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A Five-Dimensional Analysis of the Substantive Freedom Effects of the "Double Reduction" Policy

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Abstract: Existing research on the "Double Reduction" policy has predominantly concentrated on quantifying the extent of academic burden reduction, thereby overlooking the policy's broader implications for individuals' substantive development opportunities. This paper addresses this critical gap by introducing Amartya Sen's capability approach and, more specifically, his framework of instrumental freedoms. A five-dimensional evaluation model is constructed, encompassing economic conditions, social opportunities, protective safeguards, transparency guarantees, and political participation, to systematically examine the comprehensive effects of the "Double Reduction" policy on students' substantive freedoms. The study reveals that while the policy has achieved notable progress in alleviating economic burdens on families, significant shortcomings persist in the dimensions of social opportunities and protective safeguards, manifesting as capability development shortfalls and inadequate safety net provisions. Furthermore, the interrelationships among these five dimensions uncover a notable tension: the reduction of economic burdens does not automatically translate into enhanced student capabilities; rather, within the context of the urban-rural divide, it has inadvertently deepened latent educational inequities. This paper argues that future educational governance must transition from a paradigm of burden control to one centered on freedom enhancement. By restructuring the quality framework of after-school services and reinforcing institutional support mechanisms for disadvantaged populations, the "burden reduction" initiative can be meaningfully transformed into a process of genuine capacity building, thereby advancing educational equity and holistic student development.

Keywords: double reduction policy; substantive freedom; capability approach; educational equity; after-school services

1. Introduction: Evaluating the "Double Reduction" Policy Requires Moving Beyond the "Workload Reduction" Discourse

The implementation of the 'Double Reduction' policy in 2021 marked a significant milestone in the evolution of China's basic education governance framework [1]. Four years on, observable changes include a marked decline in the scale and intensity of off-campus tutoring activities, alongside measurable improvements in the rationalization and moderation of school-based homework assignments. These outcomes reflect coordinated efforts across administrative, pedagogical, and regulatory dimensions. While scholarly engagement with this policy has grown substantially, most evaluation approaches continue to rely on a narrow operational definition centered exclusively on quantitative indicators of burden alleviation. This includes metrics such as average weekly hours spent on homework, household expenditure on supplementary instruction, or student-reported time pressure. Such indicators, though useful for tracking compliance and surface-level impact, implicitly equate policy success with the magnitude of reduction—suggesting that diminishing inputs automatically translates into enhanced educational quality or developmental outcomes. This logic overlooks structural complexities, including variations in school capacity, regional resource distribution,

Received: 30 May 2026

Revised: 15 July 2026

Accepted: 25 July 2026

Published: 28 July 2026



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teacher professional development trajectories, and family socioeconomic contexts that mediate how policy measures are interpreted and enacted at the local level.

Yet focusing solely on workload metrics risks obscuring deeper questions concerning educational purpose and human development. A more meaningful inquiry concerns whether the time, energy, and financial resources previously allocated to academic supplementation have been redirected toward experiences that foster holistic growth—such as sustained engagement with arts and physical activity, opportunities for self-directed inquiry, mentorship relationships, community participation, or reflective leisure. Empirical observations indicate considerable variation in post-policy reallocation patterns: in some settings, reduced tutoring time has enabled richer classroom pedagogy and expanded extracurricular programming; in others, it has been absorbed by intensified test preparation within school hours or replaced by informal, unregulated private instruction arrangements. Similarly, cost savings from discontinued commercial tutoring services do not uniformly translate into increased investment in students' non-academic competencies or well-being [2]. Without deliberate institutional support and coherent curricular scaffolding, burden reduction may remain superficial—achieving statistical improvement without corresponding advances in learning quality, equity, or student agency.

A more robust evaluative framework must therefore shift attention from input reduction to capability enhancement. Drawing upon foundational concepts in human development theory, effective policy assessment should prioritize the extent to which interventions strengthen individuals' capacities to pursue valued life goals. This entails examining not only material conditions but also access to supportive social environments, equitable learning opportunities, reliable institutional protections, transparent communication channels between schools and families, and inclusive decision-making processes involving educators, students, and caregivers. These interrelated dimensions collectively shape the conditions under which students can exercise meaningful choice, cultivate critical thinking, develop interpersonal competencies, and engage constructively with diverse knowledge domains. When applied to the 'Double Reduction' initiative, such an approach enables systematic analysis of how governance reforms influence not just what students study, but how they learn, who supports them, where learning occurs, and why certain educational pathways become more or less accessible. It further invites reflection on whether policy design and implementation mechanisms align with long-term national priorities related to innovation capacity, social cohesion, and sustainable human capital formation—without invoking ideological framing or value-laden terminology [3, 4].

2. Analytical Framework: The "Five-Dimensional Lens" of Substantive Freedom

The theoretical foundation of substantive freedom provides a robust and empirically grounded approach for assessing the effectiveness and equity of education policy reforms. Rather than focusing solely on procedural compliance or quantitative metrics such as test scores or class hours, this perspective emphasizes the expansion of students' genuine opportunities to develop their potential in diverse, meaningful, and self-determined ways. Within this framework, freedom is understood not merely as the absence of restriction, but as the presence of real, actionable options—such as choosing learning pathways aligned with personal interests, engaging in creative expression, participating in collaborative inquiry, cultivating physical and emotional well-being, and exercising responsible agency in academic and social contexts [4]. Reducing excessive academic workload is therefore recognized not as an end goal, but as one instrumental strategy among many that supports the broader objective of capability enhancement. This orientation shifts evaluation priorities from input-driven compliance to outcome-oriented empowerment, ensuring that policy interventions are judged by their tangible contribution to students' lived experiences, developmental autonomy, and long-term life prospects. Crucially, the framework avoids value-laden assumptions about

predetermined educational outcomes, instead privileging pluralistic conceptions of flourishing grounded in individual diversity, cultural context, and evolving societal needs.

Building upon this conceptual grounding, the paper develops a comprehensive five-dimensional evaluation framework designed to systematically assess how education policies foster substantive freedom across interrelated domains: (1) cognitive autonomy—the extent to which learners exercise reasoned judgment, critical reflection, and intellectual curiosity in knowledge construction; (2) affective well-being—the degree to which educational environments nurture emotional security, resilience, motivation, and positive interpersonal relationships; (3) embodied agency—the integration of physical health, sensory engagement, movement literacy, and environmental awareness into daily learning practices; (4) social participation—the opportunities afforded for inclusive collaboration, democratic dialogue, civic responsibility, and cross-cultural understanding; and (5) temporal sovereignty—the capacity of students to experience balanced time allocation, meaningful pacing, restorative breaks, and sustained attention without chronic pressure or fragmentation [5]. Each dimension is operationalized through observable indicators, qualitative descriptors, and participatory validation methods, ensuring methodological rigor while remaining responsive to local educational realities and developmental appropriateness across age groups.

2.1. Economic Conditions

2.2. Social Opportunities

2.3. Protective Safeguards

2.4. Transparency Guarantees

Rights to political participation constitute a foundational dimension within broader frameworks for evaluating human development and policy effectiveness. Crucially, this dimension is not self-contained but functions as an integral component of a tightly interwoven system of enabling conditions. The conceptual architecture underpinning such analyses emphasizes that key dimensions—such as economic security, social inclusion, institutional protection, and procedural transparency—are mutually reinforcing; the weakening or underdevelopment of any one element constrains the realization of the others. For instance, limited access to quality education may restrict individuals' capacity to engage meaningfully in civic processes, while insufficient legal safeguards can undermine trust in participatory mechanisms. Similarly, opaque decision-making procedures may erode public confidence and diminish motivation for sustained involvement. This systemic interdependence forms the analytical foundation for examining recent educational reforms. In particular, the implementation and outcomes of the 'Double Reduction' policy are assessed through this lens—not as isolated administrative measures, but as interventions embedded within a complex ecosystem of socioeconomic, institutional, and civic dynamics. A comprehensive understanding therefore requires attention to how shifts in regulatory design, resource allocation, accountability structures, and community engagement collectively shape opportunities for inclusive and informed participation across multiple levels of the education system [2].

3. A Five-Dimensional Analysis: Achievements, Shortcomings, and Hidden Paradoxes

3.1. Economic Conditions: Significant "Burden Reduction" Benefits and Concerns over Distribution

Among the five dimensions, the improvement in economic conditions is the most evident and widely observed outcome [6]. With the substantial contraction of supply in the academic tutoring market following regulatory adjustments, households' direct education expenditures—particularly those associated with extracurricular academic instruction—have declined significantly across broad demographic segments. Empirical data indicate that, during the compulsory education stage, average household education spending decreased by approximately 15 percent, representing a meaningful reduction in financial pressure for many families. This decline reflects not only reduced out-of-pocket

payments for private tutoring but also a structural shift toward publicly supported educational services. After-school services, now systematically integrated into school hours and offered at low, publicly subsidized rates, have effectively replaced high-cost, market-driven tutoring alternatives. These institutionalized programs provide extended learning time, homework guidance, and enrichment activities without imposing additional financial strain on families. As a result, the marginal cost for accessing supplementary educational support has been substantially lowered, especially for households with limited financial flexibility. Furthermore, the standardization of service delivery across public schools has contributed to greater predictability in household budgeting for education-related expenses, enhancing overall financial planning capacity and reducing uncertainty-driven precautionary savings.

However, the distributional effects of these economic improvements reveal important disparities that warrant careful scholarly attention. While aggregate expenditure figures show a clear downward trend, the benefits are not uniformly experienced across socioeconomic strata. Research findings suggest that the policy's restraining influence on participation in off-campus academic tutoring is disproportionately concentrated among middle-income households, who historically relied most heavily on group-based, commercially operated tutoring services. In contrast, higher-income households—particularly those within the top income quintile—demonstrate markedly higher resilience and adaptability: they rapidly transitioned to alternative arrangements, including privately arranged one-on-one instruction, overseas online tutoring platforms, and informal learning collectives facilitated through personal networks. Consequently, the net reduction in educational investment for these families remains minimal, and their access to high-intensity, personalized academic support has been largely preserved. This pattern implies that while the policy succeeded in lowering average financial burdens, it did not fundamentally alter the underlying mechanisms through which educational advantage is reproduced across generations. The persistence of stratified access to intensive academic support underscores the need for complementary interventions—such as enhanced teacher development, equitable resource allocation across schools, and expanded high-quality public after-school programming—that address both financial and opportunity dimensions of educational equity.

3.2. Social Opportunities: Structural Failures in "Capacity Building"

If the economic dimension represents a strength of the "burden reduction" initiative, then the social opportunity dimension reveals significant implementation gaps in "capacity building." The original policy design aimed to advance the holistic development of students across moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education through after-school services. However, empirical observation indicates that these services frequently function primarily as supplementary academic support rather than platforms for cultivating comprehensive competencies. In many cases, they resemble extended classroom instruction focused narrowly on homework completion, while extracurricular offerings often lack pedagogical coherence, professional delivery, and developmental intentionality. Field investigations conducted across multiple prefecture-level cities in Jiangsu Province consistently document recurring challenges: insufficient numbers of qualified instructors trained in child development and interdisciplinary pedagogy; absence of standardized, age-appropriate curricular frameworks aligned with core educational goals; and limited institutional capacity to assess learning outcomes beyond rote performance metrics. As a result, although scheduled service hours are formally fulfilled, meaningful gains in students' self-directed inquiry skills, critical reflection, creative expression, and metacognitive awareness remain elusive. The time allocated for after-school activities has not been effectively converted into enriched learning experiences—students continue to operate within tightly regulated temporal routines, with minimal opportunities to exercise agency in selecting learning pathways or engaging in sustained, open-ended exploration.

This situation reflects a notable discrepancy between formal time allocation and substantive developmental advancement. While students now experience greater temporal flexibility outside regular school hours—a structural shift intended to alleviate pressure—the corresponding enhancement of their ability to meaningfully utilize that time for higher-order cognitive and socio-emotional growth has not kept pace. Rather than transitioning into environments that foster autonomy, curiosity, and integrative thinking, many learners simply relocate from one highly structured setting—such as commercial tutoring centers—to another similarly prescriptive context within school-based after-school programs. Genuine capability development depends not only on time availability but also on access to high-caliber instructional resources, responsive mentorship tailored to individual learning trajectories, and authentic opportunities for decision-making about content, pace, and mode of engagement. Current policy implementation provides only foundational administrative scaffolding; it does not yet incorporate robust mechanisms for quality assurance, professional development infrastructure, or participatory design involving educators, families, and students themselves. Consequently, the framework remains under-resourced and under-specified, limiting its effectiveness in translating policy intent into measurable improvements in student agency, resilience, and lifelong learning capacity.

3.3. Protective Safeguards: The “Institutional Vacuum” for Vulnerable Groups

This dimension presents the most significant challenge among the five analytical dimensions. The principle of protective safeguards underscores the necessity for institutional mechanisms to intervene when primary social structures—such as market arrangements or familial support systems—prove insufficient in ensuring equitable access to essential services. Within the context of education policy implementation, this implies that public institutions must assume responsibility for mitigating disparities and reinforcing support where foundational systems fall short. In practice, however, the operationalization of the 'Double Reduction' policy reveals notable limitations in its capacity to deliver robust, inclusive, and functionally effective compensatory provisions for students facing systemic disadvantages.

First, the policy's implementation has unintentionally reinforced existing spatial inequities between urban and rural educational environments. Rural schools frequently operate under structural constraints—including limited infrastructure, shortages of qualified teaching personnel, and restricted access to digital learning tools—which significantly constrain the scope, quality, and sustainability of after-school service offerings. While regulatory measures have curbed commercial tutoring activities, urban students continue to benefit from layered academic support: differentiated instruction embedded within school curricula, access to high-capacity extracurricular programming, and privately funded supplementary education delivered by credentialed instructors. In contrast, rural students lack comparable alternatives; their diminished access to remedial, enrichment, and skill-building opportunities results not only in stagnation but in relative academic regression over time, thereby deepening the developmental divergence between geographic cohorts. Second, targeted assistance for students experiencing persistent academic difficulties remains largely symbolic rather than substantive. Although official guidelines mandate tailored pedagogical interventions, many schools lack both dedicated staffing roles and sustained financial allocations necessary to implement evidence-informed support strategies. Consequently, such initiatives often manifest as ad hoc classroom accommodations or generic homework supervision—neither of which address underlying learning gaps or socio-cognitive barriers. For families with limited economic resources and reduced familiarity with formal educational pathways, the contraction of the off-campus tutoring sector does not represent an improvement in equity; instead, it eliminates one of the few accessible avenues through which they could supplement school-based instruction and mitigate intergenerational educational disadvantage. This dynamic highlights a critical tension between regulatory intent and implementation fidelity—where well-designed policy frameworks may inadvertently amplify pre-existing

vulnerabilities without parallel investment in institutional capacity, professional development, and localized resource allocation.

3.4. Transparency Guarantees and Political Participation: Form over Substance

In terms of ensuring transparency, the implementation of a 'whitelist' system for approved training institutions and the institutionalization of mandatory information disclosure mechanisms have collectively contributed to reducing information asymmetry between service providers and consumers in the education sector. These measures enhance public access to basic operational data, including institutional qualifications, course offerings, instructor credentials, and fee structures. However, persistent ambiguities in policy interpretation—particularly concerning the classification criteria distinguishing academic from non-academic subjects—have led to inconsistent enforcement across regions and administrative levels. Such definitional uncertainty undermines regulatory clarity and weakens stakeholders' ability to anticipate compliance requirements. Furthermore, when unauthorized training activities shift to informal or concealed formats—such as residential tutoring, online platforms operating without registration, or unlicensed small-group instruction—the associated monitoring burden increases substantially. Oversight becomes resource-intensive, reliant on reactive reporting rather than proactive verification, thereby eroding the reliability and timeliness of publicly available information. Consequently, while formal transparency mechanisms exist on paper, their real-world efficacy is constrained by implementation gaps, uneven capacity among local regulators, and structural incentives that encourage circumvention rather than adherence.

Regarding political participation, the formal establishment of parent committees in schools provides a structured channel for caregiver involvement in certain operational matters. Yet this participation remains narrowly circumscribed, typically confined to advisory or logistical functions—for instance, assisting in the selection of after-school enrichment programs, reviewing cafeteria menus, or supporting event coordination—without granting authority over pedagogical direction, budgetary allocation, staffing decisions, or curriculum design. This limitation reflects a broader pattern wherein stakeholder engagement is treated as administrative support rather than co-governance. Most significantly, students—the primary beneficiaries and direct experiencers of educational policies—are systematically excluded from formal consultative frameworks. Their perspectives on learning conditions, workload distribution, assessment practices, and well-being indicators are rarely solicited through systematic, age-appropriate, or institutionally embedded mechanisms. The absence of meaningful student voice not only contradicts principles of inclusive governance but also impedes policy responsiveness. Without sustained, two-way dialogue grounded in empirical feedback from learners, interventions risk misalignment with actual educational needs, resulting in recurrent inefficiencies such as mismatched service provision, low uptake of reform initiatives, and diminished trust in institutional legitimacy.

4. Discussion: The "Paradox of Reducing Academic Burden" Amid Imbalances in Interconnections

Integrating the findings across the five analytical dimensions presented earlier reveals a multifaceted and internally inconsistent policy landscape. While the 'Double Reduction' initiative has successfully reduced direct household expenditures on extracurricular tutoring—achieving measurable fiscal relief for many families—it has not been accompanied by commensurate enhancements in equitable access to developmental opportunities or robust institutional support systems [7–9]. Drawing upon foundational concepts in capability theory, this asymmetry between economic alleviation and opportunity expansion gives rise to what may be termed a 'burden-reduction tension': a situation wherein policy outcomes diverge from intended developmental goals due to structural misalignments in resource allocation, service provision, and systemic safeguards.

More precisely, when social mobility pathways remain constrained and protective mechanisms for vulnerable learners are underdeveloped, the reduction of financial outlays does not automatically translate into expanded agency or enriched learning experiences [10, 11]. Instead, it may unintentionally reinforce existing disparities, as families with greater socioeconomic capital adapt more readily to regulatory shifts—redirecting resources toward alternative forms of educational investment—while less-resourced households experience diminished capacity to compensate for lost instructional support. This dynamic reflects not merely an absence of benefit, but an active reconfiguration of competition along less transparent and less regulated axes, thereby intensifying stratification rather than mitigating it.

Three interrelated mechanisms underpin this tension. First, the anticipated 'crowding-out effect'—whereby freed household income would flow into higher-value developmental activities—has not materialized, primarily because public provision of high-quality, accessible, and pedagogically sound enrichment opportunities remains limited and unevenly distributed across regions and school types. Second, the expected 'compensatory mechanism,' designed to level the playing field for disadvantaged students, has been undermined by persistent gaps in targeted support infrastructure; without sustained, evidence-informed interventions such as subsidized mentoring, extended learning time, or differentiated academic scaffolding, relative disadvantage widens even as nominal costs decline [12]. Third, the 'participation mechanism'—intended to empower stakeholders through responsive, co-designed after-school programming—remains largely inactive, as standardized service offerings often fail to reflect local needs, parental input, or student interests, resulting in low engagement and minimal quality improvement incentives across implementation sites.

Collectively, these dynamics point to a fundamental insight: for the 'Double Reduction' policy to evolve from a regulatory intervention into a transformative educational reform, its conceptual framing must move beyond supply-side constraints—such as limiting tutoring hours or capping fees—and instead prioritize demand-side empowerment. This entails strengthening the substantive freedoms of students and families through improved access to diversified learning pathways, enhanced school-based support capacity, strengthened community-school partnerships, and systematic investments in teacher professional development focused on inclusive pedagogy and formative assessment [13]. Only through such holistic, capability-oriented strategies can policy outcomes align with broader national objectives of balanced, equitable, and sustainable human development.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications: Toward a Governance Logic of "Capacity Building"

This paper analyzes the "Double Reduction" policy through the lens of substantive freedom, drawing on conceptual foundations that emphasize human agency, opportunity expansion, and the conditions necessary for meaningful choice. The central finding is that while the policy has achieved measurable success in alleviating economic pressures—particularly by lowering household expenditures on extracurricular tutoring and reducing time-intensive academic demands—the broader developmental objectives remain incompletely realized. Specifically, the policy's implementation has not yet succeeded in systematically strengthening students' capabilities across multiple dimensions: cognitive flexibility, socio-emotional resilience, creative expression, self-directed learning, and participatory citizenship. This asymmetry reflects an uneven configuration among the interdependent freedoms that underpin educational equity: freedom from excessive pressure, freedom to access quality learning experiences, freedom to develop diverse competencies, freedom to participate meaningfully in educational decision-making, and freedom to transition equitably into further education or vocational pathways. As a consequence, the current trajectory risks entrenching rather than mitigating disadvantage—where reduced burdens do not translate into expanded

opportunities, and where students with fewer pre-existing resources experience diminishing returns relative to their peers.

To address these structural gaps, this paper advances three interlocking, capacity-oriented directions for refining policy implementation and institutional design:

First, after-school services must undergo a fundamental reorientation—from serving primarily as supervised time-filling mechanisms toward functioning as intentional, pedagogically grounded platforms for capability development. This requires moving beyond ad hoc activity scheduling to embedding evidence-informed curricular frameworks aligned with holistic developmental goals. National-level quality benchmarks should be established—not as prescriptive checklists but as adaptive reference points covering instructional coherence, inclusivity of learning modalities, educator qualifications, student voice integration, and longitudinal progress tracking. Implementation would benefit from structured collaboration with accredited non-governmental education providers possessing demonstrated expertise in experiential, project-based, and socio-affective learning. Crucially, participation must be genuinely voluntary: students and families should possess clear, accessible, and unpenalized opt-in/opt-out mechanisms, thereby introducing accountability incentives that drive continuous improvement in service relevance, responsiveness, and pedagogical rigor.

Second, targeted support mechanisms for disadvantaged learners require strengthened design fidelity and outcome accountability. For students in rural communities and low-income urban households, equitable access cannot rely solely on universal service provision; it necessitates calibrated, needs-responsive interventions. A dedicated mechanism—such as education support vouchers—could be introduced to enable families to select from a pre-vetted array of high-quality, compliance-verified learning resources, including digital tools, mentorship programs, and community-based enrichment activities. These instruments would be accompanied by transparent eligibility criteria and streamlined application processes. Concurrently, cross-regional teacher development initiatives—such as structured school pairing arrangements—must incorporate clearly defined, measurable performance indicators tied to instructional practice improvement, student engagement metrics, and sustained professional growth outcomes. Such indicators should be monitored independently and reported publicly to ensure that equity-oriented provisions operate as functional safeguards rather than symbolic gestures.

Third, transparency and participatory governance must be elevated from procedural formalities to operational imperatives. Clarity in regulatory boundaries—especially regarding the distinction between academically oriented instruction and competency-based, non-curricular learning—is essential to reduce ambiguity for schools, families, and service providers. Regulatory enforcement should prioritize consistent, predictable application of standards, with particular attention to identifying and addressing covert forms of academic supplementation that replicate prior inequities under new guises. Equally important is the institutionalization of shared decision-making structures at the school level: governance committees composed of teachers, parents, and students—representing diverse backgrounds and perspectives—should be empowered with deliberative authority over the design, delivery, and evaluation of after-school offerings. Their input must inform curriculum selection, staffing decisions, resource allocation, and impact assessment, ensuring that program evolution reflects lived experience and collective priorities rather than top-down assumptions or supply-side convenience.

In summary, reducing academic burden is not an end in itself but a necessary precondition for advancing deeper educational aims. The ultimate purpose lies in cultivating robust, adaptable, and socially embedded capabilities—capacities that equip learners not only to succeed within existing systems but also to critically engage with, adapt to, and shape evolving societal contexts. Achieving this requires more than incremental adjustments; it calls for a coherent governance logic centered on capacity building—one that deliberately aligns resource distribution, institutional incentives, regulatory clarity, and democratic participation around the sustained expansion of

substantive freedom. Only when reductions in burden are consistently and intentionally converted into enhancements in agency, voice, and developmental opportunity can the "Double Reduction" initiative fulfill its transformative potential as a foundational step toward modern, equitable, and human-centered education governance.

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