Teachers' agency makes them important actors in the policy enactment process. Their views on policies, professionalism and how they act on them determine whether policies are enacted [29]. For example, after the Double Reduction Policy was introduced, some teachers felt anxious and burdened, which affected their enthusiasm and commitment to their work and the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy [31,32].

Material Contexts generally refer to material-level variables, including school human resources, financial budgets, teaching facilities and school environment. For example, the introduction and enactment of the Double Reduction Policy have shown higher demands on schools in terms of providing after-school extended services, fostering students' all-round development and improving teaching facilities. However, these efforts are constrained by material foundations such as school funding budgets and human resource allocation, particularly in weak schools [23].

External Contexts refer to pressures and expectations from broader regional and national policies [27,33]. For example, these include regulation from education authorities, social public opinion, local government support, and pressure to improve academic performance. These external factors typically exert ongoing influence on schools under conditions that are not entirely within their control, thereby affecting the strategic choices and enactment of policies. In China, the college entrance examination (Gaokao) is a core academic goal for students and can be considered a significant external factor. The Gaokao-oriented education system continues to influence school curriculum design and teacher practices, often conflicting with the Double Reduction Policy's goal of reducing students' academic burden, posing challenges to policy enactment at the school level [34].

These four dimensions within the policy enactment framework interact with each other, collectively forming the complexity of the policy's practical dynamics across different school contexts. By this heuristic device, this study will explore the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy from multiple angles.

2.2. The role and agency of teachers as policy enactors

In recent years, research on the enactment of education policies has shifted its perspective on the role of teachers in educational policy reforms. Ball et al. (2011) proposed the difference between readerly and writerly policy texts[27]. The former is highly normative and explicit, providing clear guidance to policy enactors, with relatively little space for interpretation. The latter leaves more space for interpretation by policy enactors, allowing them to understand and transform policies according to specific contexts. When policy texts do not provide specific details on how to implement them, this may reflect the sophistication and interpretive nature of policy enactment itself. As Braun et al. (2011) pointed out, policy enactment is not a simple process of policy transmission, but a complex practice involving meaning construction[27]. Policy enactment is usually generated by teachers and administrators within schools in the process of continuously interpreting policies. Teachers' and administrators' understanding, experience, and the school context together shape the specific implementation path of the policy[27,29, 33]. It can be said that policy enactment has given teachers the possibility of agency, but this possibility varies depending on the specific context. Although teachers may have a certain degree of agency, they are still constrained and controlled by policy. The role of teachers and their interpretive and proactive characteristics in policy enactment have attracted widespread attention[35,27,36].

Agency is achieved through an individual's participation in specific contextual conditions [36]. Agency has been defined as the way in which teachers critically shape their responses to problem situations[37]. Priestley et al. (2015) developed a three-dimensional model, identifying three dimensions of teacher agency, Iterational, Practical-evaluative, and Projective[36]. Iterational refers to how teachers' experiences, practices and identity construction influence their decision making. Practical evaluative refers to how teachers consider the resources and challenges in the current context when considering possible actions in the present situation. Projective refers to how teachers plan and achieve teaching goals in practice. This model demonstrates that when faced with policy directives, teachers do not always simply follow procedures mechanically but instead can engage in diverse interpretation, consideration and selection to translate policies into more realistic practical pathways.

In China, the interpretive and agency roles of teachers as policy creators in policy enactment have also been studied. Han and Ye (2022) explored the trail of Chinese education policy reform, pointing out that after the introduction of central education policies, school teachers, principals, and local education departments all possess the authority to interpret to interpret and effect the policy enactment process[38]. Policies undergo layers of interpretation, adjustment and re-creation to align with local contexts. Song and Wu (2023) conducted interviews with 49 primary and secondary school teachers, principals and local administrative officials to investigate the mechanisms underlying the generation of teacher workload in Chinese primary and secondary schools[39]. They found that teachers face conflicts between their roles as policy enactors and educators, and that teachers engage in the reconstitution of policy discourse through dialogue, selective implementation or symbolic compliance during policy enactment. Hardy and

Melville (2019) found that teachers with professional capital demonstrate strategic agency in interpreting and adapting to policies[40]. Such studies align with the policy enactment framework proposed by Braun et al. (2011), highlighting the complexity of policy enactment across different situational contexts[27].

Additionally, the agency demonstrated by teachers during policy enactment is related to their sense making and ownership of the policy [41]. This implies that if a policy aligns with teachers' own educational sense making, they are more likely to actively participate and engage in policy enactment. For example, when teachers do not identify with a policy but adopt symbolic enactment to cope with accountability, they may implement the policy superficially [42]. Also, if the policy content does not match the actual teaching environment, teachers may lack the willingness to participate actively and show passive compliance with the policy [35].

In the process of promoting the Double Reduction Policy in China, there are also similar situations of selective practices based on teachers' personal judgements and actual contextual conditions. Especially in the context of China's different regional development backgrounds, teachers' interpretations and enactment of the policy exhibit localised conditions and significant differences in sense making and ownership, demonstrating the diversity of policy enactment effects[43,23]. This part will be analysed in detail in sub-point 2.4.

Therefore, under the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy in China, teachers' roles, agency, sense making and ownership in actual contexts integrate diverse elements influencing the enactment process. Understanding how teachers enact policies may not depend solely on the normative content of policy texts but needs to also focus on how teachers actively understand, adjust and transform policies in specific contexts.

2.3. Neoliberal elements in Chinese education and the role of teachers under the Double Reduction Policy

Neoliberalism views education as a market mechanism, emphasising competition, accountability measures and the implementation of performance targets in management practices [44]. Under neoliberal governance, students are regarded as consumers, while teachers are increasingly positioned as service providers and performance executors [45]. Neoliberalism places an intense emphasis on quantifiable outcomes, pushing teachers into a situation where they face intense performance pressure and conflicts with their role as educators [46]. Additionally, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, China is a communist country, but its education system has been significantly influenced by Western neoliberalism since the reform and opening-up [47]. This influence is not only evident at the governance level but also at the micro level, such as the emphasis on individual student choice, self-responsibility, and the rise of after-school tutoring institutions [48].

In 2021, the Chinese government introduced the Double Reduction Policy to regulate students' participation in subject-based after-school tutoring during the compulsory education stage, including subjects such as Moral Education and Rule of Law, Chinese, History, Geography, Mathematics, Foreign Languages (English, Japanese, Russian), Physics, Chemistry, and Biology[19]. The policy imposes strict controls on such

tutoring and enforces rigorous qualification reviews and capital restrictions on school-based education institutions [19]. While the policy was intended to promote educational equity, it has revealed the tension with existing neoliberal elements in China's education system.

First, prior to the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, there had been a high expansion in demand for after-school tutoring among Chinese students. According to the National Council (2020), there were 14 million mainstream subject teachers in public schools nationwide, while the total number of teachers in the shadow tutoring sector exceeded 10 million. This phenomenon can be attributed to factors such as increasing parental focus on children's education, socio-economic growth, pressure from high-stakes exams, and the influence of Confucian ideology in East Asia [49]. This has made shadow education (after-school tutoring), which incorporates elements of neoliberalism, an informal yet indispensable institution within China's education system. The Double Reduction Policy's explicit prohibition and strict regulation of after-school subject based tutoring aim to limit the commodification of education through measures opposing marketisation [50]. Following the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy, the time, types, and prices of after-school tutoring have been restricted, which contradicts the emphasis on "free choice" in neoliberalism [51].

Additionally, plenty of the shadow education institutions have seen a significant reduction in the number of courses offered or have been closed [52]. However, the Double Reduction Policy has also led to a lot of existing subject based tutoring activities shifting to the "underground grey economy" [51]. Middle-class families often use their financial and social capital to obtain additional tutoring resources through various channels, becoming the main audience for informal after-school tutoring, thereby exacerbating social inequality to a certain extent [34]. This shows that whilst the Double Reduction Policy aims to limit after-school tutoring through strict regulation, parents and tutoring institutions continue to circumvent the regulations and provide subject tutoring, indicating that the tutoring market has not truly disappeared but has merely been repackaged. This phenomenon of continuing to exist in a different form may weaken the intended effects of the policy.

Next, the Double Reduction Policy has placed teachers in a challenge. Under the policy, teachers are required to enact policy requirements and reduce students' academic burden, such as by controlling homework assignments and controlling classroom instruction [53]. However, since China's education system is primarily exam-oriented and focused on academic performance [54], teachers also face implicit pressure from parents' expectations, students' academic performance, schools, and even education authorities regarding score improvements and teaching performance while implementing the Double Reduction Policy. This dualistic demand from the two sides, the policy's requirement to reduce students' academic burden, alongside the performance-based oversight with neoliberal elements, creates seemingly conflicting yet integrated pressures, making teachers' work more complex as well as contradictory. Consequently, the professional standards for teachers have risen significantly after the issue of the policy, requiring them to enhance course quality within limited class hours.

Furthermore, while enacting the Double Reduction Policy, the government has actively encouraged local schools to offer after-school extended services for students universally. This

initiative aims to alleviate students' academic burdens, enhance educational equity and respond to parents' practical needs for after-school supervision, the development of students' diversity and the enrichment of their extracurricular lives [15]. While this initiative appears to help achieve the goal of reducing academic burdens while preventing oversight from higher authorities, it also increases teachers' workloads and stress [55]. A mixed-method study by Teng et al. on the time allocation of primary and secondary school teachers in China also points out that after the Double Reduction Policy was enacted, primary school teachers' average daily working hours increased to 12.80 hours [53]. Extended work hours pose a significant challenge to teachers' physical and mental health, affecting their teaching enthusiasm, well-being, and retention rates [56]. Also, extended work hours may prevent teachers from securing sufficient time to engage in professional development activities to enhance their professional competence as educators. Therefore, the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy is not a simple process for teachers and may have significant impacts on their lives.

As can be seen, the Double Reduction Policy seems to less students' academic burden while centralising power by breaking the existing education market with neoliberal elements. Nonetheless, in practice, teachers often face overwhelming pressure and spend a great deal of energy on both enacting the Double Reduction Policy and complying with performance-based supervision with neoliberal characteristics, which highlights the important role of teachers in policy enactment.

2.4. China's educational governance system and differences between regions and schools

2.4.1. Education governance dominated by the government and the hierarchical structure of the education system

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the nation has adopted a strongly centralised approach to governing its education system, with the Communist Party of China exercising complete control over education policy formulation and decision making. Following the reform and opening up, the government transferred some management powers to local education authorities, and societal participation in policy formulation gradually increased [38].

Although the process of education policy formulation in China has gradually incorporated more academic research institutions, experts and local stakeholders in recent years, showing the initial formation of a policy network, the government still holds the dominant discourse power. The content of policies remains firmly under government control [57]. This means that, in contemporary China, although the formulation of education policies is beginning to exhibit characteristics of a policy network and coordination mechanisms between the central and local governments and between professionals and administrators are gradually strengthening, the local education system and local schools have limited power in the policy formation stage and are mainly responsible for transmission and enactment.

The introduction and enactment of the Double Reduction Policy reflects the top-down nature of education governance in China. The Ministry of Education clearly states: *Recently, the General Affairs Office of the Communist Party of China*

Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and After-school tutoring for Students in Compulsory Education and issued a notice requiring all regions and departments to implement them by local conditions conscientiously[20].

This statement not only reflects the priority of policy-making but also demonstrates the government's unity and mandatory requirements in policy implementation. After the policy is officially issued, local education authorities are required to formulate supporting measures, such as reducing homework, extending after-school service hours, and rectifying after-school tutoring institutions, and supervise schools to implement them.

However, this study does not interpret policy as a simple implementation process. Instead, this study uses the aspect of policy enactment to explore teachers' and schools' understanding, transformation, and enactment of the Double Reduction Policy. For example, teachers may be influenced by contextual factors such as school resources, teacher beliefs, and local implementation conditions in the process of enacting the Double Reduction Policy, and these differences reflect the complexity of policy enactment[39].

Although this top-down transmission mechanism enabled rapid dissemination of policies across the country. However, the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy may encounter practical challenges due to inconsistencies in regional development, educational resources, and school backgrounds/contexts [58], which could affect the form and effectiveness of policy enactment. This has also led to a phenomenon of local adaptation in the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, which will be discussed in detail in Section 2.4.2.

2.4.2. Disparities in educational resources and policy adaptability across China

Although the Double Reduction policy has been effectively and swiftly communicated and enacted nationwide, China's diverse geography results in significant disparities across regions in terms of economic foundations, educational resources and school governance capabilities [7]. Long-term development in China has been characterised by higher overall development levels in the east than in the west, as well as higher urban development compared to towns and rural areas. This regional development imbalance leads to structural inequality, which has a considerable effect on the enactment of policies at the local level. In addition, the Chinese basic education system's definition and classification of key primary schools, non-key primary schools and weak primary schools also create diverse opportunities for the enactment of policies at the local level.

2.4.2.1 National regional comparison

From the perspective of unbalanced national regional development, the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy shows significant differences in policy attention and enactment intensity across regions. Liu et al. (2023) collected 98,396 posts containing the keyword 'Double Reduction Policy' from Sina Weibo and conducted a statistical analysis of the level of attention paid to the policy in each province after its introduction in 2021[59]. The results showed that Beijing, the Changjiang Delta Economic Zone (including Shanghai, Zhejiang province and Anhui province) and the Zhujiang Delta Economic Zone (represented by Guangdong province) paid higher attention to the policy than cities in middle and western China, with public attention to the Double

Reduction Policy spreading from the coast to the interior[59]. The provinces and cities with high attention to the Double Reduction Policy tend to locate in the economically developed eastern regions and the capital, indicating that economically developed regions have faster access to information. Policy documents can be disseminated to relevant groups, such as parents, teachers, and the education and training industry, promptly. The local governments in these regions can enact policy localisation plans more quickly, and teachers in these regions may receive more help and guidance in the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, thus gaining more experience.

Yang (2023) analysed policy documents related to the Double Reduction Policy in 28 provinces across China and found that while all provinces have responded to the government's policy by introducing local versions of the Double Reduction Policy, there are obvious differences in the way policy resources are allocated and the enactment strategies in place[60]. Local departments tend to rely on traditional experience and practices when considering the enactment of a policy and allocating resources for its enforcement [61]. Policy documents in economically developed provinces and cities are generally more comprehensive, and policy tools (e.g., financial investment, strategic deployment, promotion and demonstration, etc.) are used more frequently. In the middle or western regions of China, however, the frequency of use of many sub-tools is relatively low, and in some cases, even is absent.

Therefore, differences in economic development and educational resources among regions in China not only affect the speed of their response to the Double Reduction Policy and its enactment, but also lead to diversity in the way the policy is enacted in the different regions.

2.4.2.2 The educational gap between urban and rural areas

Educational disparities between urban and rural areas have long existed in China. The causes of these disparities are mainly reflected in the uneven economic development between urban and rural areas, the allocation of financial resources for compulsory education towards urban schools, an imperfect teacher allocation system resulting in high teacher mortality in rural schools, backward infrastructure in rural schools and significant differences in parents' educational awareness and capacity to access resources [39]. According to statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2017, 2025), although government funding for rural compulsory education schools has been increasing, it has not effectively improved teaching conditions in rural schools[62,63]. However, there are still considerable differences in the educational settings between rural and urban regions. Rural students receive less support for learning than their urban peers, resulting in persistent inequalities in learning opportunities and quality.

This imbalance is also reflected in the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy. In urban schools, with more comprehensive supporting policy measures and well-developed after-school services, students can access higher quality supportive educational resources, such as enrichment courses and extended services, while reducing their academic burden [64]. Which not only alleviates academic pressure but also enhances students' overall literacy. Meanwhile, urban teachers have more frequent opportunities to participate in training on homework assignments and curriculum integration, resulting in higher professional competence,

which in turn improves teaching efficiency and ensures the practical enactment of the Double Reduction Policy[65,58] .

In contrast, in rural and some township areas, constrained by a lack of teachers and a shortage of course resources and facilities, schools often struggle to effectively organise high-quality after-school services and utilise technological tools to promote students' enthusiasm for learning and cultivate their diverse interests[66]. On the other hand, from the perspective of teachers, due to significant shortages of human resources, a teacher may have to take on multiple teaching and non-teaching tasks, such as physical education classes and school management, which significantly increases their work pressure and affects their sense of belonging and identity with their profession [11]. In this context, even if teachers are willing to enact the Double Reduction Policy's measures of teaching based on individual aptitude and dividing assignments to improve teaching quality further, it is not easy to enact these measures effectively. These educational phenomena existing in rural and some township schools make it difficult to achieve the Double Reduction Policy's goal of improving the quality of education within schools, thereby further exacerbating the educational gap between urban and rural regions.

Besides, Urban and rural parents often vary in how they perceive and react to the Double Reduction Policy, which also has a certain impact on teachers' enactment of the policy. Parents from urban middle-class families generally have higher educational attainment and place great importance on their children's education. Following the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy, they often exhibit stronger educational anxiety and actively seek alternative resources, such as private tutors or art or sports training, to maintain their children's educational advantages [50] . Rural parents, on the other hand, are constrained by their educational awareness, time and economic resources, and their investment in their children's education is relatively limited. They may even ignore their children's academic needs due to the pressure of working away from home. This not only places rural students in a more disadvantaged position under the Double Reduction Policy but also forces teachers to assume the role of family education supporters[11]. In the absence of cooperation between home and school, it becomes even more challenging for teachers to understand and support students' learning conditions fully, thereby undermining the policy's goal of improving teaching quality.

Overall, structural differences between urban and rural regions profoundly influence the actual enactment and effectiveness of the Double Reduction Policy. These multiple factors have led to differences in policy enactment and educational equity issues between different areas.

2.4.2.3 Key primary schools, non-key primary schools, and weak schools in the Chinese education system

China's Key School System (KSS) originated in the 1980s with the aim of rapidly promoting the quality of education in primary and secondary schools. The government systematically established key schools within the education system, allocating high-quality teachers, facilities, and financial resources to these schools, thereby concentrating educational resources in a few key primary and secondary schools[67,68] . In contrast, non-key schools receive fewer resources and policy attention, and are relatively weaker in terms of teaching quality and teacher strength[69].

Beyond non-key schools, weak schools with more inadequate educational conditions also constitute an issue in

China's basic education system. According to the *Management Measures for the Special Fund for the Renovation of Weak Rural Compulsory Education Schools*, jointly issued by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance of China, weak schools are clearly defined as "rural compulsory education schools (including county-level compulsory education schools) whose teaching and living facilities cannot meet basic needs" [70]. Additional study has highlighted that underdeveloped schools also exhibit significant deficiencies in educational quality, school management, and ecological conditions, with generally low levels of social recognition [71].

In recent years, the Chinese government has gradually eliminated the distinction between key and non-key schools through various measures and regulations [72]. A series of normative documents and resource support policies reflect the government's efforts to promote balanced development of compulsory education, especially the improvement measures and guidance provided for weak schools [71]. However, disparities in school resources and systems still exist, resulting in the Double Reduction Policy being uniformly enacted at the policy document level but exhibiting specific differences and outcomes in actual enactment across schools due to their varying conditions [73].

In summary, most existing research has focused on the students and parents aspects of the Double Reduction Policy and the broader policy effects. However, there has been relatively limited research on enactment of policy from teachers' perspectives. Teachers are not only implementers of the Double Reduction Policy, but also active practitioners with a limited degree of agency within the policy framework. This agency is often constrained by multiple factors, including the school environment/ context, regional policy directions, and the allocation of educational resources. Factors such as regional development imbalances and disparities in school resources provide a complex background for the Double Reduction Policy. Few studies have explored how teachers in different school types and regional contexts understand, enact, and perceive the policy. Therefore, there is significant potential for studying the Double Reduction Policy from the perspective of teachers and its enactment.

2.5. Aim and research questions

This study aims to address a gap in existing literature by investigating the enactment of China's Double Reduction Policy through the lens of school teachers, focusing on how they understand and enact the policy, the difficulties or challenges they may encounter, and their perspectives on its effectiveness in addressing educational inequality and the stress related to the student academic competition pressure .

RQ1: How do school teachers interpret and perceive the benefits and/or drawbacks of the Double Reduction Policy?

RQ2: How do schools and teachers operationalize the Double Reduction Policy, and what challenges emerge in the process? How can a policy enactment framework inform a critical understanding of this?

RQ3: How do teachers view the impact of the Double Reduction Policy on educational inequality and pressure in China's education system?

3. Methodology and research design

This study aims to explore how primary school teachers understand and enact the Double Reduction Policy in the context of educational policy reform. To explore this topic in

depth, this study selected teachers from different backgrounds and primary schools to participate in the research. The research content covers different dimensions and perspectives of teachers' work. The research subjects are primary school teachers from different regions of China, who come from primary schools with different regional backgrounds and resources. Their diverse teaching experiences and school environments provide different contextual foundations for this study, which is destined to be subject to diverse interpretations and comparisons during the data analysis part.

3.1. Methodology

The Interpretivist Approach posits that the meanings and experiences of participants and society are open-ended and can be interpreted through concepts and theories [74,75]. Since this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of primary school teachers' meaning making and enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, the enactment of the policy is not static, but a dynamic process influenced by multiple factors and school contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to analyse teachers' narratives and practical experiences to reveal their diverse understandings and experiences of the policy. By adopting this interpretivist approach, the study can amplify the space between policy texts and actual practices and present the role of teachers under the Double Reduction Policy.

Besides, knowledge and social reality do not exist as neutral, universal entities in the external world but are instead constantly generated and reconstructed through interactions and practices between individuals, society, and the environment within specific social and cultural contexts [76]. Jackson and Mazzei (2008) also point out that "voices" are not fixed individual expressions but are constructed within specific social, cultural, and power relations [77]. This perspective inspires me to understand teachers' policy experiences as knowledge production in action, emphasising how teachers construct their understanding and responses to policies within institutional frameworks and daily practices.

This study uses the qualitative research method. Based on the above stance, this study emphasises that teachers' views and implementation methods of the Double Reduction Policy in different specific educational environments are a knowledge construction process generated through the interaction between structural institutions and individual experiences and perceptions. There is no absolute right or wrong, but rather a concrete manifestation of a diverse social reality. By qualitative research method, this study explores the internally reasonable understandings and experiences of teachers from different backgrounds regarding the Double Reduction Policy.

Another reason for choosing qualitative research methods is that, compared to quantitative research, qualitative methods often focus more on the analysis of text through in-depth dialogue and communication with participants, enabling the acquisition of more contextual, explanatory, and insightful details [78]. This allows me to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' subjective feelings, practical experiences, and strategic responses to the Double Reduction Policy, thereby capturing the complexity and details that are often overlooked in quantitative research.

Based on the above theoretical and practical foundations, the qualitative research method not only provides an appropriate way to explore teachers' interpretations and experiences of the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy,

but also helps explain teachers' understanding of the policy.

Since interviews are not a one-way process of extracting information from participants, but rather a collaborative process of constructing knowledge through dialogue with participants [77]. In each interview with different participants, tailored questions were posed under the three main research questions based on the participants' responses, seeking to create a particular interview process.

3.2. Research Design

3.2.1. Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were employed in this study to recruit participants. The reason for selecting purposive sampling is that it is a non-probability sampling method that allows deliberate selection of individuals with target characteristics based on research objectives [79], which can help recruit teachers with experience related to the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy from different types of schools and different regional contexts. By targeting participants with diverse and highly relevant characteristics to the research topic, purposive sampling can obtain rich and contextually relevant samples. Meanwhile, this study also adopted snowball sampling, whereby research participants recommended potential participants they knew to join the study [80].

Before formally commencing the study, I posted recruitment information on WeChat and Little red book (Chinese social media). I briefly introduced the research topic, participant requirements, and my email contact information on the post. Teachers who were interested and met the requirements could contact me via email. Subsequently, I sent them a detailed Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form. Then, I once again emphasised that this study would strictly protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Once teachers signed and returned the informed consent form by the specified deadline, they were considered to have formally participated in this study. Initially, five primary school teachers signed and returned the informed consent form and formally participated in this study. Later, one participant recommended another friend who was interested in the research topic and met the participation criteria. Through a snowball sampling method, after obtaining the consent of this teacher, this teacher also formally became one of the participants in this study.

Finally, this study recruited six female teachers from local primary schools as interview participants. They are from different cities and school types in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces in China. To ensure sample diversity, participants include teachers from urban key schools, township schools, rural schools, and schools classified as "weak schools" by local education authorities.

All teachers had at least five years of teaching experience, with a teaching career ranging from 5 to 29 years. This means that each teacher had teaching experience both before and after the formal introduction of the Double Reduction Policy in 2021. All six teachers participated in school-based teaching adjustments and practices related to the policy in various forms and had sufficient experience to reflect on the policy reform process.

In this study, the six participants were identified by the anonymous names CA, CW, MC, WJ, ZN, and ZH, and they came from different regions and schools in the cities of Wenzhou, Jinhua, and Nantong. The primary schools they

came from were all anonymised (using pseudonyms) in this research presentation. Participants all taught primary school

main subjects, which were Chinese, mathematics, English, and science (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Demographic Information of participants

Name (assumed name)	School	Region and School Basic Information	Teaching experience	Subject
CA	North Primary School	Jinhua City downtown (a city-level key primary school)	8 years	Primary school mathematics
CW	Lynn Primary School	Wenzhou's suburban area (a primary school defined as a weak school)	7 years	primary school science
MC	Wenzhou University Affiliated South Experimental Primary School	Wenzhou's Ouhai District (a township primary school)	5 years	Primary school English
WJ	Autumn Primary School	suburban area of Jinhua City (a primary school classified as a weak school, primarily serving students who have followed their migrant worker parents from other areas, and which had recently transitioned from a private school to a public school)	8 years	Primary school Chinese
ZN	Riverbank Primary School	Tongzhou District of Nantong City (a district-level key school)	29 years	Primary school Chinese
ZH	Central South Primary School Lake Branch	Wenzhou downtown (a branch school of a city-level key primary school)	28 years	Primary school Chinese

3.2.2. Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative research method and selected semi-structured interviews to collect data. Semi-structured interviews is a form of interview that follows a pre-prepared interview outline and core questions while allowing for follow-up questions and flexible adjustments based on the interviewee's responses, thereby guiding more in-depth narratives [81,82]

In this study, the aim is to explore the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy from the perspective of primary school teachers. Therefore, the semi-structured interview method provides participants with more space to express themselves and allows for a deeper understanding of teachers' specific practical experiences in policy understanding and enactment.

All interviews were conducted online via WeChat voice calls on a one-to-one basis. Each participant was interviewed once. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and was conducted in Mandarin Chinese. After obtaining written informed consent from the interviewees, I recorded the entire interview process with their permission. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the audio recordings into text and coded and analysed them during the subsequent data analysis process.

During the interviews, I typically began with simple icebreaker questions, such as, "How many years have you been teaching?" to create a relaxed atmosphere. The rest of the interview focused on the major research questions of this study and follow the prepared interview schedule .

For example, participants were asked to describe the basic background and educational environment of their schools. The interviews also covered the three core research questions

of this study, including teachers' perceptions of the advantages and drawbacks of the Double Reduction Policy, their understanding of the policy, its effects on their professional responsibilities and school operations, the challenges they face during policy enactment , and their views on the policy's influence on educational inequality.

3.2.3. Data Analysis

This study utilised thematic analysis as the analytical method to analyse the qualitative data collected from the interviews. In the analysis, further comparisons are conducted based on the different school backgrounds of the six teachers. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is an adaptable and interpretive analysis method. By extracting and categorising the data and presenting it as different themes, the uniqueness of the data can be revealed, and differences and commonalities can be identified [83].

The data analysis steps in this study primarily follow the Thematic Analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which can be divided into several steps[83].

At the beginning of the analysis, I transcribed the interview recordings and repeatedly read each teacher's interview content, while recording recurring expressions, contextual details, and clarifying viewpoints in the margins. Based on this in-depth engagement with the data, I began generating initial codes, allowing multiple codes to be assigned to the same piece of content to reflect its multi-layered meanings. Subsequently, I reviewed and categorised the codes based on their content and logical relationships, forming a set of candidate themes. Building on this, I refined and reviewed these themes to ensure internal consistency and alignment with the overall data, and wrote clear descriptions for each theme to summarise their core ideas. Finally, when writing the

research findings, I systematically integrated each theme with direct quotes from teachers and the research questions, while highlighting differences between schools and comparing teachers' experiences in the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy.

3.3. Ethical consideration

Participants in this study participated entirely voluntarily. Before deciding whether to participate, all participating teachers were fully informed of the purpose and content of the study and that the study would not pose any potential risks to them. They read and understood the information sheet and signed and returned the consent form to me. Before the formal interview, I remind participants that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time within two weeks after the interview without providing any reason and without suffering any adverse consequences.

To protect the privacy of participants, confidentiality measures have been taken in the collection, storage, and presentation of data. The names of participants, schools, and other details related to their identities have been anonymised in the interview records and research results, with pseudonyms used in place of real information. All interview recordings and transcripts are securely stored and accessible only to me. After the study is completed, all original data will be deleted to ensure that information is not disclosed or misused.

4. Results

This chapter will present the findings of the current study through a thematic analysis of the teacher interview data around the three research questions and present the analysis results for each research question.

The research results respond to the three research questions posed in this study and reveal similarities and differences in teachers' understanding and enactment of the Double Reduction Policy across different school contexts, particularly in terms of the interaction between teacher agency and the institutional environment.

4.1. Research question 1: How do school teachers interpret and perceive the benefits and/or drawbacks of the Double Reduction Policy?

Teachers' interpretation of the Double Reduction Policy tended to progress from an initially vague understanding to becoming clearer over time. In terms of information acquisition, teachers typically form their initial understanding of the policy through multiple channels, including both formal channels, such as official documents, and informal channels, like social media. Teachers' professional experience and subjective judgements also play an important role in this process. In practice, teachers generally believe that the policy has multiple positive effects. As will be explored in more detail below, on the one hand, teachers tended to suggest that it has alleviated students' burden to some extent, promoted the development of students' comprehensive qualities, and reduced the burden on some families in terms of time management and financial expenses. On the other hand, teachers have also expressed concerns about the practical pressures associated with the enactment of the policy, including the combined pressure of policy enactment inspections from the Education Bureau and exam

performance, the multiple tasks brought about by competition between schools, and the longer working hours and increased workload resulting from the after-school services extended due to the enactment of the policy. Teachers' understanding of the Double Reduction Policy is not simply about following instructions, but rather an ongoing process of integrating information from various sources (such as school documents, social media, parents, and students) and applying their own experience in the specific context of their teaching environment.

4.1.1. Theme 1: The Evolution of Teachers' Understanding

Teachers have diverse channels for understanding the Double Reduction Policy

Most teachers responded that their understanding of the Double Reduction Policy has evolved. Various sources of information have shaped their understanding of the policy. In the interview data, all of the teachers received information about the Double Reduction Policy came from various sources. For example, "The school sent out documents informing us about the policy, and I also learned some information from the news." (CA). Both ZN and MC indicate they learned about this policy from WeChat and TikTok. This reflects that both formal channels (such as school documents) and informal channels (such as social media) played a role in the transfer of policy information. Teachers' understanding of the policy is not passively received but structurally constructed through their networks of information sources. Different sources of information may shape different teachers' interpretations of the Double Reduction Policy.

Teachers' understanding of the policy has evolved from confusion to clearer understanding

Teachers' understanding of the Double Reduction Policy is a progressive and dynamic process, rather than a static state. This is because teachers' understanding of the Double Reduction Policy have been change. Teachers' understanding is influenced by a combination of factors, including access to information and the development of personal teaching experience. In this process, formal channels such as documents issued by schools help clarify the core content of the policy, while informal channels may influence teachers' initial judgements or lead to misunderstandings:

At the beginning of the policy, some friends from tutoring institutions discussed the control of the Double Reduction Policy on social media, and I learned a little about it. Afterwards, the school issued relevant documents, and I gained a clearer understanding of the Double Reduction Policy. (WJ)

At the same time, teachers' understanding is constantly adjusted and deepened through their continued participation in and reflection on the educational context:

When the policy was first announced, I speculated that the Double Reduction might be aimed at reducing the burden on both teachers and students. But in fact, it is actually aimed at reducing the burden of homework and after-school tutoring on students. (ZN)

Overall, these findings reveal the stages of variation in teachers' understanding of policy. Teachers' understanding of the Double Reduction Policy gradually formed through the interaction between various external sources of information

and their internal subjective perceptions and teaching experiences. External sources of information about the policy include formal channels (such as documents issued by schools) and informal channels (such as social media), which may differ in terms of policy transmission. Through their deep involvement in the policy enactment process, teachers' understanding of the Double Reduction Policy evolved from vague, subjective speculation to a more explicit understanding consistent with the policy objectives. This process aligns with the views of Ball et al. (2012) on policy implementation, which posits that actors, the environment, and discourse influence policy enactment[29]. It is also found that social media can rapidly spread policy information in China, but there is a risk of oversimplifying or misinterpreting policies, which may affect teachers' understanding of the Double Reduction Policy and subsequent policy enactment. This highlights the need for guidance from official policy documents issued by schools and higher authorities.

4.1.2. Theme 2: The advantages of the Double Reduction Policy

Most teachers can clearly acknowledge the advantages of the Double Reduction Policy, including reducing students' workload, focusing on students' holistic development, and reducing parents' pressure.

Less student burden

The Double Reduction Policy has alleviated students' academic burden to a certain extent. Three teachers have mentioned that the amount of homework has indeed decreased, particularly for repetitive and mechanical copying tasks, making assignments more flexible. As teacher CA mentioned "Of course, there's less homework now". Therefore, for students with strong academic abilities and self-management skills, the policy has provided more opportunities for independent learning; however, for students with average or weaker academic performance, the reduction in homework may instead result in a lack of learning support and supervision, potentially widening the academic achievement gap:

I can only say that it has alleviated the burden on students to a certain extent.....For students who are average or even below average..... they may find it more difficult to cope. (MC)

However, the overall effectiveness of the policy varies among students. Two teachers indicated that, because of the dual influence of the college entrance examination and intense competition for academic advancement, schools generally still regard academic scores as the key criterion for measuring educational effectiveness, despite the Double Reduction Policy aiming to alleviate students' burdens. Therefore, even though the policy restricts after-school tutoring and homework from a systemic level, the persistent pressure of exam-oriented education has prevented the policy from achieving its original goal:

Teachers do consider these factors when assigning homework.....Although the Double Reduction Policy has been in place for several years, there may have been some initial inspections, leading to slight adjustments, but now there is not much difference compared to before the policy was enacted. (CW)

This indicates that when enacting the Double Reduction Policy, teachers take numerous factors into consideration and do not strictly adhere to the policy in its entirety. Although the Double Reduction Policy has been introduced for several years, its actual impact remains limited. During the initial stages of policy enactment, some schools and teachers made adjustments to homework assignments to comply with inspections by higher authorities(e.g.,education Bureau). However, as policy oversight weakened and schools continued to prioritise academic performance, teachers gradually returned to before-policy practices in assigning homework. This phenomenon reflects symbolic enactment of the policy, where teachers outwardly comply with the policy but the extent to which their underlying teaching concepts have changed requires further consideration.

The pursuit of students' holistic development

A few teachers believe that the Double Reduction Policy has also promoted the holistic development of students in education. Before the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, China's education system was often focused on single-dimensional exam scores, with the Gaokao (college entrance exam) as the primary goal. In contrast to the previous exam-oriented education system, the Double Reduction Policy encourages schools and teachers to introduce diverse extracurricular activities and courses that foster students' overall development, emphasising the cultivation of comprehensive literacy, social adaptability, and other skills:

The curriculum reform promoted by the Double Reduction Policy has strengthened the comprehensive cultivation of practical skills and innovative qualities, while weakening the focus on scores alone. (ZN)

Additionally, many schools have designed and implemented diverse after-school services that enable students to complete their homework within a limited time while expanding their abilities and horizons to align with this policy:

Now, we will also incorporate club activities into after-school service. Many schools have adopted a "one plus X" model. After students finish their homework, they can take part in extracurricular activities such as music, English voice acting, and drama. (WJ)

Only one teacher mentioned that the Double Reduction Policy has provided opportunities for students to discover their personal abilities and interests at an earlier age. The policy has encouraged schools to offer a wider variety of courses, allowing students to explore their strengths and develop their interests in a broader learning environment, thereby expanding their future career paths rather than being confined to the subjects taught in daily school lessons:

This policy can help cultivate students' qualities and abilities, and also help children who may be diverted from the mainstream track in future education to acquire the skills needed in the future society. (ZH)

This teacher believes the enhancement of quality education has provided students who may not perform well in exam-oriented courses with the opportunity to acquire the skills needed for future society, enabling them to find value beyond academic achievements.

Reduced parental pressure

Several primary school teachers pointed out that the

Double Reduction Policy not only benefits students but also alleviates the pressure on parents. After the policy was introduced, the childcare pressure and financial burden on families have been somewhat eased. CW mentioned:

Schools have introduced after-school services, effectively extending students' time at school. The after-school extended services end around 5:30 PM, which is convenient for some dual-income families whose parents finish work at that time, so they don't need to take time off to pick up their children.

Through the extended after-school services provided by schools, the policy enactment of the Double Reduction Policy enables parents to more easily manage pick-up times, thereby reducing conflicts between family and work commitments.

Also, a few teachers believe that under the policy's regulation and supervision of after-school tutoring institutions, combined with the diverse interest and skill development courses provided by schools in their after-school services, parents' expenses on after-school tutoring can be reduced:

... it can alleviate the financial burden on families (ZN).

Overall, Double Reduction Policy has yielded several positive results in various aspects of China's basic education system, including a relative reduction in students' academic burden, promotion of students' comprehensive development and alleviation of parental pressure. However, the extent of these results varies and is not consistent across different educational backgrounds and student groups. The student burden reduction brought about by the Double Reduction Policy is a double-edged sword. For students from well-resourced families who possess strong self-management skills and high self-discipline, the policy has provided more space for independent learning; however, for students with weaker academic foundations, reduced homework may mean less supportive learning, leading to different outcomes [23]. Moreover, despite the policy's aim to reduce the burden on students, teachers are still influenced by China's deeply rooted exam-oriented education culture (Dello-Iacovo, 2009) when enacting the policy, leading to some reservations[54].

Primary school teachers in this study tended to suggest that the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy also reflects the tension between exam-oriented education and quality education in China's compulsory education stage. The inclusion of interest-based and skills-based programmes in after-school services reflects a focus on cultivating students' qualities and soft skills. Although some teachers believe that the Double Reduction Policy has played a certain role in reducing family pressure, especially in alleviating financial burdens and optimising time allocation, this does not necessarily mean that education policy has effectively shifted towards an equitable and sustainable development[34].

4.1.3. Theme 3: The drawbacks of the Double Reduction Policy

Although teachers have pointed out some advantages of the Double Reduction Policy, they have also highlighted its drawbacks. For example, increased pressure on schools and teachers, and the increased workload for teachers and so on.

Increased school/teacher pressure

Four teachers' responses to the Double Reduction Policy reflect the growing pressure on schools and teachers. Teachers commonly believe that the enactment of the policy has led to more inspections from higher authorities, such as frequent

lesson observations, mandatory documentation of after-school services. Meanwhile, although the policy aims to reduce students' burden, their exam results still need to be maintained, which has increased teachers' pressure to perform and mental strain:

Every time the higher authorities inspect the Double Reduction Policy, the pressure is intense and exhausting. Many tasks cannot be assigned to parents or students; they must be done by teachers. Then, exam results cannot be too poor. If your class's average score is several points lower than another class's average score, the principal will assume there is a problem with your teaching, and you will definitely be criticised. (ZH)

This statement reflects the performance pressure and psychological burden faced by teachers under the Double Reduction Policy. Teachers' performance is evaluated through regular assessments and performance-related metrics, which reinforce internal comparisons and accountability to some extent. Therefore, this policy enactment has created a new form of burden for teachers.

Additionally, comparisons between schools are no longer limited to academic performance, but have expanded to include other aspects such as cultural characteristics and diversity of courses offered:

It's not just about scores, but also other comprehensive development projects. (MC)

This places higher demands on schools and teachers, who face increased pressure in responding to a wide range of assessment requirements.

Increased workload for teachers

Half of the primary school teachers in this study have expressed that the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy has increased their workload. The increase in workload is mainly reflected in the after-school services required by the policy. With the comprehensive implementation of after-school services, teachers' daily working hours and energy investment have significantly increased:

Primary school teachers basically have to be at school by 7:40 in the morning.....There is no midday break, which is spent watching students take a nap or self-study. This continues until 5:30 p.m. when after-school services end and we can go home. All day long, we are on duty for our class. (WJ)

Teachers indicated that following the Double Reduction policy, teaching tasks and arrangements have been changed, resulting in an increase in additional workload. Double Reduction Policy requires teachers to maintain students' academic performance despite the reduction in external tutoring and family support, subjecting them to considerable pressure. This is similar to what Ball (2003) pointed out, that under performativity, teachers must be accountable for students' measurable outcomes even when resources and conditions are limited. Teachers also face pressure to help schools achieve 'comprehensive development'. Furthermore, the after-school extended services introduced by the Double Reduction Policy have imposed new responsibilities on

teachers to organise and monitor these services. The new tasks and heavy responsibilities have compelled teachers to remain on duty for extended periods, resulting in a state of prolonged high pressure and overwork [53].

4.2. Research question 2: How do schools and teachers operationalize the Double Reduction Policy, and what challenges emerge in the process?

In the enactment of the Double Reduction policy, my interviewees have indicated there have been some changes at both the school and teacher levels. The enactment of the policy has been deeply influenced by the actual contexts of the schools, and the personal experiences of the teachers. In the policy enactment, teachers also mentioned that they encountered challenges from various aspects, such as the performance-based requirements for teaching quality and pressure from parents.

4.2.1. School level

Theme 1: Changes to the end-of-term examination format for students

Most teachers have reflected that, with the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, primary schools have made significant adjustments to the format of end-of-term examinations. This demonstrates the schools' efforts to reduce students' academic pressure and promote diversified development. Examples include replacing end-of-term written examinations for lower grades with more fun and practical activity-based assessments:

The end-of-term assessment for first-year students is a fairground exam, where teachers of different subjects act as examiners in different classrooms. Students need to enter the classrooms to complete the tasks set by the examiners, and they pass if they complete them. (MC)

One teacher talked about that, after the end-of-term written examinations for upper years, results are presented in the form of grades:

The end-of-year exam is now an independent assignment. Sixth-year students will take part. We only tell parents the grade, not the actual score. (WJ)

However, despite the policy explicitly stipulating that no paper-based examinations be conducted in the first and second years, some teachers still reported that hidden assessments were taking place in schools:

The principal asked us to privately assess the first- and second-years students to get an idea of their academic level and prepare for the official written exams in the third year. (CW)

These findings indicate that during the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, the format of end-of-term examinations in schools is gradually shifting from traditional paper-based assessments towards more comprehensive evaluation formats. These changes tend to alleviate students' academic burdens, promote quality educational practices, and foster students' physical and mental wellbeing alongside their holistic development[60]. Nevertheless, the hidden "diagnostic" tests required by schools also reflect the anxiety

schools feel about the conflict between student performance and teaching outcomes when enacting the new policy [28,43,84].

Theme 2: school administration

In the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, school administrators played a key role in supervising and promoting policy enactment. This includes helping teachers interpret policies, assigning tasks, monitoring behaviour, and coordinating across departments:

The guidance and safety management provided by administrators during after-school extended services played a crucial role in preventing teachers from displaying "excessive teaching behaviour". (ZN)

The "excessive teaching behaviour" mentioned by the teacher above refers to the extended working hours of teachers due to the Double Reduction Policy, which requires schools to provide after-school services. This may lead to work fatigue, emotional distress, or inappropriate teaching behaviour. Regular inspections and safety monitoring implemented by schools can regulate teacher behaviour, alleviate pressure, and prevent such inappropriate behaviour, thereby ensuring the safety of students' learning and mental health.

The principal shall coordinate and arrange for the Academic Affairs Office to organise teacher training, the Logistics Department to provide support services, and the Moral Education Department to pay attention to students' mental health, ensuring that all links are coordinated and working together to ensure the smooth enactment of the Double Reduction Policy. (WJ)

The teacher's words above reflect that after the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy, schools not only focus on students' academic performance but also increasingly emphasise their mental health and holistic development. Besides, it also reflects that different actors in schools assume different responsibilities in policy enactment[33]. This implies that during the enactment of policies through teachers, corresponding assistance and support from functional departments is required.

Theme 3: School-based flexible enactment strategy

In enacting the Double Reduction Policy, two teachers reflected that schools have demonstrated a high degree of flexibility and autonomy. Different schools have tailored and adjusted their after-school extension service implementation strategies based on their particular circumstances:

Our school has introduced enrichment courses as part of its after-school services. Teachers are required to design and organise courses independently, and the content is no longer limited to Chinese, mathematics, English and science. (ZH)

Some schools even invite parent volunteers to participate in after-school services. (MC)

This reflects the ability of above schools to flexibly adjust the Double Reduction Policy enactment strategy based on their specific circumstances, thereby enhancing the policy's adaptability and enactment efficiency, but it may also pose challenges and impact resource coordination[23].

4.2.2. Teacher Level

Theme 1: Change in teaching methods

Five teachers mentioned to response to the Double Reduction Policy they have changed their teaching strategies. Teachers have integrated teaching content with pupils' actual abilities, reflecting a shift towards more flexible, efficient and student-centred teaching practices. Teachers now consider more factors in their teaching and emphasise student quality development and classroom efficiency:

Teaching now focuses more on the development of students' qualities. During morning reading, I take students outdoors to guide them in acting out and reciting texts in nature. In class, we emphasise concise explanations and stimulating interest to improve classroom efficiency. (ZN)

We now assign homework to be completed in class to facilitate immediate feedback and correction, and we assign homework based on students' foundation levels to improve its relevance and efficiency. (WJ)

These teaching adjustments demonstrate the shift in teachers' practices from a conventional teaching model focused on exam scores to a more student-centred, tailored, and diversified teaching approach following the Double Reduction Policy[65].

Theme 2: Academic Support and Skills Development in After-School Services

Five teachers mentioned that, following the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, after-school extended services have become an integral part of teachers' daily teaching routines. Beyond monitoring students as they complete their homework and providing academic assistance, teachers also engage in providing quality education to students:

During extended service hours, students can review the day's lessons under the guidance of teachers. Teachers can answer students' questions and clarify any doubts they may have. (ZN)

After completing their homework, students may participate in some extracurricular activities, such as interest-based classes led by teachers. (MC)

This implies that the Double Reduction Policy has expanded teachers' teaching responsibilities, with teachers taking on multiple roles in after-school extended services. Also, reasonable after-school activities can effectively support students' diverse learning demands[55].

4.2.3. Challenges faced by teachers in the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy

In the policy enactment process, teachers play multiple roles. They are not only the implementers of the policy but also mediators in teaching practice. Since their roles are diverse and changeable, teachers are likely to encounter different challenges in teaching. Particularly, the challenge lies in the tension arising from the objectives of the Double Reduction Policy and the pressures of exam-oriented education.

Theme 1: Maintaining a balance between quality education and exam-oriented education

The majority of teachers indicate that under the Double Reduction Policy, striking a balance between ensuring its enactment and maintaining students' examination

performance remains an enduring challenge. On the one hand, the policy advocates a student-centred, holistic education that emphasises both quality education and reducing students' academic burden. On the other hand, however, the Chinese education system remains heavily influenced by exam-oriented approaches, with student scores still serving as an important basis for evaluating student and school performance. This tension forces teachers to constantly balance between quality education and exam-oriented goals in their daily teaching practices, resulting in a state of ambiguity and tension in teaching practices:

We can only focus on exam preparation on the one hand and quality education on the other; neither can be neglected. (ZN)

The Double Reduction Policy prohibits assigning written homework to lower years, but without homework, it is difficult for lower years students to truly gain knowledge. (CW)

Exams are becoming increasingly difficult, parents are uncooperative, teachers are under a lot of pressure, and we also have to consider the school's reputation and the overall performance of the students. (ZH)

From the above quotes, despite policy initiatives advocating for reduced workload and enhanced efficiency, alongside the promotion of quality education, teachers continue to face practical pressures such as improving students' examination results and safeguarding the school's reputation. It can be seen that teachers attempt to find a balance in their daily teaching practice, yet there are often issues. This shows that teachers are caught between achieving the goals of the Double Reduction Policy and maintaining performance evaluation indicators rooted in exam-oriented traditions, seeking a balance between innovative teaching and traditional accountability pressures [43].

Theme 2: Parents' doubts and pressure on teachers

Four teachers reported that during the Double Reduction Policy, some parents tended to pass on their anxiety or negativity about their students' academic performance to teachers. This anxiety was often conveyed to teachers through questioning their teaching arrangements, placing additional pressure on teachers in their teaching practice:

Some parents showed me flyers for private tutoring and asked me whether they should enroll their children. I didn't dare give a clear answer because if things weren't good, they might blame me for recommending. (MC)

Some parents are too competitive. They give their children extra homework on their own, then mistakenly think it was assigned by the teacher. They criticise us for giving too much or too little homework. (ZH)

There have even been cases of disconnect between home and school in weak schools:

Some parents simply let their children drop out of school or adopt a passive attitude toward education, and in some cases, children even skip school due to violence at home. For these families, the pressure of survival has outweighed their desire for education. (WJ)

From the above quotes, teachers often cannot completely understand parents' various anxieties and find it difficult to find ways to treat them at root. Which shows that although the

Double Reduction Policy aims to alleviate parental anxiety about education, teachers still face complex and diverse parental expectations and pressure. Regardless of whether parents are still driven by a focus on student scores or lack support for their children's education, both pose additional challenges to teachers' work, especially during the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy [34,50].

Theme 3: Differences in resources between schools

Most teachers have expressed that, following the Double Reduction Policy, disparities in resources between schools have impacted their ability to effectively enact the policy and the educational experience of students. These disparities are particularly noticeable in terms of school facilities, course resources, and the ability to offer extended activities:

Our classrooms are equipped with artificial intelligence systems that can generate feedback reports on teacher language and student engagement immediately after class, thereby promoting teaching improvement. (MC)

Some urban schools are unable to organise extracurricular activities due to limited space. (WJ)

As a weak school, we are required to provide extracurricular extension courses, but due to limited resources, most teachers can only arrange reading, calligraphy practice or sports activities. (CW)

Teachers' interviews revealed that inequality in resource allocation between schools affects the specific enactment and effectiveness of the Double Reduction Policy. This phenomenon highlights the structural challenges faced in the policy enactment. Differences in resources between schools are not only reflected in hardware facilities, but also in personnel allocation and the ability to provide diverse extended courses. This corresponds to the "material context" in the policy enactment framework proposed by Braun et al. (2011), where the resources available to a school determine whether it has the basic conditions to enact the policy and influence how teachers respond to the Double Reduction Policy [27,85]. Therefore, even though the Double Reduction Policy has a unified goal, resource differences may lead to the policy being recontextualised in different schools, resulting in different forms and outcomes, further exacerbating regional and inter-school disparities in enactment practices.

4.3. Research Question 3: How Do Teachers View the Impact of The Double Reduction Policy on Educational Inequality and Pressure in China's Education System?

Teachers hold complex and various views on the impact of the Double Reduction Policy on educational inequality. Specifically, there is an tension between the policy's goal of promoting educational equity and the persistent pressure of the exam-oriented culture. In this study, teachers have highlighted the conflicts that have arisen in the enactment of the policy. The Double Reduction Policy has weakened the stratification of academic resources and promoted the rebalancing of educational opportunities to a certain extent by regulating extracurricular tutoring and teacher scheduling. However, the policy has not completely weakened the competitive atmosphere created by the exam-oriented culture and parents' expectations. Instead, it has triggered new implicit academic pressure among students. The changes in educational inequality perceived by teachers are often closely

related to school resource conditions and parental behaviour, highlighting the structural imbalances that the Double Reduction Policy cannot resolve.

4.3.1. Theme 1: Impact on educational inequality

Reduce students' and parents' reliance on after-school tutoring

Although the Double Reduction Policy is intended to alleviate educational inequality by restricting after-school tutoring, teachers have expressed differing views on whether it will reduce students' and parents' reliance on after-school tutoring. Two teachers believe that the policy may have weakened students' reliance on after-school tutoring to a certain extent, alleviating the problem of educational stratification caused by differences in family economic conditions:

The policy would reduce students' reliance on private tutoring and help alleviate educational inequality caused by economic disparities among families. (ZN)

This shows that the policy restricting after-school tutoring has enhanced educational equity, particularly for families with lower incomes.

However, other teachers point out that the enactment of the policy has not fundamentally solved the problem of after-school tutoring and may even widen the gap in educational resources between urban and rural areas:

I don't think so. There are many informal tutoring options available, so parents can still find ways to pay for tutoring if they want to. (CA)

Parents in urban areas tend to find ways to continue private tutoring, while parents in rural areas have basically given up, which would exacerbate educational inequality. (CW)

The Double Reduction policy clearly cannot fully resolve this issue. In economically developed regions, after-school tutoring persists, indicating that the policy has to some extent exacerbated educational inequality and the urban-rural disparity.

Promoting equitable access to quality and holistic education

Almost all the teachers have reflected that the Double Reduction Policy shows the country's efforts to promote the balanced allocation of educational resources between urban and rural areas. Through official supervision and the mobilisation of teacher resources between urban and rural areas, the Double Reduction Policy arguably seeks to provide students from different backgrounds with opportunities for comprehensive development and access to high-quality education:

The government requires balanced education, and there was an inspection a few days ago. They hope that every child can enjoy high-quality education. (ZH)

The Double Reduction Policy emphasises balanced development. More than 30 teachers from key schools have been sent to our side (weak schools) to help with teaching. They are all excellent teachers, and we hope to reduce the gap between schools. (WJ)

Hidden financial burden of private tutoring

Although the Double Reduction Policy has restricted after-school tutoring in academic subjects, to some extent it has expanded the market for hidden tutoring. Half of the teachers in this study believe that some parents' anxiety about their children's education has not eased with the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy, instead they are seeking more expensive tutoring in the hope that their children will outperform their peers:

Some parents are turning to expensive one-on-one or quality tutoring to give their children a better education, which is not cheap. (ZN)

After the schoolwork load was reduced, more parents became anxious and signed their children up for one-on-one tutoring, which is much more expensive. (MC)

Limited effect of the policy in reducing academic competition between students

Most teachers believe that the Double Reduction Policy has had limited effectiveness in alleviating academic competition among students. Although the policy has superficially reduced homework burdens and strictly controlled subject-specific tutoring, deep-rooted academic competition among students remains difficult to change at this stage due to parental anxiety and the exam-oriented culture deeply embedded in China's education system:

Only short-term alleviation exists. The reduction in homework and the de-emphasis on rankings are superficial. Parents' anxiety about the high school and college entrance examinations has shifted to more implicit competition, such as extra lessons and cultivation of special skills. The logic of competition remains. (ZN)

Anxious parents are always like this. They actively seek additional opportunities for their children to develop, and their competitive spirit remains undiminished. (CA)

In summary, teachers hold differing views on whether the Double Reduction Policy can effectively improve educational inequality, with most believing that its actual effectiveness is limited. The Double Reduction Policy promotes the redistribution of educational opportunities between urban and rural areas to a certain extent by regulating after-school tutoring, promoting the mobility of teaching resources, coordinating multi-level education systems, and restructuring resources[38,51]. However, due to ongoing anxiety among some parents, who continue to provide additional support for their children through informal tutoring, resource gaps may even widen [86]. This suggests that to achieve educational equality, the Double Reduction Policy requires consideration of broader structural issues and practical realities during policy formulation and enactment.

5. Discussion

5.1. The impact of differences in school contexts on the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy

This study found that the specific background and context of schools played an influential role in the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy. Although the policy documents

were uniform and standardised, the enactment results varied widely across regions and schools with different teaching resources due to factors such as resource conditions, teacher allocation, and student enrolment. This finding is consistent with the four-dimensional contextual framework proposed by Braun et al. (2011), i.e., situational, material, professional, and external contexts jointly influence the actual enactment of policies. In this study, teachers and schools demonstrated the influence of these four contexts in how they understood, responded to, and adjusted to the policy[27].

This study also revealed multidimensional differences in institutional responsiveness among schools. For example, in urban schools with relatively abundant resources, teachers can use multiple means to expand course design (such as AI feedback systems and seeking professional assistance to organise extracurricular activities) to enact the policy, thereby achieving the goal of reducing the burden on students while improving teaching quality and providing quality education [58,65]. In schools with weak resources, despite some adjustments made by the government to balance education, there is still a lack of facilities or resources, and policies can often only be enacted in a simplified manner, limiting the development of extracurricular activities and after-school services[66]. This finding is similar to the policy enactment gap identified by Ball et al.(2012)[29].

Such differences in policy enactments arising from different school environments and backgrounds are difficult to improve in the short term. They may further exacerbate educational imbalances between urban and rural areas and between strong and weak schools [73]. The policy aims to emphasise equality but faces challenges in terms of enactment due to contextual differences. This corresponds with the view of Liu et al. (2024) that the Double Reduction Policy may exacerbate educational stratification in specific contexts. Therefore, this study reveals the complexity of policy enactment in various contexts. This study also provides a perspective for understanding the boundaries and equality challenges of educational policies[86].

5.2. The multiple roles of teachers in policy enactment

This study found that during the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy, teachers' perceptions of their roles were diverse. They were not only implementers of the policy but also mediators between teaching practices, institutional requirements, and multiple stakeholders. Teachers needed to translate policy tasks assigned by higher authorities into daily operational teaching behaviours while balancing the various expectations of students, parents, and school administrators. In this process, teachers are not merely passive executors but demonstrate a certain degree of agency (teacher agency) under different institutional conditions and cultural environments. Teachers demonstrate strategic judgement in policy enactment by understanding, adjusting, and integrating policies into their teaching[36]. This finding corroborates the view of Braun et al. (2011) that policy enactment is a complex and creative practical process, and that teachers and educators are indispensable participants in the institutionalisation of policies[27]. This study also echoes the conclusion of Teng et al. (2024) that teachers' roles tend to diversify in the context of the Double Reduction Policy[53].

Furthermore, through an in-depth understanding of primary school teachers' teaching practices, this study found that some teachers exhibited obvious physical and mental distress when

faced with heavy administrative tasks and teaching performance pressure. This phenomenon corroborates the findings of Teng et al. (2024) that the workload of primary school teachers in China has increased significantly under the Double Reduction Policy[53].

Additionally, the significant of this study found that teachers' understanding of their roles varies significantly across different groups with varying teaching experience. Younger teachers tend to follow the advice of senior teachers or adhere to upper management directives when enacting policies. In contrast, teachers with rich teaching experience are more adept at seeking interpretive space within the Double Reduction policy, demonstrating higher flexibility and initiative. This finding is similar to the results of Hu and Alias (2025), which indicated that teachers' responses to policies are not homogeneous, and these differences may stem from teachers' professional experience, school organisational management methods, and the institutional cultural contexts of different schools[31].

However, the multiple roles teachers assume in the policy enactment have also exposed the tension between the objectives of the Double Reduction Policy and the examination-oriented orientation of China's education system. While advocating for reducing students' academic burden, the policy encourages the promotion of quality education and the comprehensive development of students, as well as their physical and mental health. Teachers have made adjustments to their teaching strategies in response. At the same time, teachers still face performance evaluations based on students' exam scores and expectations from parents. The tension caused by dual pressures may increase teachers' stress and role ambiguity in actual teaching that may limit teachers' agency to some extent [29,54].

6. Conclusion

6.1. Conclusion

This study explores how primary school teachers in China understand and enact the Double Reduction Policy within its current context, alongside their perspectives on the policy. Using qualitative research methods, interviews were conducted with six teachers from six schools across different regions and with varying educational resources. The study reveals the multiple roles teachers assume during policy enactment, their strategic choices, and the complex tensions between the Double Reduction Policy and the examination-oriented education system. It also highlights that teachers are not merely passive policy enactment agents, but rather have a few judgmental capacity and agency. They navigate and make choices between institutional constraints and pedagogical realities.

Specifically, the conclusions of the current study can be drawn on several key aspects:

Firstly, teachers' understanding of the policy is not static but evolves progressively through ongoing information acquisition and practical experience.

Teachers form initial perceptions through official documents and social media channels, subsequently refining and deepening their understanding through practical teaching experiences. Teachers can clearly recognise both the advantages and drawbacks of the Double Reduction Policy. This policy offers certain benefits to both parents and students, related to alleviating students' academic burdens, promoting students' all-round development, and reducing parental

pressure. Yet, teachers commonly point out that there are increased pressures and workloads in the actual teaching practice of enacting the Double Reduction policy.

Secondly, this study shows that teachers and schools are working diligently to enact the Double Reduction Policy, but there are certain challenges encountered during its enactment. In particular, tensions have become apparent in the enactment process. This study reveals the tension between policy objectives and the examination-oriented culture within China's education system. On one hand, teachers are required to respond to the policy's call for burden reduction and holistic education; on the other, examination results remain a crucial basis for evaluating both student and teacher performance. This combination of demands necessitates constant weighing of priorities in teaching practice, potentially leading to ambiguous role positioning and increased workload.

Thirdly, this study reveals that teachers hold complex and diverse perspectives on the impact of the Double Reduction Policy regarding educational inequality and students' academic pressure. Through limiting after-school tutoring and promoting teacher resource mobility, the policy has to some extent promoted the rebalancing of educational opportunities. Despite formally advocating for reduced homework and weakened ranking systems, intense academic competition and parental expectations regarding student performance persist, instead giving rise to new forms of implicit pressure and educational inequality. Furthermore, the policy's enactment effectiveness varies across different regions and school contexts. Urban parents are more likely to seek alternative resources, whilst rural families are more likely to abandon supplementary tuition options, potentially exacerbating the urban-rural disparity.

6.2. Implications

This study supports the view that the Double Reduction policy constitutes a dynamic enactment process. In policy enactment, teachers are not merely implementers but also possess a degree of agency. This agency is significantly constrained by factors such as school resource conditions, management approaches, and external regulatory requirements. This leads to differentiated enactment ways and practice among schools. Thus, policy makers should fully consider school-level diversity and regional development levels in future reforms. Schools should also develop supportive systems to assist teachers in policy enactment, providing them with appropriate safeguards.

Besides, the study's findings reveal a tension between the policy's objectives of reducing student burdens and promoting holistic development, and the examination-oriented culture prioritising test scores. This highlights the contradiction between policy goals and the educational evaluation system. This suggests that relying solely on the efforts of basic-level teachers may have limited effectiveness in achieving the policy reform objectives. It also requires educational administrative departments and policymakers to reflect at the institutional level and gradually reform the education system's evaluation mechanism, which is currently centred on examination results, promoting a shift towards a more diverse educational evaluation system that fosters comprehensive development.

Moreover, this study reveals the multifaceted roles teachers assume during the enactment of the Double Reduction Policy. Teachers face various challenges, such as undertaking multiple pressures and burdens. This suggests that while

education authorities and schools promote policy objectives, they should also focus on establishing professional support systems for teachers. Specific approaches may include: increasing opportunities for teachers to participate in policy discussions, providing ongoing professional development and psychological support, and establishing more personalised and reasonable work evaluation systems.

6.3. Recommendations

This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on primary school teachers' current perceptions and practical experiences regarding the Double Reduction Policy. However, as the impact of the policy is multifaceted, future research could broaden its scope to include multiple stakeholders such as students, parents, and principles, thereby comprehensively understanding the policy's effects and variations in perception across different groups. Besides, owing to the limited sample size, the generalisability of this study's findings may be somewhat restricted. In the future, it is recommended to employ larger-scale survey designs to analyse enactment variations across different regions, school types, and socioeconomic contexts. Furthermore, future research may also try a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data with qualitative interviews to enhance the width and depth of the study, thereby enabling a more comprehensive evaluation of this policy.

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