How has Double Reduction Policy Changed the Education Strategies and Experiences of Parents of Migrant Children in Zhangbei County: a Case Study in an Underdeveloped Area of China

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of China's "Double Reduction Policy" (DRP) on the educational strategies and experiences of parents of migrant children in Zhangbei County, a town in an underdeveloped area in China. Implemented in 2021, DRP endeavours to alleviate academic pressures and redirect the focus of education towards a more holistic and well-rounded development of students. Through a qualitative case study approach, this research explores how the DRP has influenced parental engagement in their children's education, focusing on three dimensions: home-based involvement, school-based involvement, and academic socialization.

The study's findings reveal multifaceted parental responses to the DRP. There is an evident shift towards valuing comprehensive development, proved by the increased emphasis on health, personal interests, and a love for learning. Following this shift, parents employ diverse strategies, including encouraging children to do sports, contact nature, use online resources to develop hobbies, take study tours, and read books. However, the persistence of the cultural significance of academic achievement and high-stakes testing continues to shape parental strategies. For instance, parents maintain expectations and inspirations for children's academic achievement, so they would actively provide extra-curricular practices.

Between the two groups of interviewees, there are considerable differences. The housewives, constrained by financial limitations and lower educational backgrounds, maintain a more traditional academic focus. In contrast, vocational teacher parents demonstrate greater openness to alternative educational pathways, such as vocational education, and employ innovative methods like study tours to nurture diverse interests and skills in their children.

This research contributes to the existing literature by offering insights into the dynamics of educational strategy adaptation under a new policy among migrant parents in underdeveloped areas, a perspective overlooked in previous research.

The implications underscore the necessity for targeted support mechanisms to empower parents, advocate a deep reflection on the stratification of higher education, and highlight the potential of vocational education as a viable and valued pathway.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy, migrant parents, parental involvement in education, educational strategies

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Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

On 24 July 2021, The General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued *Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training on Students in Compulsory Education* (2021), namely the "Double Reduction" policy (DRP). The two "reductions" of DRP refer to the reduction of shadow education and homework burden. As such, the responsibility for after-school education will return to parents or families more than ever. In line with this policy, most parents think the success of DRP largely depends on students' self-control and parents' guidance (Zhou, 2023). From then on, family education has received more attention, and the significant role of families, and parental involvement in education has been highlighted in Chinese children's growth (Li et al., 2021).

Although there is flourishing research digging into parents' involvement in children's education and the challenges they encounter during the process, investigation into the experiences of disadvantaged parents is still lacking, especially under a new policy. To contribute to filling this gap, this place-based case study aims to explore the parent engagement of migrant parents in Zhangbei County, a typical underdeveloped town under the context of DRP.

Through examining their educational strategies, experiences, and challenges, this paper aims to shine a light on parents' views and experiences of raising their children and DRP, explore parent engagement in a little-researched, marginalized area, and add to the still comparatively small body of research on DRP's impact on specific groups.

1.1 Context: Double Reduction Policy (DRP)

While DRP may not be the first initiative to address the issue of excessive academic workload among students in China's compulsory education stage, it stands out as the most far-reaching and influential policy for reducing children's academic burden in China's history (Xue & Li, 2023; Yu et al., 2021). It is crucial for the education sector

to stay updated on the latest policy changes and have timely insights into policy implementation, which forms a key part of the significance of this study.

In China's examination-based education, the academic burden on children is considerably heavy. Within school, teachers tend to assign more homework or extend students' study hours to improve scores and ranks. Outside of school, anxious parents invest in off-campus tutoring to improve their children's competitiveness. Widespread shadow education has imposed heavy workloads on students, who have to take extra classes after school at the price of leisure time. Heavy academic workloads do bring about serious mental and physical health problems for children (Wang, 2021), such as insufficient sleep (Xu & Hu, 2020) and enduring stress (Sun et al., 2013). In this way, reducing students' academic burden becomes one of the top priorities of DRP.

To achieve this, the government mainly takes two actions: reducing students' homework loading and curbing for-profit subject off-campus training institutions. The specific requirements are as follows. Inside of school, no written homework should be assigned to students in the first and second grades in primary school; for students in the third to sixth primary school grades and in secondary schools, the average time to complete written homework each day should be within 60 and 90 minutes, respectively. Outside of school, off-campus training institutions must not occupy national holidays, rest days, or winter and summer holidays to conduct subject-based training, which tutoring for core subjects like Chinese, math and English.

Another drive for DRP is the education inequity issues in education in China. The expansion of off-campus tutoring, born out of and growing from the education market, has further widened educational inequality, which goes against the socialist collectivism principle (Yang et al., 2023). Therefore, curbing off-campus training is a significant action to minimize the effects of the market and children' socioeconomic backgrounds on their educational achievements (Qian et al., 2023; Zhao, 2022).

These actions did witness policy effectiveness in the short term (i.e. reducing students' homework and off-campus tutoring). The assignment workloads have been reduced, as shown in the reduction of time children spend on it. Off-campus tutoring has been curbed greatly: according to the data published by the Ministry of Education (MOE), the number of offline private tutoring institutions has been cut by 92.14%, and online ones have seen a reduction of 87.07 % (MOE, 2021). Furthermore, to weaken grad-ism, DRP also requires primary schools to cancel score rankings to create a less competitive study environment.

Additionally, primary schools are also required to conduct after-school services when the formal courses are over, in which teachers guide students in completing written homework and participating in clubs, sports, and art and social activities. (Li, J. et al., 2022). In this way, children's time would be released and all-round development can be prompted.

However, implementing this policy also encounters various challenges with parents' reluctance as a primary one. The persistent academic anxiety among parents presents a significant challenge to the full implementation of the DRP. Despite the policy's intent to alleviate student burdens, fierce academic competition and societal pressures continue to drive parental high expectations. On the cultural level, according to Zhang et al. (2021), the deeply ingrained "examination-oriented" mindset in Chinese society perpetuates a cycle of anxiety and high-stakes achievement. This cultural norm, which equates academic success with social status, is reinforced by the structure of the College Entrance Examination (i.e. Gaokao) and its pivotal role in determining future opportunities (Brady et al., 2018, p.395). On the individual level, when parents perceive that their children's performance on school tests will significantly impact future educational opportunities or success, parental academic anxiety is triggered. Under this anxiety, they try to enhance children's learning intensity, reduce their entertainment and leisure time, and over-cultivate their cognitive ability prematurely (Chen et al., 2022). Thus, some parents hesitate to fully embrace DRP, concerned about their children's academic competitiveness, especially under the enrolment pressure and grim employment situation.

1.2 Context: Migrant Groups' Education Issues in China

Today's world has witnessed a surge in labour migration. In developing countries, large-scale rural-to-urban migration contributes to accelerated economic growth and urbanisation. In China, there were 290 million migrant workers in 2019 according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020). Their major motivations for migration are earning money and paying for children's tuition fees (Fang, Sun, & Yuen, 2017; Murphy, 2014). But the problem is that most internal migrants and international immigrants living in metropolises face great inequalities and disadvantages (Liu et al., 2017). As more migrant families leave their place of origin and settle down in urban areas, the quantity of migrant children living with their parents in the cities has risen drastically, which poses a formidable challenge for both policy and parental support in children's education.

In terms of policy, Hong (2022) states that the Household registration policy (Hukou Policy) remains the hurdle for migrant children to accept high-quality education. Under the Hukou Policy, migrant children are often forced to return to a rural region to attend high school or to attend urban informal and unregulated schools which lack well-trained teachers and adequate facilities.

In terms of parental support, in urban areas, off-campus tutoring is a prevalent choice for migrant parents. However, it is increasingly expensive, which increases household expenses for low-SES parents and exacerbates social inequality. Additionally, if migrant children come back to rural areas and left-behind children (Xue et al., 2024), the absence of parental supervision and less access to quality educational resources may lower their academic performance, for they tend to have low academic motivation and bad study habits. Thus, rural migrant students are more disadvantaged compared to their urban competitors.

Equity in education is a crucial issue, and DRP also endeavours to promote it. Education is not just a preparatory tool for productivity; it is a fundamental capability that each person should have the right to develop, and it "has been seen to be

particularly central to human dignity, equality, and opportunity" (Nussbaum, 2011, p.154),

However, DRP seems to bring a paradox of educational equity. On one hand, DRP can release the educational inequality caused by the huge gap in investment in after-school tutoring across socioeconomic status (SES) as mentioned above (Liu et al., 2024); on the other hand, DRP may enhance the inequality by blocking the way for children in disadvantaged groups to acquire enough quality education resource, because it is evidenced that out-of-school tutoring improves students' academic performance (Zhang & Bray, 2017). For instance, in Peng's study (2021), shadow education used to be a major channel through which migrant parents supported their left-behind children's education (26 migrant children, 6 migrant parents and 6 teachers). However, after the implementation of DRP, these parents may lose this essential way. Moreover, in underdeveloped areas lacking education resources (such as teachers and resources for non-subject activities), children may lack opportunities to utilize their free time released from excessive homework in the past to achieve well-rounded development (Meng et al., 2022).

The assumptions above all need examination and investigation about whether DRP has relieved the burden of migrant parents or blocked their way to support children's education. This leads to our research questions in this study.

1.3 Research Questions

The present study is guided by the following three research questions:

Research Question 1: In migrant families with young children in the compulsory education stage, what are parents' views on and perceptions of the Double Reduction Policy? What are their goals and expectations in raising their child(ren) under this new policy?

Research Question 2: What education strategies and resources, if any, do these migrant parents utilize to support the education of their child(ren) under this policy?

Research Question 3: What challenges, if any, have migrant parents encountered and how have these difficulties affected their efforts to raise their child(ren)?

1.4 Chapters Outline

This paper consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research background or context of this study and presents the study's aims, rationale, and research questions. The literature review in Chapter 2 begins by clarifying the importance of parental involvement in education, then summarizing the influencing factors of it, and then conducts the theoretical framework of parents' education involvement for data analysis, and finally investigates how has DRP changed parental strategies, experiences, and obstacles in education. Then, after critically reviewing the literature on DRP and parents' involvement, Chapter 3 describes the research design and the methodology used for data collection and analysis. The results are presented and discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 concludes this thesis by summarizing main findings, acknowledging its limitations and suggesting further areas of study.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

In the following section, literature about the importance of parental engagement, parental education strategies, and education issues of migrant groups is reviewed. There are 83 research materials identified in “Google Scholar” using the keywords "double reduction policy" and "parent", but there is no research material containing the exact phrase "double reduction policy" and "migrant parent”, neither in “SOLO” (Search Oxford Libraries Online), which indicates a possible research gap.

Nevertheless, to acquire as relevant information as possible, I used two keywords "Double Reduction Policy" and "migrant" in “Google Scholar”, and there are 29 research materials, but only 4 of them investigate migrant groups‘ education issues (i.e. migrant children, left-behind children with migrant parents, etc.) under the context of DRP: Fan (2022), Hong (2022), Xue & Li (2023), Pi et al., (2024), and the other 25 materials only mentioned migrant population as background information in the text. These four key papers provide the precious foundation for my research, which will be analysed in detail in the following content.

In the following sections, I will first introduce the importance, influencing factors, and theoretical framework of parental education involvement, and then explore its change under DRP.

2.1 The Importance of Parent Involvement in Education

Parental involvement in education is parents’ participation in supporting their children’s study and promoting academic success, whether at home, in school or via home-school connections and wider community collaborations (Hill et al., 2004, p. 1491; Harris & Goodall, 2007). It is a powerful influencer on children’s development and, therefore, an important object in the education research field.

It plays a key role in various aspects of children's development. In terms of children's academic outcomes, it is one of the primary contributors (Schmid & Garrels, 2021), such as improvements in literacy and maths (Voorhis et al., 2013) and school attendance (McConnell & Kubina, 2014). It even has a larger impact than the differences associated with variations in the quality of schools (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). In terms of social integration, parent engagement also has a noticeable influence, particularly in migrant and immigrant families (**Motti-Stefanidi et al.,** 2012; **Van Houtte & Stevens,** 2009).

Its importance is also increasingly noticed and emphasized in China in recent years. Due to the societal values attached to educational efforts in Chinese contexts, Chinese parents closely engage in their children's education (Bai, 2005; Gao, 2008). Especially after the introduction of DRP, the role of parents has been further underlined. DRP advocates the combination and cooperation of family, school, and society (Zhou, 2023). Also, most parents think the success of DRP largely depends on parents' guidance and students' self-control (Zhou, 2023). From then on, family education has received more attention, and the significant role of families, family-school relations, and parental involvement in education has been highlighted in Chinese children's growth (Li et al., 2021).

Therefore, exploring parental involvement in education is valuable for both policy implementation and children's development.

2.2 Influencing Factors of Parents' Involvement in Education

Generally, there is a wide range of factors impacting parent engagement. Positively, parental engagement is linked with social status, household income and parents' level of education (Harris & Goodall, 2007). It is negatively associated with low parental education level, maternal depression and single-parent status (Kohl et al, 2000). This further proves the disadvantaged position of low-SES families.

Moreover, some scholars put forward more lenses to explain the variation of parent engagement. For example, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, p. 13) state that parents' perception of their role in children's education is essential. In other words, parents' views about whether they are important or necessary or even permissible in children's education is the key factor. This perception is complexly shaped by family and cultural elements, such as a "sense of personal efficacy", which refers to their perception of their ability to influence children's academic achievement, and the opportunity to engage, which largely depends on the invitations, demands and opportunities generated by the school or children, parents' time available, etc. This directly leads us to the challenges faced by low-SES parents.

Low-SES parents face various barriers while supporting their children's studies. One is the lack of opportunities, which can be specifically demonstrated by the fact that parents feel "in the dark" about the details of their child's attitude and progress in school (**Sargent**, 2020). Another two barriers are the "culture of poverty", which means parents may place less emphasis on education, and the lack of "Social Capital", which is crucial to adapting to middle-class institutions with middle-class values of schools. Thus, low-SES parents may feel uncomfortable and unconfident interacting with teachers and involving in school activities (Chu & Willms, 1996).

To sum up, parental education strategies, attitudes, and experiences are influenced by diverse factors, including SES, education background, perception of education, understanding of their role in education, access to opportunities to engage, social context, etc. And low-SES parents are especially disadvantaged in these aspects, so they face lots of barriers when they try to participate in children's education, which will be entailed in the following section.

2.3 Theoretical Framework of Parents' Involvement in Education

Hill and Tyson (2009) have summarized three main dimensions of parent involvement in education: (1) Home-based involvement, (2) School-based involvement, and (3) Academic socialisation. The specific actions belonging to each dimension are listed as follows:

(1) Home-based involvements are parental involvement in education in the home realm or outside school. It entails a range of activities:

- monitoring and supporting children's homework
- communication with children about activities and issues in school
- establishing a stale and quiet learning environment at home (e.g. providing a separate room for children to study)
- taking children to events and places that foster academic success, such as accepting extra-curricular tutoring
- organising educationally enriching activities and experiences for children (e.g. taking study tours to museums, libraries and other educational venues, etc.) (Hill & Tyson 2009)
- providing reading materials for children
- reading with children
- discussing television programs with children
- controlling TV viewing time of children (Mora & Escardíbul, 2018).

(2) School-based dimension refers to the parental involvement in education in the school realm (Conners & Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2002), including:

- communication with school staff
- visits to the school
- participation in school governance and activities (Crosnoe & Ressler 2019; Hill & Tyson 2009).

As Crosnoe and Ressler (2019) point out, this type of involvement requires a high education level and social resources of parents, and low-SES parents, therefore, may be extra disadvantaged, as they often face challenges due to a lack of familiarity with the educational system.

(3) Academic socialization refers to the process through which parents shape their children's attitudes, motivations, and behaviours related to school learning (Bempechat, 1992; Taylor, 2004). This includes practices such as attributing success to ability, implementing supportive strategies, communicating high expectations, and expecting high career aspirations (Bempechat, 1990). These strategies will scaffold children's burgeoning autonomy, independence, and cognitive abilities. Its specific demonstrations are:

- communicating expectations for educational achievement
- expressing their perception of educational value
- linking schoolwork to current events
- expressing educational and occupational aspirations for their children
- discussing learning strategies with children
- making preparations and plans for the future, including linking material discussed in school with students' interests and goals (p.14).

The importance of Academic socialization lies in its emphasis on the long-term development of children, for it focuses on their internalized motivation for achievement and their future plans, and provides a link between school work and future goals and aspirations. However, its challenge lies in the fact that it depends on parents' knowledge about how to navigate children's cognition of education, which is a high demand for parents.

As this framework will be applied in later data analysis, it is necessary to clarify the distinguishment and interaction among them. The distinction between home-based and school-based ones is the realm of activities. As for home-based involvement and academic socialisation, the former involves direct one-on-one interactions between parents and children; while academic socialisation focuses on indirectly promoting academic values and expectations (Sy, et al., 2013), which is more indirect and cognition-end. In addition, they are also interacting with each other: academic socialization influences home-based involvement, as perceptions and values lead

specific actions; in the meantime, the latter is the demonstration of the former, for actions and concrete activities are the outcome of abstract cognition.

These three dimensions and their specific demonstrations all laid the foundation for my hypothesis of parental educational strategies.

2.4 How has DRP Changed Parents' Educational Involvement

Compared with school-based involvement, Chinese parents tend to have more strategies in home-based involvement and academic socialization dimension, such as communication with children, supervision of schoolwork, help with homework, emotional support, and setting high expectations and aspirations (Gan, 2019; Zou, 2013). Zooming in on migrant groups, Hu and Wu (2020) found that a good study environment and strict parental supervision at home are migrant parents' main approaches, and they are beneficial for migrant children to have a sense of belonging to the school and urban peers.

As for school-based involvement, it seems parents' contact and collaboration with teachers are lacking according to the previous research (e.g. Zhang, 2018; Gao, 2012).

Since the implementation of DRP, parents' educational strategies in China have changed accordingly, which can be observed in both the Home-based dimension and academic socialization dimension. However, the change in school-based involvement after DRP is not obvious. The changes in each dimension are interpreted in the following sections.

Home-based Dimension

Before DRP, extra subject-based training was the most priority choice in the home-based dimension. After that, the highly competitive nature of education still exists, so high-SES parents switch from institutional to private one-on-one tutoring (usually

expensive) or tutor their children by themselves (Jin & Sun, 2021; Fan, 2022). According to a survey in China, up to 87% of parents said they would not give up after-school tutoring due to the policy, but 37% reported that they would consider receiving individual one-on-one tutoring as a replacement for institutional subject tutoring (Eryong, Xue & Li, 2022). Nevertheless, for low-income families, the required financial and social capital may cause an "invisible threshold" that keeps them out (Xue & Li, 2023). The reason for it lies in the fact that individual tutoring is more expensive and the sourcing for private tutors requires information from parents' social networks.

Fan (2022) reaches a similar conclusion on how DRP has risen the threshold of tutoring in Tier 1 cities. It is stated that before DRP's introduction, there are both high-priced and low-priced courses, so subject institutional tutoring is a relatively accessible choice for parents from almost all SES to cultivate children in the home-based dimension. After DRP's introduction, even though subject tutoring was banned, migrant parents in tier 1 cities[1] still tend to follow high-SES parents to hire private tutors, which causes a heavy financial burden for them. Hence, in Tier 1 cities, migrant families will still be disadvantaged in the education competition. Unfortunately, DRP has not solved this inequity (Hong, 2022; Xue & Li, 2022).

Academic Socialization

According to Fan's study, there are noticeable differences parental engagement among different regions. In Tier-1 cities, high-SES parents still have high expectations for their children's academic achievement, and low-SES parents tend to follow this idea. A degree from a key university is still essential for their children to settle down in metropolises, so they generally still have high expectations for their children's academic achievement. However, less educated parents may meet obstacles when conflicts occur between them and their children, for they lack proper vocabulary in communicating with children (Lareau, 2002).

[1] Tier 1. This tier includes China's major "up and coming" cities which have undergone rapid urban development in recent years. There are 15 cities in this tier.

The situation is reversed outside the tier 1 cities, where parents' anxiety has been significantly relieved, so low-SES parents tend to lower their expectations, quit subject- tutoring but not seek any replacement, letting their children grow naturally (Fan, 2022). Nevertheless, the limitation of Fan's research is also obvious: the sample size of migrant parents is small (only 1), and it is based in Guangdong Province, so findings may be contextually specific and cannot be replicated in other settings in China.

Apart from regions, children's education stage is also a factor affecting parents' strategies. According to Zhou (2023), Chinese parents' support for DRP increases as children progress through compulsory education stages. That means the higher the stage of children's compulsory education, the more parents support DRP. In this way, parental involvement in academic socialization dimension varies largely based on the specific context, including regions and educational stages.

School-based Dimension

It is stated that collaboration between parents and teachers is critical for children's education under the DRP (Song, 2022), but its effectiveness of implementation is still unknown. Hence, the change in this dimension under DRP needs further exploration in the future.

In summary, the migrant groups are still in a disadvantaged position in education after DRP. Migrant parents' education strategies and experiences may differ largely in diverse regions and contexts. But the research investigating the education strategies and challenges of migrant parents is lacking. They may encounter unique obstacles in navigating the educational landscape altered by the DRP, such as limited access to educational resources, cultural and linguistic barriers and work-schedule conflict.

The research gap extends to the exploration of how these parents adapt their involvement strategies, their perception of DRP, and aspiration for children's education under this new policy. A detailed investigation into these aspects would contribute significantly to the broader discourse on educational policy and its effects on diverse family dynamics in China (Zhang et al., 2022; Peng, 2021).

Migrant parents in Zhangbei County form a hard-to-reach population for researchers, and hence, this article seeks to add to the knowledge base by providing an analysis of their narratives. Ultimately, we hope that the knowledge gained from this study may contribute more broadly to understanding how best to support those with limited socioeconomic resources to complete their studies and achieve educational success.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The empirical study that formed the core of this research was a qualitative research project investigating how migrant parents experience and what educational strategies they utilise under the DRP. This section is structured as follows: (1) Methodology Introduction-case study; (2) data collection method— including sampling strategies, recruitment, and semi-structured interviews; (3) data analysis; (4) ethical considerations; and (5) limitations.

3.1 Methodology Introduction: case study

This is a place-based case study, focusing on a specific context, Zhangbei County, an underdeveloped town in China. The twofold reasons for choosing this site and case-study method are as follows:

The first reason is that we can approach research subjects through personal networks with community organizers. Secondly, due to its distinctive economic profiles and demographic compositions, this research site provided opportunities for us to explore rural migrant parental support for their children’s education in a specific context.

Zhangbei County, located in northwestern Hebei in northern China, illustrates a case of the rapid demographic transition from rural villages to county centres in inland provinces during the post-reform era. According to official statistics, in 2010, urban residents accounted for 33.16% of the total population in the county, and in 2020, urban residents increased to 69.34%, which shows a large increase of 36.18%. In other words, within this decade, over 36% of its population has relocated from villages to the county seat. Moreover, it is also an outstanding representative of Poverty Alleviation in China, considerably transforming from a national-level poverty-stricken county to one of China's top 100 counties in comprehensive strength. Thus, a case study in Zhangbei County can provide insights into how these local factors interact with the DRP to shape parents' experiences. The considerable change both in urbanism and the economy makes it a distinctive site to explore its educational dynamics and offer more insights into Chinese education development by adding a

specific perspective in Zhangbei County. However, it should be noted that the results based on Zhangbei County may be contextually specific and cannot be referred to other settings in China.

In terms of selecting “case study” as the method, a place-based one is an appropriate choice because it allows for a detailed examination of the DRP's impact in a specific context, with a focus on a unique and often underserved population.

The ‘case study’ aimed to depict ‘what it is like’ in certain settings, capturing the ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of participants’ personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts of a situation. Case studies are not merely illustrative, as the data collected can provide powerful insights into micro- and macro-political decision-making, connecting theory and practice (Ball, 1994). By focusing on a single case, we can conduct a more nuanced analysis of the DRP's impact. This approach enables us to explore the complexities and subtleties of the policy's effects that might be missed in a broader, less focused study (Yin, 2009). More importantly, underdeveloped areas like Zhangbei County, though witnessing a great development, may face distinct challenges in implementing educational policies. A case study can reveal the barriers to policy implementation and the innovative solutions that parents and local communities develop in response (Bryman, 2016).

Case studies are particularly useful for policy-relevant research because they can inform policymakers about the on-the-ground realities of policy implementation. Hence, this study can contribute to a more informed policy discourse by providing detailed insights into the DRP's impact in an underdeveloped area (Patton, 2014).

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Sampling methods & Recruitment

In this study, I mainly target migrant parents of students in Grade 4-8 (aged 11 to 15) in Zhangbei County, China. I refined the setting by three selection criteria:

(1) the migrant parents were rural-hukou holders (with registration from rural areas in Zhangbei County);

(2) The children of interviewees were rural-hukou holders, migrating from rural areas to the county along with their parents.

(3) The children of interviewees were students in the compulsory education stage before and after the introduction of DRP (aged 11 to 15). In China, students must complete a nine-year compulsory education, which is the target period of DRP's implementation.

The sampling strategy in this study was snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability method which relies on referrals from initially sampled subjects to others believed to have the characteristic of interest. Its limitations include reliance on the subjective judgments of informants, and confidentiality concerns. And its advantages include low time and energy costs and efficiency (**Johnson,** 2014). The reason for adopting snowball sampling is that, with the limited time and resources for the dissertation, it is one of the best ways to reach a wide range of samples.

I started recruiting interviewees on May 5th and conducted interviews in June 2024. I contacted the community organizer of migrant families in Zhangbei County through my network on WeChat (the Chinese version of Facebook), and reached out to the first group of candidates, which is composed of four vocational teachers. Through them, I reached my second group of parents, which mainly consisted of their relevant acquaintances. After reaching saturation at the 4th interview in each group, the final list of my interview is settled: 4 vocational teachers and 4 housewives. Saturation refers to the point in data collection when "no additional issues or insights are identified and data begin to repeat so that further data collection is redundant, signifying that an adequate sample size is reached" (Hennick & Kaiser, 2022). In this study, the saturation is reached at the 4th interview of each group, leading to a small-size sample, which is consistent with the statement of Hennick and Kaiser (2022): "Qualitative studies can reach saturation at relatively small sample sizes". In this

process, my family and friends have contributed a lot in both approaching the community and recommending qualified candidates.

3.2.2 Interviewee Description

The characteristics of the two groups of interviewees are introduced in this section. On the whole, the first group (vocational teachers) has higher education attainment and richer working experience than the second one (housewives).

The first group were four vocational teachers, who migrated from the countryside to Zhangbei County and became teachers in vocational school by their skills. All of them finished their high school degree.

The second group of interviewees were four housewives who migrated with their husbands to Zhangbei County and became housewives after getting married. Their educational attainment is relatively lower: three graduated from middle school, and one merely finished primary school.

Table 1. Description of the Interviewees

Parent Alias	Role	Educational Level	Occupation	Hukou	Gender (kid)	Age (kid)	Grade of kid(s)
A	mother	high school	vocational teacher	rural	male	12	Grade 6
B	mother	high school	vocational teacher	rural	male	11	Grade 5
C	mother	high school	vocational teacher	rural	female	10	Grade 4
D	mother	high school	vocational teacher	rural	female	13	Grade 7
E	mother	middle school	Housewife	rural	female and male	10, 12	Grade 4, 6
F	mother	middle school	Housewife	rural	male	12	Grade 6
G	mother	primary school	Housewife	rural	male	11	Grade 5
H	mother	middle school	Housewife	rural	female	12	Grade 6

Of the eight interviewees, all of them are mothers, and their children are in the grade between 4 to 7, in the compulsory education stage both before and after the introduction of DRP, which means they experienced the change brought DRP in person.

3.2.3 Data collection: semi-structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to gather rich and relevant data. Semi-structured interviews offer a balance between the flexibility to explore unexpected avenues and the structure to ensure that key topics are covered. This is particularly useful when researching a topic like the Double Reduction policy as a new phenomenon, where parents' experiences may vary widely (Creswell,2017).

There are two phases of the interview: the first phase is focused on the migrant parents who are vocational teachers, and the second one on the housewives. I sent the interview outline (shown in Appendix 2) two days ahead to inform the interviewees of the covered topics. Before each interview, I chatted with them casually on WeChat to build rapport and asked them to fill in the written consent forms.

Interviews are conducted via Tencent Meeting and recorded on my device (not on the cloud). I turned on my video, aiming to build trust and provide some facial responses. At the beginning of each interview, I restated the research ethics and reminded the interviewees that they have the right to refuse to respond or quit at any time. Interviews generally went well; most interviewees showed a strong enthusiasm to share their opinions. Interviews vary in length from 25 minutes to 45 minutes. In terms of languages, 2 interviews were conducted in the Shanxi Dialect (the dialect in Zhangbei County) and the rest were in Mandarin. Transcriptions are conducted manually by the student investigator.

After obtaining informed consent from all participants, the interviews were audio recorded and transcripts were produced for further analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

All data collected were subject to thematic analysis to find patterns and categorise common themes and codes. Thematic analysis was chosen for this study as it was particularly suited for ‘identifying and analysing patterns within and across data

concerning participants' lived experiences, feelings, and perspectives' (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p.297). All transcriptions were coded on NVivo. The interview transcripts were analysed in both inductive and deductive approaches to generate themes. The previous research on parental involvement in education paved the way for deductive thematic analysis so that I can examine whether these themes also exist in my research. Finally, I utilize the theoretical framework in Chapter 2 to analyze the data.

However, DRP is a brand-new policy in the Chinese context, so there may be new parents' experience or educational strategies under this policy. Thus, inductive thematic analysis of qualitative data provides a tool to identify key themes in this relatively new research area. To improve the quality of the coding, I used two rounds of code to involve a process of self-reflection.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Researchers need to consider ethics at every step of designing and conducting this research project. After completing thorough ethical training, I carefully planned my research under my supervisor's guidance, adhering to the best practice guides provided by the university. The research project was approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee's (CUREC) before the data collection began.

Key considerations include obtaining informed consent and protecting the participants' and their families' privacy. Before the start of the interviews, participants were presented with an information sheet (Appendix 3), detailing the study's aims and planned procedure, their role and rights as participants, including how to withdraw from the study; and how the research data would be collected, processed and stored. Only after confirming that they had read and understood the information provided and consented to participate in the study, could they proceed to the interview. At the start of each interview, the researcher repeated the participants' rights, including declining to answer a question, withdrawing from the study, and having all their data permanently deleted.

3.5 Limitation

This study has several limitations due to its sampling method, sample size, and analysis process. The snowball sampling method can introduce several research biases. One of the biggest worries is that the sample recruited is not representative of the Zhangbei migrant population, as the sampling is built through a network of acquaintances in a non-random way. And the sample size is relatively small, though we have reached the saturation. And since this is a place-based case study, the findings may be not replicable in other regions. Besides, in the process of transcription, I removed verbal signals and non-verbal signals that may change the meaning of a conversation (Schegloff, 1997). Although this is a more standardized way, it can lead to the loss of some information reflecting the considerations or emotions of the participants (Oliver, Serovich and Mason, 2005).

Chapter 4. Findings and Results

This chapter mainly includes five sections to show the key findings. The first section demonstrates the changes brought by DRP in migrant parents' view from three perspectives: (1) the released time, (2) the banned subject tutoring, and (3) the shifted parental orientation. In the second and third sections, based on the framework of Hill and Tyson, I interpret how the changes brought by DRP impact two dimensions of parental supportive strategies: Home-based Involvement and Academic Socialization. In the fourth section, parents' involvement in the School-based dimension is investigated, but there is no evidenced change after DRP. In the fifth section, an exclusive strategy of the first group of interviewees is discussed: parents' self-improvement. Going beyond supporting children, this strategy focuses mainly on how parents improve themselves in the educational realm, which may benefit their children indirectly.

The similarities and differences in parental supportive strategies, challenges, and related reasons are investigated by comparing and contrasting.

4.1 Changes Brought by DRP

4.1.1 Released Children's Time

Before DRP, children must spend much time on assignments and institutional tutoring at the cost of leisure time. After DRP, the academic burden on students is lightened and they can finish their homework in school (in after-school services), so their time after school is largely released. This change has twofold effects: on the one hand, children have more time to develop their hobbies and enjoy their childhood adhering to DRP's advocacy. It is also emphasised by migrant parents that only after DRP, do children have more time available to participate in extracurricular activities.

On the other hand, how to help children distribute or make use of this time is a challenge for parents, especially those who are less educated. For instance, after DRP, when her child's time is released, Mother G, who has merely finished primary school,

gets lost about how to manage his time in the evenings, and she is almost desperate when her boy plays a lot.

> "He has no concept of time, as soon as something interests him, he plays, and as soon as he plays, he forgets the time. But I can do nothing, watching TV and walking around is all I can think of. There is no other thing in this little town."

Constrained by her education level, Mother G's educational strategies are relatively limited. This is one of the challenges for underdeveloped areas in which education resources are lacking, restricting parents' perceptions and available strategies.

4.1.2 Banned Subject Tutoring

As mentioned above, banned subject tutoring releases much children's time. But in the meantime, this also removes a key strategy for migrant parents to support children's education. Before DRP, four housewives and two vocational teachers all sent their children to subject-tutoring institutions. After DRP, they lost this important channel, and the return of more education responsibility to parents generally increases the anxiety levels of parents who lack parental education preparation (Fan, 2022). Mother G is a good example of suffering from this change. Before DRP, she relied on subject tutoring to discipline her boy and improve his academic performance. But when the institutional subject-tutoring is banned, she has no idea about how to support her boy's education. However, the steps of other mothers have not been stopped, for they actively explore alternative strategies in the home-based dimension to supplement, which will be interpreted in the following sections.

4.1.3 Shifted Parental Orientation

After DRP, the comprehensive quality of children was further underlined, and grad-ism was being weakened. This idea has also permeated migrant parents and changed their orientation in children's education involvement. For this change of education orientation, Mother C has a detailed narration.

> "Before the implementation of this policy, schools and society focused only on scores, so did we parents. We focused too much on the scores and ranks and we attached much importance to their mastery of certain subject knowledge while neglecting other important aspects of development, such as 'morality, intellectuality, physicality, aesthetics and labour' (the five core qualities for children growth in China).
>
> However, with the introduction of the 'Double Reduction' policy, both society and schools, including me, have changed. We took the focus off score results. Then I will deliberately make some changes. For example, instead of pushing him to learn the subject knowledge, I tried to develop his reading habit and cultivate some of his hobbies."

This shift in orientation deeply influences parental strategies in two dimensions: academic socialization and home-based involvement, which will be interpreted in the following section.

However, this reorientation is not thorough, for children's academic achievement is still a crucial concern for parents. Thus, parents would adopt various strategies to enhance children's academic performance. For different orientations, parents' strategies varied hugely, so I will interpret their strategies in two sections repectively: Parental Reorientation of DRP and the Unchanged Orientation despite DRP.

Interestingly, some supportive strategies are shared by two groups of parents, while the other is specific to the first group of vocational teachers. Three exclusive strategies emerge among vocational teachers: taking study tours, changing track, and parents' self-improvement.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, academic socialisation influences home-based involvement; while home-based involvement is the concrete

demonstration of academic socialisation. Thus, I match one or two strategies in the academic socialization dimension with one or two strategies in home-based involvement in the following analysis.

4.2 Parental Reorientation Under DRP

DRP aims to reduce children's academic burden, diminish grade-ism, and promote children's all-round development. Following the changes brought by DRP, in the academic socialization dimension, migrant parents' educational expectations are no longer restricted to getting high grades, but full development, including (1) health, (2) the chase for love and planning to change track, and (3) the love of learning. This dimension is crucial not only to parental involvement but also to children's long-term growth.

In the home-based involvement dimension, migrant parents began to organize or support more extracurricular activities for children. The activities can be divided into five genres: doing sports, contacting nature, taking study tours, using online resources for hobbies, and providing reading materials.

In the following analysis, I match one or two strategies in the academic socialization dimension with one or two strategies in home-based involvement to interpret the interaction between these two dimensions.

4.2.1 To be Healthy: Doing Sports & Contacting Nature

DRP calls for awareness of children's mental and physical health. In this study, the importance of health is emphasized by two groups of mothers. Just like Parent B states:

> "After DRP, I gradually noticed the importance of children's health. After all, you can do nothing if you are ill or weak. So, I told him 'No matter how well you

> study, your body is important first and foremost'. And after DRP, we indeed have more time to do sports."

Thus, DRP does not only enhance parents' awareness of health but also provide enough time for them to support children to build body.

In the dimension of academic socialization, when asked about their education expectation, all parents regarded children's health as an important quality. Mother A believes the physical and mental health of the child is more important than study grades, Parent E refers to an old saying in China: "Our health is our greatest wealth."

Doing Sports

Consistent with the guidance of the expectation about health, migrant parents would encourage their kids to do sports in the home-based dimension. In the view of Mother B, doing sports is beneficial for both physical and mental health.

> "Doing sports allows him to have a release point when he is stressed out in study. Thus, I would ask him to play basketball or badminton on weekends or after school with his friends."

Similarly, Mother H believes sitting for too long is harmful to kids' health, so she would prompt her daughter to "go down to the little square, kick a ball or jump rope with other kids."

Contacting Nature

On top of doing sports, contacting nature is also a unique approach for migrant parents to help children build bodies. Zhangbei County has a geographical advantage due to its vast countryside and abundant natural resources, about which migrant

parents know well because they grew up there. Therefore, they usually take their children back to the countryside where they come from, which is a special advantage of their original background. For example, Mother A and Mother D both encourage children to play in the wild in their leisure time.

> "When he was free, I would allow him to play in the countryside and live with his grandparents. He is happy and excited in the wild."

Parent D said: "At the weekend, our family would have a trip or go to a picnic in my hometown, located in the countryside of Zhangbei County. It' s very convenient and relaxing."

The health benefits brought by these two strategies are obvious. Mother A proudly said her boy is extremely fit: "He is so strong that he has never been absent from school! This is one of the things I'm most proud of!"

In this way, the outcome of home-based involvement largely meets the expectations of parents on the aspect of health, which also shows the effectiveness of DRP's advocacy for emphasizing children's health.

4.2.2 To Chase Love & To Change Track: Online resources & Study tours

To Chase Love

When asked about their ideal vision of their children, three mothers (A, B, C) all state that finding and pursuing what children love to do is crucial, instead of just getting a high rank. For instance, Mother A said: "I hope he can enter a realm he likes."

It is crucial to chase love, but how to find the realm you love or are interested in? Mothers' answer is: "To see more". Thus, they encourage their children to use online resources and take study tours to explore the outside world and their love. Even

though housewives do not express this expectation explicitly, they also hope their children can develop hobbies and find love, which is shown by their strategies in home-based involvement, such as encouraging them to use online resources to find love.

To Change Track

An exclusive theme emerging among vocational teachers is their plan for changing the track of children's education future. It refers to their plan to shift their children's future education route from the conventional academic route (from primary school to high school and college) to vocational education. In China, parental educational expectations are often related to academic achievements (Zhou, 2023). Thus, the strategic consideration of vocational education as a primary path, rather than a fallback option, is unique.

It belongs to the academic socialization dimension, for it aims to make preparations and plans for the future. Instead of competing for higher grades in the college entrance examination (Gaokao), vocational education grasps vocational teachers' attention. This may be the result of their working experiences, during which they, as vocational teachers, have witnessed the development of vocational education in China and its bright prospects. Changing track, as a future plan, also guides mothers to use a series of strategies in home-based involvement, such as using online resources to develop children's hobbies and encouraging children to take study tours. In this way, they can prepare better for the future further education.

> Mother A: "In 2025, when the Vocational College Entrance Examination will be implemented, and I'd like to see its situation and consider whether my child can take a different path so that he doesn't need to go through that which he might not be good at. If he is going to study a major with poor employment prospects through the college entrance examination (Gaokao), I would prefer him to come out to be a technician. I can accept it if he becomes a construction worker, an electrician or a welder in the future."

In her description, we can see a different path she is paving for her son. If the kid is not good at paper-and-pencil examinations, he would have the freedom to dive into vocational education and learn techniques.

Mother D, good at singing and dancing, also draws a blue painting for her daughter.

> "I'm working in vocational education, and I've thought about changing track because our school is doing quite well in the further education program. But in the end, it's up to the child to choose then. If she doesn't do well in academic subjects and wants to learn singing or dance, then I would let her learn that. If these hobbies, she does not want to learn after so many years, I will consider other majors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, finance and accounting in our school."

In their views, vocational education not only has a bright prospect, but also provides a channel for children to turn their hobbies into a lifelong career. This is in line with their expectation of "to chase love", in which children can pursue what they love from childhood.

Nevertheless, housewives do not have such a revolutionary idea and prefer to let their children follow the conventional education path. For instance, when asked whether they had considered letting their children enter vocational schools if their academic performance was not good, all housewives showed clear denying.

Parent E: "At the moment I'm not thinking about it, still hoping he can enter a good high school and a good college. This is the most stable and safe way for his future I think. I don't think vocational education is better than conventional schools."

To conclude, under DRP, vocational teachers not only realize the value of full development, but also notice another educational path: the vocational education. Instead of sticking to traditional paper-and-pencil exams, they are thinking of the combination of developing hobbies and future careers. Thus, they utilize diverse strategies to encourage chasing love, such as taking study tours and developing hobbies online. By contrast, it seems that following the conventional education route and entering a good college remains the ideal future for housewives' children. Compared with vocational teachers, their perception of the education track is limited by their educational backgrounds and working experiences. The choice of the conventional route, to some degree, echoes their expectations for higher academic achievement and corresponding actions, which will be investigated in 4.2 "The Unchanged Orientation despite DRP".

Using Online Resources for Hobbies

Following the abovementioned expectations and plans, mothers adopt diverse strategies. The first one is using online resources, especially short videos. The migrant parents in the two groups both utilized this method to support their kids' hobbies. For example, Mother D would watch short videos of singing and dancing with her daughter.

> "It's the age of social media and short videos. After my daughter finishes her homework, we will watch some short videos about singing and dancing on TikTok or Kuaishou (The top 2 short video platforms in China). And I follow a lot of interesting influencers. In my daily life, I love dancing and singing very much, which may influence her a little bit. It's really fun and we love this activity."

To some degree, short videos have even replaced interest classes. For example, in the interview with Mother H, when asked why she does not enrol her daughter in the interest classes, she said the short videos have higher cost-effectiveness, and she could watch short videos a lot and learn to sing with her daughter.

> "You only need a smartphone and connect it to WIFI…which can be found everywhere. Then you can learn to sing as many songs as you can imagine on TikTok. As for the interest classes, you need to spend a lot of money and you don't know the class quality."

However, the outcome of using online resources for developing hobbies is still uncertain, for children are still at the early exploration stage. Therefore, we are not sure whether this strategy can meet parents' expectations on the aspect of chasing love, but we are certain that it is a meaningful starting point.

Taking Study Tours

"Children's steps should not be limited to nearby countryside but expand to farther areas." Mother A said, looking at the distance. Three of four vocational teachers (Mothers A, C, D) would take children on study tours. Taking study tours means parents would encourage children to take part in tours which are generally planned and organized by educational institutions or schools, combining research studies and travel experiences with group travel and centralized accommodation, such as visiting museums, libraries, and other educational venues. After DRP, children have less homework and more free time to go outside.

> Researcher: "When did you begin taking your child on study tours?"
>
> Mother D: "It was her fourth grade in primary school when DRP was introduced, she had more free time on vacation. Before DRP, she had loads of homework in summer and winter vacations, so we have never thought about having a long travel."

Mother C would, in person, take her kid on study tours to diverse cultural public facilities to expand horizons, including elite universities and heritages.

> “He has been to Tsinghua and Peking University (Top 2 universities in China). He has also been to some Museums and Geological Museum around our hometown. Last summer we went to Chengdu to visit some heritages of primitive society because he is interested in Chinese history.”

When asked about the benefits of this activity, they reported that study tours could not directly benefit children’s studies. Instead, it is more related to broadening horizons and having fun, which is in line with their expectation of chasing love.

> “Although it is named as a study tour, it is not always necessary to be related to learning. For example, children can’t learn much about the culture of the Forbidden City during the tour. The child is more playful. The main thing is to see the outside world and have fun.” (Mother D)

The Exclusiveness of Study Tours

Although participating in study tours has many merits, it seems to have a relatively high threshold, for none of the housewives has never tried it before. Among the housewives, only one mother has heard about it on social media. Compared with vocational teachers, their perception of educational strategies is relatively restricted.

> Researcher: “Have you ever taken your kid to participate in study tours?”
>
> Mother H: “It must be expensive! Maybe the children in big cities would often have such activities, as I can see on social media. In our little town, we have no chance to take part in I guess.”

In her description, the financial burden and regional limitations are the two main concerns, which is also confirmed by Mother A.

> “It is expensive for us… one such tour may take us thousands of yuan (China Yuan, CNY). And there is no established organization for study tours, so we need to go to Zhangjiakou City (the city Zhangbei County belongs to) to get contacts.”

To conclude, DRP largely released children’s time and energy to explore the outside world. Even though study tours may not improve academic performance directly, they can considerably benefit children’s horizon, and lay the foundation for chasing love. However, for migrant housewives, the lack of perception of this strategy, poor family financial situation, and regional restrictions all cause a high threshold. Although they have migrated from the countryside to urban areas, their vision of education is still quite narrow.

4.2.3 To Love Learning: Providing Reading Materials

One expectation of migrant parents is their kids would love learning and see the value of learning in life. To do this, they express the value of education to kids. For instance, Mother B would instil the value of lifelong learning for her son.

> “I would tell him that learning is very important in life. I told him, ‘Look, I'm still learning, I don't know how to do this at work, I have to learn it too. And that’s why I could get a relatively higher status as a migrant.’ I'm just trying to be a role model for him. I would also accompany him to read some books.”

Extracurricular Reading Materials

All migrant parents in this study, regardless of their educational level or SES, know that reading is a perfect way to develop the love for learning. Thus, they would purchase loads of extracurricular books for their children:

> Researcher: “In your daily life, what kinds of books would you like to buy him?”

Mother A: “I don't limit the types of books he reads, as long as he likes, any kind of books are allowed to read, including comic books”.

Mother E, knowing her educational attainment in middle school can not help her kid enough, would buy loads of extracurricular books to complement.

> E: “There were quite a lot of extracurricular books, and her bookshelf was full of books. I know that nowadays, with my little knowledge, I can’t help him. So he needs to learn more by himself. So I will try my best to buy books to support him.”

Noticeably, short videos play a big role in helping parents to select appropriate books. For instance, Mother F, who had only finished middle school, said she bought a lot of books according to the recommendation on TikTok.

> “On TikTok, there are countless videos and experts recommending good books for children. I don’t know how to select the right ones, so I just follow the videos and experts. After all, they (experts) are much more experienced and knowledgeable than me.”

On this aspect, short videos and social media platforms have also permeated into migrant parents’ lives, which echoes the section about how parents use online resources to support children’s hobbies as well.

Conclusion

According to migrant mothers, only after DRP, do children have enough time to participate in extracurricular activities with their parents to explore the outside world and reach full development. With the advocacy of this policy, the full development of children becomes the focus of parents again. Parents hope they can be healthy, chase love, and love learning, and they have utilized diverse strategies to support these

expectations, such as encouraging children to contact nature, taking study tours, using online resources, and providing reading materials.

However, mothers' backgrounds vary greatly, leading to various challenges. For example, limited regional resources in Zhangbei County and the household financial situation restrict migrant housewives from encouraging their children to go on study tours.

4.3 Unchanged Orientation Despite DRP

While DRP brings a reorientation of parents' education focus, this shift is limited and not thorough. Parents' focus would come back to grades again, especially when some High-stakes tests (HST) are approaching. HST refers to the tests resulting in a major impact on the interests of an individual (**Jones & Ennes,** 2018). At this time, parental anxiety is triggered, because they perceive that their children's performance on HST will significantly impact children's future educational opportunities and success. With this anxiety, they usually try to enhance children's learning intensity, reduce their entertainment and leisure time, and over-cultivate their cognitive ability prematurely (Chen et al., 2022). Mother D is a good example, for her daughter is in grade 6, facing the middle school entrance exams soon.

Mother D: "Recently, her entrance to middle school exams are coming up soon, and I'm starting to get a little worried about whether she's not doing enough exercises. The exercises are too little… because teachers don't assign much homework nowadays… so I bought her some papers to practice."

Thus, the existing HST, remain a trigger for parental anxiety and drives them to offer extra learning materials to children. As shown above, parental anxiety about educational competition has not eased. In East Asia, this anxiety is further exacerbated by societal expectations and cultural norms prioritising HST scores. The HST and parental anxiety together lead to the following strategies in academic socialization (Expectations and Inspirations for Academic Achievement) and home-

based involvement dimensions (Providing Extra Learning Materials & using Online Resources).

4.3.1 Academic Socialization: Academic Expectations and Inspirations

Expectations for Better Academic Achievement

Although most migrant parents do not place academic achievement at the top of their educational concerns, they still generally have high expectations for their children's academic performance. When the 8 parents interviewed were asked which is the most important quality of children (happiness, interpersonal skills, health, study, etc.), nobody put ‘academic performance’ first. However, when further asked whether they expected children's high grades, parents would still set score goals or “bottom line”. Mother D is a good example of setting score goals for children.

> “I've set score goals for her, for example, if she scores 90 this time, I'll motivate her to have a goal and try to reach 95 next time. If she can’t reach it, I will not blame her. What is important is to have a goal in examinations.”

Mother E is a good example of setting the “bottom line” of scores for her kid.

> Researcher: “Do you have strict expectations for your child's examination scores or ranks?”
>
> Mother E: “I have never expected or forced him to be the No.1 or No.2 in class…this can be not controlled by us. For children’s growth, I always believe personality and health are the most important.”
>
> …
>
> Researcher: “In examination, which range of scores is acceptable for you?”
>
> Parent E: “He should get at least 90 out of 100 in exams. Otherwise, he will have no chance to enter a good middle school!”

Inspiration for Higher Academic Achievement

With expectations for better Academic Achievement, migrant parents would also often inspire their children through verbal communication. For example, Mother G, who had only finished primary school, would take her husband and herself as examples to spur her son on to study hard.

> "I told him 'You should study hard, otherwise you'd be uneducated just like me and your dad, suffering from stupidity. In addition, you're a boy, so you will have a family to support, which is a heavy burden as well. You must study hard to shoulder the burden."

This inspiration demonstrates parents' attempts, through education, to prevent their children from following their families' footsteps into tiring manual work.

Challenges Brought by DRP

One supporting policy of DRP is banning score rankings, intending to shift attention off scores, erase grad-ism, and create a more relaxed and less competitive educational environment. This brought a huge obstacle for migrant parents to support their children's academic performance: they do not know their children's educational performance. Under DRP's advocacy, primary schools in Zhangbei County have canceled the extrinsic demonstration of examination ranks, which blocked parents from knowing children's academic attitudes or progress. Thus, their opportunities to get involved in children's education are lessened (Sargent, 2020), for they cannot set concrete ranking goals for children.

Mother C states that she is totally "in the dark" about her kid's performance because there is no ranking any more. Thus, she had to interact with other parents to learn more about her kid's academic performance through comparison.

> “Since last year, schools don't rank students, they don't publish their results as before. We can’t see anything about examinations. This caused me to know almost nothing about my kid’s progress or retrogrades. Sometimes I need to talk with other parents and know other kids’ performance to estimate my kid’s status.”

To conclude, even though these parents have shifted their focus from the scores to full development, they are still deeply concerned with children’s academic achievement. Unlike the low-SES parents in Chu and Willms’s study, they do not demonstrate the “culture of poverty”, referring to parents attaching little importance to children’s education (Chu & Willms,1996). The academic expectations and inspirations, in turn, transfer into their actions in home-based involvement: providing extra learning materials and using online resources for study. However, they face one obstacle under DRP, which is they have less perception of children’s grades, which reduces the opportunities for education involvement to some degree.

4.3.2 Home-Based: Extra Learning Materials & Online Resources

Under DRP, parents can no longer rely on institutional tutoring anymore, so they had to find another way out. In this case, providing extra learning materials and utilizing online study resources become their choices. And these two approaches are shared strategies for both vocational teachers and housewives.

Providing extra learning materials

After DRP, children in primary schools have less homework and do not have to attend subject tutoring, so they have much free time at home. However, worried about children’s academic performance and their related future, parents would actively provide them with extra learning materials.

Mother E is a good example. She used to send her son to a tutoring institution in the evenings to finish homework. After DRP, her son usually stays at home for

entertainment for the whole night. Hence, she gets worried about her son's future academic performance if they have too much free leisure time after school. Hence, she provides extra academic practice.

> "I will buy him quite a lot of learning materials because he will play a lot when he comes back. As soon as I see him play, I will be anxious. Thus, I would push him to do extra practice for at least one hour."

Additionally, due to mothers' low education level, they are unable to tutor their children's studies on their own or take up the job of shadow education, so buying extra learning materials becomes a substitute. Mother F expressed her sense of powerlessness speaking of helping her son in study because of her poor educational background.

> "Our education level is very low… I have not even finished middle school… I cannot help him study at all！ In this way, he can only rely on himself to make efforts. The only thing I can do is to buy him as much learning material as possible, and I'll try my best to buy more study materials if he needs them."

Challenges of providing extra learning materials

Although providing extra learning materials is a prevalent strategy for migrant parents in this study (only Mother G does not employ it), parents encounter challenges on how to communicate with and discipline their children.

For instance, Mother D often clash with her daughter about doing extra exercise. During the interview, she showed a deep sense of despair since she had no idea about how to communicate with and discipline her daughter successfully, showing that she is already "at her wit's end".

> “Out of good intentions, I bought her exercises. However, she is reluctant to do it! We can’t reach a common ground on it. I’m always angry because of it, and our relationship get worse.”

This phenomenon is consistent with Liu’s findings, which demonstrate the conflicts between parents and children due to parents’ anxiety (Liu, 2023). More broadly, this can also be seen in other East Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea (Lee et al., 2010), when they introduced similar policies to alleviate students’ heavy academic burden and eliminate shadow education. Parents’ anxiety about their children’s academic performance and related future may worsen their relationship with their children.

Using Online Resources for Study

On top of providing extra learning materials, mothers got another competent helper: the Internet. Parents use online resources to support their children’s study through diverse approaches, using “snap for answers” apps as a representative. Using these apps, parents take pictures of their homework, upload them and search for answers online. For example, when parents cannot help children with homework, they would turn to these apps.

> “When my kids had trouble with their homework, I'd turn to the “snap for answers” apps if I couldn't figure it out. There would be the correct answer and sometimes even videos explaining the key knowledge points.”

This method is shared by low-educated parents as well, as mother F, a housewife who only finished middle school, uses a mobile application called “Homework Help” to help her kids solve problems in homework.

> “I don’t know how to answer the questions, but I know how to use my mobile phone. What I need to do is to capture a picture of the question, and upload it to “Homework Help”, the answers and interpretation will appear immediately. It’s very convenient.”

Furthermore, after successfully using online resources in homework support, Mother A further confirms the feasibility and convenience of the Internet, so she shifts subject-tutoring to online courses because of DRP’s ban on institutional tutoring.

> “I had enrolled him in a tutorial class before, it was a Maths class, but he struggled with it, and I even had a conflict with him. Moreover, after DRP, the for-profit subject tutoring was banned, so I stopped enrolling him in the class. However, there are rich study resources on the Internet, so we changed our approach from attending tuition classes to exploring the Internet.”

Challenges of Using Online Resources

However, online resources are a double-edged sword: on one hand, parents can utilize them to help children study and break the restrictions of specific contexts (e.g. pandemic), time, and region; but on the other hand, children may also be addicted to Internet and spend too much time on electric devices. For instance, mother C expressed her deep concern for her kid’s addiction to the Internet: “One of my biggest worries is his (my kid's) addiction to electronic devices. The more often I restrict him, the more interested he is. And we often clash over it.”

For this situation, all migrant parents’ solution is generally verbal restriction, like Mother A.

> “I ask him not to use the tablet for entertainment”, but the actual outcome does not meet their expectations, which leads to confusion and challenge for parents:

> “I have no idea about how to deal with it, limiting his time spent on the mobile phone is so difficult.”

More importantly, this situation gets harder when parents need to supervise two kids at once. Mother E faces the difficulty of supervising two kids and restricting them from spending too much time on electric devices.

> “I have two kids and sometimes I can't discipline them in the meantime. Sometimes, the older one listens to the lesson well but the younger one just watches the short videos secretly. And when I turn to the younger one, the older one would scroll social media.”

This phenomenon is in line with Lareau’s statement (2002), that parents who are less educated often lack the proper vocabulary to communicate with children when they encounter conflicts in parental education, so they are more likely to feel anxious.

Moreover, this addiction may also lead to physical damage to kids, which is shown by the child of parent F getting myopic because of looking at the screen for too long time while attending online courses.

Conclusion

To conclude, even though DRP advocates lessening grad-ism and shifting attention to children’s all-around development, exam scores and ranks remain an essential focus of migrant parents. Although they do not place them in the first place of children’s development, as important exams approach, they would shift their focus on academic performance again. Following this, without institutional tutoring and enough ability to tutor on their own, one mother (G) got lost and desperate, while others adopted some supplementary, including providing extra learning materials and using online resources for study. In addition, there are also a lot of challenges, such as children’s Internet

addiction, parents' lack of skills to communicate or discipline children effectively, etc.

4.4 School-Based Involvement

DRP advocates the combination and cooperation of family, school, and society. Nevertheless, in this study, parental communication with teachers remains lacking after DRP, which is shown by two aspects: the low frequency and scarce approaches.

From the view of parents, they do not interact with teachers until the child has some study losses, and there are only two methods available for them to communicate with teachers: "parent-teacher meetings and WeChat messages (Mother A).

"I only contact the teacher when I realize that my child has some problems in the study, so I wouldn't interact with them quite often." (Mother C)

As for teachers, they do not initiatively contact parents until something goes wrong:

Mother F: "In primary school, the only time a teacher would contact you was if a child was making a mess, committing an offence, or having an incident".

To summarize, in terms of the interaction between migrant parents and teachers, the frequency is quite low and channels are limited. This lack is consistent with previous findings of Zhang (2018) and Gao (2012). One reason is that both parents and teachers suppose that they do not need interaction or communication until children have some extrinsic problems. Despite DRP highlighting the significance of combining family education and school teaching, the interaction between the two sides remains lacking. Hence, without the ranks, grades, and enough information from teachers, parents are "in the dark" about their children's academic performance to some extent.

4.5 Beyond Education Involvement: Parents' Self-improvement

Self-improvement is an exclusive strategy among the first group of mothers. It means they try to improve themselves in the educational realm, by acquiring related knowledge, to support their children better. This strategy is new because it is absent not only in the theoretical frameworks on parental involvement by Hill and Tyson but also in existing empirical research on parental education engagement (e.g. Gao, 2012; Musengamana, 2023).

As Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler state, parents' perception of their role in children's education is a key factor for parental engagement (1997). And the first group of mothers, vocational teachers, have a strong awareness of their influence on children. Thus, they are trying to improve themselves by knowing more about education and study. Short videos and internet platforms provide rich resources for them. For instance, Mother D would "occasionally watch lectures from the Internet or listen to them on The Himalayas (a Chinese podcast platform). Mother C would watch some short videos: "There are some Chicken Soup for the Soul and some insightful words about education, and I'll take a listen if I think that's right."

Challenges of Parents' Self-Improvement

However, Self-improvement is exclusive to some degree due to its high threshold for educational levels, financial situation, and regional resources. For example, parent G, who had only finished primary school, did not regard herself as a crucial influencer and expressed her obstacle to understand related content.

> "Study is more of a matter of himself, and I cannot help him a lot… I even haven't finished middle school, so I can't understand much content about education, nor a lot of migrant parents around me."

Mother B also mentioned the high cost of the courses or lectures for parents as well as the limited scale of resources for parents in Zhangbei County, which led to parents' reluctance to invest in such improvement activities and lack of access to them.

Thus, compared with vocational teachers, housewives' awareness of their role in children's education is weaker. And restricted by their education background and household financial condition, they have less opportunities to improve themselves in cultivating children. To some extent, it also explains why their educational strategies are relatively limited.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

The "Double Reduction Policy" (DRP) in China marks a significant change in educational policy, intending to reduce the academic burden on students and foster a more comprehensive approach to education. This research illustrates that addressing children's academic stress involves intricate issues and educational principles in Chinese culture. On one hand, reducing the academic pressure on children reflects a commitment to fostering well-rounded development without overwhelming them. It acknowledges the necessity of reforming teaching and learning, enhancing people's awareness of family education's significance, and establishing the connection between family and school. On the other hand, given the pressure of the current high-stakes examinations, most parents are likely to prioritize investing in education and improving their children's academic performance. This further indicates a disparity between the stated values in societal practices and policies (Jiang & Saito, 2022).

This research, carried out using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis in Zhangbei County, provides a nuanced understanding of how migrant parents have adapted their educational strategies in response to DRP. The findings reveal a complex interplay between policy intentions, parental expectations, and the realities of educational practice.

Using the framework of Hill and Tyson, data are interpreted in three dimensions: (1) Home-based involvement, (2) School-based involvement, and (3) Academic socialization. Overall, migrant parents use diverse educational strategies in three dimensions to support their children's full development and academic achievement. The strategies in academic socialization and home-based involvement are flourishing, while those in the school-based one are relatively lacking.

The impact of the DRP on parents' involvement in their children's education is multifaceted. On one hand, it encourages parents to shift their focus from just grades to overall development, including health and personal interests. This helps them become

more mindful of their children's holistic growth and reduces the academic pressure on them. On the other hand, this shift is limited because migrant parents are still heavily concerned with their children's academic success in high-stakes testing due to intense competition and cultural norms that prioritize grades. In terms of improving children's academic performance, the DRP appears to pose challenges for migrant parents as it restricts subject tutoring and eliminates score rankings, which were their main means of enhancing their children's competitiveness and understanding their learning progress. To address these challenges brought about by the DRP, migrant parents are turning to online resources and extra learning materials as key alternatives to support their children's education.

Since academic socialization and Home-based involvement dimensions interact with each other, the researcher matches the themes of academic socialization with those in the Home-based involvement dimension. For example, “to chase love” is paired with “study tours” and “using online resources for hobbies”.

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

5.1.1 DRP’s Impact on Academic Socialization

The DRP has indeed prompted a reorientation of parental focus from academic scores to the comprehensive development of their children. This change is specifically presented by the fact that parents in Zhangbei County have begun to emphasize health, the pursuit of personal interests, and a love for learning, aligning with the policy's goals. And this reorientation deeply influences their strategies in the home-based involvement dimension.

Noticeably, this shift is not uniform, and the influence of cultural norms and high-stakes testing remains a significant countervailing force. Despite the DRP's intent to reduce the emphasis on exam scores, academic achievement remains a critical concern for migrant parents. The persisting cultural norms prioritising High-stakes test (HST) scores and remaining HST continue to trigger parental anxiety. This is especially demonstrated by the fact that as HST approached, parents would shift their focus on

academic performance again and express expectations and inspirations related to academic achievement. This is in line with previous research on parental anxiety (Chen et al., 2022; Brady et al, 2018).

However, under DRP, the demonstration of scores and ranks is cancelled. Though it is consistent with DRP's aim to weaken grad-ism, it blocks an important channel for parents to know their children's academic performance and set specific score goals for their children.

5.1.2 DRP's Impact on Home-based Involvement

Following academic socialization, parents' strategies for home-based involvement have been adapted. As DRP has switched their focus off scores, strategies such as encouraging sports, facilitating contact with nature, and utilizing online resources for hobbies have emerged as key components of home-based involvement.

However, since the shift in Academic Socialization is not thorough, the home-based involvement strategies also change correspondingly. For instance, when parents shift their focus on academic performance again, they would utilize strategies to enhance children's learning intensity. Under DRP, institutional tutoring, which used to be the main strategy, is absent, parents have turned to 2 alternatives: providing extra learning materials and using online resources, such as "Snap for Answers" apps and online courses. Though there are also a lot of challenges hidden in these two alternatives, such as children's Internet addiction, these two methods become powerful supplements, the replacement is prevalent.

Furthermore, the reliance on extra learning materials and online study resources highlights the ongoing tension between the policy's objectives and the realities of an education system still largely oriented towards academic competition.

In this dimension, using online resources is a noticeable highlight for both vocational teachers and housewives to cultivate their children, no matter for exploring potential interests, or enhancing academic learning. This may partly be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic and the online classes conducted at that time. The duration of implementation of DRP (i.e. from the summer of 2021) overlaps with the duration of COVID-19, in which children had to attend online courses at home, and their teachers would also share some online study resources for them, which subtly opened a new door to learning. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has made online resources more prevalent than before. It further proves the prevalence of short videos in China as it has permeated to underdeveloped areas.

5.1.3 Comparison between Vocational Teachers and Housewives

The study's comparison between vocational teachers and housewives reveals significant differences in their educational strategies, but similar challenges.

In the academic socialization dimension, though both groups attach emphasis on children's academic performance, vocational teachers, with their relatively higher educational background and richer working experience, are more likely to embrace changes brought by DRP and alternative educational paths, such as vocational education. In contrast, housewives tend to adhere more closely to conventional academic routes, reflecting a more conservative approach to education. That means, if vocational teachers' children are not competitive in subject learning in the later stage of education, they would be supported to pursue vocational education and learn techniques, just like their mothers.

In the home-based involvement dimension, vocational teachers' education strategies are more diverse compared with those of housewives. For instance, they would organize study tours for children to explore potential interests. By contrast, restricted by financial situations and horizons, housewives can only turn to online resources to develop hobbies, such as short videos for help.

The challenges faced by two groups of mothers are similar in disciplining children, no matter whether to prevent them from over-using electronic devices or persuading them to do extra subject practices.

In this way, the impact of DRP on parents' education strategies is larger in vocational teachers than housewives, because the former changed educational orientation more thoroughly than the latter. This difference may be explained by the occupation of mothers. The vocational teachers are more exposed to DRP as staff in the education field, but detailed investigation for this needs further exploration.

5.2 Limitations

In this study, the following four potential limitations are recognized.

Firstly, this study only offers a glimpse into the lived realities of a small number of migrant mothers in Zhangbei County. The sample size, though sufficient for saturation, may lack the representativeness of the target population. In addition, the occupation genre and gender of interviewees are limited, merely covering two occupations (i.e. vocational teachers and housewives) and women, which further weakens the representativeness of the sample.

Secondly, the interviewee recruitment is built through a network of acquaintances, so the interviewees may communicate about education strategies with each other in daily life. Consequently, they are likely to utilize similar education strategies. In this way, the sample of eight migrant parents may be not representative of the Zhangbei migrant parents.

Thirdly, the research design of this place-based case study means its findings may be not replicable in other regions. The context in Zhangbei County is unique, no matter of geographical or socioeconomic views. Thus, the educational strategies in other regions in China may need more nuanced investigation.

Fourthly, some results of qualitative analysis are not well explained. For example, the reason for scarce school-based involvement is not investigated enough. One possible explanation is that the teacher-student ratio in China is generally high, so teachers do not have enough time and energy to communicate with each parent. In addition, the degree of DRP's impact on education orientation of two groups is different, which also demands further investigation.

5.3 Implications

The implications of this study extend beyond the local context of Zhangbei County. As migrant parents are facing diverse obstacles, policymakers should consider the need for supplementary support to empower migrant parents in their role as educational facilitators, such as organizing parent education programs.

Also, the potential of vocational education as an alternative pathway deserves greater attention, as it aligns with the DRP's goal of promoting diverse educational outcomes. Despite its crucial role in developing diverse talents and promoting employment, vocational education faces various obstacles in China, such as public perception issues. Since the Reform Era in 1978, vocational education and training in China have been regarded as inferior to academic routes and positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy. Vocational education and training, together with its students suffer considerable prejudice in Chinese society. Thus, in order to develop vocational education, a multi-dimensional effort involving society, government, and industry entrepreneurs is required, with a particular emphasis on overcoming societal prejudices and showcasing the potential of technical and vocational education to students and their parents.

On top of developing vocational education and training to cultivate diverse talents, the study underscores the need for reforming higher education and constructing a more comprehensive evaluation system in education. The switch of parents' focus from scores to all-round development is not thorough because of remaining academic

anxiety. DRP aims to weaken grad-ism, but all its efforts will come to nought if children still have to face this highly standardized enrolment system in high school and chase high grades again in College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) (Chen & Wang, 2022). Therefore, to achieve the sustainable development of education in China, the key still lies in establishing an evaluation mechanism that can promote a virtuous cycle in the education ecosystem.

One approach is weakening the vertical stratification in higher education, so a more equitable and effective educational system can be fostered. It would not only support the DRP's objectives but also contribute to a broader educational reform that values individual potential and diverse talents.

Weaken the Vertical Stratification in Higher Education (HE)

If we set our sights high, it is worth noting that although DRP is specific to primary and middle school, it is necessary to revolve HE to match up. The vertical and hierarchical structure of HE has been a major demand mechanism causing academic anxiety. If we compare academic anxiety to floods, DRP is the dam to block up, while the drain lies in HE. Many HE systems are vertically stratified, with a large disparity in status and resources between top universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) (Marginson, 2018), and China is no exception. Since the 1950s, the Chinese government has maintained a clear stratification in HE, where most of the resources are concentrated in a few elite universities. Elite universities obtain the prioritized government resources and their faculty have better career advancement opportunities and greater access to international dynamics. Given these advantages, elite HEIs are more likely to attract and retain elite scholars and, then, preserve and accelerate advantages, leading to an institutionalized Matthew Effect (Merton, 1968). The vertical stratification of China's HE is crystallised by factors such as uneven resource distribution (Shu et al., 2021) and the solely research-oriented location of universities.

To weaken this stratification, it is crucial to address three factors. Firstly, the government should promote the redistribution of funding and resources to less privileged universities (Hu, 2011). This could involve establishing a national education fund that targets underfunded institutions and promoting collaboration and partnerships between elite and non-elite universities. These would improve infrastructure, foster knowledge sharing and resource pooling (Yang et al., 2015), and enhance faculty development. Such partnerships could take the form of joint research projects, faculty exchange programs, and shared online courses, which would provide students with access to a broader range of academic resources and perspectives.

Secondly, the government should encourage the diversification of HEIs' missions and focuses. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to higher education, HEIs should be empowered to develop niche areas of excellence that cater to the diverse needs of students and industry demands. For example, second or third-tier HEIs can reposition their location, and turn their focus from research to vocational education, which provides another new track with a bright employment prospect. For instance, HEIs without big names but with outstanding professional strength, like agricultural and medicine colleges, can win a place in the evolving market.

Finally, to reduce the emphasis on elite HEIs, the classification of universities must be reformed (Shu et al., 2021) to recognize and reward the unique contributions of all HEIs (Tremblay et al., 2012). This could involve creating alternative ranking systems that assess universities based on their contribution to social mobility, innovation, and community engagement, rather than solely on research output and academic prestige.

To sum up, when all HEIs are viewed as valuable equally, the pressure to attend top tier universities may decrease, leading to a reduction in academic anxiety. This aligns with the idea that education should serve as a means of social mobility and personal development, rather than as a marker of social status or a determinant of life chances.

From a broader perspective, the effective implementation of DRP still needs further reforms to match up and address the root causes of academic anxiety. By advocating for developing vocational education that values personal characteristics alongside and rapidly growing demand for technique talents, we can create a more balanced perspective on educational success. Furthermore, DRP also calls for a re-evaluation of the value placed on elite HEIs. Encouraging diversity and excellence across all universities can equalize opportunities and reduce the premium of top-tier universities. This shift in perspective is essential for transforming education into a true catalyst for social mobility and personal development.

As China continues to refine the DRP and navigate the complexities of educational reform, the policy's evolution serves as a critical case study for the global educational community. Future research should delve into the long-term effects of the DRP on various student populations, the adaptability of educational policies to societal changes, and the potential for international collaboration in addressing shared educational challenges.

Martin Luther King once said: “Intelligence plus character——that is the goal of true education.” This quote underscores that we should not only emphasize improving test scores but also developing children’s full development. By doing so, we can prepare children not just for academic success, but for a lifetime of learning and development.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Central University Research Ethics Committee - Approval

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk

Shuting Zhang
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

10.04.24

Dear Shuting,

Research ethics approval

Research title: How has Double Reduction policy changed the education strategies and experiences of parents of migrant children in Zhangbei County: a case study in an underdeveloped area of China

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_131

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's website.

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Robert Klassen

DREC Member

cc: Leon Festein, Amy Bennett

Appendix 2. Interview Questions

Introduction and Background Information:

1. What's your job? What's your child's grade and age now?

Awareness of the Double Reduction Policy & Importance of Education:

2. In 2021, which grade were your children in?
3. Have you heard about the 'Double Reduction' policy (DRP) introduced in 2021? After that, has your children's homework and academic burden been released? What's your attitude to this change?
4. What does education mean to your child's future, you and your family?
   If it is important, what are your hopes for your child's education and future career?

5. As migrant parents, do you find it difficult to help your children in study? What's your challenge in this process? (For example, you may find it difficult to balance work and family responsibilities, or you have limited literacy, etc.)

Strategies for Supporting Children's Education:

6. Do you supervise your children's homework now? How about the situation before this policy's introduction?
7. How do you assist children when they are struggling with study? If yes, has this approach changed since DRP?
8. How about your expectations for your children's education? Has it changed since DRP?
9. Is there always a stable environment for learning, before and after DRP? Do you think it is important for study?
10. Do you provide learning materials like books and dictionaries? How about the situation before DRP?
11. Are there occasions when you find it difficult to help with your child's schoolwork or when you don't understand something they're learning? How will you address it?
12. Are there other ways you utilize to benefit your children's education?

Involvement in School Activities

13. How often do you attend school meetings (or other activities), or communicate with your child's teachers and school staff? Has it changed since DRP? What's your attitude to it?

Other support and challenges:

14. Apart from school teachers, what other sources of support do you receive to help your children study? (For example, you may consult other parents to get more experience).
15. Under DRP, what's your biggest challenge to involve in children's education? How do you deal with it?

Open-Ended Questions: Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences with the 'Double Reduction' policy and your child's education?

Appendix 3. Participant Information Sheet

15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
Department of Education

Supervisor: Leon Feinstein
[leon.feinstein@education.ox.ac.uk]
Shuting Zhang, Msc student
shuting.zhang@st-annes.ox.ac.uk

Department Email: general.enquiries@education.ox.ac.uk

[How has the Double Reduction policy changed the education strategies and experiences of parents of migrant children in Zhangbei County: a case study in an underdeveloped area of China]

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [Insert]

1. Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

2. Why is this research being conducted?

The "Double Reduction" policy (DRP) was introduced in China in 2021, aiming to reduce the academic burden of students both in school and off-campus tutoring. It has become the subject of various analyses, from diverse perspectives, such as its influence, limitations, etc. Under this policy, parents have played a greater role in children's education. While there is much research focused on its impact on parental attitudes and educational practices, there is still a lack of in-depth analysis focusing specifically on the experiences and challenges faced by diverse groups, such as migrant parents in less developed regions. So, this study aims to explore the migrant parents' involvement in children's education in underdeveloped regions of China, such as Zhangbei County. A detailed investigation into these aspects would contribute significantly to the broader discourse on educational policy and its effects on diverse family dynamics in China.

3. Why have I been invited to take part?

The research invites parents who migrate from rural areas to urban areas for better job opportunities. Their children should be in the compulsory education stage before and after the introduction of DRP (aged 10-15). This parent group may encounter special challenges and experiences under the DRP, especially in an underdeveloped area. This will add value to the relevant research as well as policy-making and implementation. Around fifteen participants are invited to participate in the interview process.

4. **Do I have to take part?**

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason by advising me of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is [*01/08/2024*]. Your data will be deleted if you decide to withdraw.

5. **What will happen to me if I take part in the research?**

The participant information sheet and an informed consent form explaining the purpose and procedures of the study will be circulated to you before the interview starts by the contacted community managers.

Interviews will be conducted in person, and the specific date will be decided based on our mutual convenience.

The interviews are around 45 minutes, starting with questions about biographical information, followed by around 10 descriptive questions about your involvement in your children's education, such as strategies you use and challenges you face;

With your consent, I would like to audio record you so I can have an accurate record of our conversation;

You can ask to pause or stop the research activities at any time, without penalty.

6. **What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?**

As the topic relates to parents' involvement in their children's education, certain anxiety may be triggered during the interview. Participants will have the right to pause or stop the interview at any time. No real names are recorded. Participants will be identified by pseudonymised names. However, information including gender, age, and hukou type (Chinese household register) will be recorded.

7. **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the research, it is hoped that this research will lead to reflection on participants' support for their children's educational future and experience in participating in research.

8. **What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?**

Interview notes, audio transcriptions, and other relevant documents, such as consent forms will be stored on a password-protected laptop. No identifiable data will be retained. Anonymised data will be deleted after three years. Only the researcher and her supervisor, Prof. Leon Feinstein will have access to the research data. The interviews are conducted to get a more nuanced understating of parental involvement in children's education under a new policy. Especially, the unique group, migrant parents in the underdeveloped region, can provide a more comprehensive view.

9. **Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?**

The results of this research will form the basis of an Oxford master's dissertation. Participants' names will be anonymized. Participants have a choice of allowing the researcher to directly quote from their interviews.

10. **Data Protection**

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest.

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: **xxxxx)**.

11. **Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact *[Shuting Zhang; shuting.zhang@st-annes.ox.ac.uk*] or [Leon Feinstein; leon.feinstein@education.ox.ac.uk], and we will do our best to answer your query. *We* will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee;
Email: ethics@medsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee;
Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

12. **Further Information and Contact Details**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Shuting Zhang
Department of Education
University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
University tel: *01865 274024*

Appendix 4. Description of the Interviewees

Parent Alias	Role	Educational Level	Occupation	Hukou	Gender (kid)	Age (kid)	Grade of kid(s)
A	mother	high school	vocational teacher	rural	male	12	Grade 6
B	mother	high school	vocational teacher	rural	male	11	Grade 5
C	mother	high school	vocational teacher	rural	female	10	Grade 4
D	mother	high school	vocational teacher	rural	female	13	Grade 7
E	mother	middle school	Housewife	rural	female and male	10, 12	Grade 4, 6
F	mother	middle school	Housewife	rural	male	12	Grade 6
G	mother	primary school	Housewife	rural	male	11	Grade 5
H	mother	middle school	Housewife	rural	female	12	Grade 6

Appendix 5. Visual Description of Codes' Frequency