

China's Double Reduction Policy and Inclusive Educational Equity: A Critical Integrative Review of Academic Stress, Shadow Education, Socioeconomic Inequality, and Family Adaptation

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China's Double Reduction Policy (DRP), is a major compulsory-education reform intended to reduce excessive homework, regulate private supplementary tutoring, strengthen the role of schools, and ease educational anxiety. Yet its implications for student well-being and educational equity are more complex than changes in homework hours or formal tutoring participation alone can capture. This critical integrative review synthesizes research on four interdependent domains: academic stress, socioeconomic status (SES), shadow education, and parental involvement, and interprets them through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, Social Cognitive Theory, and Bourdieu's theory of capital. Evidence indicates that the policy has reduced some visible burdens and is associated with improved mental-health and well-being indicators for many students. At the same time, high-stakes assessment, peer comparison, family aspirations, and uneven access to educational resources can sustain or redistribute pressure. Formal tutoring has contracted substantially, but resource-rich families may convert economic, cultural, and social capital into individualized or less visible forms of support. Family and school

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responsibilities have also expanded, creating unequal adaptive demands across socioeconomic groups and increasing teacher workload in some settings. From an inclusive education perspective, these patterns raise a central question: whether public schools can provide sufficiently differentiated and accessible support for learners whose families cannot purchase alternatives or whose learning requires additional assistance. Direct evidence concerning students with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN) under the DRP remains limited; this absence is itself an important research gap. The review proposes a model of unequal educational adaptation and identifies implications for school-based support, teacher capacity, family–school partnerships, and future special-education research.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy, inclusive education, education quality, academic stress, shadow education

1. Introduction

China's compulsory-education system combines broad access to schooling with intense competition for educational opportunities. Academic success remains closely connected to selective transitions, future schooling options, and family aspirations. At junior secondary level, the Zhongkao is especially consequential because it helps determine access to different forms of upper-secondary education. In such a context, educational burden is not simply a matter of how many assignments a student completes. It is also produced by the anticipated consequences of performance, comparisons with peers, school accountability arrangements, and the resources families can mobilize when they fear that a child may fall behind.

Concern about academic stress therefore predates the Double Reduction Policy (DRP). Academic-related stress can affect learning, motivation, mental health, sleep, and longer-term educational participation (Pascoe et al., 2020). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping further suggests that stress is generated through an interaction between demands and appraisal rather than by demands alone (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The same homework load, test, or change in school policy may be experienced as manageable by one student and threatening by another because students differ in expectations,

coping resources, prior experiences, family support, and the perceived stakes of failure. This point is crucial for evaluating a policy whose most visible mechanisms involve reducing external demands.

A second feature of the pre-DRP landscape was the rapid expansion of private supplementary tutoring, widely described as shadow education. Shadow education follows the formal curriculum and often expands in response to competitive examinations and perceived limitations of mainstream schooling. Across Asia, it can raise achievement for some students while simultaneously intensifying household expenditure and reproducing social inequality (Bray & Lykins, 2012). In China, Zhang and Bray's (2018) mixed-methods study in Shanghai demonstrated how unequal access to private tutoring could offset equalizing initiatives in formal schooling. Families with stronger economic resources were better positioned to purchase tutoring, while cultural knowledge and social networks also helped advantaged families identify and navigate high-quality opportunities.

Against this background, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the DRP in July 2021. The official policy sought to reduce excessive homework and off-campus training burdens, improve the quality

and service capacity of schools, regulate the tutoring sector, reduce family expenditure and parental anxiety, and promote students' healthy development (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2021). The policy thus combined a student-well-being objective with an equity objective: less excessive academic work, less dependence on purchased tutoring, and a stronger public-school role.

The reform produced immediate institutional change. Commercial subject tutoring was sharply constrained; schools were expected to improve assignment design and after-school services; parents were encouraged to rely less heavily on private tutoring; and teachers assumed additional responsibility for keeping learning within the school. These changes created a natural experiment in the redistribution of educational time, resources, and responsibility. They also created a conceptual problem for policy evaluation. If homework falls but examination stakes remain high, has stress actually decreased? If commercial tutoring contracts but individualized tutoring or enrichment substitutes emerge, has inequality actually declined? If schools and parents take on more responsibility, does this strengthen inclusion or merely move burden to other actors?

Early evidence illustrates this complexity. Wang et al. (2022), using a large follow-up sample of 28,398 Chinese elementary and junior high school students, reported reductions in depression and anxiety after implementation of the DRP, with reduced homework, more extracurricular activity, more time with parents, longer sleep, and lower academic stress associated with better mental-health outcomes. More recent longitudinal evidence by Zhou and Fan (2025) similarly suggests that reduced homework and school-based after-school services can improve subjective well-being without harming achievement on average. Importantly, however, their analysis also indicates that restrictions on private tutoring may have different academic consequences by socioeconomic background, with low-SES students particularly vulnerable to

achievement losses when school or family substitutes are insufficient. This finding shifts the question from whether the DRP “works” in general to for whom particular policy components work, under what resource conditions, and with what distributional consequences.

This distributional question is closely aligned with inclusive education. Internationally, inclusion is increasingly understood as a system-level commitment to identify and remove barriers to presence, participation, and achievement for all learners, rather than simply locating students with disabilities in ordinary classrooms (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive pedagogy similarly emphasizes extending what is ordinarily available to everybody instead of designing a narrow mainstream and then attaching special provision after learners fail to fit it (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In China, inclusive education has developed through Learning in Regular Classrooms and related reforms, but research has long identified gaps in professional support, teacher preparation, and local implementation (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Deng & Zhu, 2016; Qu, 2024).

The connection between the DRP and special education has received much less direct attention. Most empirical DRP studies focus on general compulsory-school populations, parents, teachers, tutoring markets, or mental-health outcomes. It would therefore be inappropriate to infer that a policy effect observed among the general student population necessarily applies to students with disabilities or SEN. At the same time, the DRP changes the very systems through which extra academic support is accessed. This makes it highly relevant to special and inclusive education. Students who need additional instruction, differentiated materials, individualized support, counseling, or close family-school coordination may be especially affected by whether the public system can replace support that was previously purchased outside school.

This review therefore integrates literature that is often treated separately: academic stress and

coping; shadow education and social stratification; parental educational involvement and anxiety; teacher workload and school adaptation; and inclusive education in China. The goal is not to claim that these literatures are equivalent but to show how they intersect around a shared process of policy adaptation. The review asks four questions: (1) How has the DRP reshaped academic stress and well-being among students and teachers? (2) How has the regulation of shadow education interacted with SES and access to educational support? (3) How have parental involvement and school–family relationships changed under the new policy environment? and (4) What do these patterns imply for inclusive and special education, particularly for students whose families possess fewer resources or whose learning requires additional support?

The central argument is that the DRP is best understood not simply as a burden-reduction intervention but as a redistribution of demands, resources, and coping responsibilities. Three theoretical lenses help explain this process: Lazarus and Folkman’s stress-and-coping model explains how demands are appraised; Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory explains reciprocal behavioral adaptation to environmental change; and Bourdieu’s theory of capital explains why the capacity to adapt is unequally distributed. Taken together, these perspectives support the concept of unequal educational adaptation: identical policy rules can generate different educational experiences because students, families, teachers, and schools enter reform with different resources and support needs.

2. Methodology

This article uses a critical integrative review design. An integrative review is appropriate when a topic spans multiple conceptual traditions and empirical methods and when the goal is to generate a coherent explanatory framework rather than estimate a single pooled effect. The present review does not claim the exhaustive coverage or formal risk-of-bias procedures of a systematic review or meta-analysis. Instead, it combines the literature assembled in the

underlying doctoral literature review with targeted verification and updating of major theoretical, empirical, policy, and inclusive-education sources. This approach is particularly suitable because the DRP literature includes longitudinal surveys, cross-sectional studies, mixed-methods research, policy analyses, qualitative studies, reviews, and official policy documents.

The substantive scope was defined around five clusters of evidence. The first concerned academic stress, mental health, and student well-being under the DRP. The second concerned shadow education, tutoring regulation, and socioeconomic inequality. The third concerned parental educational anxiety, parental involvement, and family adaptation. The fourth concerned teacher workload, school-based after-school services, and differentiated instruction. The fifth concerned inclusive and special education in China, especially Learning in Regular Classrooms, teacher and system capacity, and access to support for students with SEN. Classic theoretical works on stress and coping, reciprocal determinism, and forms of capital were included because these theories are used to connect the empirical clusters.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, major scholarly books, official policy documents, and reports from recognized international organizations. Particular emphasis was placed on studies published after the DRP was introduced in 2021. Earlier research was retained when it established the pre-policy context, such as the role of shadow education in social stratification or the development of inclusive education in China. To strengthen bibliographic reliability, publication details and digital object identifiers were checked against publisher pages, PubMed, ERIC, institutional repositories, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, UNESCO, and other primary or authoritative bibliographic sources where available (Lee et al, 2024; Baskara et al, 2024).

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, findings were organized descriptively around the

policy's major domains: academic burden and stress, shadow education, family response, school and teacher response, and educational equity. Second, evidence was compared across studies to identify convergence and tension. For example, studies reporting improved student mental health were considered alongside evidence that examination pressure, parental anxiety, or teacher workload may persist. Third, the findings were interpreted through the integrated theoretical framework. Rather than treating SES, stress, and parental involvement as independent variables, the synthesis examined how policy changes are appraised, what resources stakeholders can mobilize, which adaptive strategies become available, and how these processes shape educational outcomes.

The review uses inclusive education as an analytical lens rather than as an outcome that has already been directly tested in the DRP literature. This distinction is important. Research on China's inclusive education system demonstrates continuing challenges in teacher preparation, specialist support, resource coordination, and local implementation (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Deng & Zhu, 2016; Liang et al., 2022; Qu, 2024; Hanefar et al, 2026). However, there is currently limited direct empirical evidence isolating the effect of the DRP on students with disabilities or SEN. Accordingly, statements concerning SEN in this review are framed as implications, hypotheses, and priorities for future research rather than as established causal findings.

The integrative approach also has limitations. The evidence base is recent and rapidly evolving, regional implementation varies, and several post-policy studies rely on observational designs. Furthermore, "shadow education" itself is increasingly difficult to measure because restrictions can shift tutoring into individualized, informal, online, or enrichment forms. These limitations are addressed explicitly in the Discussion.

3. Results

The synthesis yielded four interrelated findings. First, the DRP has reduced important visible sources of academic burden and is associated with improved well-being for many students, but reductions in objective workload do not necessarily eliminate the appraisal processes that generate stress. Second, regulation has transformed the tutoring market, yet the capacity to replace formal tutoring is strongly stratified by family resources. Third, the policy has reshaped parental involvement and school–family relations rather than simply reducing parental investment. Fourth, the stronger role assigned to schools creates both an opportunity for greater inclusion and a risk of unequal implementation where teacher or institutional capacity is limited. These findings are integrated in Figure 1.

3.1 An Integrated Theoretical Framework: Appraisal, Agency, and Capital

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping conceptualizes stress as an ongoing person–environment transaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Primary appraisal concerns whether a condition is interpreted as threatening, harmful, irrelevant, or challenging. Secondary appraisal concerns whether sufficient coping resources are available. This distinction explains why the removal of a specific burden can have heterogeneous psychological effects. Less homework may reduce overload for one student while creating uncertainty for another who interprets reduced practice as a threat to examination preparation. A family may experience tutoring restrictions as welcome financial relief or as the loss of a crucial educational safeguard. The policy condition is shared, but appraisal is not.

Social Cognitive Theory adds reciprocal adaptation. Bandura (1986) emphasizes that behavior, personal factors, and environments influence one another. The DRP changes the educational environment, but students, parents, teachers, schools, and tutoring providers do not respond passively. Parents seek information and alternatives; schools redesign after-school

provision; teachers change assignment and instructional practices; students alter study routines; and private providers change products. These responses can, in turn, reshape the environment in which the policy operates. Policy implementation is therefore not a linear path from regulation to outcome but a feedback process.

Bourdieu's framework explains why the menu of adaptive responses is unequal. Economic capital provides the capacity to purchase individual tutoring, enrichment activities, technology, transportation, or specialist services. Cultural capital helps families interpret school expectations, evaluate educational options, communicate with teachers, and support learning directly. Social capital provides information, referrals, and access to networks. These resources can be converted from one form into another. A restriction that closes a large commercial tutoring

center does not remove the high-SES family's knowledge, professional contacts, flexible time, or ability to purchase a private alternative.

The three theories therefore generate a common sequence: policy change alters demands and opportunities; stakeholders appraise the change; they assess and mobilize resources; they select coping or adaptive responses; those responses shape short- and long-term outcomes; and outcomes feed back into subsequent appraisal and behavior. The key addition made by the present review is that resource availability is not peripheral to this process. It is a central mechanism through which nominally uniform policy can produce heterogeneous outcomes. Figure 1 summarizes this model and places inclusive/equity outcomes alongside well-being and learning outcomes rather than treating equity as a separate policy domain.

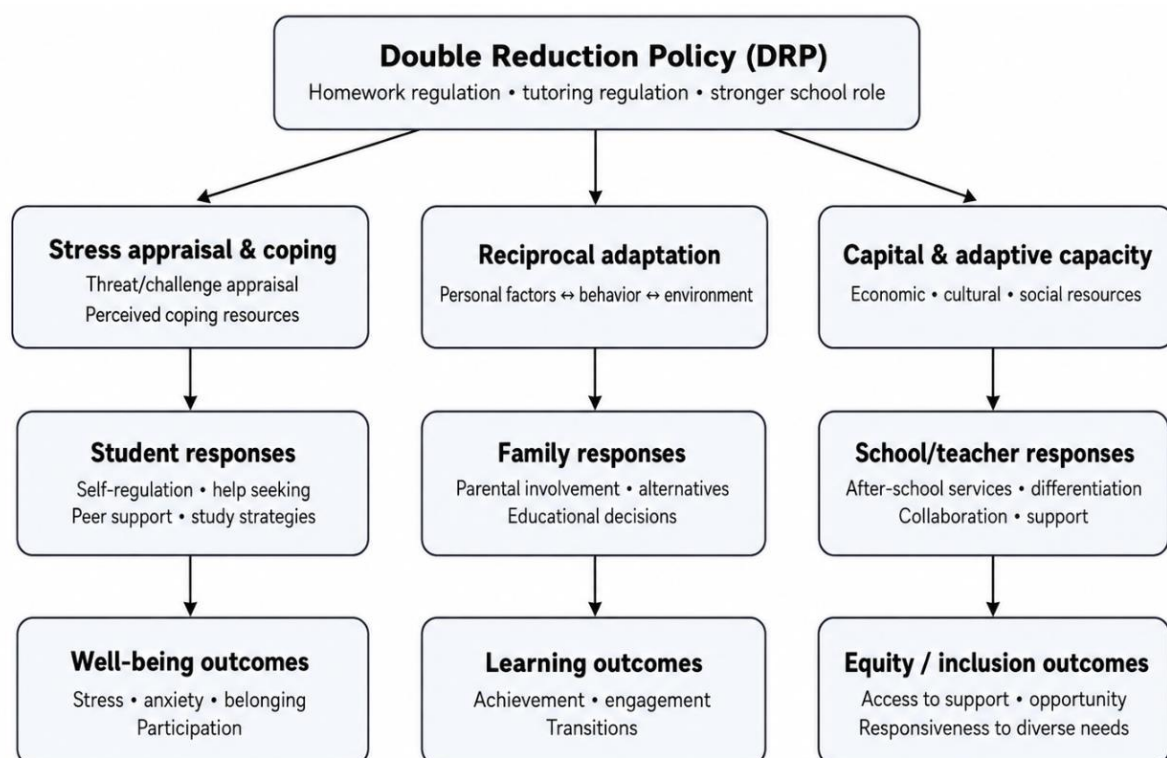


Figure 1. Integrated framework of educational adaptation under the Double Reduction Policy

3.2 Academic Burden, Stress, and Student Well-Being

The strongest evidence for a beneficial DRP effect concerns reductions in visible academic

burden and improvements in student well-being. Wang et al. (2022) followed 28,398 elementary and junior high school students and found lower overall depression and anxiety after the policy. Reduced homework, increased extracurricular

activity, longer sleep, greater time with parents, and lower academic stress were associated with better mental-health outcomes. The large sample and pre/post design make this study particularly important, although, as with any policy-era observational study, concurrent changes cannot be fully separated from the policy environment.

Zhou and Fan (2025) provide a more differentiated longitudinal analysis. Using two-wave data from 1,402 fourth- and fifth-grade students and a first-difference approach, they examined distinct components of the DRP rather than treating it as a single exposure. Reduced homework and school-based after-school services improved subjective well-being without compromising achievement on average. This is consistent with the policy's central premise that some academic work can be reduced without sacrificing learning. It also supports a move away from equating educational quality with the volume of work completed.

However, the stress literature cautions against interpreting lower workload as equivalent to the disappearance of academic pressure. Academic-related stress is linked not only to time demands but also to evaluation, performance expectations, uncertainty, and perceived consequences (Pascoe et al., 2020). In China, selective transitions remain consequential. A student may therefore experience fewer formal assignments but still perceive strong pressure to outperform peers or secure admission to a preferred school. From a transactional perspective, the psychological meaning of examination performance can remain stable even while one source of workload declines.

Peer comparison is part of this process. Where students and parents believe that others continue to obtain additional support, the restriction of formal tutoring may even create uncertainty about hidden competition. The stressor becomes not merely “too much homework” but “not knowing whether I am doing enough relative to others.” This helps explain why policies that remove visible competitive behaviors can leave the perceived structure of competition intact. The policy can reduce the instruments of competition

more quickly than the institutional and cultural incentives that produce competition.

Parental educational anxiety provides additional evidence that pressure is not confined to students. Chen et al. (2022), analyzing survey data from 3,298 families, found that educational anxiety remained a common experience under the DRP and was related to school stage, student achievement, family income, educational satisfaction, and parenting factors. Yu et al. (2022) similarly showed that parents' understanding of the DRP, education anxiety, and perceptions of educational equity were intertwined in how parents interpreted education “involution.” More recent research by Niu et al. (2025), based on 2,932 parents, found a negative association between family SES and parental educational anxiety and showed that perceived policy effectiveness partially mediated this relationship. Thus, anxiety is partly about policy and partly about families' perceived capacity to manage educational risk.

These results suggest a first major synthesis: burden reduction can improve well-being, but the psychological pathway is conditional. It depends on whether reduced demands are accompanied by a credible sense that students can still meet important educational goals. In practical terms, homework reduction is most likely to reduce stress when students have confidence in classroom learning, after-school support, and fair access to preparation. Where such confidence is absent, visible workload may decline while anticipatory stress persists or changes form.

3.3 Teacher Workload and the Redistribution of Educational Labor

The DRP also redistributes work within the education system. When students rely less on commercial tutoring, schools are expected to provide more complete educational support. This includes improved classroom teaching, scientifically designed homework, after-school services, enrichment, and closer communication with families. These goals can be pedagogically desirable, but they require professional time and institutional capacity.

Teng et al. (2024) provide direct evidence of this redistribution. Their mixed-methods study of 364 Chinese primary school teachers, followed by six in-depth interviews, found that teachers' working time increased after enactment of the DRP and that time allocation became uneven, with substantial demands associated with subject teaching and after-school services. Their reported average working day exceeded conventional working-hour expectations. The study therefore challenges a simple narrative in which student burden is reduced without system-level cost. Some of the work previously distributed across homework, families, and commercial tutoring is now absorbed by teachers and schools.

This matters for inclusion because differentiated teaching is labor intensive. Inclusive pedagogy is not achieved by placing students with different needs in the same classroom while keeping teaching structures unchanged. It requires teachers to anticipate variation, design flexible participation, monitor individual progress, collaborate with specialists and families, and adapt instruction (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Professional development for inclusion likewise requires sustained organizational learning rather than a one-off technical intervention (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). If after-school duties and policy compliance consume teacher time, the capacity for meaningful differentiation can be weakened even when policy language emphasizes high-quality schooling.

The Chinese special-education literature makes this concern concrete. Deng and Poon-McBrayer (2012) argued that Learning in Regular Classrooms expanded access but remained constrained by inadequate local resources, personnel preparation, and support. Deng and Zhu (2016) later described China's pragmatic effort to redefine the relationship between special and regular education, suggesting that special schools should support rather than sit entirely apart from inclusive education. Qu's (2024) policy analysis similarly shows that contemporary Chinese inclusion depends on interconnected regular and special provision. These studies imply

that a stronger school role under the DRP could support inclusion only if schools have access to professional expertise and support infrastructure.

The central issue, therefore, is not whether teachers should provide after-school support or differentiated instruction, but whether the reform provides enough time, staffing, professional development, and specialist collaboration to make those expectations sustainable. Teacher well-being and inclusive capacity are linked. A reform that improves student free time while generating chronic teacher overload risks reducing the responsiveness of the very system expected to replace private supplementation.

3.4 Shadow Education: Contraction, Substitution, and Socioeconomic Inequality

Prior to the DRP, shadow education was a significant mechanism through which families sought academic advantage. Bray and Lykins (2012) documented the widespread role of private supplementary tutoring across Asia and emphasized its implications for inequality. In China, Zhang and Bray (2018) demonstrated that shadow education could undermine equalization in formal schooling through unequal access and tracking. The core mechanism was not simply that affluent families spent more; it was that they could combine economic resources with information, networks, and educational strategies.

The DRP directly targeted this mechanism by sharply regulating for-profit subject tutoring. The formal market contracted, and this contraction represents a substantive policy achievement. It reduced the visibility and legitimacy of intensive commercial tutoring and lowered the pressure on many families to purchase standardized packages simply because everyone else appeared to be doing so. In principle, this can reduce financial burden and weaken one pathway of social stratification.

Yet regulation also changes the form of demand. Families continue to face examinations and future educational transitions. Where parents remain convinced that supplementary input improves competitiveness, they may search for

substitutes. Such substitutes can include one-to-one tutoring, small-group arrangements, educational technology, non-subject enrichment, informal tutoring through networks, or direct parental instruction. The key equity question therefore moves from “Who attends a tutoring center?” to “Who can obtain effective supplementary support in the new regulatory environment?”

Zhou and Fan’s (2025) findings are especially important here. Their analysis indicates that restricting private training institutions improved well-being but was associated with reduced academic achievement among low-SES students. The study does not imply that commercial tutoring should simply be restored. Rather, it suggests that low-SES students may have fewer substitute resources when a previously accessible form of supplementary instruction disappears. This is a classic example of unequal adaptive capacity: a policy can reduce an inequitable market overall while still creating transition risks for students who relied on relatively affordable standardized tutoring and lack private alternatives.

Niu et al. (2025) reinforce the broader socioeconomic mechanism from the parental side. Higher family SES was associated with lower educational anxiety, and perceived policy effectiveness mediated part of this relationship. Families with more resources may feel better able to respond to uncertainty. Their security derives not only from income but from a wider sense of control over educational options. Conversely, lower-SES families may welcome lower tutoring expenditure but remain concerned about whether school-based support is sufficient.

Bourdieu’s theory makes the substitution process visible. When a direct purchase route is restricted, economic capital can be converted into other resources; cultural capital can support strategic planning and direct learning assistance; social capital can identify less visible opportunities. For high-SES families, the form of educational investment can change while the capacity to invest remains. For lower-SES families, public

schools may become even more central because the range of private substitutes is narrower.

This produces a second major synthesis: the DRP may reduce inequality in one market without automatically eliminating inequality in educational support. In some settings, formal tutoring inequality may decline while differences in personalized services, parental teaching, information, digital resources, or school quality become more important. Equity evaluation therefore needs to track support pathways rather than only participation in registered tutoring institutions.

3.5 Parental Involvement and Family Adaptation

Parental involvement under the DRP is best conceptualized as adaptation rather than simple increase or decrease. Before the policy, many parents outsourced part of their educational involvement to tutoring institutions while retaining managerial responsibility for scheduling, purchasing, monitoring, and comparing educational services. After the policy, the balance between outsourced support, direct home involvement, and school collaboration changed.

Research on parental anxiety shows that this recalibration is psychologically demanding. Chen et al. (2022) found substantial variation in educational anxiety related to family and student characteristics. Yu et al. (2022) showed that parents’ policy understanding, anxiety, and perceptions of equity jointly shaped their interpretation of educational competition. Niu et al. (2025) added evidence that SES and educational expectations matter for how parents evaluate the policy and experience anxiety. These studies undermine the assumption that regulation mechanically reduces parental concern.

Recent longitudinal evidence on parental involvement also suggests that dimensions of involvement do not move together. Mu et al. (2026) examined trajectories of parental educational involvement before and after the DRP and linked different dimensions and rates of change to learning engagement and achievement.

Their findings emphasize the importance of the quality and form of involvement rather than simply the amount of parental activity. This distinction is consistent with a broader literature showing that parental involvement can be constrained by time, knowledge, family circumstances, child factors, parent–teacher relations, and societal structures (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018).

The policy therefore produces different adaptation profiles. A high-SES family may replace commercial classes with one-to-one tutoring, enrichment, direct teaching, or strategic school choice. A middle-SES family may combine school after-care with selective purchased services and increased homework monitoring. A low-SES family may depend heavily on the school’s after-school program and teacher guidance. None of these profiles should be treated as a fixed SES stereotype, but they illustrate how available resources structure the feasible choices families can make.

Family–school collaboration becomes particularly important when schools assume a stronger role. Clear communication can reduce uncertainty about what children should learn, what support is available, and when additional intervention is needed. However, collaboration is itself resource dependent. Parents vary in work flexibility, confidence communicating with teachers, educational knowledge, language and literacy resources, digital access, and familiarity with school procedures. A policy that expects “more parental involvement” without differentiating support risks rewarding families already best positioned to participate.

For inclusive education, the issue is even more salient. Parents of children with disabilities or SEN may need to communicate about individualized goals, accommodations, specialist services, behavior support, or progress monitoring. Chinese research on inclusive education shows that family experiences can be shaped by the strength of school support systems and the practical implementation of inclusive rights (McCabe & Jiang, 2024). If educational adaptation under the DRP becomes more

dependent on parental advocacy, families with less social and cultural capital may encounter additional barriers.

3.6 Implications for Inclusive and Special Education

The reviewed DRP evidence is not, by itself, evidence about students with disabilities or SEN. This boundary must be maintained. Direct empirical research on how the DRP affects students with identified special or additional educational needs remains sparse. Nevertheless, the mechanisms documented in the broader literature are highly relevant to inclusive education because they determine how support is organized and accessed.

China’s inclusive education system has expanded over several decades, particularly through Learning in Regular Classrooms. Deng and Poon-McBrayer (2012) described both substantial progress and persistent weaknesses in resources, personnel preparation, and support. Deng and Zhu (2016) argued for a more integrated relationship between special and regular education. Liang et al. (2022), in a systematic review of inclusive physical education, identified multilevel facilitators and barriers ranging from individual factors to institutional and societal conditions. Qu (2024) similarly shows that contemporary policy continues to place inclusion and Learning in Regular Classrooms at the center while expecting special schools to function as resources within a broader system.

These findings imply that school capacity is the hinge connecting the DRP to inclusion. If formal tutoring is reduced and mainstream schools become the primary site of academic support, students who need additional instruction will depend more heavily on the school’s ability to identify need early and respond appropriately. For some learners, after-school services may provide a more equitable alternative to private tutoring. For others, generic after-school supervision will be insufficient. The relevant standard is not whether every student receives the

same number of hours but whether support is responsive to actual learning barriers.

This distinction is essential because supplementary education can serve different functions. For one family it may be a positional investment designed to outperform peers. For another it may provide remediation because classroom instruction has not been accessible. For a child with a disability it may overlap with specialized educational or therapeutic support. Policy should therefore distinguish excessive competitive tutoring from genuinely necessary additional support. Reducing the former is compatible with guaranteeing the latter.

Inclusive pedagogy offers a useful principle: extend the richness of ordinary provision so that more learners can participate without being separated or stigmatized (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Applied to the DRP, this means that school-based after-school services should not merely reproduce standardized tutoring inside the school. They should include flexible academic assistance, accessible materials, opportunities for guided practice, social-emotional support, and routes to specialist consultation. The goal is a stronger universal system capable of responding to variation.

Teacher capacity is therefore central. The professional-development literature shows that inclusive education requires opportunities for teachers to learn how to respond to diversity, work across professional boundaries, and reinterpret difference in context (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). If the DRP expands teacher workload without expanding collaborative planning time, specialist access, and professional learning, the inclusive promise of stronger school provision may not be realized. Conversely, if after-school reform is coupled with resource rooms, special-education expertise, counseling, and family support, the DRP could reduce reliance on unequal private markets and strengthen public inclusion.

Finally, inclusion requires attention to intersecting disadvantage. UNESCO's (2020) global framework emphasizes that disability,

poverty, location, gender, language, and other dimensions can combine to create exclusion. The DRP literature currently focuses strongly on SES but less often examines how SES intersects with disability or additional learning needs. A low-income student with a learning disability may experience policy change differently from a high-income student without additional needs, and neither experience can be inferred from an average effect. Future research must therefore disaggregate outcomes and examine how multiple sources of disadvantage shape adaptive capacity.

4. Discussion

The evidence reviewed above supports neither a simple success narrative nor a simple failure narrative. The DRP has achieved meaningful changes: it has reduced excessive homework in many contexts, transformed the formal tutoring sector, expanded school-based after-school responsibilities, and is associated with improved well-being for substantial numbers of students. At the same time, the reform operates within an educational environment where selection, status competition, family aspiration, and unequal resources continue to matter. The most useful interpretation is therefore that the DRP changes the distribution of educational burden and support.

4.1 Paradox 1: Less Workload Does Not Necessarily Mean Less Stress

The first paradox is the distinction between objective workload and subjective stress. Wang et al. (2022) and Zhou and Fan (2025) provide good evidence that reduced homework and more balanced time use can improve well-being. These benefits should not be minimized. They demonstrate that educational systems can reduce some academic demands without necessarily lowering achievement.

However, stress is an appraisal process. When students continue to perceive examination outcomes as highly consequential, pressure may persist even after homework is reduced. A student who previously coped by completing many assignments may become anxious when those assignments disappear if no alternative

sense of preparedness develops. Similarly, parents may interpret fewer formal learning hours as either healthy rebalancing or as a threat to future competitiveness. The same policy mechanism can therefore lower stress for some and create uncertainty for others.

The policy implication is that burden reduction should be paired with credible instructional quality and transparent assessment expectations. Students need to believe that learning during regular school hours is sufficient and that support is available when difficulties arise. If families believe that success still depends on hidden supplementary resources, the psychological logic of competition remains intact.

4.2 Paradox 2: Less Formal Tutoring Does Not Necessarily Mean Greater Equity

The second paradox concerns the difference between equal regulation and equitable opportunity. Restricting commercial tutoring removes a highly visible pathway through which affluent families could purchase additional instruction. This is a genuine equity intervention. Yet it does not equalize family resources themselves.

Zhang and Bray (2018) showed before the DRP that shadow education reproduced inequality through access and tracking. Post-policy evidence suggests that the mechanism can mutate rather than vanish. Zhou and Fan (2025) found that private-tutoring restrictions had adverse academic effects among low-SES students in their sample, highlighting the importance of substitutes. High-resource families may be able to purchase individualized tutoring or enrichment, use educational technology, teach directly at home, or mobilize networks. Lower-resource families are more dependent on school provision.

This means that policy evaluation must move beyond counting licensed tutoring institutions. Researchers should measure who receives one-to-one tutoring, who participates in enrichment, who obtains online support, who has a parent able to provide sustained academic help, and who has access to effective school after-care. Educational inequality increasingly concerns the

architecture of support rather than a single market.

4.3 Paradox 3: Greater Family Responsibility Does Not Necessarily Mean Greater Inclusion

The third paradox concerns parental involvement. Family engagement is important, but the capacity to engage is unequally distributed. Hornby and Blackwell (2018) identify barriers at family, child, parent–teacher, and societal levels. Under the DRP, families may be expected to communicate more closely with schools, support holistic development, supervise learning, and make informed decisions about alternatives to tutoring. These expectations are easier for parents with flexible work schedules, educational knowledge, strong communication skills, and supportive networks.

For families of students with SEN, the demands may be greater still. Inclusive education often requires sustained communication about individual needs and access to professional support. Chinese studies indicate that inclusive rights have expanded but support systems remain uneven (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; McCabe & Jiang, 2024; Qu, 2024). If schools respond to the DRP by assuming that families will fill remaining support gaps, students whose parents have fewer resources may become more vulnerable.

The implication is not to reduce parent–school partnership but to design it differently. Schools should provide multiple communication routes, accessible information, proactive outreach, and clear pathways to additional support. Parental involvement should be enabled rather than merely expected.

4.4 Unequal Educational Adaptation as a Conceptual Contribution

The three paradoxes are unified by the concept of unequal educational adaptation. Policy changes are experienced through the resources available to those who must adapt. Students have different self-regulatory and social supports. Families possess different forms of capital.

Teachers work in schools with different staffing, leadership, class sizes, specialist resources, and local expectations. Regional differences further influence the availability of both public and private educational opportunities.

This perspective advances the original three-theory framework by showing that stress, behavior, and capital are sequentially linked rather than merely parallel. The Transactional Model explains appraisal: What does this change mean for me? Social Cognitive Theory explains reciprocal response: What will I do, and how will my action reshape the environment? Capital Theory explains feasible choices: What resources can I mobilize? Outcomes then feed back into future appraisal. A family that successfully locates an alternative tutor experiences one policy environment; a family that cannot locate support experiences another, even when formal regulations are identical.

Inclusive education adds a normative criterion to this model. A policy should be judged not only by average outcomes but by whether learners with different needs can participate, learn, and access support. Ainscow (2020) argues that inclusion and equity require attention to barriers and the contexts that generate them. The DRP therefore becomes an inclusion question when it changes which supports are available, who can obtain them, and whether public schools can respond to diversity.

4.5 Policy and Practice Implications

Several implications follow. First, student burden should be monitored multidimensionally. Homework hours and tutoring participation remain useful indicators, but they should be complemented by perceived stress, sleep, belonging, time use, academic confidence, and access to support. A student can have fewer assignments yet feel more insecure; another can have similar workload but experience less stress because support has improved.

Second, school-based after-school services should be treated as a core equity instrument. Zhou and Fan (2025) show that school-based after-school provision can support well-being

without harming achievement. To maximize equity, such services should include targeted academic assistance rather than only supervision or generic activities. Schools serving lower-income communities may require additional staffing and funding because they cannot assume that families can purchase substitutes.

Third, teacher workload must be part of equity policy. Teng et al. (2024) demonstrate that the DRP can significantly increase teacher working time. Sustainable reform requires workload auditing, protected planning time, collaborative staffing, and professional development. Inclusive education should not be added as an additional task after every other obligation has been assigned. Specialist teachers, resource centers, counselors, and interprofessional collaboration can spread responsibility more realistically.

Fourth, policymakers should distinguish competitive tutoring from necessary support. Regulation should continue to address excessive commercialization and positional competition, while public systems should guarantee access to remedial, special, and individualized support based on need. Students should not lose legitimate assistance simply because the same market previously delivered both competitive enrichment and essential remediation.

Fifth, family–school partnerships should be differentiated. Schools should provide explicit guidance on curriculum expectations, available support, and referral procedures. Outreach should not depend on parents' confidence or knowledge of institutional norms. For families of students with SEN, communication should include clear information about individualized goals, accommodations, specialist services, and progress monitoring.

Sixth, equity evaluation should examine substitution. When one resource is restricted, research should ask what replaces it. This applies to tutoring, parental time, teacher work, digital resources, and specialist support. A reform can appear equitable if only the regulated activity is measured while new forms of advantage remain invisible.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research

This review has several limitations. It is a critical integrative review rather than a systematic review, and the post-DRP evidence base is still developing. Studies differ in region, age group, outcome measurement, and research design. Some findings reflect early implementation, when families and schools were still adapting. Longer-term effects may differ as tutoring markets, school services, and parental expectations stabilize.

Causal attribution also remains difficult. Wang et al. (2022) provide valuable longitudinal evidence, but mental-health changes can be influenced by broader social conditions. Zhou and Fan (2025) offer stronger component-level longitudinal analysis, but their sample comes from one Beijing district. Teng et al. (2024) document teacher workload in a mixed-methods design, yet workload may vary substantially across school types and regions. Generalization should therefore be cautious.

Measurement of shadow education is another challenge. Formal tutoring is easier to count than informal or individualized support. Future surveys should distinguish registered tutoring, one-to-one tutoring, small-group instruction, online services, enrichment programs, unpaid tutoring through networks, and direct parental teaching. Without this differentiation, researchers may underestimate substitution and misinterpret equity effects.

The most important special-education research gap concerns students with disabilities and SEN. Future studies should explicitly sample these learners and their families. Research questions should include whether students previously relied on tutoring for remediation; whether school after-services are accessible; whether individualized education goals are supported during after-school time; how the policy affects therapeutic and specialist educational services; and whether parents experience new advocacy burdens. Studies should disaggregate outcomes by disability type, support intensity, SES, region,

and school resources rather than treating SEN as a single category.

Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs are particularly needed. Quantitative studies can identify changes in well-being, achievement, support access, and service use, while qualitative interviews can reveal how students, parents, and teachers interpret those changes. Multi-stakeholder studies conducted within the same schools would be especially valuable because the burdens of one group may be transferred to another. A reduction in student homework, for example, can only be fully understood when teacher preparation time and parental support are measured simultaneously.

Regional comparison is another priority. The underlying doctoral review highlighted Guangdong as a context of intense educational competition and substantial socioeconomic diversity. Comparative studies across urban and less-developed settings could test whether school capacity moderates the relationship between tutoring restriction and student outcomes. Such work would also help determine whether the concept of unequal adaptive capacity operates similarly across different local education systems.

Finally, future policy evaluation should include inclusive outcome indicators. In addition to academic achievement and mental health, studies should measure access to support, participation in school life, school belonging, accommodation quality, family financial burden, teacher capacity, and the continuity of individualized services. The appropriate question is not merely whether burden has been reduced, but whether every learner has a realistic pathway to the support required for meaningful participation and progress.

5. Conclusion

China's Double Reduction Policy is one of the most consequential recent reforms of compulsory education because it directly intervenes in homework, private tutoring, school responsibility, and family educational behavior. The evidence synthesized in this review shows that the reform has produced real benefits.

Reduced homework and expanded school-based services can improve student well-being, and large-scale follow-up evidence indicates declines in depression and anxiety after implementation. The contraction of formal commercial tutoring has also weakened a prominent market through which educational advantage was purchased.

At the same time, the review demonstrates why policy effects cannot be evaluated through visible burden alone. Stress depends on appraisal and perceived consequences; inequality depends on the resources available for adaptation; and inclusion depends on whether public institutions can respond to learner diversity. Three paradoxes therefore define the reform: less workload does not necessarily mean less stress, less formal tutoring does not necessarily mean greater equity, and greater family responsibility does not necessarily mean greater inclusion.

The integrated framework developed here conceptualizes the DRP as a process of unequal educational adaptation. Policy change alters demands and opportunities. Students, parents, teachers, and schools interpret those changes, mobilize resources, and adapt their behavior. Because resources are unequally distributed, the same regulation can create different pathways. High-SES families may substitute new forms of support; low-SES families may depend more

heavily on public schools; teachers may absorb additional labor; and students with additional learning needs may be especially dependent on the responsiveness of school-based provision.

For special and inclusive education, the most important conclusion is also the clearest research gap. Direct evidence concerning students with disabilities and SEN under the DRP remains insufficient. The broader evidence should not be generalized to these learners without direct study. Instead, it identifies an urgent agenda: determine whether the stronger school role created by the DRP expands access to differentiated support or exposes gaps previously masked by private supplementation.

Ultimately, the success of burden-reduction reform should be judged not only by how much educational activity is removed, but by what replaces it and for whom. An inclusive system does not guarantee equity by imposing identical limits on every family. It builds sufficient public capacity so that differences in income, networks, parental education, disability, and learning need do not determine whether students can obtain appropriate support. In this sense, the long-term equity value of the DRP will depend on whether burden reduction is matched by an equally ambitious strengthening of inclusive, differentiated, and well-resourced schooling.

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