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Institutional Mechanisms in the Implementation of China's Double Reduction Policy: A Narrative Review

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Abstract. China's Double Reduction Policy (DRP) seeks to reduce students' workloads and limit private tutoring. The policy responds to public concerns about student well-being and academic stress while promoting balanced development. Recent evidence indicates that the policy has produced some improvements in mental health and subjective well-being, but these changes are small or uneven across policy measures and student groups. At the same time, parents and educators continue to emphasize academic success, creating a tension between formal policy goals and an educational system shaped by examinations and competition. Drawing on a theory-informed narrative review of 13 sources, this paper examines how institutional legitimacy, coupling, technical ceremonies, institutional isomorphism, competing logics, organizational routines, and local interpretation influence implementation. The review suggests that the DRP can generate both substantive changes and visible conformity without fully changing the academic expectations and routines that organize daily schooling. Implementation gaps may therefore reflect not only insufficient enforcement but also the interaction of government mandates, established practices, cultural expectations, and local interpretation. One implication is that evaluations of the DRP should consider students' experiences and distributional consequences alongside visible measures of compliance.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy, Institutional Theory, Policy Implementation, Organizational Routines, Educational Equity

1. Introduction

The Double Reduction Policy (DRP) limits homework and private tutoring in an effort to ease students' workloads [1]. Its concern with academic stress and student well-being also reflects a broader commitment to balanced development. These aims, however, are being pursued within an education system where examinations remain influential and academic success continues to guide many decisions made by schools, educators, and parents [1]. The policy thus raises a question that extends beyond formal compliance: whether reductions in homework and tutoring alter students' educational experiences when the competition surrounding them has not disappeared.

The available evidence gives a qualified answer. In a follow-up study of 28,398 elementary and junior high school students, Wang and colleagues recorded small declines in depressive and anxiety symptoms after the DRP [2]. Zhou and Fan studied 1,402 fourth- and fifth-grade students in Beijing.

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They found that homework reduction and school-based after-school services were associated with better subjective well-being without lower academic performance [3]. The same study reported a different pattern for students from low-SES families: regulating private tutoring improved their subjective well-being but reduced academic achievement [3]. The policy can therefore bring real benefits, although neither their size nor their distribution is uniform.

Modest and uneven changes following a major national reform cannot be understood from outcome measures alone. This review considers what happens in schools between a formal requirement and its enactment, using institutional concepts. Legitimacy and coupling emphasize the relation between formal structures and teaching practice [4, 5]. Technical ceremonies emphasize the evidence through which implementation becomes visible [6]. Isomorphism and institutional logics shed light on how schools respond not only to government demands but also to expectations concerning well-being, achievement and parental responsibility [7-9]. These pressures are framed in the day-to-day work through organizational routines and local interpretation [10, 11]. The guiding question of the review is: What is the role of institutional forces in creating the gap between the formal requirements of the DRP and the actual implementation of the DRP in schools? These ideas, when brought together, provide an account of the organizational processes behind the differences observed in policy outcomes.

2. Methodology

This theory-informed narrative review comprises 13 sources: five concerning China's Double Reduction Policy and eight addressing institutional legitimacy, coupling, technical ceremonies, isomorphism, institutional logics, organizational routines, and policy interpretation. The theoretical sources were drawn from course readings and nine preparatory memos written as course-based analytical assignments on institutional and organizational concepts in education; four empirical studies and one policy overview were retained to strengthen the treatment of student outcomes, school enactment, and equity.

Sources were identified through searches completed by September 17, 2026. Searches combined terms including "Double Reduction policy," "student well-being," "academic achievement," "school implementation," "teacher perspectives," "after-school services," and "educational equity," together with the institutional concepts used in the preparatory memos. Google Scholar served only as a discovery tool, and bibliographic information and reported findings were checked against journal, publisher, university, or research-organization webpages. Sources were retained if they examined the DRP directly, reported evidence relevant to implementation or equity, or supplied a concept used in the memos to interpret implementation; items without a clear connection to these questions were excluded.

The analysis first separated empirical claims about the DRP and its outcomes from the theoretical concepts used to interpret implementation. Materials were then organized into related themes: empirical outcomes; legitimacy and coupling; technical ceremonies; isomorphic pressure and competing logics; and routines and local interpretation. As a targeted narrative review rather than a systematic review, meta-analysis, or original empirical investigation, it does not claim exhaustive coverage or independently establish causal effects.

3. Empirical outcomes and the institutional puzzle

Wang and colleagues conducted a two-wave study in 152 schools in Guangdong Province, analyzing responses from 28,398 students who completed surveys before and after the DRP [2]. Depressive

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symptoms were assessed with the PHQ-9 and anxiety symptoms with the GAD-7. The prevalence of depressive symptoms declined from 9.9% to 9.4%, while that of anxiety symptoms declined from 7.4% to 7.1% [2]. Reduced homework, greater participation in extracurricular activities, more time with parents, reduced academic stress, and more than eight hours of sleep were associated with lower risks of poor mental health [2]. The authors nevertheless described the overall decline as small.

These findings should be interpreted cautiously. The study's two observation points were approximately eight months apart, and the authors noted high attrition, reliance on self-reported measures, and the possible influence of pandemic-related changes [2]. It therefore provides stronger evidence of limited improvement after policy implementation than of a causal effect of the policy alone. This distinction is important because visible reductions in homework do not necessarily indicate an equally large change in students' broader academic pressure.

Zhou and Fan provide evidence from a longer observation period. Using two-wave longitudinal data collected from September 2021 to June 2023, they studied 1,402 fourth- and fifth-grade students in a Beijing district [3]. Using first-difference analysis with Lasso controls, they assessed three policy initiatives: reducing homework, regulating private training institutions, and requiring schools to provide after-school services. Reduced homework and school-based after-school services improved subjective well-being without compromising academic achievement [3]. In contrast, regulation of private tutoring improved subjective well-being but reduced academic achievement among students identified by the study as having lower socioeconomic status [3].

Together, these studies complicate a simple contrast between policy success and failure. The DRP may change some aspects of students' experiences, but different policy instruments do not produce identical results. Moreover, an aggregate improvement can coexist with small effect sizes and unequal consequences. These findings raise the institutional question of how schools and families interpret, demonstrate compliance with, and adapt to the reform under continuing academic expectations.

4. Institutional mechanisms in policy implementation

4.1. Institutional legitimacy and decoupling

Meyer and Rowan's account of institutional legitimacy helps clarify why the DRP's formal structure matters [4]. Schools are expected to demonstrate that they conform to rules recognized by government, families, and the public, even though formal arrangements may not be closely tied to the technical work of teaching. Restrictions on homework and private tutoring make the policy response visible. Their adoption can therefore strengthen legitimacy without ensuring that students experience an equally substantial change in academic pressure.

The possibility of decoupling arises from this difference between an adopted structure and the work carried out under it. Academic success still shapes the choices of parents and educators [1]. A mixed-methods study involving 3,528 teachers in 30 provinces and 42 semi-structured interviews found improvements in instructional beliefs, design, and classroom practices, together with continuing constraints related to workload, time, region, and school type [12]. The study documents enactment and its constraints; it does not itself establish decoupling. Decoupling is used here as one possible interpretation of the tension that remains. Evidence of improved well-being [2, 3] likewise makes it inaccurate to describe implementation as wholly symbolic. Formal compliance indicates that change has occurred, but not that practice has been transformed in every respect.

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4.2. Recoupling and technical ceremonies

Hallett describes recoupling as a process through which formal rules become more directly connected to everyday practice [5]. Under the DRP, such a connection would require changes in assignments and after-school provision, not only the announcement of new requirements. Teachers would still be working with parents who expect strong academic results, so closer implementation could expose rather than resolve the conflict between workload reduction and achievement. The positive outcomes reported by Zhou and Fan [3] are compatible with closer links between policy and practice, but they do not by themselves demonstrate that recoupling has taken place.

Technical ceremonies concern a different issue. Yurkofsky uses the term for practices that may alter daily work while giving particular weight to evidence that can be displayed and measured [6]. Decoupling refers to looseness between structure and practice; a technical ceremony can be performed in practice and still leave less visible aspects of quality unclear. Homework hours and the number of tutoring sessions illustrate the kind of indicators available under the DRP, rather than findings independently established by the outcome studies. Those measures cannot fully describe differences in students' experiences. Wang and colleagues reported small overall changes in depression and anxiety [2], and Zhou and Fan found that the three policy components did not affect all groups in the same way [3]. A documented procedural change consequently reveals only part of what happened to academic pressure and instructional work.

4.3. Institutional isomorphism and competing logics

A national mandate also places schools under a shared institutional pressure. In DiMaggio and Powell's terms, the DRP contains a coercive form of isomorphism because schools must meet centrally established requirements for homework and private tutoring [7]. The resulting formal arrangements may look similar across schools. Their classroom practices and their students' experiences, however, need not be the same.

The policy also introduces a different account of educational success. Its emphasis on well-being and comprehensive development sits beside an established emphasis on academic achievement. Lounsbury and Pollack show how changing social values can lead institutions to repackage their practices through a new logic [8]. In the DRP context, the newer language of reduced burden does not remove the older logic of academic competition [1]. Schools are left to work with both, making implementation a negotiation between continuing achievement expectations and the policy's broader aims.

Marsh and colleagues found that several institutional logics can coexist without displacing the common grammar through which schools operate [9]. The same idea helps interpret the DRP. A school may endorse student well-being and comprehensive development while remaining accountable for academic performance and responsive to parents and professional norms. Familiar arrangements can therefore persist within an institution that has accepted the reform. The differences reported by Zhou and Fan are consistent with the need to separate its components: homework reduction, after-school provision, and regulation of private tutoring work through different arrangements and produced different outcomes [3].

5. Organizational routines and local interpretation

Organizational routines help explain why formal reforms may have uneven effects on daily practice. Where schedules and curricula are strongly oriented toward examinations, established teaching

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routines may constrain how reforms are enacted. Standardized routines can promote consistency across schools, but they may also limit flexibility and innovation. Feldman and Pentland distinguish between the ostensive and performative aspects of routines and argue that routines can be a source of both stability and change [10].

Routines are enacted, rather than merely followed: how teachers and administrators perform them can sustain or alter established patterns. The DRP requires educators to adjust lesson planning, assignment decisions, after-school services, and communication with parents. These repeated activities are local sites of balancing well-being and academic performance. The gap between policy and practice is therefore constructed not only at the level of national design but also through the everyday actions within schools.

Coburn's study illustrates how school leaders' interpretations of policy influence teachers' enactment of reform [11]. Teachers do not merely receive policy messages and reproduce those messages. How they respond depends on the ideas to which they have access, the social processes through which policies are interpreted and the conditions for professional learning that exist in schools. If leaders define success primarily in terms of tests, teachers may change observable practice, but may still adhere to their prior priorities. If the workload reduction is linked to instruction and school-based services, the policy may become more closely linked to student experiences.

This process helps to explain differences in implementation among schools with a common mandate. Local actors translate institutional pressures into decisions about assignments, classroom instruction, communication with families, and criteria for student progress. The mechanisms above thus are mutually reinforcing: coercive pressures generate common structures, competing logics generate practical tensions, and routines and interpretation decide how these tensions are handled.

6. Educational experience and equity

The empirical literature shows why educational experience should be considered alongside visible compliance. Reduced homework and fewer formal tutoring sessions are important indicators, but the small changes in depression and anxiety reported by Wang and colleagues demonstrate that procedural change and experienced relief are not identical [2]. The associations between mental health and homework, extracurricular activity, family time, academic stress, and sleep also highlight the relevance of students' daily lives to policy evaluation [2].

Equity is also an empirical concern, rather than solely a question arising from the theoretical framework. Zhou and Fan found that regulating private tutoring reduced academic achievement among low-SES students even while improving their subjective well-being [3]. This finding suggests that families do not enter the reform with equal resources and that the same restriction can produce different educational consequences. Average policy effects should therefore not be interpreted as representative of the experience of all student groups.

Evaluations of the DRP should therefore examine how students experience workload and pressure, how teachers modify instruction, how parents respond to restrictions, and whether school-based services compensate for reduced access to private tutoring. Evidence from Chinese primary and secondary schools indicates that after-school program participation partly connects family cultural capital to educational outcomes, while school resources significantly enhance participation [13]. This finding suggests that equity depends not only on whether after-school programs are offered, but also on how family and school resources shape students' participation. Evaluations should therefore compare service availability, content, staffing, perceived quality, and sustained participation across family backgrounds, and ask whether school-based services compensate for

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reduced access to private tutoring. Linking observable implementation practices to these experiences can help distinguish overall improvements from uneven outcomes across schools and student groups.

7. Conclusion

An enforcement-only account may not fully explain the implementation gap surrounding the DRP. Stronger enforcement may increase visible conformity without changing the institutional conditions that organize educational practice. Yet the policy is not purely symbolic: homework reduction and school-based services can improve well-being, and reported changes in daily life are associated with better mental-health outcomes [2, 3]. The reviewed evidence thus points to partial and differentiated change within a system still shaped by examinations, routines, and parental expectations.

Legitimacy and coupling perspectives explain how formal compliance can coexist with continuing academic pressure and how tighter connections between policy requirements and practice can disrupt established routines. Technical ceremonies clarify why measurable evidence may not capture the scale or distribution of change. Isomorphism and competing logics show how schools balance well-being and achievement, while routines and local interpretation explain why the same mandate may be enacted differently.

Implementation should therefore be evaluated using both observable indicators and students' accounts of their educational experiences. The evidence also indicates that equity depends on how family and school resources shape participation in school-based support [3, 13]. The review is limited by a small and focused literature base, and it does not use systematic review or meta-analytic methods. Future studies should compare implementation across schools and regions and consider how the resource conditions influence the teachers, parents and students' responses over time.

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