

How Can Policy Enactment Help Us to Understand the Influence of the Implementation of “Double Reduction” Policy on Chinese School Teachers in Compulsory Education?

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Abstract

In order to further improve the quality of school teaching, regulate the training behavior of out-of-school training institutions, and reduce the excessive burden of homework and out-of-school training for students in compulsory education stage, Chinese government has released the “double reduction” policy. After the implementation of this policy, widespread attention and heated debates has been attracted in the society. A number of scholars have conducted studies and discussions on the impact of the policy on different actors, such as the effectiveness of the policy in reducing the burden on students, the impact on the prospects of the education and training industry, and the influence on students’ parents. The impact of the policy on teachers is also a perspective worth studying and discussing, but few studies have emphasized the impact of the policy on teachers. This essay will use the theory of Policy Enactment in analyzing the impact of the “double reduction” policy on teachers, addressing teachers’ actions in response to this policy. The article argues that staffing and infrastructural factors in the physical environment, teachers’ experiences and pressures influence teachers’ actual actions. While the use of policy formulation theory to analyze the impact of the “double reduction” policy on teachers helps to analyze the impact of the policy on teachers, it can be unreasonable to focus too much on the impact of the staffing and infrastructure factors noted in the theoretical framework to the exclusion of the impact of other aspects, such as teachers’ experiences and stress, on teachers’ actual actions.

Keywords

Policy Enactment, Burden Reduction, Compulsory Education, Teachers

1. Introduction

With the increasing competition in society nowadays, it has become the consensus of many parents in China not to let their children lose at the starting line. The intensification of social competition has also given rise to the perverse development of the education and training industry. In order to chase profits, the training industry operates in violation of the law and launches a wide range of training courses, which intensifies social anxiety. The gap between the rich and the poor in education is also growing amid increasingly fierce social competition. Children from privileged families are able to attend all kinds of tuition classes, which also shows that those with an advantageous economic status have access to more educational resources in education. In this context, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening as a result of socioeconomic development, and the gap between the rich and the poor in education is also becoming more pronounced. Wealthy families have access to better educational resources and better teachers, which can be seen as a violation of equity in education (Zhao, 2015).

In order to better improve this situation, The General Office of the Central Committee of China's Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council on July 24, 2021, jointly released the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Compulsory Education Students (the "double reduction" policy) (Ross, 2021). This policy aims to effectively reduce the excessive burden of homework and off-campus training on students at the compulsory education level. It is worth noting that the release and implementation of the new policy have brought about significant changes that have impacted many in society. Among them, school teachers in compulsory education can be seen as one of the major groups affected by the new policy. What impact has the implementation of this new policy had on school teachers in compulsory education? From the perspective of policy implementation, what role do teachers play in the implementation of this policy? How do teachers deal with the new information in this policy? This essay will first explain the reason why this theory fits the topic, especially in the Chinese context. Then, it will introduce the theory of Policy Enactment by comparing the differences between policy and policy enactment, demonstrating the role of actors in policy enactment and emphasizing the importance of the contextual dimension as well as policy re-contextualization. Apart from that, the introduction of the "double reduction" policy and how it will be interpreted through the perspective of policy enactment theory will also be provided. Also, actions taken by teachers in response to this policy will be included in this section. Moreover, the contextual dimensions of the theory of Policy Enactment will be explained in detail, to argue that staffing and infrastructural factors in the physical environment, teach-

ers' experiences and pressures can be regarded as the crucial factors which influence teachers' actual actions (**Figure 1**). Additionally, a summary and reflective discussion will also be given in order to show that, it can be helpful to use the theory of Policy Enactment in analyzing the impact of the “double reduction” policy on teachers, however, it can be unreasonable to focus too much on the impact of the theoretical framework while ignoring other aspects.

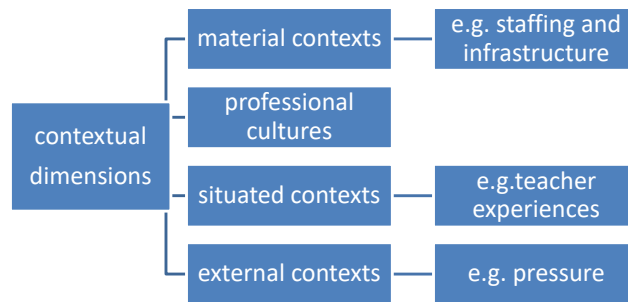


Figure 1. Factors influencing teachers' actual behaviors in context dimensions.

2. Theory of Policy Enactment

In much of the existing writing on education policy, the meaning of policy itself is often defined as an attempt to solve problems as a matter of course (Singh, 2015). Such an understanding of policy can be seen as superficial. Policies do not usually show you what to do. Instead of being simply implemented, they are interpreted by different policy actors in the school environment. In this context, therefore, it can be valuable to unpack the links between new policies and school teachers through the lens of policy implementation. Different school teachers, as participants in the implementation of educational policies, will understand and implement the policies differently. This becomes particularly evident in China. Due to the vast territory of China and the uneven economic and cultural development of different regions, the importance attached to education and the school environment varies greatly from region to region (Niu et al., 2010). School teachers and people in different regions also have different understandings, expectations and needs for education policies. As a result, the introduction of the theory of Policy Enactment in this essay can be used to better understand the impact of the implementation of the “double reduction” policy on school teachers in China. In this section, the difference and relationship between policy and policy development, the actors' roles in policy enactment, the significance of contextual dimension as well as the policy re-contextualization will be presented to better explain the theory of Policy Enactment.

2.1. Gaps and Relationships between Policy and Policy Enactment

Because of the difference between the characteristics of policy and practice, the presentation of policy cannot simply be seen as an initiative to solve a problem. Recognizing the difference between the two is crucial to the interpretation of a

new policy. Policies are often crude and are simply expressed through texts. Practice, however, by contrast, is complex. It is contingent and volatile in nature. As a result, policy is vulnerable to action. In the course of practice, the policy can easily be eroded and weakened (Ball et al., 2012). Additionally, moving from policy to practice requires a process of transformation. In other words, these policy texts need to be transformed from text to relevant action influenced by context, rather than simply put into practice. This process of translation involves the interpretation of policy texts. While these policy texts, issued by the state and relevant professional authorities, are usually authoritative and persuasive, they are influenced by the policy actors in the process of translation into practice. Policy texts may be interpreted by policy actors using a variety of resources (Ball, 2012). Specifically, each policy actor reads or is exposed to content linked to their own experience and will read the policy from their identity and subjective standpoint. As a result, the same policy text developed will be interpreted differently by different policy actors, and this may lead to disagreements.

2.2. Actors' Roles in Policy Enactment, Contextual Dimensions & Policy Re-Contextualization

In the policy enactment research, it can be crucial to look at the different understandings of policy by each actor and the reactions of actors to policy in practice. Moreover, the policy process can also be regarded as interpersonal interaction. Through interpersonal interaction, policy stories with different starting points may be shared. In the context of education policy, teachers and educators are key actors in the policy process, rather than subjects in the policy process (Ball, 2012). Some scholars argue that empirical research shows that the acceptance of unpredictable and intricate policy phenomena by the theory of Policy Enactment from the logic of contextual interaction fits well with the actual state of education policy and education policy research (Ball et al., 2012). Specifically, in their view, the theory of Policy Enactment explains policy implementation as a dynamic, non-linear, complex and continuous policy process consisting of re-contextualization, interpretation, translation and transforming. In this process, they attempt to materialize Foucault's concepts of discourse, power and actor in the educational policy process, where policy actors are understood as policy actors reading texts in multiple contexts, giving concrete meaning to policy texts and integrating them into the trajectory of daily work. For example, teachers in the classroom or staff meetings in the school; and, depending on the contextual conditions, the policy texts are translated into practical policy action strategies (Ball et al., 2012). It is worth noting here that policy actors' interpretations of "new policy contexts" can also be seen as re-contextualizing policy. When a policy enters a particular school, it needs to confront situations that already exist in the school, such as financial situations, staff structures as well as leadership experiences. The new policy brings in a new context but still needs to interact with the existing context in which it is working at the same time in order to re-contextualize the policy (Ball et al., 2012).

From the policy re-contextualization mentioned above, it can be reasonable to

consider the contextual dimension as an important role in the enactment of educational policies. Some scholars have identified that the current challenge in the implementation of education policy at the grassroots level lies in the fragmentation of policy formulation and implementation, taking into account educational practices in schools rather than contexts (Ball et al., 2012). In many studies on educational policy enactment, policies are closely influenced and affected by school-specific factors. The fact that these factors are constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactment often tends to be overlooked. Some scholars propose to consider the role of context in shaping policy enactment in several ways. They argue that there are four different levels of context in the process of policy interpretation: material contexts, professional cultures, situated contexts, and external contexts (see **Figure 1**). Firstly, they focus on the material contexts of the policy process, which in the school context are typically educational resources such as staff, educational funding, classrooms and laboratories. They also focus on the professional culture context, where professional culture and professional training in schools can be elements that influence the understanding of policy and the adoption of policy practices by policy actors in schools. In addition, they argue that thinking about local contexts applies a historically-interpreted cognitive approach, arguing that those elements that are locally legitimate and have shaped the school's identity over time need to be isolated and treated specifically. For example, the historical student base and the norms of action that are taken for granted in schools. The fourth component is the external context. They emphasize that schools today are no longer isolated subjects, but are interconnected with other social units. The emergence of environmental conditions, such as league tables and benchmarks, makes these links more visible and influences policy directions at all times (Ball et al., 2012).

In general, emphasis should be placed on the integrated consideration of active policy actors and contexts. It is worth paying attention to the creative policy interpretations of policy actors in specific policy contexts, to the operation of policy as a continuous state of life, and to the policy responses that are being fed back. At the same time, it is important to realize that policy neither have a definite nor a clear starting point. It is not a set of rules, but a set of contexts (Ball et al., 2012). Policy process research is about confronting this context and the process by which it is re-contextualized by policy actors.

3. Policy Enactment & the “Double Reduction” Policy

As explained in the theory of Policy Enactment above, the process of moving from policy text to policy enactment begins with the entry of the policy text into a specific context (e.g. school), where it is read by the policy actors and given a specific meaning in their context, before being transformed into actual action according to the specific contextual conditions. Following the process of policy enactment, this section will follow this sequence in the elaboration of the “double reduction” policy. The main purpose of this section is to relate policy development theory to the “double reduction” policy. Through the lens of policy devel-

opment theory, the “double reduction” policy will be interpreted in detail in order to better answer the research questions. More specifically, this part will first elaborate on the specific policy text including the measures proposed by the “double reduction” policy. Then, it will view the “double reduction” policy through the Policy Enactment theory by discussing teachers’ practical teaching actions under the new policy. In addition, the contextual dimensions of the theory of Policy Enactment will be included as a focus in this section for a detailed explanation to show the role of context in shaping policy enactments.

3.1. Specific Policy Texts and Actions

In addition to the analysis of the theory, the concrete presentation of the policy can not be overlooked. The purpose of the “double reduction” policy can be summarized in two main ways. On the one hand, it emphasizes reducing the burden of homework on students at the compulsory education level. On the other hand, it aims to reduce the burden of students’ off-campus training (Ross, 2021). At the same time, the “double reduction” policy also gives a series of information in the policy text on the objectives of the pedagogical reform actions. This information on the objectives of the reform is multifaceted, each objective is detailed and directed at a specific activity, and covers different groups. The following section will explain the specific policy text in four aspects.

3.1.1. Homework

In terms of homework, the total amount and length of homework should be reduced across the board to reduce the burden of homework on students and to protect their right to rest. In addition, homework management methods should be improved by establishing a system of the public announcement of homework at school and strengthening quality monitoring. It is strictly forbidden to assign or disguise homework to parents and to ask parents to correct homework. Moreover, the total amount of homework should be categorized and the average time for completing written homework at the junior secondary level should not exceed 90 minutes (Ross, 2021).

3.1.2. The Quality of Teaching and Learning in Schools

In addition to the requirements and restrictions on homework. This policy also calls for an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in schools. On the one hand, the quality of homework design should be improved. The design of homework should be integrated into the teaching and research system. At the same time, graded, flexible and personalized homework assignments are encouraged. On the other hand, guidance on homework completion should be strengthened. Teachers will guide students through most of their written work in school. In addition to this, students should be guided to make scientific use of their time after school. Specifically, schools and parents should guide students to complete the remainder of their written work after school and to do the necessary revision work. Other extra-curricular activities should also be encouraged, for example, doing chores as much as possible, engaging in appropriate physical

exercise, and participating in reading and literary activities (Ross, 2021).

3.1.3. The Level of Extra-Curricular Services in Schools

Apart from the emphasis on improving the quality of teaching and learning within the classroom, the policy also sets out requirements for the level of extra-curricular services provided by schools to meet the diverse needs of students. Firstly, after-school service hours should be ensured and the quality of after-school services should be improved. For example, schools can offer self-study classes on weekday evenings and provide extended care services for students with special needs; for students with learning difficulties, schools should draw up after-school service implementation plans to provide them with tutorials and answer questions; for students with good academic performance, various art, labour, reading, interest groups and club activities can be organized for them. At the same time, extra-curricular service channels should be expanded. Extra-curricular services can be provided by school teachers, but also by retired teachers, qualified social professionals or volunteers. In addition, free online learning services should be enhanced and improved. Not only should rich and quality online education and teaching resources be developed to provide students with free education and learning resources on quality topics covering all grades and subjects, but also free online interactive exchanges and question and answer sessions with outstanding teachers should be organized. Furthermore, efforts should also be made to increase the use and guide students to make full use of free quality educational resources on the Internet (Ross, 2021).

3.1.4. After-School Training Institution

For out-of-school training institutions, the policy also proposes that they should be strictly governed and the practice of out-of-school training should be comprehensively regulated as a means of reducing the cost of out-of-school family education and alleviating the corresponding burden. On the one hand, the policy proposes to insist on strict approval of institutions. No new off-campus professional training institutions for compulsory education students will be approved, and existing professional training institutions will be unified and registered as public interest institutions. At the same time, the policy also emphasizes regulating the operation of training services. Not only should a system of recording and monitoring the content of training be established, but also methods of managing training materials for out-of-school training institutions should be developed and introduced to strictly prohibit excessive standards and over-training. On the other hand, the policy states that supervision of permanent operations should be strengthened. Not only should the use of false advertising and other means to promote unfair competition in business be firmly prohibited, but industry monopolies should also be firmly investigated and dealt with in accordance with the law. In addition, especially for the recent rapid development of online training, the policy also regulates: online training should focus on protecting students' eyesight, with each session lasting no more than 30 minutes, with a break of no less than 10 minutes between sessions, and training ending no

later than 21:00 (Ross, 2021).

3.2. View “Double Reduction” Policy through Policy Enactment Theory

3.2.1. Practical Teaching Actions under the New Policy

As mentioned above policy actors can be considered to play a significant role in policy enactment. The role of educators in the “double reduction” policy is a topic that deserves further discussion. As the focus of this paper will be on the impact of the “double reduction” policy on school teachers in China, the emphasis in this part will be on the critical role played by school teachers in the policy enactment process. When the “double reduction” policy enters a specific school, teachers will perceive and interpret the practical implications of this “new policy context” based on the context in which they find themselves. The first example is Shendang Secondary School. As the school is characterized by a relatively small number of teachers, the school’s teachers have developed a strategy of “full participation and mix and match”. All 66 teachers in the school are involved in the management of the after-school service, and arrangements are made so that each class has a tutor for a different subject each day, with a combination of cultural and skills teachers. In this way, the different needs of the students are met and the quality of the school’s after-school service is ensured despite the limited number of teachers. In addition to this, the teachers at this school also answer the queries of students in different classes through teacher swapping. Specifically, teachers of different subjects are free to swap with the teacher of the next class, so that if the question and answer session of one class is over, they can go to another class that needs it and help the students to check the gaps and improve the effectiveness of the evening self-study (Zhang, 2021).

In addition to the example of Shendang Secondary School, the examples of Shanghai Jingye Junior High School and Tsinghua University Affiliated School also show the different meanings that teachers give to policy texts due to their different contexts and translate them into practical action. At Shanghai Jingye Junior High School, the school has a full range of sports equipment and sufficient space, so the teachers have set up the after-school service to provide a variety of sports activities that are more suited to the school. The school currently offers a wide range of sports such as table tennis, badminton, volleyball, basketball and rope skipping, all with professional teachers. Students are free to choose according to their own interests. In this way, the extra-curricular activities of the students can be enriched and the quality of the school’s after-school services can also be improved (Zhang, 2021). As for Tsinghua University Affiliated School, the district’s lead school, teachers focused on the school’s instructional setting. In order to better examine what is being taught in the school classroom, teachers have reduced their previous administrative responsibilities and are focusing on how to coordinate homework assignments and how to design thematic lessons. The content of teachers’ meetings has shifted from focusing on the minutiae and daily life such as how to address student habits and attendance to focus on the design of instruction in the classroom (Zhang, 2021).

3.2.2. View Teachers' Actions through Contextual Dimensions

It can be seen that the teachers' concern for this new policy context tend to be based on their particular situation. This concern is not only at the level of policy understanding, but also can have a direct impact on the teachers' actual teaching actions under the new policy. As the actual teaching actions of teachers can also be affected by context, the contextual dimensions of the theory of Policy Enactment will be used and the influence of specific context on teachers will also be explained by combining actual cases.

1) Material contexts: staffing and infrastructure

In educational policy enactment, material contexts have been given a lot of attention as one of the contextual dimensions. Staffing and infrastructure, as components of material contexts, can be seen as factors that influence teachers' interpretations and responses to policy. In the case of Shendang Secondary School and Shanghai Jingye Junior High School mentioned above, the role of staffing and infrastructure in the policy enactment can be seen. In the case of Shendang Secondary School, in terms of staffing, due to the relatively small number of teachers in the school, the school adopted an all-teacher approach and mixed and matched teachers from different subjects to participate in the school's after-school services, to meet the different needs of students despite the limited number of teachers and to ensure the quality of the school's after-school services (Zhang, 2021). In the case of Shanghai Jingye Junior High School, the school's infrastructure is rich in physical education resources, and teachers have taken this into account by offering sports activities as an extra-curricular service to enrich students' extra-curricular activities. It is also because the school has more sports equipment and more space that the quality of the after-school service can be guaranteed (Zhang, 2021). In contrast, the quality of after-school services would be significantly curtailed if schools lacked sufficient teachers and appropriate sports facilities for students to engage in extra-curricular activities. Thus, it can be seen that staffing and infrastructure can play a crucial role in policy enactment.

2) Professional culture

In the contextual dimensions of professional cultures, teachers' experiences are often seen as a factor that influences their interpretation of and policy response. Scholars note that teachers will work (and continue to work) in schools because of the friendships they build, their commitment to colleagues and the school's vibrant ethos. Communication, sharing or collaboration between them can emotionally relieve the stress of everyday school life. Especially when they are faced with an unprecedented new policy, these experiences can enable them to weather the "policy storm" (Ball et al., 2012). In other words, the experiences shared between teachers can go some way to encouraging them to continue working and innovating, even in stressful situations. In the case of the Tsinghua University Affiliated School mentioned above, even though the teachers were faced with new teaching tasks and the challenge of the unknown in the face of this new policy, they formed a teaching and research group to exchange ideas on how to improve the quality of the content under the "double reduction" policy.

The teachers were able to exchange their new lesson plans and discuss the feedback from their classes (Zhang, 2021). In this way, the new policy can positively influence teachers by facilitating communication, collaboration and sharing among them to face new challenges.

3) External context: Pressure

In addition to material contexts and professional culture, external context is also considered as a factor in contextual dimensions. One important example of this is pressure, which will be discussed here. When new policies come into operation in schools, some discomfort and conflicts over the new policies arise as a result. When teachers are confronted with these conflicts, they tend to become stressed (Ball et al., 2012). In the context of the “double reduction” policy, the pressure to improve student’s learning outcomes is naturally shifted to school teachers as a result of the ban on out-of-school training, which inevitably places greater demands on their expertise and competence. In the case of the Tsinghua University Affiliated School, the enactment of the new policy has resulted in teachers having to redesign the subject matter and content, which has put a lot of pressure on them (Zhang, 2021). In addition to the pressure brought about by the improvement of teaching ability, the pressure of homework design management, the time pressure of after-school service and the pressure of home-school communication and collaboration are also worthy of being noticed. Data from interviews with teachers in several studies showed that, in the management of homework design, teachers reported that menu-based hierarchical design was time-consuming and laborious, and that there was a lack of practical research and training. In the dilemma of after-school services, teachers said that it was difficult to take care of every student, and that the long hours of after-school services led to student fatigue and inefficiency, especially for rural students who spent too much time traveling to and from school. With regard to the pressure on communication between home and school, teachers said that some parents were uncooperative and did not pay attention to their children’s learning (Luo & Wu, 2024). Overall, the data from various studies can show that the enactment of the policy can put pressure on teachers in several aspects (Figure 2).

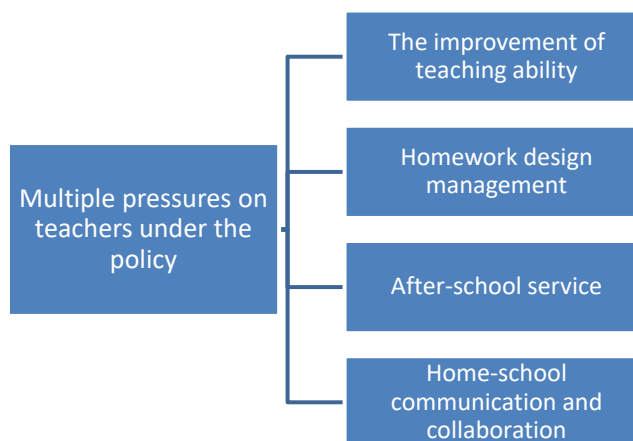


Figure 2. The pressures on teachers arising from the policy.

4. Reflections and Summary

In summary, looking at the impact of the “double reduction” policy on teachers through the lens of Policy Enactment theory, it can be shown that each teacher appears to have some different considerations and expectations when faced with the new policy. Some teachers are concerned about the management of after-school services, others are concerned about the development of sporting activities, and others are concerned about changing the direction and content of their teaching and research. Although the policy applies to the country as a whole and not to each specific teacher, subject or school, in the enactment of the “double reduction” policy, after teachers read the policy and then give it specific meaning in their contexts, practical action will be translated according to the specific contextual conditions. In addition to teachers making different practical pedagogical actions according to their contexts, the analysis of contextual dimensions and the combination of practical examples can also demonstrate discomfort and conflict with the new policy, which can cause teachers to feel stressed. This pressure is not only a result of the higher demands placed on teachers’ expertise and competence but may also come from the perception of rising achievement and parental pressure. Although the new policy can have a negative impact on teachers, the pressure can promote communication, collaboration and sharing among teachers to face the new challenges. Furthermore, the experiences shared among teachers can go some way to encouraging them to continue working and innovating, and the friendships they build as a result of communicating, sharing or collaborating can emotionally relieve the stress. Overall, the “double reduction” policy can, on the one hand, cause teachers stress, but it can also facilitate communication between teachers and, on the other hand, motivate them to make different practical teaching actions according to their context.

It can be seen from the Policy Enactment theory that the impact of the “double reduction” policy on teachers through an analysis of the policy actors and contextual dimensions can be explained. However, it can be unreasonable to over-emphasize one side at the expense of the other. The impact of policy on teachers outside the theoretical framework should also be noted. For example, a related policy was implemented at the same time as the “double reduction” policy to address the broader goal of equality in education. Although not included in the “double reduction” policy, this policy, which was triggered by the “double reduction” policy, also had an impact on teachers. This teacher rotation program was designed to address the problem of parents getting their children into the best schools by buying expensive school places to further promote equality. Teachers were asked to move to schools elsewhere so that students in different areas would have equal access to quality education from experienced educators (Luo, 2021). The series of effects of teachers being required to rotate and the inequality it creates for teachers can be seen as an effect of the “double reduction” policy on teachers. In addition, in the analysis of the theoretical framework, measures taken by teachers to provide after-school services are mentioned

but does not go further than the increase in teachers' workload caused by this move. For instance, will the fact of teachers be asked to provide extra-curricular services conflict with their inherently established schedules? Will it cause inconvenience and other negative consequences for teachers? All of these can be regarded as impacts on teachers caused by the "double reduction" policy which can not be ignored. In short, although using a theoretical framework to analyze the impact of the "double reduction" policy on teachers can help in discussing research issues, it can be irrational to pay too much attention to the impact of the theoretical framework and ignore the impact of other aspects.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the article first introduces the social context in which the "double reduction" policy emerged and explains why the theory of Policy Enactment is fitting for the topic, especially in the Chinese context. The article then provides a full introduction to the theory of Policy Enactment by comparing the differences between policy and policy enactment, illustrating the role of actors in policy enactment and emphasizing the importance of the contextual dimension and re-contextualization of policy. In addition, the article explains the concrete measures proposed by the "double reduction" policy. It also links the theory of Policy Enactment to the "double reduction" policy in order to explore teachers' practice in the light of the new policy. Examples of teachers' actions in response to this policy are also included. In addition, the contextual dimensions of the theory of Policy Enactment are explained in detail as a focus to better answer the research questions. Staffing and infrastructural factors in the material contexts, teacher experiences and pressures are all considered to influence teachers' practical teaching actions. Finally, the article gives a review and reflective discussion to show that, although the use of the theory of Policy Enactment to analyse the impact of the "double reduction" policy on teachers can be useful to the research questions, it can be unreasonable to focus too much on the impact of the theoretical framework at the expense of other aspects.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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