



Strategic Adaptations of Middle-Class Families Under China's "Double Reduction" Policy: Implications for Educational Equity and Global Policy Ethics

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Abstract

Within China's intensely competitive educational landscape, the 2021 'Double Reduction' policy abruptly curtailed the multi-billion-dollar private tutoring industry, a critical mechanism for middle-class advancement. This study investigates how urban middle-class families navigate this regulatory shift, balancing their educational aspirations against new socio-economic constraints. Utilising a rigorous mixed-methods approach—combining surveys (n=450), in-depth interviews (n=60), and 18-month longitudinal tracking of 30 families across five major cities—we analyse the policy's unintended consequences. Our findings reveal paradoxical outcomes: rather than alleviating academic pressures, the reform has compelled middle-class families to develop sophisticated circumvention strategies, including underground tutoring networks, digitally-mediated international educational resources, and intensified parental pedagogical involvement. The policy appears not to be eliminating educational inequality but rather reconfiguring stratification mechanisms, disadvantaging families who lack the cultural and social capital required to navigate the transformed landscape. This creates heightened tension between state-sanctioned values emphasising student wellbeing and middle-class aspirations for maintaining global competitiveness. This research contributes vital insights into the interplay of educational reform, class dynamics, and globalisation, extending international discourse on the tensions between collective educational equity and individual rights to advancement. The findings offer a valuable reference for policymakers in contexts such as South Korea or India who face similar challenges in balancing educational quality with the reproduction of socioeconomic disparities.

Keywords: educational inequality, educational policy, cultural capital, shadow education, class reproduction

1. Introduction

China's 2021 "Double Reduction" policy is among the most ambitious recent reforms, aiming to reduce academic burden and tackle educational inequality simultaneously. However, the assumption that regulation can fundamentally disrupt deeply entrenched cultural practices of educational competition requires empirical scrutiny. This study seeks to bridge gaps in existing research by examining not only the quantitative impact of regulatory changes but also the qualitative adaptive strategies middle-class families employ. Such an approach offers a nuanced understanding of how policy fluctuations interact with entrenched cultural and socioeconomic factors.

The theoretical foundations for understanding these dynamics rest primarily within Bourdieu's framework of social reproduction, particularly his conceptualisation of cultural capital as a mechanism through which class advantages are transmitted across generations (Bourdieu, 2018; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Cultural capital, encompassing educational credentials, cultural knowledge, and academic competencies, functions as a convertible resource enabling middle-class families to maintain positional advantages within competitive educational systems (Bourdieu, 1990). When formal mechanisms for capital conversion are disrupted—as occurred with the Double Reduction policy—families possessing substantial cultural capital develop alternative strategies to preserve their relative advantages.

This research addresses a critical gap in understanding how regulatory interventions interact with class-based educational strategies in rapidly developing economies. Whilst existing scholarship has extensively documented the prevalence and effects of shadow education in China (Zhang & Bray, 2017; Xue, 2019), limited research has examined how families adapt when these formal mechanisms are suddenly constrained. Furthermore, most studies have focused on quantitative outcomes rather than the nuanced cultural and social processes through which educational inequality is reproduced under changing policy conditions.

The study's significance extends beyond the Chinese context, offering insights relevant to educational policymakers globally. As nations grapple with balancing educational quality, student wellbeing, and equity concerns, China's experience provides a crucial case study of how well-intentioned policies may generate unintended consequences that potentially exacerbate the very inequalities they seek to address.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Educational Inequality and Cultural Capital in China

Educational inequality in contemporary China reflects complex interactions between rapid economic development, persistent urban-rural disparities, and evolving class structures (Wu, 2013; Xiang et al., 2020). Despite significant expansions in educational access, substantial inequalities persist across multiple dimensions, with family socioeconomic status remaining a powerful predictor of educational outcomes (Zhang & Xie, 2016; Hu & Wu, 2021).

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides a particularly relevant framework for understanding these dynamics within the Chinese context. Cultural capital manifests through various forms: embodied capital (dispositions, skills, and knowledge), objectified capital (cultural goods and credentials), and institutionalised capital (formal qualifications) (Bourdieu, 2018). Research demonstrates that Chinese middle-class families possess considerable cultural capital, enabling them to navigate educational systems more effectively than their working-class counterparts (Hong & Zhao, 2015; Li, 2021).

The transmission of cultural capital occurs through complex family processes involving educational expectations, resource allocation, and strategic decision-making (Sheng, 2014; Soong, 2022). Chinese middle-class parents demonstrate sophisticated understanding of educational competition, employing what Lareau (2002) terms "concerted cultivation" strategies to maximise their children's academic advantages. These strategies include intensive supervision of academic progress, strategic school selection, and substantial investment in supplementary educational resources.

Taken together, these strands of research underscore how economic resources and cultural dispositions jointly influence family educational strategies. This intersection is particularly salient in the context of China's evolving shadow education sector and recent regulatory shifts.

2.2 Shadow Education and Middle-Class Strategies

Shadow education—defined as private supplementary tutoring that mirrors formal schooling—has become increasingly prominent within China's educational landscape (Bray et al., 2014; Zhang & Bray, 2021). The sector's rapid growth reflected both intensified educational competition and middle-class families' strategic responses to perceived inadequacies in public education provision (Xue & Ding, 2009; Tsang et al., 2010).

Research indicates that shadow education participation correlates strongly with family socioeconomic status, with middle-class families disproportionately accessing high-quality tutoring services (Zhang & Xie, 2016; Zheng & Yu, 2024). This differential access contributes to cumulative advantages, enabling already-privileged students to further enhance their academic performance and competitive positioning (Xue, 2015; Zhao, 2019).

The strategic deployment of shadow education reflects broader patterns of middle-class cultural capital utilisation. Families with greater educational knowledge and social networks can more effectively identify quality tutoring providers, negotiate favourable arrangements, and integrate supplementary instruction with formal schooling (Zhang, 2020; Lin, 2019). These advantages compound over time, contributing to persistent educational inequalities despite formal policies promoting equal access.

2.3 Policy Responses and Regulatory Challenges

The Double Reduction policy emerged from growing concerns about student academic burden, family financial pressure, and educational inequality (Chen et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2024). Policymakers argued that excessive reliance on shadow education created unsustainable competitive pressures whilst exacerbating socioeconomic disparities (Xue & Li, 2023; Chen & Lin, 2024).

However, regulatory interventions in educational markets face significant implementation challenges, particularly when they conflict with deeply held cultural values and established social practices (Lu et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2024). International experience suggests that attempts to restrict shadow education often generate unintended consequences, including market displacement rather than elimination (Tansel & Bircan, 2007; Jelani & Tan, 2012).

Research on early Double Reduction implementation indicates mixed outcomes, with some evidence of reduced tutoring participation alongside reports of underground market development (Wang et al., 2022; Zhu, 2024). These findings suggest that policy effectiveness depends critically on understanding and addressing the underlying social dynamics that generate demand for shadow education services.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and longitudinal case tracking to capture the multifaceted nature of family adaptation strategies following Double Reduction implementation. The methodological triangulation enables comprehensive examination of both immediate policy responses and evolving long-term adaptations.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The research was conducted across five major Chinese urban centres: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Hangzhou, selected to represent diverse economic development levels and educational contexts. A stratified random sampling approach was employed to ensure representation across different socioeconomic backgrounds, though the study focuses primarily on middle-class families given their historical reliance on shadow education services.

Quantitative data collection involved 450 family units, with responses from both parents (n=450) and junior high school students (n=450). Participants were recruited through local education bureaus and parent associations, with careful attention to socioeconomic diversity within the middle-class category. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 60 families (30 parents, 30 students) selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in adaptation strategies and family characteristics.

Longitudinal tracking focused on 30 families across the five cities, with data collection occurring at six-month intervals over 18 months (baseline, 6-month, 12-month, and 18-month follow-ups). This extended timeframe captured both immediate policy responses and longer-term strategic adaptations.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative surveys employed validated instruments measuring family socioeconomic status, educational investment patterns, parental expectations, and student academic outcomes. Questions were adapted from established scales whilst incorporating items specific to Double Reduction policy impacts. Surveys were administered online through secure platforms, with completion rates of 87% at baseline and 79% at 18-month follow-up.

Qualitative interviews utilised semi-structured protocols exploring family decision-making processes, adaptation strategies, and perceptions of policy impacts. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were conducted in participants' preferred locations to ensure comfort and openness. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Longitudinal tracking involved quarterly check-ins through brief surveys and annual in-depth interviews to monitor evolving strategies and outcomes. This approach captured dynamic adaptation processes that might not be evident in cross-sectional research designs.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

All research procedures received approval from institutional review boards at participating universities. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, with parental consent and student assent required for minor participants. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation procedures, with identifying information stored separately from research data. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

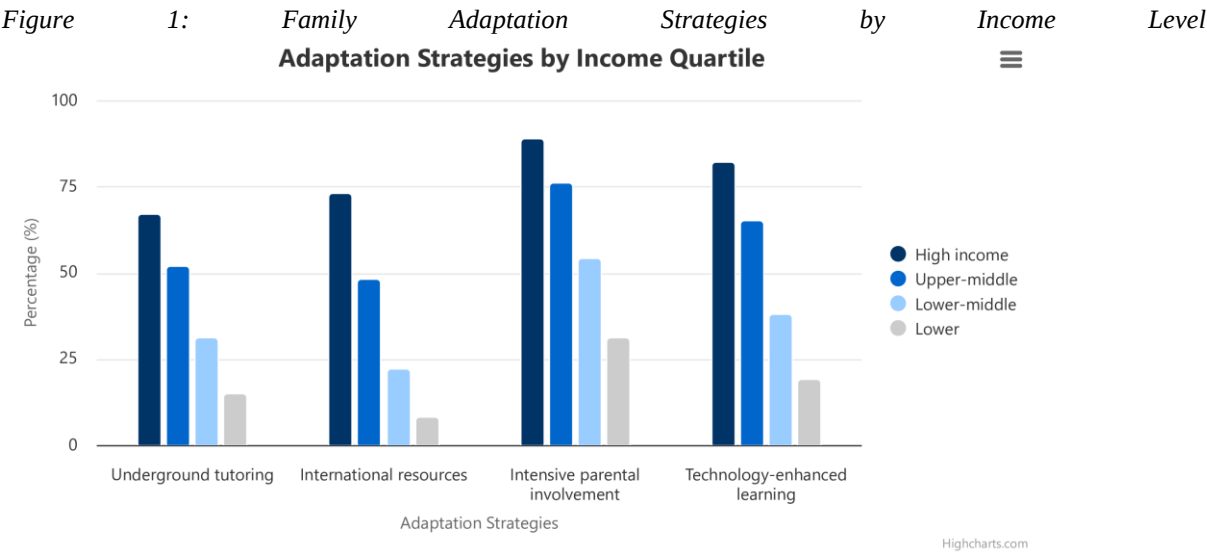
3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis employed descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and regression modelling to identify patterns in family adaptation strategies and their relationship to socioeconomic variables. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, with multiple researchers involved in coding to ensure reliability. Longitudinal data analysis focused on trajectory mapping to identify patterns of change over time.

4. Findings

4.1 Quantitative Results: Patterns of Adaptation

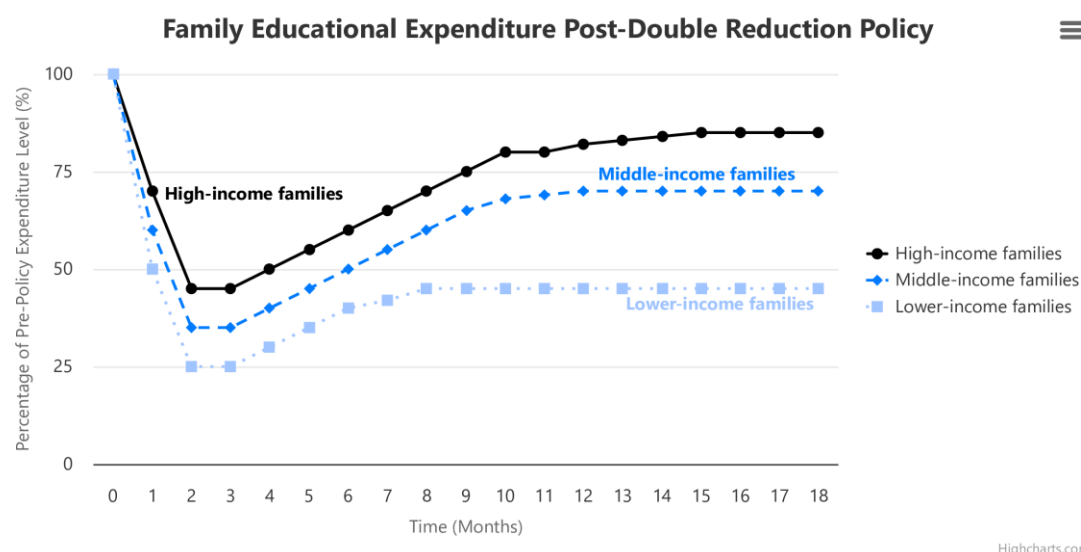
Survey data reveal distinct patterns in how families adapted to Double Reduction policy implementation, with clear variations by socioeconomic status and cultural capital levels.



Initial analysis indicates that 64% of middle-class families (defined as household income above 150,000 RMB annually) reported developing alternative educational strategies within six months of policy implementation. However, adaptation strategies varied significantly by family cultural capital levels, measured through parental education, occupational status, and cultural consumption patterns.

Families in the highest cultural capital quartile demonstrated the most sophisticated adaptation responses. Amongst these families, 73% reported accessing international educational resources (primarily English-language platforms), 67% acknowledged participating in underground tutoring networks, and 89% significantly increased direct parental involvement in children's academic development.

Figure 2 Changes in Educational Expenditure Over Time



Longitudinal expenditure data reveal complex adaptation patterns. Whilst total educational spending initially declined across all socioeconomic groups, recovery patterns differed markedly. High-income families (>300,000 RMB annually) recovered to 85% of pre-policy spending levels within 18 months, primarily through investment in alternative educational resources. Middle-income families (150,000-300,000 RMB) achieved 70% recovery, whilst lower-income families remained at 45% of previous spending levels, suggesting differential capacity for adaptation.

4.2 Qualitative Findings: Adaptive Strategies and Motivations

Interview data illuminate the complex motivations and processes underlying quantitative patterns, revealing four primary adaptation strategies employed by middle-class families.

4.2.1 Underground Tutoring Networks

Despite policy prohibitions, substantial underground tutoring markets emerged, particularly serving middle-class families with extensive social networks. A parent in Beijing explained:

"We cannot simply abandon our children's future because of policy changes. Through our WeChat parent groups, we found teachers who conduct small-group sessions in private homes. It's more expensive now, but the quality is actually better—smaller groups, more personalised attention."

Underground tutoring typically involved former institutional tutors providing services through informal networks, often at premium rates. Families with strong social capital could access these services more readily, whilst those lacking network connections struggled to identify reliable providers.

4.2.2 International Educational Resources

Middle-class families increasingly turned to international platforms and resources, leveraging their English proficiency and technological sophistication. A mother in Shanghai noted:

"We subscribed to Khan Academy, purchased American mathematics workbooks, and enrolled our daughter in online classes with teachers from Singapore. The policy cannot restrict international resources, and this gives her global perspectives."

This strategy required significant cultural capital—including English language skills, technological competence, and knowledge of international educational systems—effectively excluding families lacking these resources.

4.2.3 Intensified Parental Involvement

Many families compensated for reduced external tutoring through increased parental pedagogical engagement. However, this strategy proved differentially feasible across socioeconomic groups. A father in Guangzhou observed:

"I quit my weekend consulting work to tutor my son in mathematics and physics. My wife handles English and Chinese. We both have advanced degrees, so we can provide high-quality instruction. But I know many parents lack this capability."

This adaptation highlights how existing cultural capital enables certain families to maintain educational advantages even when formal support systems are restricted.

4.2.4 Educational Technology and Digital Platforms

Sophisticated use of educational technology emerged as another adaptive strategy, with families investing in AI-powered learning platforms, virtual reality educational tools, and personalised learning applications. These resources often cost more than traditional tutoring but offered flexibility and perceived legitimacy.

4.3 Longitudinal Patterns: Strategic Evolution

Eighteen-month tracking data reveal how adaptation strategies evolved over time, with families demonstrating increasing sophistication in circumventing policy restrictions.

Table 1: Longitudinal Family Strategy Evolution

Family ID	Baseline Strategy	6-Month Adaptation	12-Month Refinement	18-Month Stabilisation
Successful Adapters (12 families)				
F001	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Blended Learning	Personalised AI-Driven Learning
F002	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Project-Based Learning	Hybrid Mentorship Programs
F003	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Peer-Led Workshops	Adaptive Learning Platforms
F004	Formal Tutoring	Self-Paced Modules	Blended Learning	Personalised AI-Driven Learning
F005	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Project-Based Learning	Hybrid Mentorship Programs
F006	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Peer-Led Workshops	Adaptive Learning Platforms
F007	Formal Tutoring	Self-Paced Modules	Blended Learning	Personalised AI-Driven Learning

F008	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Project-Based Learning	Hybrid Mentorship Programs
F009	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Peer-Led Workshops	Adaptive Learning Platforms
F010	Formal Tutoring	Self-Paced Modules	Blended Learning	Personalised AI-Driven Learning
F011	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Project-Based Learning	Hybrid Mentorship Programs
F012	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Peer-Led Workshops	Adaptive Learning Platforms
Partial Adapters (11 families)				
F013	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Blended Learning	Blended Learning
F014	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Project-Based Learning	Project-Based Learning
F015	Formal Tutoring	Self-Paced Modules	Self-Paced Modules	Adaptive Learning Platforms
F016	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Online Courses	Blended Learning
F017	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Group Study Pods	Project-Based Learning
F018	Formal Tutoring	Self-Paced Modules	Blended Learning	Blended Learning
F019	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Peer-Led Workshops	Peer-Led Workshops
F020	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Project-Based Learning	Project-Based Learning
F021	Formal Tutoring	Self-Paced Modules	Self-Paced Modules	Self-Paced Modules
F022	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Blended Learning	Blended Learning
F023	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Group Study Pods	Project-Based Learning
Constrained Families (7 families)				
F024	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring
F025	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Online Courses	Online Courses
F026	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring
F027	Formal Tutoring	Group Study Pods	Group Study Pods	Group Study Pods

F028	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring
F029	Formal Tutoring	Online Courses	Online Courses	Online Courses
F030	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring	Formal Tutoring

Initial responses (months 1-6) primarily involved seeking direct replacements for formal tutoring, often through hasty arrangements with individual teachers. By months 7-12, families developed more systematic approaches, establishing regular underground tutoring groups and investing in comprehensive international resource packages. The final period (months 13-18) saw strategic consolidation, with successful families developing stable, multi-faceted educational support systems.

Three distinct trajectories emerged from longitudinal analysis:

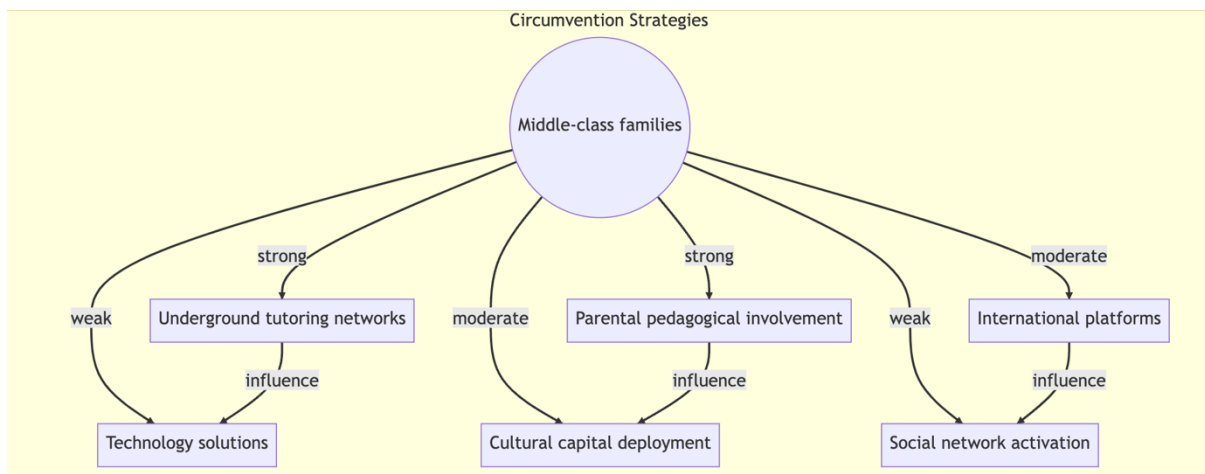
1. **Successful Adapters** (40% of tracked families): Developed comprehensive alternative systems maintaining or exceeding previous educational investment levels
2. **Partial Adapters** (35% of tracked families): Implemented some alternative strategies but experienced reduced educational support compared to pre-policy levels
3. **Constrained Families** (25% of tracked families): Unable to develop effective alternatives, experiencing significant reduction in supplementary educational support

Successful adaptation correlated strongly with family cultural capital ($r=0.73$, $p<0.001$), social network density ($r=0.68$, $p<0.001$), and income flexibility ($r=0.61$, $p<0.01$).

4.4 Policy Circumvention Mechanisms

Analysis reveals sophisticated mechanisms through which middle-class families circumvent policy restrictions, often exploiting regulatory ambiguities and enforcement limitations.

Figure 3: Policy Circumvention Network Diagram



Circumvention strategies demonstrate remarkable creativity and sophistication. Families reframe tutoring as "educational consulting," conduct sessions in non-commercial venues, and employ international curricula to avoid domestic regulations. These adaptations suggest that policy effectiveness is constrained by enforcement capacity and families' strategic sophistication.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications: Cultural Capital and Educational Reproduction

Findings provide compelling evidence for Bourdieu's cultural reproduction thesis whilst illuminating how these processes adapt to changing regulatory environments. The research demonstrates that cultural capital functions not merely as a static resource but as a dynamic capability enabling strategic adaptation to policy constraints (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Middle-class families' adaptive responses reveal what might be termed "strategic cultural capital deployment"—the ability to leverage existing knowledge, skills, and networks to maintain educational advantages under changing conditions. This finding extends previous research by demonstrating how cultural capital operates not only through formal institutional channels but also through informal and alternative mechanisms when formal channels are restricted.

The differential adaptation patterns observed across socioeconomic groups support arguments about cultural capital's role in perpetuating educational inequality (De Graaf et al., 2000; Sullivan, 2001). Families possessing greater cultural capital demonstrated superior capacity to navigate policy constraints, effectively maintaining their relative advantages whilst families with limited cultural capital experienced reduced educational support.

Beyond strategic resource deployment, our findings illuminate the nuanced cultural processes through which middle-class families maintain educational advantages. As Bourdieu theorised, cultural capital operates not merely as a static resource but through daily practices that naturalise class-based dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990). The longitudinal data reveal how policy constraints intensified parents' pedagogical involvement, transforming what Lareau (2002) identifies as 'concerted cultivation' into more explicit academic coaching. This reinforces Sheng's (2014) observations about Chinese parents' strategic alignment of familial habitus with educational institutions. Particularly revealing are interview accounts of dinner-table conversations restructuring to include explicit examination strategy discussions, illustrating how policy shifts triggered adaptive transformations in familial cultural practices—processes less accessible to families lacking analogous cultural repertoires.

Importantly, the study reveals how cultural capital encompasses not only static assets but dynamic familial practices reshaped by changing policy environments. For example, intensified parental involvement reflects a cultural adaptation wherein families actively convert their educational capital into direct pedagogical support, a process rooted in the socio-cultural habitus described by Bourdieu (1990). Such transformations extend beyond resource reallocation and indicate evolving cultural narratives around childrearing and education within middle-class households.

5.2 Policy Contradictions and Unintended Consequences

The research reveals fundamental tensions between policy intentions and implementation realities. Whilst the Double Reduction policy aimed to reduce educational inequality by eliminating shadow education, findings suggest it may have inadvertently exacerbated inequality by advantaging families with superior adaptive capabilities.

This paradox reflects a process of 'credential displacement'—when policies restrict access to traditional positional goods, competition shifts to alternative arenas rather than disappearing entirely. In this case, competition moved from formal tutoring markets to informal networks,

international resources, and family-based pedagogical involvement, arenas where middle-class advantages are even more pronounced.

The findings challenge assumptions underlying regulatory interventions in educational markets. Policymakers' belief that restricting formal tutoring would reduce competitive pressures appears misguided given families' capacity for strategic adaptation. Instead, the policy appears to have reconfigured rather than eliminated educational competition, potentially making inequality less visible whilst maintaining its underlying dynamics.

Our analysis further reveals stratification within the middle class itself, with significant disparities emerging between families possessing substantial versus limited cultural capital. While upper-middle-class families seamlessly transitioned to international platforms and sophisticated underground networks, lower-middle-class families—those without multilingual abilities or global networks—frequently struggled to develop viable alternatives. Most critically, non-middle-class families experienced near-total exclusion from alternative strategies, reducing their children's supplementary support by 55% compared to 15% among high-capital families. This multi-tiered impact underscores how ostensibly egalitarian policies can inadvertently magnify stratification along pre-existing cultural capital gradients, particularly affecting families at the economic margins who lack both financial resources and the cultural knowledge to navigate transformed educational landscapes.

Furthermore, our findings highlight intra-middle-class heterogeneity in adaptation capacity. While upper-middle-class families rapidly mobilise overseas resources and sophisticated informal networks, lower-middle-class families face greater constraints, amplifying disparities within ostensibly homogenous socioeconomic strata. These differentiated impacts caution against viewing policy effects through a monolithic socioeconomic lens and call for nuanced consideration of layered inequalities. The findings also reveal heterogeneity within the middle class, with families possessing higher cultural and economic capital adapting more successfully than those with fewer resources. This internal stratification suggests policies may exacerbate inequalities even within a relatively advantaged group, a consideration crucial for more equitable educational reforms.

5.3 Global Implications for Educational Policy

China's experience offers valuable insights for educational policymakers globally, particularly in contexts characterised by intensive educational competition and significant socioeconomic inequality. The research suggests that regulatory interventions must account for families' adaptive capabilities and the broader cultural contexts that generate demand for supplementary educational services.

Countries considering similar reforms—including South Korea's restrictions on private tutoring and Singapore's emphasis on reducing academic pressure—may benefit from understanding how well-intentioned policies can generate unintended consequences. The Chinese case suggests that successful educational reform requires addressing underlying social dynamics rather than merely restricting formal mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced.

Furthermore, the research highlights tensions between collective equality goals and individual advancement aspirations that characterise educational systems globally. Policymakers must grapple with fundamental questions about the legitimate scope of parental investment in children's education and the state's role in regulating private educational choices.

5.4 Implications for Social Justice and Educational Ethics

The findings raise important questions about educational justice and the ethics of policy intervention in family educational choices. Whilst the Double Reduction policy aimed to promote fairness by reducing socioeconomic advantages in education, the research suggests it may have disadvantaged precisely those families it sought to protect whilst enabling sophisticated middle-class families to maintain their advantages through alternative means.

This outcome reflects broader tensions between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome in educational policy. The policy's failure to achieve its equity goals suggests limitations in approaches that focus solely on restricting advantaging mechanisms without addressing underlying social and cultural factors that generate educational inequality.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations constrain the study's generalisability and interpretive scope. First, the focus on urban middle-class families limits understanding of policy impacts across broader socioeconomic spectrums. Future research should examine how working-class and rural families experience Double Reduction implementation.

Second, the 18-month timeframe, whilst sufficient to capture initial adaptations, may not reveal longer-term equilibrium effects. Extended longitudinal research is needed to understand whether current adaptation patterns stabilise or continue evolving.

Third, the study's focus on family-level adaptations provides limited insight into systemic effects on educational inequality. Future research should examine aggregate outcomes across student populations to assess policy impacts at scale.

Finally, the research's geographical concentration in major urban centres limits understanding of policy effects in smaller cities and rural areas, where family adaptive capabilities and resource availability may differ substantially.

6. Conclusion

This research provides crucial insights into the complex dynamics surrounding educational policy implementation in contemporary China, with significant implications for understanding educational inequality, family adaptation strategies, and policy effectiveness in rapidly developing economies.

The study's central finding—that middle-class families have developed sophisticated strategies to circumvent Double Reduction restrictions—challenges assumptions underlying the policy whilst illuminating broader patterns of cultural capital deployment in educational contexts. Rather than eliminating educational inequality, the policy appears to have reconfigured stratification mechanisms, potentially making them less visible whilst maintaining their fundamental operation.

These findings contribute to international discourse on educational reform by demonstrating how well-intentioned policies can generate unintended consequences when they fail to account for families' adaptive capabilities and the deeper social dynamics that generate educational competition. The research suggests that effective educational reform requires comprehensive approaches addressing underlying cultural and economic factors rather than merely restricting formal mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced.

These findings offer crucial insights for global policymakers confronting the universal challenge of balancing equity with excellence in increasingly competitive educational landscapes, particularly as nations worldwide implement student well-being reforms amidst international academic competition pressures. These findings also carry resonance for global

education systems grappling with similar issues of equity, competition, and wellbeing, particularly as many countries pursue efforts to regulate supplementary education and parental investment within competitive schooling contexts.

For policymakers globally, China's experience offers valuable lessons about the challenges of regulating educational markets in contexts characterised by intensive competition and significant socioeconomic inequality. Countries considering similar reforms must carefully consider potential unintended consequences and develop implementation strategies that account for families' strategic responses.

The research also raises important questions about educational ethics and social justice, highlighting tensions between collective equality goals and individual advancement aspirations that characterise educational systems globally. These tensions require careful navigation by policymakers seeking to balance competing values and interests in educational provision.

Future research should extend this analysis to broader populations, longer timeframes, and different cultural contexts to deepen understanding of how educational reforms interact with social stratification processes. Such research will be crucial for developing more effective and equitable educational policies in an increasingly competitive global environment.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that educational policy effectiveness depends not merely on regulatory design but on understanding and addressing the complex social dynamics that shape family educational strategies. Only through such comprehensive approaches can policymakers hope to achieve the ambitious goals of reducing educational inequality whilst maintaining educational quality and respecting legitimate family aspirations for their children's advancement.

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