

# Viewpoints from Senior Leadership in Junior High School in China: The Conflicts between Double Reduction Policy and Neoliberal Education

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**Keywords:** Double reduction policy; Neoliberal education; Junior high school; China

**Abstract:** After China's national reform and opening in the 1980s, the number of students enrolled in Chinese compulsory education has steadily increased. The double reduction policy has significantly impacted how people view education. People's perception of education. The Chinese government approved establishing the country's first private school to address the rapidly expanding student population during the 1980s and 1990s. This opened neoliberalism and private capital to infiltrate the Chinese educational system. The current neoliberal operation of private and shadow education has had a significant negative impact on educational equity in China. Many studies have been conducted about neoliberalism in the Chinese context and the double reduction policy. However, the former studies are mostly based on students, parents, and teachers, and principals' viewpoints have rarely been taken. Therefore, this research focuses on the voices of private school principals in compulsory education to explore their perception of the double reduction policy and neoliberal education in the Chinese context. The result demonstrates that private school leaders have a positive attitude toward the double reduction policy and are very confident in facing the following challenges caused by the policy. However, private school principals illustrate their negative perceptions of neoliberal education since its nature of marketization and privatization harms Chinese education equity.

## 1. Introduction

After China's national reform and opening up in the 1980s, the number of students enrolled in Chinese compulsory education has steadily increased. The double reduction policy has significantly impacted how people view education. Regarding Chinese compulsory education, the double reduction policy's effects have significantly changed the educational beliefs, implications, and practices in teaching and learning. The Chinese government approved establishing the country's first private school to address the rapidly expanding student population during the 1980s and 1990s. This opened neoliberalism and private capital to infiltrate the Chinese educational system. The current neoliberal operation of private and shadow education has had a significant negative impact on educational equity in China.

The double reduction strategy identifies the current educational problem as caused by excessive study loads and high family educational costs. These facts are all confirmed by evidence. A study by Chu and Xie shows that students in the compulsory school stage had an above-average rate of homework of more than 80% using data from China Youth Research [1]. Meanwhile, Hu, Fan, and Ding note that a 2011 study conducted in eight major cities on 5000 students shows that education consumes the majority of family expenditure at 35.1 percent while also depleting the family's income by 30.1 percent [2]. From 1955—the year the first reduction policy was established—to 2017, nine reduction policies were implemented nationally. In China, load reduction at the compulsory level has been considered for more than 50 years, but little has changed. Under this situation, the double reduction policy is the most stringent reduction policy ever announced under these circumstances.

The double reduction has significantly impacted shaping the educational perspective and practices in Chinese private schools. Numerous studies have examined how the double reduction policy affects students, parents, and teachers [3]. These studies have consistently shown that teachers feel

challenged by the change in teaching and learning under the policy, parents are concerned about the lack of additional educational resources, and students' pressure is still very high. However, little research has been done on how the principals feel about the double reduction policy.

Additionally, neoliberalism has long been involved in the context of Chinese education, and numerous studies have focused on this. Studies revealed that neoliberal education stands in contrast to Chinese educational philosophy and could have detrimental effects on the equity of Chinese education.

## **2. Methodology**

This chapter discusses the research paradigm and methodology that the study used. Some sections have been included in the research process. These sections are participants, data collection, data analysis, reliability and validity, and ethical issues.

### **2.1 Research Paradigm**

There are two mainstream paradigms discussed for research. The first is positivism, which Gary Thomas defines as the idea that knowledge about the social environment can be acquired objectively: what we see and hear is simply perceived and easily recordable. Similar to how physicists investigate levers, atoms, and pulleys, social and psychological phenomena can be observed, measured, and researched scientifically [4].

The second paradigm is interpretivism, which claims that because each of us uniquely creates the world, the reality that social scientists are interested in is not readily perceivable. It is specific to each of us and not just "out there," with words and events carrying a range of meanings. Therefore, it must be thoroughly researched using more than physics and chemistry approaches. Discussions of variables, quantification, and procedures are required to investigate this hazy, constantly changing terrain.

### **2.2 Participants**

These two schools' principals are the ideal candidates for a purposeful sampling since the double-reduction and the neoliberal environment most impact them. In addition, these two principals are information-rich situations, which means they can provide a wealth of details regarding the research issue and the main goal of the investigation.

In this study, the double reduction strategy and the neoliberal environment have a more significant impact on private schools than on public ones since private schools were the first to open the door for neoliberalism's involvement in education, which advocates for privatization and marketization. Meanwhile, the double reduction puts more strain on private institutions than public ones.

Mr. X is the principal of compulsory education in School A. The compulsory education department has about 1200 students and 200 teaching staff. In 2019, a top-ranking shadow education provider with a well-known national brand founded the school, its second academic institution in China. The school now holds the top spot in its district.

Mr. X worked as a teacher for five years. In the nine years that followed, he served as a class teacher, lesson planner, year group leader, head of a teaching and research team, deputy head of the teaching department, and head of the teaching department. Then, in 2009, he started working for the most well-known private school in the area. He served as the company's school's principal for the following eleven years. The fact that he continued to work as both a principal and a class teacher is crucial because, in his opinion, a principal can only stay up to date on education when they are on the front lines. He assumed leadership of School A in 2021, when it was first formed.

Mrs. Y is the vice-principal of compulsory education in School B. The compulsory education department has about 5200 students and 220 teaching staff. The school was established by a famous local private education firm in 2015.

For eight years, Mrs. Y was a teacher. She then switched to administrative positions and spent the next sixteen years there. She held a position in a public school from 1996 until 1999. She was subsequently employed by a nearby private school and has continued to work there as of late. She has held the positions of head of a teaching and research team, head of a year group, and head of the

teaching department over the past 16 years.

## **2.3 Data Gathering**

As a result, the interview schedule for this study was carefully planned. Although the interview is semi-structured, an interview guideline has been provided to the participants before the interview to make sure the interview is on the right track. All open-ended questions enable the interviewer to gauge the interviewee's opinions more effectively [5].

## **2.4 Data Analysis**

This study uses thematic analysis to analyze the data. Thematic analysis has been widely used in social science to explore the data's code and identify key themes from the raw data.

Following category development, a further in-depth investigation will reveal which categories may be subclasses of others, thus enabling the researcher to design a category tree. The researcher can rationally arrange the data based on said category tree. The names of the categories will be determined by the themes of the research-related questions, the participants' actual words, or an external source. The responses will be contrasted and compared based on various respondents.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1 Private Education Purpose**

Mr. X identified that Chinese education developed rapidly after the Reform and Opening action during the 1980s. However, the government noticed that the compulsory public education resource was insufficient to support the fast-developing education demands. Consequently, private schools were approved by the government. In addition, the administration has noted that the most prestigious universities and schools in the west are private institutions. Thus, the government believed private schools had advantages and strengths [6]. The Chinese government allowed private education to bridge the gap between educational demand and supply and take advantage of private education's benefits.

Mrs. Y mentions that the beginning of private education aimed to be a beneficial addition to the entire education system in China. This statement corresponds to Mr. X's perception of enriching education resources and aiding education. The original expectation of the government on private education was to get private capital with education sentiment to help the distribution of education resources with no or low profit.

Therefore, the original purpose of promoting private education was first to fill education demands after Reform and Opening. This was especially true in rural areas. The second purpose was to import an advanced education system and do a test in the Chinese context. Thirdly, to engage a limited level of capital operations to help education resource distribution.

This is because the government permits private school owners to receive the appropriate profit from their institutions. Mr. X, however, argued that this situation was problematic because the government needed to regulate the profit margin. Most crucially, principals concur that the unchecked growth of private education has changed its original intent and has instead placed a higher priority on profitability than its original objectives. Mr. X and Mrs. Y concur that most private schools nowadays prioritize financial success. The primary goal of today's private schools, according to Mr. X, is to provide better educational services than public schools and to maintain their position as the best in the community.

### **3.2 Conflicts between Private Education and Education Equity**

When talking about private education, there are two aspects. The first one is about private schools. Mr. X believes that the existence of private schools to some extent, causes the assemble of high-quality education resources, which means private schools had the right to pick top students with high social and economic status and hire top teachers in the area with high salaries with the fund they got from expensive tuition fees [7]. When the best teachers and students are put together, it is easy for a private school to hold a top position locally.

The second aspect of private education is shadow education. Conversely, Mrs. Y discussed "shadow schooling," where parents can buy additional educational support depending on their financial capacity. Even while the government insists that educational resources should be distributed appropriately based on kids' learning situations, the marketization of shadow education causes the allocation of educational resources to depend on parents' financial standing. The shared point of these two findings is that the current education resource distribution of education resources is assigned based on social and economic status rather than education demands.

### **3.3 Difficulties of Applying Neoliberalism in the Chinese Educational Context**

Mrs. Y compared Chinese and western geopolitical settings and concluded that following the Reform and Opening up the initiative, China had consented to enter the global market and marketize a number of public institutions of higher learning and education. However, it has been declared under the federal government's control, meaning it has the authority to intervene. In contrast, everything is left to the western world's free market without any government involvement. Neoliberalism cannot be discussed in Chinese education because schools need more decision-making authority.

Mr. X built up his viewpoint on the population of China to prove that neoliberalism is not applicable in the Chinese educational context. He reasoned that China's educational resources are still insufficient to meet the increasing demand for education. There are a lot of students. Neoliberalizing government education will lead to an unpredictable path that will result in an inefficient transfer of the current, scarce educational resources based on a marketized approach. Neoliberalism cannot, therefore, guarantee educational justice or the equitable distribution of resources among a large number of students.

### **3.4 The Challenges of Teaching and Assessment**

Despite the government's promotion of the after-school program, Mr. X claims that teachers' workload in his school did not alter at all due to the double reduction policy. However, instructors are now eligible for additional compensation for the after-school program. He is considering that his school is a boarding school that also permits commuter students. He, therefore, set up teachers and personnel to oversee the nighttime self-learning session even before the policy was in place. Mr. X insists that even before the policy, it was difficult for any teacher in a private school to complete all of their work in the allotted 8 hours. This is in reference to the weight of "increase quality and enhance efficiency." Additionally, part of the educators' job is to research how to enhance the effectiveness and quality of instruction. In his opinion, the double reduction policy was successful in once again stressing teachers.

After reviewing the Beijing paper this year, Mr. X saw that the senior high school entrance exam's difficulty had been changed to be easier to deal with the change in the double reduction policy. Mr. Y drew attention to the fact that in her school, she used a process assessment technique that evaluated pupils based on both their daily moral performance and final grade. She does, however, add that a student's grade is still an essential component of their evaluation because it still has the potential to determine their fate.

## **4. Conclusion**

According to my investigation, principals generally have favorable opinions of the double reduction program. This is due to the fact that the principals do not need to make additional arrangements to deal with the policy due to the inherent benefits of their schools having after-school service even prior to the double reduction policy, and "improve quality and raise efficiency" is an original norm of the teachers at both schools, meaning there is no need for additional effort from the teachers and no management strategy changes for principals. Additionally, the change in parental expectation, to some extent, relieves the pressure put on teachers. Then, the examinations have a trend to get more accessible, and process assessment can help to assess students comprehensively.

According to my research, principals have a typically negative view of neoliberal education. This is as a result of neoliberalism's distortion of private education's initial goals. Additionally, the unequal

allocation of scarce educational resources was a result of neoliberal shadow and private schooling. Last but not least, China lacks the free economic environment necessary for the development of neoliberalism in the framework of Chinese education.

The remaining gaps in my research, along with recommendations for additional study, are all addressed at the conclusion of each subtopic in the discussion chapter. In conclusion, this study examines how principals in a Chinese private junior high school perceive the double reduction strategy and neoliberalism. It is hoped that my study will offer a picture of how Chinese private junior high school principals overcame the obstacles they faced as a result of the significant influence of this legislation on the educational landscape. I hope I can offer some advice to the teachers who are trying to strike a compromise between the needs of the students' learning and the double reduction policy's requirements. Private schooling does eventually have advantages for both parents and pupils.

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