

A Critical Discourse Problematization Framework (CDPF) Analysis of "Double Reduction" Policy in China

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Context

China has a highly competitive education system with high-stakes tests. Private tutoring, which provides supplementary content to additional lessons and enhances learning levels, thrives in such competitive education environments. Students and parents invest more time and money to fill in for academic deficiencies or gain a learning advantage more efficiently. This unlimited development of the privatization of education is seen by the government as undermining a fair education environment and leading to unhealthy competition. A buzzword of 2020 vividly describes China's hyper-competitive culture, "Neijuan" (involution), in the labor market and education system. Involution describes the phenomenon where individuals usually do extra work, but this extra effort is unable to yield a valid output. Chinese society is rife with anxiety and pressure to compete for limited opportunities with the same limited resources, which reflects the inequality of access to and distribution of opportunities.

In July 2021, the Chinese government released "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education", referred to as the "Double Reduction" policy. The policy was implemented at all levels of schooling in compulsory education, and impacted both public and private education, with requirements such as a reduction in homework, a ban on out-of-school/after-school tutoring, restrictions on class schedules, as well as a series of regulations for training institutions and governance guidelines to improve the quality of teaching within the school.

Discourses of **Equality** and **Equity** in China with political agenda:
Píngděng (i.e., equality): "sameness" in the distribution of resources
Gōngpíng (i.e., equity): "fairness, justice, and impartiality" in the distribution of resources.

Mao Era-New Democracy
Core Value: Equality & Egalitarian

Reform and Opening-up - Ideology of Structural Functionalism
Equal opportunity

Equity was subordinated to economic development and socialist modernization

21st Century - Chinese-style Modernization- "common prosperity"(xiǎokāng)

Jūnhéng (i.e., balance and equilibrium)

"Chinese developmental road" of socialism: "people-centered development"

Research Questions

What does the representation of private education in the "Double Reduction" policy reveal about the changing discourses of equality & equity in China?

Sub-Questions:

- How is private tutoring represented in China's "Double Reduction" policy?
- How does the "Double Reduction" policy problematize private tutoring in China?

Methodology

Critical Discourse Problematization Framework (CDPF)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)



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'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) approach



WPR approach to policy analysis:
(1) What is the problem (e.g., of problem 'gamblers', 'drug use/abuse', domestic violence, global warming, health inequalities, terrorism, etc.) represented to be?
(2) What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?
(3) How has this representation of the problem come about?
(4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?
(5) What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?
(6) How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

Findings

I. The privatization of education has affected the quality of public education

14. ...training institutions are not allowed to hire school teachers with high salaries...(MOE, 2021).
...there are situations where teachers do not actively teach in class to induce or force students to attend off-campus training institutions where they teach (Special Campaign to Rectify Tutoring Institutions, 2018).
...teachers giving students supplementary lessons or new lessons on holidays and weekends has affected the progress and quality of formal education ("Ten Regulations", 2013).

II. The privatization of education aggravates a competitive learning environment

13. No new off-campus training institutions for compulsory education students will be approved by all localities, and the existing training institutions will be registered as non-profit organizations... subject tutoring institutions shall not be listed for financing, and capitalization is strictly prohibited (MOE, 2021).
15. Strictly control the excessive influx of capital into tutoring institutions... It is resolutely prohibited to engage in unfair competition by fictitious original prices, false discounts, false publicity, etc. (MOE, 2021).

III. The privatization of education increases the burden of family education, both financially and mentally

22. According to the law and regulations, it will seriously investigate and punish all kinds of illegal advertising behaviors of off-campus training that exaggerate the tutoring effect, mislead the public educational concept, and create anxiety among parents (MOE, 2021).
26. Strengthen supervision of tutoring fees... Determine pricing methods in a scientific and reasonable way, clarify charging standards, and resolutely curb excessive charges and excessive profit-driven behavior... Effectively prevent the occurrence of problems such as "difficult to return fees" and "running away with money"(MOE, 2021).

Discussion

The policy text conveyed that the government views the private education sector as the root, if not the main, cause of the woes of public schools. Behind the determination of this argument is the changing discourse of equality and equity in China.

The "Double Reduction" policy is seen as a key policy for the balanced development of education in Chinese-style modernization. It is also linked to other national policies and actions, such as the three-child policy. Reducing the financial burden of private tutoring promoted by the "Double Reduction" policy is a supporting measure to improve the country's fertility rate by reducing education costs and parental stress of raising children in China.

The Silences in the "Double Reduction" Policy:

I. The reasons for a decline in the quality of public education and teacher turnover in public schools are more complex than portrayed in the policy:

high-level salaries in training institutions and private schools; low satisfaction with teacher's income; long working hours that limit self-development; inflexible teacher performance evaluation system; tedious teaching objectives...

II. To a large extent, the competition in the education market is not really about the private sector manipulating markets and capital. Rather, it is the state and school-determined singular form of entrance examination, admission pattern, and allocation of limited public education resources that drove competition in the education sector. The entrance exam itself is like a market competition in which everyone participates and follows the logic of score.

III. The mental and economic pressure of this generation is related to the homogenized society with the singular measure of achievements, singular goals, and singular methods of competition.

"Common prosperity" is premised on continued economic growth. The government has issued a series of policies aimed at reducing the social burden, reducing the cost of living, and providing citizens with equal opportunities in medical care and education. These actions are ultimately aimed at expanding domestic demand and improving the overall consumption capacity of the people. This logic also reflects in the education sector. My study finds that the "Double Reduction" policy shows a paradox: the policy was introduced to reduce the burden and reducing 'unhealthy' competition within the education system, but in order to provide a more competitive environment for revitalizing the economy. Healthy competition drives development in society. The goal of achieving educational equality is to advance toward the road of common prosperity, but the premise is that of activating the economy.

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