

Implementation Strategies and Institutional Challenges of China's Basic Education Policy

Khadija Ally Kisanzo, Ebrima Saine, Martha N. Mgalla

Zhejiang Normal University, China

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100121>

Received: 10 November 2025; Accepted: 20 November 2025; Published: 02 December 2025

ABSTRACT

China's basic education reforms, following national plans such as the 2010-2020 National Plan and the Education Modernization 2035 strategy, have effectively increased access to education and created a system that focuses on both quality and fairness. However, this organized literature review shows a big difference between what policies intend to do and how they are actually carried out at the local level. The study says that although approaches like fiscal equalization and teacher rotation make sense, they don't work well because there are deep-seated problems within the system. These include a culture that focuses too much on exams, which stops new teaching methods from being used, not enough rewards for teachers, and the harmful side effects of policies like closing down schools in rural areas. Ongoing problems such as the hukou system and the digital divide make inequality worse. The study says that to be successful in the future, we need to go beyond just creating policies. We should focus on building stronger local abilities, making sure everyone's goals match, and using methods that fit the specific situation to ensure fair results for all.

Keywords: China Education Reform, Policy Implementation, Institutional Challenges, Educational Equity, Teacher Policy, Evaluation Reform, Double Reduction Policy.

INTRODUCTION

China's education reform has followed a long-term, strategic plan designed to improve fairness, educational standards, and modernization. The education plan from 2010 to 2020 set up a system where money is shared fairly, schools are managed at the county level, and all students can enrol, which helped more people get access to education and lessened differences between regions. Based on these accomplishments, the Education Modernization 2035 plan focused on improving teacher skills, updating how schools are assessed, and increasing accountability through governance based on performance (CPC & State Council, 2010; 2019). One significant achievement was the Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation (2020/2021), which shifted from assessments based mainly on exams to a more comprehensive approach that looks at school quality, how well teaching works, and the well-being of students. Even though there has been a move towards progress, the way things are being put into action locally is not the same everywhere. This is because some areas lack the necessary skills and resources to manage changes effectively, and there is still a strong focus on exam results in many places (CPC & State Council, 2020). Equity is still a big issue because differences between rural and urban areas, unequal money situations in different regions, and rules tied to hukou status keep people from getting good education (Guo, 2023; MOE, 2022). To fix these differences, China started moving teachers around, gave money to poorer areas, and combined some rural schools. These policies helped improve infrastructure and how teachers were spread out, but they also had some unexpected effects. For example, some minority students felt left out, and the local culture started to fade away (Hannum & Wang, 2022). Changes in teacher training, like the Free Teacher Education program, helped more teachers become available but still had problems with keeping teachers, offering good reasons to stay, and letting teachers make their own decisions at work (Zhou, 2019). Recent changes, like the Double Reduction Policy from 2021, aimed to cut down on too much homework and control the private tutoring businesses so that all students have fair access to good education. However, weak enforcement, public doubt, and continued parent requests for tutoring have made it less effective (Li & Li, 2023). Similarly, the 2022 Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards focused on competency-based learning, which highlights creativity and problem-solving skills, but

in poorer rural schools, there hasn't been much progress in putting these ideas into practice (MOE, 2022; Wei, 2022).

China has also tried using ICT in education, like live-streaming lessons and co-teaching projects. These efforts have helped rural areas get better access to education, but they still have problems with keeping them going and having enough support systems (Guo et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2024). At the same time, a shrinking population has caused fewer kids to attend preschool and some kindergartens to close, showing problems in early childhood education even though the government is spending more money on it (FT, 2025; Springer, 2020). China's education reforms show major advancements in working toward Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to provide inclusive and fair quality education, but there are still some ongoing challenges that need to be addressed. These issues involve differences between rural and urban areas, problems with supporting teachers, teaching methods that focus too much on exams, and policies that are not applied equally everywhere. Fixing these issues needs a bigger, long-term approach that improves teachers' enthusiasm, makes sure opportunities are fair for everyone, and boosts the ability of local communities to manage education effectively. More study is needed to check how well reforms work, especially when it comes to fairness, following the right policies, and keeping education improvements going over time.

Significance

This study is important for policymakers, teachers, and organizations working on international development. It offers a clear look at the big difference between strong policies and how they are actually carried out in China's basic education changes. It provides important information about the system's institutional obstacles, like the strong exam-focused culture, differences in money across regions, and reward systems that don't match what's needed to achieve fairness and good quality. By looking at evidence from many different areas of reform, the research creates a full picture of how big changes happen in China's education system. It also gives useful ideas for other countries facing similar issues like scaling up, making sure everyone has fair access, and modernizing. This helps create better, more suitable policies around the world.

Research Questions

1. What are the key strategies adopted by Chinese government to implement basic education policies since the 1986 compulsory education law?
2. What institutional challenges hinder the effective implementation of basic education policies in less-developed provinces?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative, desk-based approach and conducted a systematic literature review. The SLR method was chosen because it's thorough and clear, offering a structured way to find, assess, and combine existing research. This helps create a detailed understanding of policy structures, challenges within institutions, and methods used to implement policies in China's basic education system (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). This method works best when there's a lot of written information available, especially for questions about rules or government policies.

Sources and Procedures

The research used secondary data from various sources to make sure the analysis was both comprehensive and detailed.

Data Sources included:

1. **Academic Literature:** Articles published in journals that have been reviewed by experts, books written by scholars, and papers presented at academic conferences that offer both theoretical ideas and research-based findings.
2. **Official documents:** Official documents include policy directions, statistical information, and reports from government agencies, especially the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE, 2023).

3. International Publications: Comparative studies and reports from global organizations like UNESCO (2023), the OECD (2023), and the World Bank (2023).

A clear and fair way was used to collect the data. Keyword searches for terms like "China Basic Education Policy," "education policy implementation in China," and "institutional challenges in education reform" were done on academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar, as well as the official websites of related organizations.

Inclusion And Exclusion

Nine clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to keep the focus and ensure relevance. The review looked at documents from 2010 up to 2023 to make sure the analysis shows the latest changes and improvements. Non-peer-reviewed articles, opinion pieces, and works published before 2010 were not included, following the standard guidelines for systematic literature reviews as outlined by Booth et al. in 2016.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke in 2006. This process involved several stages:

1. Familiarization involves reading the chosen materials carefully and going through them again to understand them better.
2. Coding involves systematically labelling important ideas, main topics, and repeated problems found throughout the dataset.
3. Theme Development: Finding and grouping similar codes together to form larger, more meaningful themes that answer the research questions.
4. Reviewing, figuring out, and giving names to the themes to make sure they correctly show what the data means.
5. Reporting involves putting together the main themes into a clear and logical story that carefully examines and combines the evidence.

SLR Component	Description
Search Terms	"China basic education policy", "education policy implementation in China", "institutional challenges in education reform", and related keyword combinations.
Databases and Sources	Academic databases: JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar. Official/government sites: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE). International organizations: UNESCO, OECD, World Bank.
Inclusion Criteria	Publications from 2010–2023; peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and conference papers; official policy documents and statistical reports from MOE; comparative and analytical reports from international organizations; studies directly addressing basic education policy structures, implementation, and institutional challenges in China.
Exclusion Criteria	Documents published before 2010; non-peer-reviewed materials (e.g., opinion pieces, blogs, newspaper articles); sources not focused on China's basic education or not related to policy/implementation/institutional issues; duplicate records.
Thematic Analysis Familiarization	Repeated, careful reading of all included documents to gain an in-depth understanding of policy frameworks, implementation processes, and institutional contexts.
Thematic Analysis Coding	Systematic labelling of key ideas, recurring concepts, and challenges (e.g., governance structures, resource gaps, teacher capacity, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms).
Thematic Analysis Theme Development	Grouping similar codes into broader themes (e.g., "policy design and structure", "implementation mechanisms", "institutional barriers", "support and capacity-building

	strategies”).
Thematic Analysis Reviewing and Naming Themes	Refining, merging, or separating themes; checking that each theme accurately represents the underlying coded data; assigning clear, descriptive names to each theme.
Thematic Analysis Reporting	Organizing the final themes into a coherent narrative that explains how China’s basic education policies are structured, how they are implemented, what institutional challenges arise, and how different studies address these issues.

Validity and Reliability

To improve the study's trustworthiness, various methods were used. Triangulation was important because the results were supported by different kinds of sources, like academic, government, and international ones, to reduce the chance of bias. Focusing on peer-reviewed articles and official documents helped ensure strict academic and institutional standards. All steps in gathering and analyzing the data were carefully written down to make sure everything was clear and could be repeated later. The study also got help from informal peer review, where coworkers gave feedback on choosing sources and explaining findings, which made the conclusions more reliable (Flick, 2018). 9. Since the study is based entirely on desk research and uses secondary data, there was no direct contact with human participants, which means there were no risks related to consent or confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical responsibility was kept by following academic rules closely: every source was properly cited, copyright laws were followed, and plagiarism was carefully avoided. To keep things honest and meet academic standards, it was important to clearly share how the research was done and what was found (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

LIMITATIONS

The study recognizes some limitations that come with its design. Its dependence on secondary data means the analysis is based on the accuracy, coverage, and possible biases found in already published sources, rather than on original, direct evidence collected through research. One major challenge was the language difference; since many key policy documents are in Mandarin, the analysis mostly used English sources, which might reduce access to detailed local viewpoints. Institutional reports from organizations such as UNESCO or the World Bank might present issues in a way that supports their own goals and priorities. Although there are some limits, using multiple sources and carefully analyzing the information helps reduce their effect on the study's main findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

China's Long Reform Arc: Strategic Frameworks, Central Steering, and Evaluation Reform

A key part of China's basic education reform is using a step-by-step, top-level design approach to make sure that local actions match the country's main goals. Since the 2010–2020 National Plan for Education Reform and Development, various frameworks have aimed to provide "balanced and high-quality" compulsory education, with county-level administration acting as the main system (CPC & State Council, 2010). The Ministry of Education (MOE, 2022, 2023) says that compulsory education now includes more than 150 million students and 10 million teachers. This is made possible through special programs like building schools in rural areas, giving out free textbooks, and helping students who live away from home by providing financial support. In 2019 and 2020, Kec035 and the Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation moved forward with these goals by changing the focus from just exam results to a broader range of indicators that measure both learning and well-being (CPC & State Council, 2019, 2020; Yan & Yang, 2021). However, studies show that local officials still deal with stress from tough exams and what parents want, which leads to uneven how policies are carried out (Huang, Liu, & Zhang, 2024).

Equity Finance, County Governance, and School Network Restructuring

China's efforts to reform its education system have focused on using money transfers from the government and managing schools at the county level to reduce differences between urban and rural areas (Guo, 2023). County governments act as the basic units for ensuring fairness in governance. They are responsible for assigning teachers, managing school facilities, and creating maps that show how schools are spread out. Even though some progress has been made in reducing differences between provinces, inequality still exists within counties because of differences in how well local governments can manage and handle money (Guo, 2024). School consolidation, also called school mapping, aims to make the best use of resources by combining smaller rural schools into bigger ones. Research shows that this situation often leads to long travel times, stress from crowded places, and feeling out of place culturally for kids from rural areas and ethnic minorities (Hannum & Wang, 2022; Hannum, An, & Wang, 2022). These results show that we need extra efforts like helping with travel costs, teaching in both languages, and getting people in the community involved to make sure everyone has fair chances.

Teacher Workforce, Rotation, and Incentive Challenges

Teacher policy continues to be a key part of China's education reforms. The Free Teacher Education (FTE) program has helped increase the number of teachers since the 1970s (Zhou, 2019), and new policies about teacher rotation and moving them around are trying to fix differences in the quality of teaching. Studies from Liaoning Province show that to make rotation work well, there need to be helpful support things like housing help, chances for promotion, and rewards for career growth. These supports help people stay in their jobs longer (Liao, 2017; Li, 2023; Zhongquan, 2024). On the other hand, weak incentives lead to higher staff turnover and resistance (Cheng, 2020). Teacher appraisal changes connected to the 2020 evaluation system are slowly moving the focus to how well teachers teach and how much students are involved in class, but strong traditions that value exams above all else are still making it hard to change teaching methods (Li, 2024).

Curriculum Modernization, Digitalization, and Systemic Constraints

The 2022 Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards represent a major change in education, focusing more on students' abilities to ask questions, think critically, and be creative (MOE, 2022). This modern approach to teaching is also supported by a digital transformation plan called Education Informatization 2.0. This plan helps create smart school environments and ensures fair access to digital learning through initiatives such as live-streamed classes and the use of two teachers working together in the same classroom (Wang & Li, 2022; Guo, Xu, & Wang, 2022; Sun, Liu, & Ma, 2024). However, putting these parallel reforms into action runs up against major system challenges. One major issue is the ongoing focus on exam-based methods, especially the gaokao and selective school admissions, which limit new teaching approaches and encourage memorization instead of real understanding (OECD, 2016). Additionally, achieving success is made harder because not everyone has equal access to the important help they need. In rural areas, teachers often don't get enough training for the new curriculum, there aren't enough learning materials available, and the technology systems are not reliable (Wei, 2022; Luo, 2023). The long-term success of digital projects depends on having enough funding over time and involving teachers from the local area in a real way, which is not always the case (Lin, Chen, & Zhang, 2024). So, unless these basic problems are solved, the ability of updating the curriculum and using digital tools to provide fair and good education won't be very strong.

Shadow Education, Demographic Shifts, and Systemic Adaptation

The 2021 Double Reduction policy was introduced to reduce students' workload and control the profit-driven tutoring industry (CPC & State Council, 2021), and this happens at the same time as major changes in population trends are affecting early childhood education. Although the policy has reduced big tutoring companies, small tutoring groups are still around because parents remain worried about getting their kids into good schools (Li & Li, 2023; Ding & Wu, 2024). How well this crackdown works also depends on how strictly it's enforced in different areas and the quality of after-school programs available to the public (Zhang, Chen, & Sun, 2023). At the same time, a shrinking number of students is changing the way education is shaped. A 25% decrease in preschool enrollments between 2020 and 2024 caused more than 41,000 kindergartens to close,

according to the Financial Times in 2025. This shrinking population offers a chance to shift focus from increasing numbers to improving quality, but there are still big challenges in the system that make it hard to do so. Persistent shortages of qualified teachers and poor rural facilities keep preventing fair access to quality early childhood education (Springer, 2020; MOE, 2022). These similar problems show how complicated it is for rules and population changes to work together, so we need flexible approaches that deal with both the private education that happens outside official systems and the way the public education system is changing over time.

Inclusion Challenges and Cross-Cutting Institutional Barriers

Even though there are policies aimed at making education accessible to everyone, many students who are already at a disadvantage still face big challenges in getting included, showing that there are deep problems within the system itself. Migrant children often struggle to get into schools because of the hukou system and decisions made by local officials (Chen, 2023; Li, 2024). At the same time, children who stay behind in their hometowns face emotional and academic challenges and have access to very few support programs (UNICEF China, 2024; Wikipedia, 2025). Children with disabilities face being left out because schools often don't have the right tools, trained staff, or real effort to provide inclusive education, even though there are laws that require it (Human Rights Watch, 2013). These particular problems show that there are bigger, widespread issues within the systems in place. The hukou system shows how structural policies can hurt fairness, and the lack of support for disabled students highlights ongoing money shortages that limit what local areas can do. These barriers are connected to other bigger problems in the system, like a strong focus on exams that stops new teaching methods from being used, reward systems for teachers that don't stop them from leaving, and technology projects that don't work well unless the local community takes charge. To truly realize the potential of China's education reforms, it's important to fix these institutional issues by improving how decisions are made and held accountable, and by better understanding and working with the cultural and social factors that influence education.

DISCUSSIONS

This study reveals that China's basic education reforms operate within a complex "implementation ecosystem," where ambitious, centrally directed policies interact with persistent local-level challenges. Key initiatives, such as the 2010–2020 National Plan for Education and the 2035 Education Modernization initiative, aim to enhance quality, equity, and modernization nationwide. However, the study identifies an "implementation paradox": the more comprehensive and sophisticated the policy, the greater the likelihood of encountering barriers during implementation. These barriers stem from variations in local contexts, including differences in resources, teacher capacity, administrative expertise, and socio-economic conditions. As a result, even well-designed national policies may produce uneven outcomes, requiring local adaptation and interpretation. This tension highlights that policy implementation is not linear but a negotiation between national ambitions and local realities. Addressing these challenges necessitates context-sensitive strategies, capacity-building, and flexible support to ensure reforms achieve their intended impact across diverse regions. To make sense of this paradox, our findings identify three major, interlocking challenges within the ecosystem:

Evaluation Gravity

Despite the progressive aims of China's recent education policies and curriculum reforms, which emphasize twenty-first-century competencies, critical thinking, and holistic student development most notably articulated in the Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards (2022 edition) classroom practices continue to be heavily shaped by high-stakes examinations. This phenomenon, often referred to as "evaluation gravity," reflects the strong pull of national exams, particularly the gaokao, on teaching and learning priorities. Even when curricula promote inquiry-based learning, creativity, and broader skill development, teachers and students are compelled to prioritize exam preparation to secure academic advancement and social mobility. Consequently, pedagogical innovations and reform ideals are frequently subordinated to test-oriented objectives. This tension between the aspirational goals of policy and the practical demands of the evaluation system exemplifies a persistent challenge in China's education reforms. Addressing evaluation gravity requires systemic adjustments to

assessment practices, balancing the need for accountability with the promotion of holistic competencies and authentic learning experiences.

Institutional Inequality and Efficiency-Equity Trade-offs

China's education reforms have sought to balance standardization and decentralization, for instance by delegating significant implementation responsibilities to county-level governance structures. These measures have contributed to notable progress in reducing broad regional disparities in educational access and quality. However, persistent institutional inequalities particularly in resources, infrastructure, and staffing continue to create significant challenges, with rural and under-resourced areas disproportionately affected compared to urban centers. Policies such as school consolidation illustrate the classic efficiency-equity trade-off inherent in reform efforts. Consolidation can enhance efficiency by optimizing resource use, improving school management, and expanding access to better facilities. Yet, without adequate support mechanisms for local contexts, these policies may inadvertently exacerbate inequities, for example by increasing travel distances for students, reducing local school autonomy, or concentrating advantages in already better-resourced areas. This tension underscores that achieving both efficiency and equity in educational reform requires careful policy design, context-sensitive implementation, and sustained local support to mitigate unintended consequences.

Policy Friction and Misaligned Goals

China's education reforms often encounter significant "policy friction," arising when universal, centrally mandated policies interact with diverse local traditions, institutional norms, and practical constraints. For instance, hukou-based residency regulations continue to restrict the access of migrant children to local schools, limiting the reach of national education policies and perpetuating inequities. Similarly, digital education initiatives face uneven adoption, particularly in rural or under-resourced regions where infrastructure is inadequate and teachers lack sufficient training or technological readiness. Standardized teacher evaluation and rotation programs demonstrate positive outcomes only when they resonate with local motivations, professional norms, and existing school cultures, highlighting the importance of contextual alignment. Even widely publicized policies targeting private tutoring, such as the Double Reduction policy, reveal the challenges of top-down reform in the face of entrenched societal expectations and parental pressures. These examples underscore that effective policy implementation requires careful negotiation between national objectives and local realities, with flexibility, support, and adaptation to reduce misalignment and unintended consequences.

CONCLUSION

China's basic education reforms over the past decade have made significant strides in expanding access, raising quality, and modernizing the system for millions of students and teachers, largely through strategic policy frameworks, central steering, targeted financing, and ongoing curriculum and technology initiatives. Nonetheless, this study reveals that the success of such reforms is shaped by a complex "implementation ecosystem" where national ambitions meet diverse and uneven local realities. The "implementation paradox" that greater policy sophistication often encounters more significant barriers remains persistent: deep-rooted exam pressures, institutional inequalities, misaligned stakeholder goals, and friction between central directives and community needs continue to challenge the realization of reform objectives. Progress in equity financing and county-level governance has narrowed provincial gaps but left lingering disparities within counties, requiring more tailored and sustained local support. Teacher workforce improvements, curriculum modernization, and digitalization efforts signal forward movement, yet their impact is unevenly felt: technology and training are distributed inequitably, educational resources remain strained in rural and minority areas, and new pedagogical approaches struggle under traditional exam-oriented expectations. Meanwhile, the changing landscape created by the Double Reduction policy, demographic shifts, and inclusion challenges especially for migrant and left-behind children underscore how system adaptation must be ongoing and context-responsive.

Addressing these complex challenges demands not just further policy innovation but a renewed commitment to adaptive implementation and genuine equity. For reforms to achieve their potential, stakeholders must align curriculum, assessment, and teacher support, transition towards holistic, competency-based evaluation, and

ensure technology access is coupled with robust professional development. Resource allocation models and support systems should be refined to reflect community needs within counties, not just between them, and governance reforms must link education financing directly to actual enrollment, including migrant children a step essential for inclusivity and long-term quality. Above all, capacity building, accountability, and flexible adaptation must be at the core of future efforts, balancing central guidance with local agency and ensuring that reforms are lived out in classrooms, not just designed in policy documents. By learning from these experiences and targeting persistent gaps, China can continue to steer its education system towards greater fairness, effectiveness, and resilience for a changing society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To make China's basic education reforms more effective, policymakers should focus on actionable strategies that bridge national policy with local realities. First, capacity building at the local level should be guided by clear, measurable targets such as increasing the percentage of teachers who receive annual professional training, establishing digital learning coordinators in every county, and regularly reporting progress on teacher-student ratios and technology access. Incentivizing districts that meet or exceed these benchmarks through results-based rewards can drive improvement. Reforms should also be more culturally and regionally responsive by providing targeted, data-driven support for rural and minority communities. This involves distributing resources using funding formulas that account for local disadvantages, prioritizing equity in both teacher allocation and infrastructure, and ensuring that curriculum updates, assessment changes, and teacher development programs are implemented in a tightly aligned, integrated manner. Shifting the focus of assessments from rote knowledge to deeper thinking skills by introducing and tracking participation in project-based evaluations will encourage more creative and meaningful teaching practices. Digitalization efforts must be supported with sufficient training and resources, with progress measured by technology readiness indexes and student device access, to ensure equitable uptake across all regions.

To address longstanding inclusion and demographic challenges, the government should accelerate hukou reform and update educational funding mechanisms so that financing directly follows students, including migrants, wherever they enroll. This will require new governance accountability, ensuring localities that receive these funds are held to high standards for transparency and reporting. At the same time, greater investment in early childhood education with a national enrollment target for quality public preschools can help close foundational gaps. Finally, adaptive planning using real-time demographic and resource data will enable more efficient, need-based allocation of educational support amidst ongoing social changes. By implementing these linked and measurable recommendations, China's education reforms will be better positioned to not only meet ambitious national targets, but also deliver genuine, equitable improvements in local classroom experiences and outcomes.

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