



Teachers' work under responsabilising policies: an analysis of educators' views on China's 2021 educational reforms

Achala Gupta & Xi Zhao

To cite this article: Achala Gupta & Xi Zhao (2023): Teachers' work under responsabilising policies: an analysis of educators' views on China's 2021 educational reforms, Journal of Education Policy, DOI: [10.1080/02680939.2023.2236067](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2023.2236067)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2023.2236067>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 14 Jul 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 91



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Teachers' work under responsibilising policies: an analysis of educators' views on China's 2021 educational reforms

Achala Gupta  and Xi Zhao

Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

ABSTRACT

This article offers unique insights into the relationship between education policy and teachers' work. It considers how globally pervasive responsibilising regimes make teachers' work more burdensome. Drawing on interviews with 15 school teachers, this article shows how China's 2021 Double Burden Reduction Policy has reconfigured educators' (class)work practices and pedagogical approaches. Specifically, it unpacks the policy mechanisms that: 1) condense school time and make teachers' work more methodical and 2) prolong teachers' working hours that are dedicated to offering students after-school educational support, thus reducing the demand for shadow education. This article argues that this policy shifts the education burden away from tutorial enterprises and parents and onto the teachers, which illustrates a case of the impact of policy regimes on teachers' work within the broader context of neoliberal globalisation. Moreover, this article produces a novel typological spectrum – submission, substantiation, and scepticism – to capture and understand the diverse ways in which teachers may respond to policy-led changes to their professional work globally. Overall, it generates new knowledge on the impact of homogenising education policies on teachers' work and the heterogeneity of teachers' responses to these policies, thus contributing conceptually to the wider field of policy sociology in education.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 January 2023
Accepted 10 July 2023

KEYWORDS

China; teachers' burden; education policy; teachers' work; shadow education; double burden reduction policy

Introduction

The relationship between policy and teachers' work has been a long-standing field of analysis in educational research. Scholars have shown the intricate ways in which changes brought by education policies, including but not limited to performance measurement frameworks and accountability procedures, fundamentally transform not only what teachers are expected to do but also how they are expected to deliver the teaching content in the classroom (see Ball 2021; de Saxe, Bucknovitz, and Mahoney-Mosedale 2018; Högberg and Lindgren 2021). These policy-led transformations to teachers' work are globally enforced with changes pushed forward by supra-state organisations such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) through their

CONTACT Achala Gupta  Achala.Gupta@soton.ac.uk  Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, University Rd, Building 32, Highfield Campus, Southampton SO17 1TR, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for example (Sellar and Lingard 2013).

Despite its global nature, there are relatively fewer discussions on the impact of policy-induced educational reforms on teachers' work in Asia with only limited studies focusing on and discussing specifically how teachers might be responding to these changes in their professional lives (see Gupta 2021a; Li, Rao, and Tse 2012; Zhang 2023). Exploring such connections between education policy and educators' work in the Asian region is crucial. Doing so will not only bring to the fore issues of global significance but will also shed light on the complex relationship between teachers' work and educational landscapes more broadly (of which shadow education is a crucial part within Asia, where this study is empirically grounded, and worldwide (see Bray 2022)).

Aiming to redress this gap and to contribute to the ongoing debate on how teachers' work is situated within policy imperatives and associated changes globally, this article investigates educators' views on the impact of radical educational reforms, introduced by the Chinese state's 2021 Double Burden Reduction Policy (DBRP), on producing, informing and shaping teachers' work. The discussion reveals how, in specific ways, changes to teachers' work in China are situated within the state's vision of the role of formal schools in delivering quality education, whilst also proactively discouraging the demands for shadow education in the Chinese education market. Moreover, drawing on our qualitative data, we suggest a typological spectrum – submission, substantiation, and scepticism – to capture and understand the variations in teachers' responses to policy-led changes to their work. This typology not only offers novel insights into the heterogeneity of teachers' approaches to education policies in the empirical context, but it also informs conceptual discussions concerning the processes underlying policy enactments through teachers' everyday work. Overall, the discussion generated in this article contributes conceptually to the international field of policy sociology in education.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We first provide a conceptual background of our article, focusing on how teachers' work is understood in relation to education policies in the literature. Then, we contextualise the study within the empirical reality of the DBRP and discuss specifically the ways in which the policy influences educators' everyday work. Next, we will introduce the study on which this article draws before discussing the key research findings. The article concludes with a synthesis of the conceptual implications of the empirically grounded discussion.

Education policy and teachers' work: understanding teachers' burden under responsibilising regimes

Scholars have empirically investigated, discussed, and conceptualised extensively the relationship between education policy and teachers' work. Policies are governance tools, aiming to change particular schooling practices but in doing so they also (re)define teachers' everyday work including the meaning educators associate with their work (Ball 2021). Neoliberal policies often responsabilise individuals. Responsibilisation refers to a state strategy, often embedded in dominant policy narratives, that puts the burden of accomplishing a task or a series of tasks in specific and often prescribed manners on individuals – in this case, teachers. As such, neoliberal education policies typically not only generate a high-pressure workload for school teachers but also change teachers'

relation to their work, thus, reconfiguring in crucial ways schooling cultures worldwide. This section engages with the international literature that addresses how policies intersect with teachers' work and educators' enactment of policies, focusing particularly on two concepts 'teachers' burden' and 'responsibilising regimes' within the broader context of neoliberal globalisation. The discussion presented below offers insights into the conceptual basis for the analysis presented later in this article.

In the English context, policy-led changes to educators' work have been scrutinised considerably since the 1980s when educational reforms led to the rise of a culture where teachers were forced to respond effectively to managerial demands of target-setting, implement measurable assessment procedures and perform in ways that the state dictated (Ball 2003). This significantly reduced teachers' autonomy as educators in school settings. Such fundamental changes to teachers' work under these responsibilising regimes have effectively increased teachers' burden and pushed the teaching profession into crisis (see discussion in Towers et al. 2022). Teachers' response to this, however, has been relatively mixed. Drawing on interviews with teachers in three case study schools (representing diverse school settings), Towers et al. (2022) reported that although the majority of their participants discussed leaving the profession due to feeling under pressure from high workloads, some teachers shared a counter-narrative by highlighting the job satisfaction they derived from their work and supported the policy reforms as they felt they had positive implications for their students' academic success. Hence, although the policies might instruct teachers to devote fully to educational reforms by setting 'aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation' (Ball 2003, 215), policy enactments are often much more complex.

Furthermore, neoliberal influences on teachers' work can vary by context as how policies alter the ways in which educators understand and articulate the nature and scope of their role can be heterogeneous. For example, drawing on interviews with 28 teachers in Ontario, Canada, MacDonald-Vemic and Portelli (2018) showed how school teachers imbibe and affirm policy imperatives in their speech acts, 'speaking the language' of and thus accepting the meritocratic and accountability-focused policy reforms that began in Canada during 'The Harris Years', following neoliberal structural adjustments. Similar political and economic reforms in India have led to the culture of what Gupta (2021a) refers to as 'teacher entrepreneurialism' whereby teachers understand the scope of their work beyond the boundaries of formal schooling and often legitimise their actions by referring to neoliberal policy imperatives that promote market-driven, profit-oriented schooling cultures. The notions of innovation and productivity that teacher-entrepreneurs often associate themselves with may not necessarily however apply to teachers in other contexts. In Eastern and Central European countries as well as places such as Ghana, Vietnam, Kyrgyz Republic, and Cambodia, teachers are not just considered to be overworked but are also poorly paid. Teachers subsequently resort to providing private tutoring, which becomes a way for them to remain in the teaching profession and exercise the autonomy they have lost in school classrooms (see a review paper on portraits of teachers in neoliberal times by Duong and Silova 2021).

Overall, the existing literature on education policies shaping teachers' work captures a variety of globally synchronic ways in which teachers' work has become more stressful due to the accelerated intensification of activities compounded by the perceived loss of autonomy. At the same time, there are diverse ways in which teachers respond to the

transformed work circumstances across empirical contexts. This article contributes significantly to this ongoing discussion by focusing particularly on educators' views on education policy in relation to teachers' work. In doing so, it enhances the scholarly understanding of the relationship between (educational) policy and practice (teachers' work) globally.

Chinese state's management of (formal and shadow) education

On the 24th of July 2021, the Chinese government introduced an education policy, published as 'Opinions on further reducing the homework burden and off-campus training burden of students in compulsory education'. As the title of the policy document suggests, this policy aims to address two kinds of burdens – homework and off-campus training (or tutoring, which is also referred to as shadow education in the literature). As such, it is popularly known as the Double Burden Reduction Policy (referred to here as DBRP). The DBRP is one of the many policy reforms (see Zhang 2023 for discussion on this) the Chinese state has introduced and implemented in order to manage and govern two key education sectors in the country: formal schools and the tuition industry. Specific ways in which the DBRP shapes teachers' work have been outlined below. Unless specifically attributed, all quotations used in this section have been taken from the DBRP policy document (MoE 2021).

The policy proclaims to reduce the 'education burden' on students through specific measures taken to transform particular educational practices. Notably, the DBRP insists on (re)claiming formal schooling institutions as primary education providers amidst the ubiquity of shadow education in China. In the policy document, this is reflected under 'general requirements' suggesting that the government wishes to 'strengthen the role of school education as the main front'. This is reinforced further through the policy, by its stress on improving the education quality and students' learning outcomes. Correspondingly, the policy articulates that teachers' work will be to improve 'the quality of classroom teaching' through deploying prescribed teaching management procedures, optimising teaching methods and strengthening teaching management, and to improve students' learning efficiency in school (note, how the language used here speaks to the educational reforms focusing on accountability regimes worldwide – see discussions in Ball 2021; Gupta 2021a; Högberg and Lindgren 2021; Sellar and Lingard 2013). The policy offers three directives for teachers to realise these expectations:

- (1) Offer multi-purpose extended hours: Teachers are directed to offer 'after-school service time' to pupils during which they will curate activities aiming to popularise science, culture, sports, art, labour, reading, interest groups and club activities, and assist students in finding these hours 'attractive' for extended learning, thus expanding 'learning space' in schools. In these sessions, teachers are also tasked with addressing the requirements of struggling students and helping them complete their homework. Moreover, teachers are expected to offer free online learning services to facilitate education beyond what is covered on a given topic in the official curriculum. These goals that schoolteachers are expected to achieve will inevitably result in a greater workload as teachers will need to produce new content and take on more responsibilities.

- (2) Design homework tasks that are focused and purposeful: The policy asks teachers to revitalise their homework practices to reduce the homework burden on students and address the demand traditional homework practices had created for shadow education. Specifically, the policy suggests that teachers should strive to reduce the total amount and duration of homework and improve their 'homework management methods' by strengthening the 'overall planning of assignments for subject groups and grade groups' and regulating 'the structure of assignments to ensure that the difficulty does not exceed the national curriculum standards'. In addition, teachers are instructed to 'systematically design basic homework that conforms to age characteristics and learning rules and reflects the orientation of quality education'. Although these changes may prove beneficial to students and presumably alleviate the burden of education costs on families, they will entail substantial changes to teachers' work concerning the delivery of the content, of which homework has been a significant part for educators in the empirical context.

Furthermore, teachers' work will be affected by the policy's approach to heavy regulation and governance of the tuition industry. The policy instructs local authorities to 'no longer approve new off-campus training institutions for disciplines for students at the compulsory education stage' and forbids the tuition sector from creating content that is beyond the curricular demands of the formal schooling system, thus strongly advocating for the discontinuation of the 'shadow curriculum' in China. This particular policy experience resonates with other countries where shadow education intersects teachers' work quite profoundly; see discussion in Zhang (2023). Although this is linked to the previous point about the state's imperative to reclaim schools as the primary providers of formal education in China, the regulation of the tuition industry will affect teachers who offer tutoring part-time for additional income directly (this was also noted in the 2015 education policy, aiming to prevent school teachers from offering tutoring services – see Zhang 2023) and indirectly by further responsabilising teachers for the overall educational experience and learning outcomes of their students.

The case of China presented here, when compared with the discussion provided in the section above, shows somewhat homogeneous effects of globally prevalent policy regimes that responsabilise teachers for students' overall academic performance (see discussion in Högberg and Lindgren 2021). There are, of course, contextual specificities in China where policies ask teachers to not only perform new tasks but also assume greater responsibilities that were typically responded to by families and shadow education businesses collectively. Nevertheless, similar to policy-led changes to teachers' work in other countries, the DBRP expects teachers to understand their work entirely differently from before and this shift is rooted within the renewed ways in which the policy envisions the role of formal schooling in national growth and development.

The study

This article draws on individual, semi-structured interviews carried out with 15 primary school teachers during September-December 2021 in the Henan province in China. The professional profile of our participants varied in terms of the levels and

the subjects they had expertise in as well as the number of years they had been teaching. Specifically, the teachers we spoke to taught Chinese, English and Mathematics subjects to students enrolled in years 4 to 6. Our participants also had a wide range of professional teaching experiences in the public education sector: the majority had taught in schools for more than 20 years; four participants had taught for about 5–20 years, and only three had teaching experience of fewer than three years at the time of the fieldwork.

Fieldwork for this study was carried out during heavy restrictions and challenges to travelling during the COVID-19 pandemic. To overcome these challenges, we used WeChat, a popular Chinese social networking site, to facilitate our interactions with our participants. We used this site because all our participants insisted we did this, which is likely because they were familiar with it and thus felt comfortable using WeChat to talk to us as well (see Lawrence 2022 for a discussion on using WeChat for fieldwork in China).

For data production, we were mindful of the importance of *listening* to educators (Gupta 2021a). To facilitate this, we asked teachers open-ended questions such as ‘How do you understand the impact of the policy on your work?’ and ‘What are your views on the various aspects of the policy?’. As a result, the responses we received from our participants encapsulated what *they* felt to be relevant regarding the impact of the policy on their work. All interviews were audio-recorded, and each lasted for about an hour or so. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin as we felt it was crucial that the teachers were able to express their ideas and thoughts in their first language freely.

The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated into English for data analysis purposes. We used NVivo to analyse our data. We first coded the transcripts and then evaluated the content under each code to identify themes from our data regarding the impact of the policy on teachers’ work. The coding framework was developed both inductively from the data and deductively using key discussions on the relationship between education policy and teachers’ work in the extant literature (see previous sections for discussion on this). Various aspects teachers discussed in relation to this topic provided valuable insights into the policy, its intended aims and potential including unintended outcomes on teachers’ work from their own standpoint.

Importantly, the educators’ perceptions, reflections, reactions and suggestions this article surfaces are of primary school teachers within a specific geographical region in China during the first school term following the DBRP-led educational reforms. Many factors are likely to shape teachers’ attitudes regarding their work such as: significant differences in educational practices across educational levels, the points in time since the implementation of the DBRP within and across provinces, income disparity of teachers serving rich, middle-income and economically disadvantaged communities, and persistent rural and urban regional variations in educational eco-systems within the empirical context. As such, teachers’ views presented here may or may not align with the educators working under different circumstances to them. Our participants also reflected on this by stating that educators involved in teaching students at higher educational levels, at which students appear for high-stakes examinations, may share more intense and complex views on the policy imperatives and their impact on teachers’ work. While we do not claim to be entirely comprehensive in recording and reporting teachers’ perceptions of the DBRP in China as a whole, the discussion presented in this article will still offer useful

insights that will enable future explorations of nuanced similarities and differences in teachers' viewpoints to fully understand the impact of the DBRP on teachers' work.

We have organised key themes emerging from our data into two sections, capturing teachers' views of and responses to the DBRP-led educational reforms in turn. The following section captures the points that all educators agreed on in relation to how the policy had changed their everyday professional work and the subsequent section presents educators' responses to the policy, highlighting key disagreements and differences in participants' views. These sections illustrate the complex relationship between policy and practice more broadly and educational policy reforms and teachers' work more specifically.

Teachers' burden under a responsabilising policy regime

All the teachers we spoke to mentioned two specific ways in which the DBRP would add a greater burden to their work and further responsabilise them: 1) whilst claiming to alleviate the burden of education from students and their families, the DBRP has *shifted* that burden onto the teachers and 2) within the renewed dynamics between the formal education system and the shadow education system, whereby the latter is strictly regulated by the state, teachers are given greater responsibilities, many of which were typically assumed by the private tutoring sector. Both of these points are discussed in turn below.

Burdening teachers' work by condensing school time whilst prolonging working hours

When reflecting on the specific ways in which teachers thought they would be affected by the implementation of the DBRP, they discussed the changes not only in terms of their workload but also in relation to the very nature of their work. Particularly, teachers talked about how the policy directives condense their school time on the one hand and prolong their overall working hours on the other. Teachers felt that both policy tactics were crucial to meet the state's expectations of educators' work.

Condensed school time

All our participants discussed how they have relatively less time allocated to them during regular schooling hours to complete the same tasks they had been doing and how they have been performing these much more carefully than before. Teachers felt that they were already conscious of how various aspects of their teaching are prescribed and made methodical – for example, one teacher says, '... so teachers must pay more [attention] to create a better and more efficient classroom and improve children's performance'. This renewed focus on teachers' work that is output-driven or result-focused rather than being oriented towards the input teachers offer students in the classroom resonates strongly with the experiences of teachers in other countries where the teachers' role has been reduced to being a worker or a technician (de Saxe, Bucknovitz, and Mahoney-Mosedale 2018; also see; Ball 2003; Gupta 2021a) with the broader aim to meet the end goal of essentially raising students' grades (Högberg and Lindgren 2021; Sellar and Lingard 2013). In such situations, teachers in our study felt that notions of efficiency and productivity had become more important than the slow-paced,

organically developed, multi-faceted engagements educators said to have enjoyed with their students (see resonance with Towers et al. 2022 for example).

Another cross-cutting theme across our interview data was that teachers felt that policy suggestions regarding the revitalisation of their homework practices would essentially mean them redesigning their fundamental approach to classroom management throughout an academic year. Teachers talked about how they ‘have to prepare for all aspects of the lesson preparation process’ whilst simultaneously balancing quality with quantity of homework. This is reflected further in the interview excerpts below:

I do pay more attention to classroom design because students have limited time to study, and I will highlight some key points to explain to them specifically.

The homework cannot be assigned too much. So, I have to put more thought into assigning homework and strictly control the quality and quantity of homework.

These excerpts show teachers’ thinking process of accommodating homework regulations that the DBRP states. For teachers, this meant them reconceptualising classroom teaching in ways that suited the intents and purposes of the policy. Specifically, teachers recognised that reduced homework burden meant ‘limited time to study’, making it imperative for teachers to change their pedagogical approach to delivering teaching content, by, for example, stressing ‘key points’ during classroom sessions and assigning ‘efficient’ homework that can be completed in the timeframe suggested in the policy. To contextualise this shift, it might be worth noting that the policy specifies that students in Grades 1 and 2 should not be given any homework and that the homework should be assigned in such a way that it does not take up more than 60 minutes to complete for students in Grades 3 to 6 and 90 minutes for students in junior high school (MoE 2021).

Although this policy directive may ensure students’ improved performance in schoolwork, it may not necessarily mean greater learning outcomes beyond school grades. Importantly, these discussions allude to how reduced homework for children did not mean less classwork for teachers; instead, it instructs teachers to compact the same amount of work into a new timescape, thus effectively increasing teachers’ work and heightening their workload. Hence, it is not just specific changes teachers will be making to their work, but they will collectively inform ‘the emergence of different forms of interconnected educational work’ (Comber 2012, 119). Furthermore, teachers suggested that instead of being given the time to adapt to these new circumstances, they are expected to adopt new ways to work as per the prescribed changes (see discussion on this in Li, Rao, and Tse 2012), making the overall work teachers do policy-responsive rather than practice-produced.

Finally, these seemingly straightforward changes to teachers’ work have much wider implications for the broader educational sector and educational practices in China. For example, homework completion is one of the primary reasons why students attend tutoring centres. In many ways, shadow and formal education systems rely on each other to meet different expectations children and their families have from both sectors (see Zhang 2023 for discussion). Reducing the school time overall and employing stringent homework-related guidelines would mean that not only will teachers be *performing* the role of teachers, but they will also be their students’ tutors, resulting in an increased workload as well as greater pressure of doing these jobs ‘efficiently’, as the policy dictates.

Prolonged working hours

Alongside a condensed schooling timescape, teachers in our study also discussed the additional time school teachers were encouraged and incentivised monetarily to offer their students *after* regular schooling time, thus extending further teachers' work and prolonging their overall working hours. Participants discussed this work as an 'additional service' they were 'expected to deliver', to primarily offer academic support to students who may have been struggling to grasp teaching content during regular schooling hours. This had very clear implications for after-schooling tutoring services, as alluded to above in the previous section and discussed in the next section. The following excerpts exemplify teachers' views on this.

Maybe our workload is a little bit more than before. Because the school now has an extended class service, we have to work for an extra hour or two after work to help the students with their studies.

... after the extended class service, teachers have to work very hard because they have to work longer hours at school.

Yes, the workload is more significant than before. We have introduced the extended class service, that is to say, in the time we should be off work, we have added two hours of extended service to let the children on the campus complete the daily homework, so our working hours have been extended, so our work has become more pressured.

This 'extended service' impacted teachers' work as they were expected to perform two types of responsibilities within the span of their overall working hours. As teachers, they ought to deliver 'efficiently' designed content during 'regular' schooling hours. And, as service providers aiming to support students academically, they had to offer 'extra' time to their students after usual schooling hours. Although intertwined, the nature of responsibilities in both sets of hours was sufficiently distinct. This distinction, as mentioned above, was clearly articulated in the form of the work teachers were expected to carry out during each of these timeframes of overall expanded teaching hours.

This change to teachers' work is not only embedded within the overall change in schooling practices but is also emblematic of the state redefining education itself, the role of educational institutions and educators in this and what it means to be an 'effective' educator (MoE 2021). Parallels can be drawn from other countries such as Australia (see Comber 2012) India (Gupta 2021a) and England (see Towers et al. 2022) among others, signifying the homogeneity of intents and purposes of contemporary education policies globally. These cross-country similarities essentially illustrate how the redefinition arising from policy texts resembles the characteristics of ideal teachers: 'elastic or infinitely flexible and ultimately dutiful figures who can unproblematically respond to new demands' (Cormack and Comber 1996, 121). Such expectations speak directly to new managerial regimes that hold teachers responsible for routinely prescribed tasks and manage their work for efficient delivery of desired outputs (for discussion, see Ball 2003). This point has been expanded further in the following section.

Responsibilising teachers to accommodate the changing role of formal schooling vis-à-vis a highly regulated shadow education industry

Another crucial implication of the DBRP that teachers talked about in relation to their work was the heavy regulation – and the state’s increasingly restrictive allowance for the operations – of the private tuition industry. Teachers felt this had clear ramifications for the extent to which they were held responsible and accountable for teaching, students’ learning and learning outcomes. Teachers’ perspectives regarding this corresponded to the connection between three policy technologies: the market (in the form of the tuition industry), managerialism (imposed by the Chinese state) and teachers’ responsibilities (as expected and clearly outlined in the DBRP).

Specifically, in China, the DRBP declares that private tuition centres will not be allowed to operate as freely as before, thus effectively displacing them from being prominent and in some cases dominant (in relation to formal schools) institutions of education delivery. In these circumstances, many schoolteachers we interacted with felt that with no access to private tutoring support for students, teachers will have to assume full responsibility for students’ learning, making their job ‘more demanding’ and putting them ‘under greater pressure’:

It’s more demanding than before. Because if there is no extracurricular tutoring, the teacher basically [cover] . . . all the knowledge points . . . in the classroom, but also time [themselves, such that they are] . . . precise, you cannot waste time in the school, because the classroom time is limited after all, so that the teacher is still under pressure. The other thing is that we have an extra extended class so the teacher may go home a little later.

I think that school leaders will definitely be more strict with teachers. Because before, if you didn’t get it right in the classroom, you could probably make up for it after school at a tutoring agency, but now you’re putting all your energy into the classroom, which means that all the content students learn in the classroom comes from the classroom, so teachers will take the design of the classroom more seriously. The students also know they can’t take tutoring classes in the future.

As shown above, teachers talked about how the changes brought by the policy will produce a new dynamic between school leaders and teachers, with the former being ‘more strict’ on the latter. The nature of this conversation resembled discussions in other cultural contexts where teachers are similarly responsibilised for students’ learning outcomes (see Towers et al. 2022). As the excerpts above suggest, teachers indicated that heavy regulation of private tutoring would mean that students will rely more on formal schooling and specifically on teachers’ work to excel in school exams, resulting in a new set of expectations being created among children and their families from the school teachers. This will facilitate the societal norms of holding school teachers accountable for not only the delivery of the full curricular content in the classroom but also this being done in a way that facilitates academic excellence among students (since the DRBP considers learning outcomes as a proxy for quality education; see MoE 2021).

Teachers felt this sense of responsibility was traditionally shared between schools and the tuition industry as tutoring agencies typically cover the syllabus alongside schools whilst strengthening students’ understanding and clarifying doubts emerging from the content discussed in classrooms. In significant ways, therefore, teachers felt that the tuition industry accommodated the needs of high-aspiring students by training them at

a more advanced level than school teachers could, as well as of the low-achievers who needed more support than what teachers could offer during regular schooling hours. Thus, the changes that are discussed in the policy as detrimental to the tuition industry (MoE 2021) will inevitably lead to a complete transformation of the education ecosystem in China where both formal and shadow education have long existed symbiotically (see Zhang 2023; also see parallels in other Asian countries in; Gupta 2021b, 2021c) with clear implications for teachers' everyday work. Specifically, teachers said that they will need to redesign their teaching content and its delivery so that formal schooling could compensate for the lack of tutoring, as the policy document suggests. Teachers felt that it would be challenging to accommodate tutors' work into their work, within the infrastructure of condensed school time and prolonged working hours, especially when they themselves will have less autonomy on their work.

Importantly, teachers insisted that these remarks, mentioned above, were not directed at the intent of the policy but conveyed a worry about the unintended consequences of the policy-led changes on teachers' work. This changing dynamic between formal and shadow education sectors signifies the role and power of the state even in neo-liberalised societies, where market forces are presumably more dominant than the state. These connections are embedded within the global dynamic of the private sector's participation within, with, and around the public sector of education (as discussed in Ball 2007). Importantly, the discussion presented here indicates change not only in teachers' work but also alludes to the emergence of new indicators of teachers' performance and productivity measures in the absence of the privatised tuition industry.

While schoolteachers were aware of the repercussions of the strict regulations for the shadow education industry on their work, they also articulated the ban on privatised forms of tutoring support as a 'positive' change. As the excerpts below illustrate, teachers felt that this ban will ensure that school teachers focus more on their everyday work in school rather than the work they do in partnership with the tuition sector:

Some teachers may not be able to participate in private tutoring outside of school, which has been eliminated and will focus all their teaching efforts on schooling. They may become more dedicated.

In the past, children might study part of the curriculum in advance during the summer, but now there is no advanced study session. But this is not a good thing, because if students study in advance during the holidays, they will [...] not listen to the lesson ... but if they have never studied before, never studied in advance, and then face the unfamiliar knowledge, they may be more interested. Then I think as long as the children are curious and have a sense of novelty, the teacher will be willing to teach actively and be responsible for tutoring. I believe this is a positive aspect.

These excerpts denote transformations to teachers' work from slightly different perspectives. The first excerpt signifies the potential end to the work teachers performed outside of regular schooling hours (a common practice in China, see Zhang 2023, and in other countries, see; Duong and Silova 2021; Gupta 2021a). Without the possibility of such arrangements due to the DBRP, teachers felt that the resources, embodied in the form of school teachers, would now be productively utilised in school settings, making the formal education system stronger (as outlined in MoE 2021). The second excerpt alludes to the impact of the policy on teachers' work and their experiences of teaching in the

classrooms. Some teachers felt that before the policy was introduced, students relied heavily on tutoring lessons, and they valued these more than the educational support students had access to in schools. Since tutorial centres would typically be ahead of schools in covering the syllabus, students often tended to be inattentive in schools, which discouraged teachers in their everyday work (see Zhang 2023; also see; Gupta 2021c for a similar case in India). However, with the rapidly declining influence of shadow education due to the DBRP, our research participants felt that students would take their school lessons more seriously and pay attention to the content delivered in the classroom, potentially making teachers more enthusiastic about their work and their role in shaping their students' learning experiences. Teachers felt that this would motivate school teachers to perform well in their role as educators.

Educators' responses to the reconfiguration of teachers' work

Alongside discussing the changes in the nature and extent of teachers' work under the DBRP, we also asked for educators' responses to these changing work conditions. The narratives of submission, substantiation, and scepticism – referred to here as a typological spectrum – illustrate creative ways in which educators respond to, deal with, and negotiate policy imperatives and policy-led practices. Beyond understanding educators' response to the renewed working conditions in the empirical context, the discussion presented in this section provides a framework for understanding processes involving policy enactments vis-à-vis teachers' work globally. This typology should be seen as a spectrum or a continuum that can be used to capture and consider multiple responses from the same teacher at a single point in time and changes in views of the same teacher on a particular education policy over time across societies. For example, different teachers can share varied responses to a policy at the same time and a teacher who now submits to an education policy may in future become sceptical of its reality.

Submission

As discussed in the previous section, teachers recognised how their work and workload will increase as a direct result of the implementation of the DBRP, yet many of them compliantly supported these state directives. While it was difficult to ascertain whether this was due to the fear of or faith in (or the latter disguised as the former, or perhaps vice versa) the state's actions, it was nonetheless interesting to observe teachers unequivocally accepting the will of the state, as an initial response of many of our research participants. The excerpts below show teachers' approaches to state imperatives in the forms of: 'adaptation', 'adjustment', and often simply 'acceptance'.

[I]t is a process of adaptation. Maybe there will be a new policy to adjust in the future, the procedure can not satisfy everyone, but since the state has issued this Policy, it must be reasonable. Otherwise, it would not be implemented on a large scale nationwide.

If it is an extended class, teachers have to spend a little more time than usual to help students. In addition, they need to redesign the classroom to make it more efficient. In fact, our teachers will talk to each other about teaching under the current situation . . . It's okay. Since teachers are asked to do it, we just do it.

The first excerpt illustrates teachers' unfailing belief in the state, demonstrated through teachers stressing if the policy has been employed nationwide, then it 'must be reasonable' – despite the recognition of, yet underplaying, the fact that it may not 'satisfy everyone'. The second excerpt identifies the potential problems with the policy but implies the pointlessness of debating it any further. Overall, teachers in this set of policy responsiveness appeared to accept the policy-led changes to their work to support the 'national reform' for a 'better future', which also signifies educators adopting the state-envisaged characteristics of an ideal teacher, i.e. as a worker or a deliverer of services (see Ball 2021). Furthermore, greater responsabilisation for teachers' work and the introduction of new markers to evaluate teachers' performance seemed to encourage our participants to comply with policy regulations. Indeed, this is exactly what the state expects and such responses from teachers sustain an environment where the focus is often directed at producing 'efficient' and controllable 'education workers' (see Ball 2007).

Substantiation

Many of our participants who responded acquiescently to the new circumstances of their everyday work foregrounded their response as a testimony to their 'ethics of care'. This was often articulated as dedication and love for one's job and selfless willingness to contribute their labour to meet the state's vision for educational development broadly and for students' academic success more specifically (this resonates strongly with the participants in the study by Towers et al. 2022). Some of these responses are outlined below and these excerpts can be contrasted with teachers' responses in the form of *resistance* to policy imperatives in many other countries, such as the UK, within the broader literature of the 'care of the self', amidst neo-liberal education policies (see Ball and Olmedo 2013; MacDonald-Vemic and Portelli 2018).

I feel that as a teacher, it's a little harder, but I'm happy to do it, probably because I love it.

We are in school longer than before. That is, our workload has increased, and we have more time to spend with studentsActually, the teachers have no complaints. They are quite willing to accept it . . . I think I can accept it if it's long-term because teachers are still very dedicated. Although they are not our children, we care more about their academic performance than our children's, and we want them to learn well.

Actually, the pressure is acceptable. After all, the main task of a teacher is to teach students. The workload is a little more than before. Because the school has to provide extended hours of service, the main reason is that this service increases teachers' workload.

Of course, these are the pressures of our work. That is to say, although the teachers are a little more stressed, we still prefer this. Because in the past, students' homework was done at home, and when they came to school, some of it was done and some of it was not, and there were many cases of not finishing homework on time. But now, although our teachers work longer hours, we feel that the children's homework is completed neatly in the classroom every day. This helps us to keep track of the children's mastery of their studies.

Other ways in which some teachers substantiated the added burden on their work were: 1) by comparing their situation to their peers; as primary school teachers, they felt they should not complain because their counterparts teaching at higher educational levels are under greater work pressure. For example, a teacher says, 'The pressure is definitely not as tremendous as

middle school and high school. In fact, it's within the range' 2) by associating their labour to the country's 'progress'. Teachers viewed the new policy as the state's intervention to facilitate educational progress in China, thus making them feel obliged to take part in this intervention with a 'positive spirit' – doing so involved ignoring, undermining or even suppressing the need to critique the imminent changes to teachers' work and their practices, and 3) by referring to the arrangements put in place to recognise teachers' work, especially through remuneration given to compensate for their work after regular schooling hours.

Scepticism

A few teachers, however, were sceptical about whether the policy-induced change in teachers' work will indeed meaningfully alter schooling practices the way it is articulated in the policy document. Specifically, teachers felt they would be burdened with extended work and expanded working hours in addition to their routine work, such as conducting exams and scoring and ranking students. While teachers recognised that their professional lives would change, they felt that the pressure students experience due to the exam-oriented education system, as a whole, would remain intact. This made it challenging for teachers to understand whether the additional work they will now have to do is worth their effort. Their concerns are typified in the excerpts below:

Although it is a double reduction, the teachers are under more pressure. The whole pressure seems to have shifted to the teachers because the exams are still there, and the children still have to take the exams while shouting about reducing the burden on the children, but the exams still need grading and ranking.

Actually, every teacher wants to be efficient. On the one hand, you have to teach students, and on the other hand, you have to see if the children can absorb the knowledge. Teachers are also under a lot of pressure when time is tight. Then the task is immense, trying to give all these things to the children, the time in the classroom is limited, and we are not allowed to assign homework outside the classroom, just afraid that some people will report us with homework and threaten us with the policy.

Some teachers, as the excerpts above suggest, reported abruptness in their professional work. They discussed how, before this policy was announced, their work focused on benefiting their students. Teachers were sceptical about the efficacy measures outlined in the policy (as discussed above), and they substantiated this by alluding to the way in which teachers' work will be heavily prescribed, scheduled, and contained within pre-determined sets of tasks in school settings, thus ensuring that the learning occurs in already 'packaged' teaching routines without a provision or space allocated for children to process learning and teaching in their own time. These feelings resonate strongly with teachers' response to education policies intending to police teachers' work in many other cultural contexts (as discussed earlier in Ball 2003, 2021).

Another crucial aspect teachers highlighted was the impact of the DBRP on accountability practices; the following words from a teacher we spoke to, 'just afraid that some people will report us with homework and threaten us with the policy', clearly shows teachers' perception of their work being observed and monitored under the new regulations. This, for teachers, meant the rise of a new mechanism to govern and manage

educators' everyday work, thus potentially unsettling their perception of and disrupting their approaches to their work as educators.

Conclusion

This article has explored how a policy reform reimagines teachers' work – how it is (re) understood — and the ways in which it is responded to by teachers, thus capturing the processes of recrafting the boundaries of teachers' work and the social contract between teachers, parents, the state, and the private tuition industry in a relatively underexplored empirical context. Our discussion has demonstrated the impact of policy homogenisation through evidence of resonance between teachers' accounts of changes to their work in China vis-à-vis other cultural contexts both in Asia and Europe. Simultaneously, it offers insights into the uniqueness of China in how teachers respond to policy-led reforms. Thus, this article provides novel insights into how teachers' work has been reconfigured and how this reconfiguration has been understood in China since the implementation of the DBRP, and how these processes align with other cultural contexts globally. This section will focus on the key implications of our research findings for understanding the relationship between policy and practice, both conceptually and empirically.

Firstly, this article has illustrated how policy reforms transform schooling practices and how these transformations are realised through a renewed understanding of education, teachers' role in this and their work. Specifically, it has shown the particular ways in which teachers understand their work and workload under changing policy contexts. Here, it has been articulated through measures of condensed work during regular schooling hours and additional work during prolonged working hours. On the one hand, teachers are expected to change their work as educators, including the nature and extent to which they will assign homework whilst elevating the quality of education delivery during regular schooling hours. On the other hand, teachers have been held responsible for the overall development of students and are instructed to plan, perform, and sustain a wide range of extracurricular activities after regular school time. As such, this article has shown – similar to other cultural contexts globally – that the more recent educational reforms direct teachers to change various aspects of their work, including pedagogical practices (concerning homework, for example) and curating extra-curricular activities, to maintain the managerial expectations of them as productive and efficient workers.

Secondly, the article has discussed how teachers' work is often impacted by the policy not only within the formal education system and everyday schooling practices but also the education market more broadly. This surfaces in the discussion about how, in the empirical context where shadow education and formal education are intricately entwined, it is vital to see the impact of any policy-driven change on this relationship to fully comprehend the policy-led reconfigurations to schooling practices and teachers' work. This observation aligns strongly with other Asian countries (such as South Korea and India) where tutoring is a prominent system of education delivery. Indeed, this article has shown that heavy regulations placed on shadow education enterprises will inevitably have implications for teachers' work as in such contexts school teachers will likely be held more responsible and accountable than before for children's academic and extra-curricular learning outcomes since this burden will no longer be shared between school teachers and tutors in the private

tuition industry as it was traditionally. Teachers in our study, for example, felt that they would be relied upon much more by not only the schooling systems and the students but also by students' families in the absence of private tuition support outside of formal schools. Such a change can potentially add additional pressures on educators' work and workload.

Thirdly, the research findings have implications for understanding educators' responses to policy-led changes. Many studies have talked about the various ways in which teachers react to such changes. This study has provided a glimpse into three specific ways in which teachers might approach policy reforms. These were: a complete submission to the policy directives, a careful substantiation of these directives and measured scepticism about the efficacy of the policy in meeting desired outcomes. This typological spectrum not only signals the multi-layered and diverse narratives of educators but also signifies the complex ways in which educators perceive their role and work in relation to policy across and within empirical contexts. For example, uncritical compliance to the policy suggests that many of our participants saw themselves not necessarily as professionals, agents, or stakeholders producing the possibilities for change but as workers, technicians, and bureaucrats whose key purpose was to *follow* the directions given to them by their employer, the state, thus aiding implementation of the new policy was a crucial part of fulfilling those roles. While none of our participants resisted the policy-driven changes to their work (as we observe in other cultural contexts – see Ball 2021; de Saxe, Bucknovitz, and Mahoney-Mosedale 2018), a few of our participants critiqued the policy, pointing out the dissonance between its intent and its unintended implications for teachers' work.

Finally, various discussions presented across sections in this article have shown that the impact of policies on teachers' work and how school teachers interact with education policies are comparable, with notable similarities across countries both within Asia and beyond. Given the context of extensively and intensely growing processes such as policy convergences, globalisation and the prevalence of neoliberal regimes, it would be useful in future to pursue cross-country and cross-regional analyses to unpack and comprehend how education policies shape teachers' work and the enduring relevance of empirical specificities in this context more fully.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to our research participants, who gave up their time to participate in our study during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the reviewers for critically yet constructively engaging with our manuscript and for providing useful feedback.

Author contributions

Our contributions to this article were as follows: Achala Gupta (lead author, data analysis, and writing) and Xi Zhao (data collection and transcription).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Achala Gupta is a lecturer at the Southampton Education School, University of Southampton. Her research focuses on investigating educational issues sociologically. Achala has contributed to the literature on comparative and international education through her research about education delivery systems (formal and supplementary) and schooling practices in Asia, and students' aspirations and transition within higher education in Europe. She has published articles on the heterogeneity of middle-class (dis)advantage, teacher-entrepreneurialism, social legitimacy and the organisational arrangements of private tutoring in India, as well as on how students are made sense of by policymakers, staff, the media and students themselves in Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, and Spain.

Xi Zhao is a postgraduate student at the Southampton Education School, University of Southampton. Her research is centred around the influence of policy on private education in China. She employs qualitative methods in her research and has provided valuable perspectives and findings to the existing literature on the subject.

ORCID

Achala Gupta  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3172-8198>

Ethics statement

A favourable ethical opinion was secured from the University of Southampton's Ethics Committee: reference 66601.

References

- Ball, S. J. 2003. "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity." *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (2): 215–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>.
- Ball, S. J. 2007. *Education Plc: Understanding Private Sector Participation in Public Sector Education*. London: Routledge.
- Ball, S. J. 2021. *The Education Debate*. London: Policy Press.
- Ball, S. J., and A. Olmedo. 2013. "Care of the Self, Resistance and Subjectivity Under Neoliberal Governmentalities." *Critical Studies in Education* 54 (1): 85–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.740678>.
- Bray, M. 2022. "Teachers as Tutors, and Tutors as Teachers: Blurring Professional Boundaries in Changing Eras." *Teachers & Teaching* 28 (1): 64–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2021.2019700>.
- Comber, B. 2012. "Mandated Literacy Assessment and the Reorganisation of teachers' Work: Federal Policy, Local Effects." *Critical Studies in Education* 53 (2): 119–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2012.672331>.
- Cormack, P., and B. Comber. 1996. "Writing the Teacher: The South Australian Junior Primary English Teacher, 1962–1995." In *Teaching the English Subjects: Essays on English Curriculum History and Australian Schooling*, edited by B. Green and C. Beavis. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- de Saxe, J. G., S. Bucknovitz, and F. Mahoney-Mosedale. 2018. "The Deprofessionalization of Educators: An Intersectional Analysis of Neoliberalism and Education "Reform"." *Education and Urban Society* 52 (1): 51–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124518786398>.
- Duong, B., and I. Silova. 2021. "Portraits of Teachers in Neoliberal Times: Projections and Reflections Generated by Shadow Education Research." *Globalisation, Societies & Education* 19 (5): 696–710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1878013>.

- Gupta, A. 2021a. "Teacher-Entrepreneurialism: A Case of Teacher Identity Formation in Neoliberalizing Education Space in Contemporary India." *Critical Studies in Education* 62 (4): 422–438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2019.1708765>.
- Gupta, A. 2021b. "Exposing the "Shadow": An Empirical Scrutiny of the "Shadowing process" of Private Tutoring in India." *Educational Review* 75 (3): 394–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1931038>.
- Gupta, A. 2021c. "Social Legitimacy of Private Tutoring: An Investigation of Institutional and Affective Educational Practices in India." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 43 (4): 571–584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1868978>.
- Högberg, B., and J. Lindgren. 2021. "Outcome-Based Accountability Regimes in OECD Countries: A Global Policy Model?" *Comparative Education* 57 (3): 301–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2020.1849614>.
- Lawrence, L. 2022. "Conducting Cross-Cultural Qualitative Interviews with Mainland Chinese Participants During COVID: Lessons from the Field." *Qualitative Research* 22 (1): 154–165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120974157>.
- Li, H., N. Rao, and S. K. Tse. 2012. "Adapting Western Pedagogies for Chinese Literacy Instruction: Case Studies of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Singapore Preschools." *Early Education & Development* 23 (4): 603–621. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2010.536441>.
- MacDonald-Vemic, A., and J. Portelli. 2018. "Performance Power: The Impact of Neoliberalism on Social Justice educators' Ways of Speaking About Their Educational Practice." *Critical Studies in Education* 61 (3): 296–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2018.1428642>.
- MoE. 2021. The General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council Issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and the Burden of Off-Campus Training for Students in the Compulsory Education Stage. (original in Chinese, translated in English). Accessed: https://www-moe-gov-cn.translate.google/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/202107/t20210724_546576.html?_x_tr_sch=http&_x_tr_sl=zh-CN&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc.
- Sellar, S., and B. Lingard. 2013. "The OECD and Global Governance in Education." *Journal of Education Policy* 28 (5): 710–725. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2013.779791>.
- Towers, E., S. Gewirtz, M. Maguire, and E. Neumann. 2022. "A Profession in Crisis? Teachers' Responses to England's High-Stakes Accountability Reforms in Secondary Education." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 117:103778. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103778>.
- Zhang, W. 2023. *Taming the Wild Horse of Shadow Education: The Global Expansion of Private Tutoring and Regulatory Responses*. London and New York: Routledge.