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Chinese private education reform
through the lens of the capability approach

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Faculty of Education – University of Cambridge
Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.
Abstract

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This thesis seeks to understand how private education reform in China was interpreted and implemented at the school level. Using the capability approach as a conceptual framework, this research first argues that Chinese private education reform policies can be conceived of as capability-enhancing with the aim to promote four types of education capabilities: practical capabilities, cross-cultural capabilities, citizenship capabilities, and 21st century capabilities. Practical capabilities are defined as freedoms to pursue sports, arts, crafts, and industry-related education opportunities. Cross-cultural capabilities involve the freedom to access international curricula, language education, and knowledge about foreign cultures. Citizenship capabilities refer to the freedoms to be a Chinese citizen, be patriotic and knowledgeable about traditional Chinese culture and core socialist values. Finally, 21st century capabilities include the freedoms to develop critical thinking, communication, collaboration, leadership, independence, and innovation skills.

This thesis applies the tools of policy instruments framework to explore how the 50 key private education reform policy documents targeted these capabilities at the national level using inducements, mandates, capacity-building, system-changing and hortatory policy instruments. Subsequently, a multi-site multi-method qualitative approach is employed to trace policy interpretation and implementation down to the level of 23 private schools visited during fieldwork. Interview and observational data are analysed through the lens of the capability approach to assess how the four groups of capabilities were understood and interpreted by the local authorities and private school leadership in the process of private education reform implementation. The thesis then argues that reform implementation process at the case level was an outcome of a dynamic interaction among the actors of policy implementation network within the context of local education market conditions. Three actor-based conversion factors are distinguished, which are parental demand, local policy priorities and school leadership synergy. The interactions among them are explored to argue that the alignment or misalignment of these conversion factors could promote or restrict target capability formation in selected case-schools, followed by the examination of context-based conversion factors and their impact on policy implementation network.
Discussion argues that the separation of conversion factors without addressing how they interact with each other oversimplifies the policy implementation context and calls for a deeper understanding of these interactions, emphasizing the importance of accounting for real-world complexities and shifting the focus from abstract justice ideals to evaluating policies based on their impact on individual capabilities, integrating values and personal agency. The thesis concludes with a discussion of how the findings relate to the issues of education policy decentralisation, experimentation, and accountability within policy implementation networks. It is argued that the role of private education within the socialist education system of China has been the provision of diversified education opportunities to supplement state education provision and offer niche education pathways to suit the diversified needs of the Chinese population.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my students.

Be stubborn
When the odds are against you,
And it seems you lack the talent, riches or intelligence.
When you give it your best and still fail,
Be stubborn.
Not for the sake of blind ambition
Or shallow pride.
But to stand in awe at the magnificent sight
Of boundless possibility

不屈不挠
当你面对万千艰难险阻，
当你觉得自己缺乏才华、财富或智慧，
当你即使已然全力以赴却依旧失败，
仍然不屈不挠
这不是出于盲目的野心，
也不是为了肤浅的自尊，
而是为了站在辽阔天地，
敬畏生命的无限可能

(Translated by Yiren Zhang)
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Introduction

With the growing demand for private education and an increasing number of private schools worldwide (Singh and Bangay, 2014; Verger et al., 2016), it is often claimed that current education systems and methods are outdated (Selko, 2016; Rasskazova et al., 2020) and no longer suitable for the realities of the 21st century (World Bank, 2019; OECD, 2020; Sage and Matteucci, 2022). Specifically, this means that the economies of many countries became linked by globalisation trends and technological development (Rasskazova et al., 2020), routine tasks are being taken over by machines (Matteucci and Sage, 2019; Sage and Matteucci, 2022) and digital infrastructure is rapidly expanding (World Bank, 2019). With this economic and technological development comes the need for schools to equip students with digital literacy and resilience (OECD, 2020), problem-solving and collaboration abilities (Bell, 2010), as well as soft skills for peaceful coexistence in increasingly racially, culturally, and linguistically mixed societies (Sage, 2020). Ball and Collet (2022, p.988) even went as far as claiming that the institution of a school as it exists nowadays is “a block, an obstacle, an inhibition to freedom and to ‘learning’”, impossible to reconcile with critical thinking, well-being, or inclusion (ibid, p.990).

Where rote learning and memorisation remain central in schools (Schleicher, 2020), it is said to fail to prepare student for high-skilled employment (ILO, 2011) and a high degree of uncertainty which requires the ability to think critically and to collaborate rather than the skill to retain and recall information (Sage and Matteucci, 2022). This often results in the lack of necessary leadership, negotiation, strategy, and technical skills among school and even university graduates (Kuczera, Field, and Windisch, 2016; Webber, 2019). Public education, in particular, has been criticised in such a way. Sir Ken Robinson (2010) argued that “public schools were not only created in the interests of industrialism—they were created in the image of industrialism. In many ways, they reflect the factory culture they were designed to support. ... Schools divide the curriculum into specialist segments: some teachers install math in the students, and others install history. They arrange the day into standard units of time, marked out by the ringing of bells, much like a factory announcing the beginning of the workday and the end of breaks”. If students are made used to strict rules and schedules suitable for an industrial society with mandated job roles and static skill set requirements, it is argued to be insufficient for the demands of the modern society where atypical and diverse tasks may require creative solutions (Rasskazova et al., 2020). While there has been an increased interest in the role private education could play in the transformation of education systems worldwide,
major concerns have also been raised about the role private education may play in promoting social injustice.

There appears to be a juxtaposition of the “private” and “public” in much of social justice education research. Private schools are said to be undermining education equity and contradicting the notion of education as a basic human right (Verger et al., 2016; Neves et al., 2017; Bayram, 2018) while public education is seen as “a great equaliser” providing opportunities to disadvantaged youth (Ndimande and Lubienski, 2017, p.3). According to Inglis (2023, p.4), two types of research questions permeate the literature on private education research: “those who assess claims of equity and quality in specific schools and programs that target poor children … and those who question the entire premise of private education and the motives of foundations and corporations”. Bayram (2018, p.346) explained that private education being “a commodity that can be bought and sold” means it is not a right but a privilege. It is then contrasted with public education (Crawfurd and Hares, 2021; Inglis, 2023) which is argued to provide “the only systematic means of economic redistribution in education” (Power and Taylor, 2013, p.471) as opposed to private schools which challenge the creation of fair, socially just, and high-quality education systems accessible to all children (Espindola, 2019) by sustaining a “cycle of privilege” (Green and Kynaston, p.20). However, such straightforward division between the roles private and public schools play in promoting or restricting social justice in education is, at best, a misguided oversimplification.

Ball (2007, p.15) described the conventional separation into “public” and “private” education in addressing the issues of inequalities as “lazy binaries”. He argued that “a blanket defence of the public sector, as it is or was, over and against the destructive inroads of privatisation, is untenable” (Ball, 2007, p.187) as it is built on the misguided notion that public schools always worked fairly and in the interests of all children. Power and Taylor (2013, p.464) further explained that such divisions often stemmed from aligning private schools with the market and public schools with the state, with social justice “commonly seen as the prerogative of the public sphere”. As a result, the discourse about social justice in education has consistently born the risk of deteriorating “into vitriolic debate about which sector has the more effective model” (Scanlan, 2010, p.592) revealing the “moral and political positions that permeate the critical discourse” (Inglis, 2023, p.4). Furthermore, Hove and Matashu (2021, p.48) argued that the “old segmentations of elite versus mass education, private versus public education” have nowadays evolved into far more complicated phenomena as Francis, Mills and Lupton (2017,
p.415) drew attention to “the role of public education systems in reproducing and legitimising inequity”. Thus, the nature of private education and its relationship with the public domain must be considered in its contextual, historical, and socioeconomic complexity prior to making any claims about the role private schools could play in socially just education systems if, indeed, any sweeping generalisations could even be made with any reasonable degree of confidence. This is not only because what is seen as public education or private education is “historically specific, culturally contingent, and ideologically loaded” (Power and Taylor, 2013, p.464) but also due to the sheer complexity in which private actors may be engaged education (Levin et al., 2013, p.516).

First, the borders between private and public education provision may often be blurred by contextual nuances of a particular time and place. As Green (2020, p.519) pointed out, “privately managed schools may be funded largely by the government; some state schools, charging no fees, are privately managed”. Power and Taylor (2013, p.466) further argued that “the various public-private partnerships, the rise of educational philanthropy and the involvement of voluntary and not-for-profit organisations in education have all made any clear demarcation between what counts as public and what counts as private difficult to sustain”. This means that when it comes to the issues of social justice, seeing private and public schools as simple opposites engaged in a zero-sum game is not only no longer descriptively adequate but also risks promulgating potentially misleading views of “an expansion of the private sphere that poses a threat to the public sphere” (Moeller, 2021, p.233). For instance, Fraser (2009) claimed that both public and private schools may be responsible for resource redistribution through taxation, philanthropy, or sponsorships, while at the same time reinforcing maldistribution by means of different funding regimes and parental investment. In addition, Levin et al. (2013, p.516) have shown that state schools not only purchase services from private education, including school management, but also sometimes receive funding from private sources. According to Francis and Mills (2012, p.583), the ideological binaries of private and public education “have rapidly been rendered archaic and often hypocritical as private funding and arrangements characterise aspects of all our institutions.” Under these circumstances, the juxtaposition of private and public to discuss the issues of social justice in education research no longer appears adequate.

Second, there is little evidence that private education delivers educational outcomes dramatically different from the public sector. It has been shown that it is not the private nature
of the school that affects children’s outcomes but rather the mix of contextual factors, such as “race, gender and social class” (Francis and Mills, 2012, p.577), parental occupation and migration background (UNICEF, 2018) as well as the type of families pursuing educational opportunities in any particular school (Farquharson, McNally and Tahir, 2022). A study by Somers, McEwan and Willms (2004) evaluated the relative effectiveness of public versus private education across ten South American countries to conclude that the difference in student achievement within the two sectors has been misinterpreted in previous studies as the impact of private schooling while in fact it is likely to simply reflect peer group characteristics in particular schools. Pianta and Ansari (2018) also found that, when sociodemographic characteristics are considered, there is no advantage of attending a private school in terms of academic, social or psychological attainment of students. A similar conclusion was reached by Gruijters, Alcott and Rose (2021) who argued that, when family backgrounds are evaluated, the perceived positive effect of private schooling is unnoticeable in Pakistan and reduced to about a quarter of a standard deviation in India, Kenya, and Uganda. With this in mind, it can be concluded that “the biggest predictors of educational disadvantage relate to people, not places” (Farquharson, McNally and Tahir, 2022, p.3), which follows the argument of Francis and Mills (2012, p.579) who suggested that schools “cannot compensate for the many injustices that occur within the broader society”. Furthermore, private, as well as public education were both argued to be susceptible to corruption, rent-seeking behaviour, and mismanagement, which compromises the “quality” of education opportunities schools may provide (Harma, 2019; Salmi, 2000). Therefore, it is also possible to follow the lines of argument by Ball and Collet (2022) and Crozier and Davies (2007) who claim that all modern schools are, in fact, a lost cause in terms of education equity as institutions where existing inequalities are simply verified.

Finally, not all private schools are the same. Green (2020, p.520) warns against any general conclusions about the effects of private schooling on children’s outcomes due to the “diversity of reasons which are not common across countries”, including the degree of public funding received by private schools, the availability of education resources, and the extent of state engagement in private school governance. While in some cases private education is said to be a profit-oriented enterprise (Hogan and Thompson, 2020), setting low-income students up for failure (Lipman, 2011) by perpetuating existing education inequalities (Ball, 2003; Bayram, 2018), Ball (2007, p.187) also argued that “it is difficult to deny that some education businesses do some things well” and that “some kinds of private sector participation are more defensible
than others”. For example, Herro and Obeng-Odoom (2019) critiqued scholars for restricting their analysis to the “business-model” of capitalism overlooking philanthropies with sincere interest in addressing social inequalities. Alternatively, Scanlan, (2010, p.574) drew attention to Catholic private schools that “are both more affordable and more likely to be located in urban areas with higher concentrations of traditionally marginalized students”. There has been evidence of private schools being affordable to lower classes in India (Tooley and Dixon, 2006), offering scholarships and free places to the poorest while also providing education opportunities (ibid, p.458). Green (2020, p.520) also highlighted the differences between private schools in Britain, France, and Germany by pointing out that French private school typically charge much lower fees while German private education is “far-from-socially-exclusive”. Indeed, private education is diverse and what constitutes a private school in England may not necessarily be reflected by the realities of an education market elsewhere. Henseke et al. (2021, p.2) pointed out how distinctive British private education is due to its close ties to positions of power within the political and business elites in the UK (Reeves et al., 2017; Green and Kynaston, 2019) and making luxury a part of school experience (Green and Kynaston, 2019, p.117). These characteristics are not necessarily transferable to private education markets globally.

Thus, conceptualisation of the role that private schools may play in society in terms of education equity needs to depart from the binary assessment of private versus public education provision and ask a more relevant question: in the world where countries, cultures and societies are increasingly connected by globalisation and technological progress, how can social justice be universally defined and whose interests are counted when scholars determine what is socially just? Injustices tend to be more straightforwardly conceptualised. For instance, according to Gandolfi and Mills (2022, p.15), social injustice occurs from “economic injustices grounded in poverty; cultural injustices shaped by racism, colonialism and misogyny; and political injustices, where people are denied a voice in key decisions impacting upon them”. However, Francis and Mills (2012, p.578-579) pointed out that sociological research has thus far failed to clearly conceptualise the principles of socially just education systems or propose comprehensive alternatives to the widely discussed patterns of inequality reproduction. While the term “social justice” is often used in education research (Levin et al., 2013, p.514), its analysis relies heavily on the definition and subjective judgements on the matter (Rawls and Kelly, 2001). Fraser (2009, p.3) draws attention to the radical heterogeneity of this discourse where “present-day claims for justice routinely run up against counterclaims whose underlying
ontological assumptions they do not share”. This tends to arise from “different philosophical positions and connected interests” (Francis, Mills and Lupton, 2017, p.417) that academics concerned with social justice chose to adopt. Furthermore, there is a tendency to prioritise educational distribution over recognition and outputs over experiences (ibid, p.425). As a result, the question of whose interests should count and how the bounds of social justice in education are to be determined creates an obstacle to any straightforward claim regarding the role of private education.

One way to address this challenge is to acknowledge the existence of different dimensions and interpretations of social justice in education and the fact that the implications of private engagement in education are neither one-dimensional nor uni-directional (Power and Taylor, p.465). For example, Levin (2013, p.517) distinguished four aspects of evaluating the role of private education from the perspective of social justice: freedom of choice, productive efficiency, issues of equity and social cohesion. Freedom of choice is self-explanatory, productive efficiency refers to “the use of social resources in their most efficacious way”, equity addresses “fairness in the distribution of educational resources and outcomes” and social cohesion incorporates the issues of acceptance and inclusive participation in education for all (ibid). Fraser (2009), on the other hand, determined three different lenses of approaching social justice in education: economics of redistribution, cultural recognition, and politics of representation, which concern the ways resources are distributed, how the interests of different groups are being considered and to what extent people have a say in making decisions that affect them. Further, Morwenna Griffiths (as quoted in Francis and Mills, 2012, p.581) argued that a socially just society is dependent on people’s ability to “find a good life” which both has value and is valued by others, which means the integral value of educational experiences must not be overlooked in social justice research. Raewyn Connell (as quoted in Francis and Mills, 2012, p.582) then argued for the importance of evaluating not only the distribution of education but also its nature and content with regard to determining what is socially just. Thus, the focus on educational outcomes as the sole measure of socially just education appears to be too narrow to adequately address the plurality of dimensions of social justice (Francis and Mills, 2012) and to take into consideration that “some strategies to address matters of injustice may well contribute to greater injustices” (Francis, Mills and Lupton, 2017, p.426). With this in mind, several approaches to social justice must be considered to reach the necessary degree of depth in understanding the purpose of private education and further contextualise this research.
First, when it comes to economics of redistribution, the implications of private funding for social justice are “at best, patchy” (Power and Taylor, 2013, p.471). According to Fraser (2009), economic injustice in education is rooted in maldistribution of resources, i.e. children of disadvantaged families are also more likely to go to poorly equipped schools. There is a lot of evidence in literature that it is, indeed, the case. For example, Crawfurd and Hares (2021) argued that even private schools in rural areas often remain unaffordable to the poor, favouring instead families with the ability to pay. They conducted an extensive literature review to provide an update for the work of Ashley et al. (2014), considering the effectiveness of public-private partnerships and private school chains in India, Pakistan, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Peru. The study concluded that private education reinforces economic inequalities in education in these contexts by favouring rich over poor and urban over rural populations. Edwards and Means (2019) also argued that low-fee private schools were too expensive for many families with limited incomes in Zambia. Thus, as Inglis (2023, p.4) accurately summarized, private schools usually “do not serve the interests of most economically and socially disadvantaged children in the Global South”. This is because private education is a market mechanism and, according to Ball (2007, p.188) “markets are by their nature unstable and not all businesses are socially responsible”. This means that “the bottom line for business is ultimately profit” (Ball, 2007, p.188) and private education is not equipped to narrow the resource gap between those with the money to invest in their child’s education and those struggling to make ends meet. Thus, from the perspective of resource redistribution dimension of social justice, market-based education provision is, by nature, unequal.

Second, another dimension of social justice in education is “the responsiveness of the education system to family educational goals” (Levin et al., 2013, p.515), similar to what Fraser (2009) calls politics of representation or “the capacity to influence public debate and authoritative decision-making” (Fraser, 2005). Ultimately, it is the question of whether people have agency over their education or are they subjected to the consequences of decisions which they did not make. As Levin et al. (2013, p.529) further explained, “the purpose of choice, and allowing private schools to enter the market, is to match schools with the preferences of families based upon their values, beliefs, personal goals and perceived educational needs” which may overlap with political philosophies, religious beliefs, and ethnicities of the students. Facilitating parental choice is said to decrease “the injustice of political exclusion from the decision-making process” (Power and Taylor, 2013, p.475), given that “restricting choice and access can worsen inequality and overall welfare” (Hanushek, Sarpça and Yilmaz, 2011, p.1). While it is true that
pursuing educational pathways of perceived individual value by means of private education remains an unrealistic choice to many disadvantaged families, if such choice was taken away from the parents, who, and with what intentions, would get the power to decide what education opportunities a culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse population of children in any given society has the freedom to pursue?

As Francis, Mills and Lupton (2017, p.423) pointed out, “freedom to make individual choices, and to have distinctions and preferences recognised, is often in tension with the utilitarian needs of the collective”. This is not only because of the “limits to the state’s ability to provide sufficient ‘types’ of educational provision to fully represent every discrete aspect of human expression” (ibid) but also because states do not always act in the best interests of individuals. Francis and Mills (2012, p.582) quoted Morwenna Griffiths on this subject in saying that “it is not the place of policy to define what a good life is”. Indeed, sacrificing individuals’ freedoms to exercise agency over their education in exchange for presumably equal outcomes suggests the memory of the Soviet education system which made private engagement in schooling illegal, effectively enforcing the state monopoly to determine what Soviet children were learning, how they were learning it and whose interpretations were being taught in schools. Social inequalities were never truly eradicated in the Soviet Union (Yanowitch and Robertson, 1977; Ewing, 2010), but the public school system was set up to ensure that all children were being equally taught the same values, beliefs and knowledge specified by the government as “an unquestioned dogma” (Ewing, 2006, p.517). Obviously, not all public education systems are being taken advantage of in this manner, but it provides an illustrative example of how the absence of parental choice in education has the potential to create a fruitful environment for unaccountable state propaganda.

On the other hand, it has been argued that “neoliberal strategies of choice and competition exacerbated the racial bias within the education system” (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 5) and that “different strokes for different folks schooling risks further social segregation” (Francis, Mills and Lupton, 2017, p.423). For instance, in the United States, increasing homogeneity in private school enrolment was claimed to exacerbate stratification (Scanlan, 2010, p.573). However, Crawfurd and Hares (2021, p.7) argued that “there is little evidence on whether the emergence of private schools increases overall segregation between all schools” and that “segregation can be just as severe in an entirely public system as an entirely private one, due for example to strong residential sorting if rich children attend different public schools to poor children”.

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Hanushek, Sarpça and Yılmaz (2011) claimed that private school choice may reduce school segregation in some circumstances while Joshi (2020) and Bagde et al. (2022) found no negative spillover effects from the growth of demand for private education on the students remaining in public schools. According to Gandolfi and Mills (2022, p.15) some social justice minded public-school teachers were leaving state schools for the private sector which “provided greater freedom for them and their students”. Overall, it appears that any such conclusions are ultimately context-dependent, grounded in the socioeconomic, cultural, and political realities of the places, countries, and schools where research was conducted.

With this in mind, the third dimension of social justice with regard to private education worth considering is the issue of diversity. Private actors are said to bring the diversity of goals and resources into the education systems through the process of decentralisation (OECD, 2020). This idea can be traced back to Friedman’s (1962) views on the role of market competition in diversifying education provision for the benefit of heterogeneous education needs of the modern society. According to Green (2020, p.519), some private schools may “use their independence to offer diversity and an escape from constraints in the state sector” to families who find public education inadequate for their children’s needs. Recognising this diversity of educational needs and its cultural, societal, and ethnic underpinnings is necessary to address cultural injustices when the interests of some groups are prioritised over the interests of others (Fraser, 1997). With regards to this, Power and Taylor (2013, p.474) argued that “developments in the private sphere are more able to accommodate and respect difference than the public sphere——as represented by the state——has managed thus far”. Fraser (2009) suggested the politics of recognition to accommodate diversity, but this runs into the argument that “a cohesive society with common economic, social, and political institutions may be compromised by the divisiveness of choices” (Levin et al., 2013, p.529). Levin et al. (ibid) then provided an example of the Dutch education system to suggest that private schools in the Netherlands contribute to social justice from the perspective of freedom of choice and productive efficiency while at the same time undermining education equity and social cohesion.

Thus, there is no straightforward way to define the purpose of private education through the lens of social justice. According to Power and Taylor (2013, p.474), “it may appear as if the influence of the private sphere may lead to increased maldistribution and economic injustice, but alternatively it may well decrease misrecognition and cultural injustice”. In addition, the temporal dimension must be considered as education markets are not a static phenomenon –
they evolve and change following the generational, technological and policy transformations. One thing is, nevertheless, clear – there is a global demand for various means of private engagement in education. Crawfurd and Hares (2021) argued that such a high demand for private education in lower and middle-income countries is puzzling given the lack of evidence that students in private schools achieve better education outcomes. Apparently, “the revealed preference of millions of parents for paid schools demonstrates that they gain enough value from private schools to justify the cost” (ibid, p.5). There may be a variety of factors affecting parental choice, including logistics, a higher perceived effectiveness (De Talancé, 2020) as well as access to educational opportunities unavailable within the public sector (Salmi, 2000). According to Green (2020, p.520) “other factors can also be important, such as the desire or need for a boarding school education, or religious preferences”. This means that to further the understanding of the role private schools may play in different societies it is crucial to research not only the student outcomes, but also the educational experiences different groups of people have within the private sector. Ball (2007, p.15) argued that “most discussion of education markets still remains at the level of ‘abstraction’; little is written about the actual buyers and sellers, forms of labour, constraints and regulations in lived, ‘concrete’ markets”. While this is not entirely true as there is plenty of research about specific schools, programmes and countries, his call to distinguish the nuanced and shifting realities of private education from the neat abstractions of moral judgements highlights the need for more context-specific and up-to-date research on what actually happens in private schools. Green (2020, p.528) also argued that private education research lacks the focus on “the realities faced by school leaders and by parents deciding about their children’s schooling” which is necessary to go beyond the discussion of the effects of private schooling and into the domain of its mechanisms.

A study of Chinese private education reforms can provide a valuable insight into the role private schools can play in the transformation of an education system. First, China is a country where education reforms have affected millions of students since the beginning of the Opening up period in 1978 (Deng, 1997), which gives scholars a unique research opportunity to explore the way educational change accompanied a massive economic transformation (Xue and Li, 2021) when China began its shift from a centralised state-owned economy to what was called a “socialist market economy” in the 1980s¹. Second, discussing the reintroduction of private schools into the PRC socialist education system, which originally had all private schools

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¹ This refers to the market economic system with a significant degree of state ownership in the form of SOEs (State-Owned Enterprises) (Ding, 2009).
nationalised in 1949 (Randall and Cheng, 2000), offers a chance to examine newly emerging private actors performing in a variety of contexts without being limited to only one social class, region, or a small number of students. Specifically, this is because Chinese private education has grown into a large industry over the past forty years with over 20 million students attending private primary and secondary schools spread across multiple provinces, including urban, rural, and suburban areas. Thus, the Chinese case offers valuable data to education researchers when the role of privately-run schools in education reforms is increasingly questioned (Hoyt, 1991; Wongsurawat, 2011; OECD, 2020).

This research examines Chinese private education reform with the aim to understand its role in expanding student education capabilities and the process of capability formation in Chinese private schools. To this end, the conceptual lens of the capability approach originally developed in the works of Amartya Sen (1985; 1995; 2005) was applied to provide a unified framework of analysis for a policy and fieldwork data corpus consisting of 50 national and 35 local policy documents combined with 36 interviews and observational data gathered during 23 private school visits conducted between 2019 and 2021. Given that a lot of research already exists on Chinese education reforms at the end of the 20th century (Tao and Chunhua, 2012; Hawkins, 2000; Wang et al., 2018; Ding, 2021) and the lack of up-to-date empirical studies on the topic (Day et al., 2014), the focus of this thesis was on the latest stages of private education development in China. The research has concluded that private education reform interpretation and implementation in selected case-study private schools was a dynamic process depending on the interactions among several key actors of policy implementation, as well as contextual circumstances with a high degree of variety and flexibility in the process of capability formation. It was also found that reform policies provided space for private schools to interpret the reform objectives in a way that suited local parental demand and market context to remain sustainable on a highly competitive private education market.

The thesis consists of an introduction, six main chapters and the concluding discussion chapter. Chapter one first focusses on the history and context of private education reform in China to argue that the origins of the current reforms can be traced back to the Opening up policies that began in 1978. Second, through the analysis of milestone policy documents and statistical data

2 Private education in China can be considered an industry because private schools most commonly belong to the investment portfolio of an Education Investment Group with chain private schools prominent across many provinces. More statistical and policy detail regarding this is available in chapter one.

3 See Figure 7 for data details.

4 See Figure 12 for data details.
the chapter evaluates the cyclic nature of private education development in China as a combination of preferential policies, authority transfers and government restrictions that are shown to evolve into a comprehensive legislative framework.

Chapter two begins with a thematic narrative literature review to examine the problem space, determine the literature gaps, and situate this thesis within its research field. It evaluates the debate on why private schools were reintroduced into the socialist education system followed by the role they are said to play in education modernisation in China. The extent of education decentralisation is explored with private schools argued to remain supplementary to state education provision. Subsequently, the chapter explains why the use of the capability approach (Sen, 1984; 1995; 2005) was a helpful conceptual framework for the selected research questions, which are:

1. To what extent are the reform objectives for private primary and secondary education in China capability-enhancing?

2. In what way has local interpretation and implementation of the private education reform affected the process of capability formation in Chinese private schools?

The key concepts are then defined followed by an argument for the suitability of the capability approach to education policy analysis in the Chinese context and the assessment of its critiques in the light of the research objectives. Subsequently, the chapter defines public policy and discusses the conceptual tools for the analysis of policy design and implementation in this research. It argues that a combination of a policy instruments framework (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; Schneider and Ingram, 1990; McDonnell and Grubb, 1991) with the concepts of the capability approach (Sen, 1985; 1995; 2005) offers a suitable lens to formulate the answers to the selected research questions.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology of the thesis, advocating for a qualitative design to investigate capability development in Chinese private schools and the link between private education reform and policy implementation. It describes policy document selection, translation methods, and three cycles of policy analysis to understand the reform objectives. The rationale for a multi-site approach to fieldwork is explained, detailing interview question formulation, ethical considerations, and pilot testing, leading to post-pilot case selection guided by replication logic and the opportunity to learn. Data analysis involves coding and interpretation of NVivo-analysed interview data with the use of abduction and retroduction.
logic, supported by a case-quintain approach. Validity concerns prioritize internal validity through triangulation and procedural challenges for theoretical generalization.

Chapter four discusses the findings of policy analysis to answer the first research question by focussing on the internal logic of the private education reform in China followed by the assessment of policy rationale through the evaluation of five different types of policy instruments. Subsequently, policy assumptions and objectives are theorised to argue that Chinese private education reform could be conceived of as a capability enhancing education policy. The chapter draws attention to the four types of capabilities targeted by policymakers using a diverse, flexible, and complex mix of policy instruments.

Chapters five and six are dedicated to the fieldwork findings emerging from the analysis of interviews and observational case-study data to answer the second research question. First, the way education reform capabilities were interpreted and prioritised by the selected private schools is discussed in chapter five. It is argued that all case schools were equipped with resources to develop target capabilities, though the quality and diversity of available resources differed with more expensive private schools being able to offer more exclusive resources. It was also found that interpretation of reform objectives differed on a case-by-case basis which means that while all private schools focussed on the four groups of capabilities, the way these capabilities were understood varied with the differences of resources and the focus of a school.

Chapter six argues that private education reform policy implementation was not a straightforward top-down process in case schools but rather an interactive collaborative activity involving three key policy implementation actors. It introduces the concept of policy implementation network to argue that the interactions among school leadership, local authorities and student families influenced the process of capability formation in selected private schools by creating actor-based conversion factors. Finally, the role of context-based conversion factors such as market competition and market demand, is examined in combination with actor-based factors to argue that emerging mixes of conversion factors were dynamic and unique to each case, though certain patterns could be observed across all cases.

Finally, the discussion chapter questions the relationship between school resources and capability formation, drawing attention to the need to incorporate the interactions among the conversion factors into the conceptual framework of the capability approach. It explores the strengths and theoretical implications, arguing that while the capability approach shifts focus
to concrete policy impact on individuals' capabilities and facilitates practical policy research, challenges remain in reconciling values in capability formation and guiding policy formulation. The chapter also addresses the thesis's limitations, including its focus on specific education capabilities within Chinese private education reform and the potential for future research to delve into capability realization by the students. Subsequently, it evaluates the implications of the findings for the field of private education research and questions the role private education might play in modernising our education systems. It argues that the vagueness of private education reform policy language provided space for a mix of factors to converge at local levels and facilitate context-specific implementation practices, particularly focusing on the role of parental demand and accountability of private schools to the local authorities.
1. The history and context of private education reform in China

This chapter first explores the history of private education in China by providing an overview of the early development of private schools from ancient China to the beginning of the 20th century. It argues that the origins of the current private education reform policies can be traced back to the Opening up reform period beginning in 1978, since private schools were banned in 1949 for more than three decades. The second section of this chapter then focuses on the four stages of the current private education reform from 1978 to 2022 to evaluate the changes in policy focus over more than four decades. An overview discusses how these stages were defined and what their main characteristics were. Subsequently, the specifics and milestone policy documents of every stage of private education reform are explored to trace the changes in the policy agenda. They offer a general understanding of how policymakers were rebuilding the institutional and legislative framework underpinning the existence of private schools in modern China following their reintroduction into the socialist education system in 1982. It argues that the course of private education reform included a combination of incentives and restrictions from the authorities in the context of increasing education decentralisation and systematic change which created a distinct landscape for the operation of private schools.

The third section provides a review of relevant statistical data to evaluate the dynamics of the private education industry and the relationship between the four stages of reform and changes of the private school market. It explores how the number and proportion of private schools changed over the years and to what extent the demand for private education has grown since the beginning of the reform. It argues that the private education market expanded rapidly with a growing number of students attending private schools illustrating a large increase in the demand among families in China. Furthermore, the trends on the private education market corresponded to the four stages of private education reform which indicated a high degree of dynamism and adaptability within the developing industry of private education. The data on international schools in China is also evaluated to argue that private education has increasingly occupied the niche of international education due to both the policy environment and market demand. The data on private school financing then offers an understanding of where the funding for private schools came from and to what extent the Chinese government participated in financing the private education industry throughout the reform. Finally, the regional distribution of private schools is explored to argue that private education did not concentrate
exclusively in developed urban areas and that the demand for private schools also existed in rural and suburban regions of China.

1.1. The early development of private education in China

Private education has a long history in China. Having first appeared during the Zhou and Spring-Autumn periods, private schools became “the only source of formal education” in the Han Dynasty from 206 BCE to 22 AD (Randall and Cheng, 2000, p.1). The opening of the first private school over 2,500 years ago is commonly attributed to Confucius who is thought to have taught more than 3,000 students throughout his life (Randall and Cheng, 2000). Deng (1997) noted that such schools were popular because of the weakness of the central dynasty and its inability to provide education throughout the turbulent periods of Chinese history. Randall and Cheng (2000, p.2) further argued that private schooling continued to be the major path to education as “official schools were small in size and unable to meet the demand for education”. This trend persisted at the turn of the 20th century with the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. According to Hu (1994), private schools constituted 36.7% of all secondary schools and 24.8% of all primary schools in 1936. Randall and Cheng (2000, p.2) explained that this was because state school funding went into financing the military instead. Consequently, private schools enrolled nearly a half of all secondary school students and roughly a quarter of all primary school students (Hu, 1994). Private schooling then declined during the civil war in the 1930s - 1940s resulting in a large drop in the proportion of primary private schools to only 12.7% (Mao and Shen, 1988). Finally, the foundation of the PRC in 1949 ended private education in China for close to four decades as 2200 private schools were nationalised by the state in the early 1950s (Randall and Cheng, 2000).

The beginning of the Opening-up reforms in 1978 encouraged a renewed interest in private education. Chairman Peng Zhen’s report to the Fifth Session of the National People’s Congress in November 1982 contained the principle of “two legs” proposing the amendment to the Constitution of the PRC to allow for the development of the private school sector (Xue and Li, 2021). The Constitution was subsequently revised by the National People’s Congress in 1982 to include the possibility for private schooling for the first time since the establishment of the PRC. Article 19 of the amended Constitution encouraged “the collective economic organizations, state enterprises and undertakings and other social forces to set up educational institutions of various types in accordance with the law”. As a result, the number of non-governmental schools experienced rapid growth (Chow and Shen, 2006; Lin, 1999). However,
the early stages of private education re-emergence in the Chinese society saw the unwillingness to call private schools “private” and the choice of a rather ambiguous label instead, which was indicative of the caution that the Chinese authorities exercised throughout the reform. All private schools were put under the umbrella term of “schools run by social forces” which included both schools opened by social organisations and former public schools that had been turned over to private management (Chow and Shen, 2006, p.130). In addition, private schools that had been closed since 1949 were given an opportunity to reopen with greater autonomy (Hawkins, 2000). Thus, private education began its re-emergence within the socialist education system.

1.2. The overview of the four stages of the private education reform (1978 – 2021)

This section provides an overview of how the legislative framework of private education has evolved over the past four decades. The history of private education reform since the beginning of the opening-up reforms in China is typically divided into four main stages (Liu, 2011; Ding, 2021; Que et al., 2019; Feng 2019). There is no agreement among scholars on the specific milestone years that would signify the end of one stage and the beginning of another, but the characterisation of these stages was undertaken in a similar manner by different scholars (Liu, 2011; Que et al., 2019; Feng 2019; Ding, 2021). In this section, it is argued that 1987, 2002, and 2015 can be considered the milestone years for the development of private education in China when the fundamental changes to the institutional framework of private education were made. Prior to getting into details of each stage, this section summarises the key elements of the four stages with the help of Figures 1 and 2 that were manually compiled based on the list of national policy documents used for the analysis of the Chinese private education reform which can be found in Appendix 1.

Figure 1 provides a summary of key policy events relevant to the stages one and two of the Chinese private education reform. First, private education went through the initial recovery period from 1978 to 1987, with the MOE Provisional Regulations on Running Schools by Social Forces putting into place specific inducements\(^5\) for private schools that encouraged “social forces” to participate in the establishment and management of educational institutions in China. Second, the period of rapid growth which is typically said to continue until the Private Education Promotion Law came into force in 2002 (Que et al., 2019) and for the first

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\(^5\) McDonnell and Elmore (1987, p.5) define inducements as the transfer of money to individuals or agencies in return for certain actions. Further details can be found in the policy analysis section of the methodology chapter.
time since 1978 offered a comprehensive institutional framework for the operation of private schools. Major changes to the legislative framework were being introduced in rapid succession throughout these early stages as the legislative and institutional framework for the operation of private schools was being created from scratch with little continuity. This was due to the thirty-three-year ban that private education had experienced prior to its reintroduction in 1982. The lifting of this ban meant that the Chinese government had to incorporate private education into the education reform that began with the Decision on the Reform of the Education System in 1985, addressing the specifics of the growing private education industry, such as Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools and the management of international private schools.

Figure 1: Key policy events for the stages one and two of the Chinese private education reform (1982 – 2002)

Figure 2 provides an overview of the main policy events relevant to the stages three and four of the Chinese private education reform (2002-2021). First, the Private Education Promotion Law marked the start of the third stage in 2002 called the standardised development period with the emergence of the comprehensive legislative and institutional framework for the operation of Chinese private schools. During this stage, more specific regulations were introduced as the private education industry was expanding and the market was maturing. Then, the mid-2010s signified the beginning of the classified management period with the year 2016 marking the separation of private schools into for-profit and non-profit categories. Overall, these two stages of the private education reform are characterised by the higher involvement
of the government into the management of private education. As Figure 2 shows, there was an increasing specification in the focus of the reform policy documents reflected in their titles, which signalled a more comprehensive and detailed approach to managing the private education industry.

Figure 2: Key policy events for the stages three and four of the Chinese private education reform (2002 – 2021)

The following four sections of this chapter provide details on the key policy documents, characteristics, and the focus of the private education reform policies throughout the four stages.

First stage: recovery period (1978 – 1987)

Although the year 1978 marked the beginning of the opening-up reforms in China, it was not until 1982 that private education was officially reintroduced into the Chinese constitution. Prior to that, unofficial private training institutions emerged to provide services to students willing to take the college entrance examination (called Gaokao in Mandarin) which was reintroduced in 1977 (Ding, 2021). By the early 1980s, regulations were needed to manage the recovering private education sector as the education reform was said to be “lagging behind school running
practice” (Que et al., 2019, p.29). Thus, the Chinese authorities began to introduce relevant regulations from 1982 to coordinate the rapidly expanding private education industry which marked the beginning of the recovery period of the private education reform (1982 – 1987).

Throughout this period, private education reform policies were first put into the general education reform documents which meant that private schools were supposed to follow the same policies as state-funded schools. Thus, the first key policy of this stage was the Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Education Reform published in 1985. This document contained the roots of the development of international education in China, the focus on education decentralisation and the emphasis on experimentation in education reforms. Specifically, it encouraged Chinese schools to “learn from the world” and instructed local authorities to see the needs of economic development as the basis for the reform of the Chinese education system. At the same time, local governments were made responsible for basic education funding and management with the growth of education financing mandated to exceed the growth of regular fiscal revenue.

The second key policy was the Compulsory Education Law in 1986. This Law marked several changes brought about by the education reform including banning entrance examinations at the compulsory education stage, mandating construction companies to build schools in newly developed districts and introducing the notion of proximity-based admission. It also contained the first indication of rewarding private education. Article 10 stipulated that “the people’s governments at all levels and their relevant departments shall commend and reward social organizations and individuals that have made outstanding contributions to the implementation of compulsory education in accordance with relevant regulations”. No specifics were offered on the type of rewards which meant it was left to the discretion of the local authorities.

While these two documents established the foundations of education reforms in China, there was still an obvious lack of specific private education reform policies. This resulted in ambiguity on the private education market regarding what private schools were allowed and not allowed to do. This ambiguity was significantly diminished over the second stage of private education reform.

6 This means schools were prohibited from holding enrolment tests that would determine a child’s admission.
7 Proximity-based admission is the term used by Chinese policymakers to set geographical boundaries for school enrolment based on student’s household registration.

The second stage began with the publication of the MOE Provisional Regulations on running schools by social forces in 1987. This was the first national level policy document dedicated specifically to managing private education. It explicitly stated what had previously only been implied: private schools were subjected to following national education policies and had to be supervised by the local people’s governments and education administrative departments (Article 4). First, the Regulations banned illegal profit-making activities and formalised the general principle of proximity-based admission in private schools with some exceptions allowed at the discretion of the provincial education administrative departments. Second, this document was the first in the line of inducement focused private education policies. While it was made clear that social forces had to raise their own funding for school running activities, commendation and rewards were established to promote education investment from private sources.

In 1992, Deng Xiaoping’s Southern tour speech placed education, science, and technology at the heart of Chinese economic development (Deng, 1992) which according to Que et al (2019, p.30) gave another boost to education reform. The Outline of Education Reform and Development in China published by the State Council in 1993 proclaimed active encouragement and strong support for private education. Simultaneously, fiscal expenditures on education as a percentage of GDP were set to increase up to 4% and education internationalisation was said to be “boldly absorbing and learning the successful experience” of education management abroad. Investors from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, as well as overseas Chinese, were encouraged to donate and support education in the mainland by carrying out international cooperation in running schools. Ultimately, this led to the growing number of international private schools that had been allowed to enter the domestic market. Subsequently, more flexibility and incentives were given to private education. For example, the Teacher’s Law of the PRC allowed private education to independently determine teacher treatment and benefits in 1994 while the Education Law of the PRC allowed private schools to receive government financial support in 1995. Provisional Regulations for Sino-Foreign cooperation in running schools (1995) formalised education investment channels from abroad and the use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction. It stated that so long as jointly run

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8 Policies containing a significant number of policy instruments categorised as inducements (see details in chapter 4).
schools adhered to the national policies, they had the flexibility to independently implement educational and teaching activities. Finally, Opinions on the Funding of School Management by Social Forces published by the State Education Commission in 1996 mandated the inclusion of private education into regional development plans, allowed state subsidies for private education and prohibited charging of any supervision, developmental or management fees by the local education administrative departments. These policies contributed to the creation of a preferential policy environment for private education not only nationwide but also at the local level.

At the same time, policies introduced during the rapid growth stage of private education reform provided more standards and clarity by specifying the institutional arrangements (Ding, 2021). For instance, the State Regulations on Running Schools by Social Forces were a milestone document in 1997 that both offered greater autonomy to private education and introduced clearer directions. On the one hand, private schools were allowed greater flexibility in daily management activities, matters of HR and establishment of specialisations. Local governments were also given permission to arrange preferential land policies. On the other hand, textbook selection, tuition fee standards, and requirements for the appointment of school principals were put under the supervision of state authorities who could take over a school that failed to meet the standards. The Action Plan for Education Promotion for the 21st century in 1998 further maintained this trend by focussing on quality standards for education provision in private schools while also encouraging curriculum experimentation and supporting the growth of private education industry.

The final key policy for this stage of the private education reform was the Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development published by the State Council in 2001. This document implemented a major change by allowing organisers of private schools to legally obtain financial rewards from legal school income. It also offered more specific inducements in the form of tax exemptions and encouraged cooperation between public and private schools. Experimental areas were to be established in all localities to aim at curriculum reforms, diversification of teaching materials, and further education decentralisation. All these changes granted private schools a competitive advantage on the market as they had more flexibility in funding allocation and could experiment, diversify, and innovate faster than public schools were given the freedom to do. This stage of private education reform ended with a more comprehensive legislative framework for private schooling, several major inducements and
significant encouragement from the state that needed private schools to supplement public education provision.

**Third stage: standardised development period (2002 – 2015)**

Private Education Promotion Law in 2002 marked the beginning of the new era for private schools by making *private education* an official term to replace the previously ambiguous umbrella of “*schools run by social forces*”. Article 2 of the Law specified that it “shall be applicable to activities conducted by social organizations or individuals, other than the State organs, to utilize non-governmental financial funds to establish and run schools and other institutions of education which are geared to the need of society”. This meant private schools were given a formal legal status and legal rights within the Chinese education system. Que et al. (2019, p.30) argued that this stage of the private education reform was a response to the relatively chaotic growth of the private education sector that had posed a challenge of ensuring equitable access to education and the accountability of private schools to Chinese families. Thus, the Private Education Promotion Law first established a feedback channel for Chinese families to launch complaints about the misconduct of private schools and introduced stricter requirements for school leadership appointments and tuition fee use. Yet it also continued the trend of encouraging the growth of private schools by expanding access to government funding, lease of assets, preferential tax and credit arrangements, land use, and loan policies. More importantly, the Law introduced the concept of *reasonable returns* that formalised the process of obtaining return on investment for school organisers.

The Joint Circular on Implementing Private Education Promotion Law, published in 2003 followed by the Implementation Rules for the Private Education Promotion Law in 2004, sought to clarify and further institutionalise the industry. These documents specified the standards for school facilities, fundraising rules, asset ownership, supervision procedures, fee charging standards and return on investment limits. As a result, a comprehensive institutional structure was put in place to “create a fair and just policy environment for the development of private education, implement the state’s support measures for private education, and

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9 Article 51 specified that “after the cost of a private school is deducted, the funds for its development are withheld and the sum of money for other necessary expenses is drawn in accordance with the relevant regulations of the State, the investor may obtain a reasonable amount of requital from the cash surplus of the school. Specific measures for obtaining reasonable amounts of requital shall be formulated by the State Council”.

10 Issued jointly by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee of the National People’s Congress, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the Ministry of Justice, and the Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council.
effectively protect the legitimate rights and interests of private schools and their teachers and students” (Joint Circular on Implementing Private Education Promotion Law, 2003). Thus, over the next few years, several specific documents were published to address underregulated aspects of private education reform.

For example, the Implementing Rules for the Regulations on Operating Sino-Foreign Schools (2004) and the Interim Measures for the Management of the Collection of Private Education Fees (2005). The first document provided a legislative framework for joint educational ventures banning Sino-foreign cooperation in the field of compulsory education, prohibiting religious institutions from establishing schools in China, and providing details on the procedures for establishment, management, financial matters, and termination of Sino-foreign joint educational ventures. The second policy introduced standards for tuition fee formulation based on the actual costs of running a school with addition of reasonable returns on investment and made local authorities responsible for specific implementation rules and supervision. The Chinese government was also actively amending and adjusting previously passed regulations such as Compulsory Education Law in 2006 and the Education Law of the PRC in 2009. These adjustments were necessary to catch up with the growing popularity of private education as Chinese families were reaping the economic benefits of rapid economic growth11.

In the early 2010s, private education reform in China focussed on education innovation with the Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) encouraging experimentation in the Sino-foreign joint school management and establishing an exchange system for principals and teachers to learn from international experiences. Private schools were also given preferential policies to support innovation with the Notices on the National Education System Innovation Pilot (2010) indicating several provinces that were to focus on education innovation. The National Education System Reform Leading Group was established as a new supervisory body to approve local education innovation initiatives. Private education was encouraged to diversify under the supervision of local authorities whose performance evaluation was made dependent on the success of education duties. These policies were essential to ensure that private schools could tap into their innovation potential while also remaining accountable to the state authorities.

11 According to the data by the World Bank (2022), Chinese annual GDP increase ranged from 8.5% to 14.5% in the first decade of the 21st century.
Finally, more standardisation followed that eventually led to the beginning of the classified management stage of the private education reform. Implementation Opinions on Encouraging and Guiding the Entry of Private Capital in the Fields of Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education published by the Ministry of Education in 2012 provided more detailed regulations on licensing, asset registration, bank accounts, foreign investment management, responsibilities of the board of directors, state subsidies and supervision of private schools. Compared to previously published documents, fewer incentives and more restrictions were placed on the private sector. Amended Regulation on Operating Sino-Foreign Schools of the PRC also gave more authority over joint venture approvals to the government. Ultimately, by the end of the third stage of the private education reform in China, the government had gained a stronger hold over the private sector in terms of quality control and management of all aspects of school running activities. At the same time, the private sector was given more flexibility compared to public schools to innovate and experiment within the scope of the regulations.

**Fourth stage: classified management period (2015 – 2021)**

The fourth stage of the private education reform started with the publication of Package Amendments to Education Laws by the National People’s Congress in 2015 which established a classification system for private schools, dividing them into for-profit and non-profit schools. Article 5 of the Private Education Promotion Law was amended to read: “private schools have the same legal status as public schools and enjoy corresponding preferential policies in accordance with registration as non-profit or for-profit legal persons”. The Article 18 was then amended to permit school organisers to independently choose for-profit or non-profit registration. These changes meant that two development tracks emerged within the private education sector in China in 2016 as different types of schools were treated differently by the law. Non-profit schools received more state encouragement in terms of tax benefits, registration and management procedures, as the Chinese government was attempting to reduce profit-making activities on the private education market.

Several documents with more detailed regulations regarding for-profit private schools promptly followed. First, the amended version of the Private Education Promotion Law (2016) further elaborated on the differences between for-profit and non-profit private school management with non-profit private schools receiving preferential treatment in terms of tax, land allocation and government subsidies. For-profit private schools were banned from
providing compulsory education which meant primary and secondary schools between grades 1 and 9 had to be registered as non-profits. Different fee charging standards were also implemented with state authorities at the local level responsible for formulating fees for non-profit schools and for-profit school fees subjected to the market. Second, the Detailed Implementation Rules for the Classification and Registration of Private Schools (2016) made it easy for private schools to acquire a non-profit legal status while registering as a for-profit enterprise required a school to undergo financial liquidation. Third, the Implementation Rules on the Supervision and Administration of For-profit Private Schools (2016) required increased transparency of the school budget and yearly reports. Furthermore, organisers had to prove they had “economic strength” commensurate with the level and type of school they planned to establish to qualify for a for-profit license. Non-profit private school organisers generally adhered to the same requirements as public schools and had fewer rules to follow.

The second trend during the fourth stage of the private education reform was the increasing involvement of the Communist Party of China in private education. For example, the Opinions on Strengthening Party Construction in Private schools (2016) formalised the role of the Party in decision-making processes with consent of the school Party organisation\(^\text{12}\) being made compulsory for the school’s board of directors to make important decisions. Ideological courses in private schools were also emphasised with the 13\(^{th}\) Five-year Education Development Plan (2017) stressing the importance of education for the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. At the same time, the emphasis on education modernisation and innovation grew stronger. The China Education Modernization 2035 plan (2019) mandated all localities to formulate detailed education modernisation plans, focus on building intelligent campuses, use modern technology in education and continue private education diversification reform. Subsequently, the Implementation Plan for Speeding up Education modernisation (2018-2022) encouraged smart education and building special demonstration zones for online and internet education. Under these circumstances, private education gained another competitive advantage over public schools due to more experimentation flexibility given by policymakers to innovative private schools.

\(^{12}\) All private schools in China were required to form a Party organisation that would participate in decision-making and be accountable to the higher levels of the Communist Party of China governance. The Party organisation would normally consist of senior school leadership and staff members who are members of the Communist Party of China.
Overall, the fourth stage of private education reform focussed on system-changing policymaking\(^{13}\) with classified management\(^{14}\) allowing profit-making activities to exist in the socialist education system but only under the strict supervision and quality control of the government. At the same time, many incentives were offered to the organisers of private schools to run non-profit enterprises that would receive state support, tax privileges and supplement public education provision.

To summarize all four stages of the private education reform in China, their history and context have been distinctive in two ways. First, there was a gap of over three decades in the existence of private schools in China which changed with the Opening up reforms in 1982 when the reintroduced private education had to operate in the country emerging from decades of centralisation and ideological dominance in education\(^{15}\). Thus, the legislative and institutional framework for the operation and management of these schools had to be created anew with little sense of continuity. This was in part due to the massively different political, social, and economic realities of the Chinese Empire and the Republic of China where private education had previously existed compared with the realities of the People’s Republic of China on the verge of the Opening up reforms.

Secondly, the policies have shown that the beginning of the private education reform in China did not happen on its own and was part of a large programme of reforms that included the general reform of the education system, as well as significant changes in the economy. China in the 1980s was a society in transition which created a unique landscape for private education reform as policymakers had to adjust to rapid social and economic transformations happening because of the Opening up reforms. Thus, policy documents throughout the four stages of the private education reform contain a mix of preferential policies encouraging the development of private education and mechanisms of control placing restrictions on their operations in the context of increasing education decentralisation.

\(^{13}\) Introducing many system-changing policy instruments that are defined as “transfers of official authority among individuals and agencies to alter the system by which public goods and services are delivered” (McDonnell and Grubb, 1991, p.6). Further details on this in the policy analysis section of the methodology chapter.

\(^{14}\) As defined by the private education reform, classified management is the separation of all private schools into for-profit and non-profit schools accountable to different regulations.

\(^{15}\) In particular, given the consequences of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).
1.3. The development of private education in modern China

This section evaluates the available statistical data on the growth of private education in modern China to explore the relationship between the four stages of the reform and the trends on the private education market. It examines the changes in the numbers of private schools, both primary and secondary; the proportion of private schools; the total numbers of students and the proportion of students attending private schools; the numbers of international private schools, private school financing and the development of private education in rural and urban areas of China.

The figures were constructed using the China National Statistical Database\textsuperscript{16} and Ministry of Education Yearbooks\textsuperscript{17} accessed in Mandarin in 2020. Each yearbook had to be downloaded separately and searched through manually to obtain required data as no visualization tools were available from the official government sources that would cover the entire reform period and provide necessary details. Thus, each figure was made manually beginning with the earliest available data point, which varied according to data availability, and ending in 2019. The data from the pandemic years (2020-2022) was not included for two reasons. Firstly, statistical figures served the purpose of providing context for fieldwork which began in 2019. Secondly, data on private education development during the COVID-19 pandemic may reflect the influence of the pandemic measures which fall outside of the scope of this research.

The section argues that statistical data correlates with the policy changes throughout the private education reform as the numbers of private schools were increasing when the policy environment was favourable and declining when new restrictions were being introduced. That is not to say that private education reform policies have been the main cause of changes on the private education market. In addition to other factors, the reform policies themselves could have reflected the undergoing market changes that the Chinese government was attempting to manage. Nevertheless, statistical data revealed a high degree of dynamism within the private education industry in China that indicated its ability to adjust quickly to the changing circumstances.

\textsuperscript{16} The Chinese version of the website is available at: http://www.stats.gov.cn/
\textsuperscript{17} The Chinese versions are available here: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_560/2020/ and here: https://www.yearbookchina.com/navibooklist-n3022013336-1.html
School numbers

To begin with, the overall number of regular schools in China increased 16 times between 1949 and 2019, from 4,045 schools to 66,379 schools in total. At the same time, Figure 3 shows that the number of regular primary schools decreased by over 50%, from 346,769 schools in 1949 to 160,148 schools in 2019. The key factor behind the drop in the number of primary schools might have been the introduction of the one-child policy in 1980 which significantly decreased the number of children born in China in the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, the Compulsory Education Law introduced in 1986 ensured a consistent number of secondary schools by making 9-year education mandatory. According to Figure 3, there was also a large spike in numbers just before the period of Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976, which is most likely due to inadequate data collection or inaccurate data reporting.

Figure 3: The total number of regular primary and secondary schools in China

Specific numbers on private education show a trend consistent with the four stages of private education reform as Figure 4 indicates a rise in the numbers of private schools in China, both primary and secondary. Specifically, the number of regular private primary schools increased 6 times over 25 years: from 1,078 private primary schools in 1994 to 6,228 private primary schools in 2019. The number of regular private secondary schools increased more than 10 times over 25 years from 888 schools in 1994 to 9,220 schools in 2019. This shows that reform

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\(^{18}\) In Chinese context, “regular” schools refer to schools offering compulsory National curriculum to the citizens of the PRC. This includes international schools that are owned privately but are accountable to the Ministry of Education. This excludes schools owned by embassies and catering to foreign nationals, as well as all vocational schools.
policies must have been, if not always conducive, then certainly not limiting the growth of private education industry in China to the extent of preventing it from expanding rapidly and significantly. Figure 4 shows the period of steep increase in the numbers of both primary and secondary private schools from 1994 to 2002, which corresponds with the rapid growth stage of the private education reform characterized by numerous policy inducements to encourage the development of the private education sector, such as those outlined in the State Council Regulations on running schools by social forces\textsuperscript{19}. The number of private secondary schools overtook the number of private primary schools in 2002, following the implementation of the Private Education Promotion Law. This is consistent with the overall trend in regular school numbers shown in Figure 3, as the number of primary schools has been generally declining.

Figure 4: The total number of regular private schools in China

Subsequently, there was also a period of decline on the private education market with the numbers of primary and secondary private schools falling between 2006 and 2012, which corresponded with the standardized development period of the private education reform. The revised Compulsory Education Law banned tuition and miscellaneous fees at the compulsory education stage which meant that students in grades 1 to 9 could no longer be charged. This created a policy obstacle for the expansion of private schools that were dependent on collecting

\textsuperscript{19} Details provided in the previous section of this chapter

39
tuition fees up until 2012 when the Ministry of Education mandated the revision of “discriminatory policies against private schools” to promote the development of private education.

Thus, over the reform period, the proportion of private primary schools increased from just 1% of all primary schools in 1999 to 4% in 2019 as shown by Figure 5, which is a notable increase given the large total number of primary schools in China. At the same time, the proportion of private secondary schools among all regular secondary schools increased significantly from 3% in 1999 to 14% in 2019 as illustrated by Figure 6. However, these two pie charts also show that while private education expanded significantly over the years, it still occupied the position of a “supplement” to public schooling in terms of its proportion within the entire education industry which is what private education reform documents discussed in the previous section clearly stated. This is significant because it puts private education into perspective as not the mainstream educational pathway. Overall, Figures 3-6 demonstrated a large increase in the numbers of private schools in China over the course of the education reforms, which indicated the growing demand for educational pathways alternative to the public school system in Chinese society.

**Student numbers in private schools**

The total number of students attending *private secondary schools* rose from over half a million (545,526 students) in 1997 to 19 times more (10,470,770 students) in 2019, as illustrated by Figure 7. Similarly, 522,284 children went to *private primary schools* in 1997, with the numbers increasing 18 times to 9,449,051 children by 2019. Thus, the data shows that there was not only a growth in the number of schools registered as private but also a real increase in the numbers of children attending those schools. Given that the total number of regular schools experienced a decline as shown by Figure 3, the rise in private school attendance indicated a real demand for private education among families in China. Furthermore, while Figure 4
demonstrated a fall in the numbers of *private schools* between 2006 and 2012, there appears to have been no decline in the number of *private school students*. Figure 7 shows the number of private secondary school students to be stable during that period and the number of private primary school students on the rise which means that private education was in demand even when the market appeared to be declining.

Figure 7: The number of students in private schools in China (1997 – 2019)

This is supported by Figure 8 which also illustrates a significant increase in demand for private schooling in China through the increased proportion of private school students within the education system in China\(^20\). Compared with 1999, the proportions of both primary and secondary private school students in 2019 increased 9.7 times and 9.8 times respectively.

Figure 8: The proportion of private school students in China (1999 vs 2019)

\(^{20}\) The “other” category in Figure 9 includes students attending public schools as well as local community-run and state enterprises-run schools.
Overall, a large increase in the number of private school students corresponds with the increase in the number of schools accommodating these students. Thus, the data poses a question of what private schools were offering to Chinese families that a growing number of them were willing to enrol their children in these schools and forgo state funded education. One answer can be found by looking at the statistical data on international education.

**International private schools**

As shown by Figure 9, the demand for international education\(^{21}\) has been largely increasing in China with the number of international schools rising steeply over the past 30 years. While there were just 7 embassy-run international schools in 1989, this number jumped to 861 international schools in 2019, including private international schools, embassy-run schools, and international divisions of public schools. Most importantly, the kind of international schools operating in China have changed significantly during the reform. In 1997, 63% of all international schools were embassy-run schools aimed at children of foreigners living in China. These schools did not use to accept Chinese citizens and required a foreign passport for enrollment.

By 2007, the proportion of embassy-run schools had fallen to 47% of all private schools and then further decreased to just 17% by 2017. On the other hand, while there were only 11 privately-run international schools in China in 1997, this number rose to 364 in 2018\(^{22}\). The proportion of privately-run international schools also increased from 31% in 1997 to 50% in 2017, as shown by Figure 9. Interestingly, international departments of public schools experienced the largest growth from just 6% of all international schools in 1997 to 33% in 2017. Figure 9 demonstrates that there were only two public schools with international divisions in China in 1997, but 215 in 2018. However, new international divisions of public schools were prohibited from obtaining a license in 2013\(^{23}\) which means that their number is unlikely to go up unless the policy changes. Thus, the data shows the demand for access to international curricula, study abroad opportunities and foreign language education to not only be growing but also increasingly accommodated by the Chinese private education system.

\(^{21}\) In simple words, international education in Chinese context includes schools that provide access to foreign curricula, such as IB, A-levels, American Common Core, and other international programmes.

\(^{22}\) Still, among all private schools, private international schools account for just 2%.

\(^{23}\) Measures for the Management of International Divisions in Senior High Schools banned all new international divisions of state schools in 2013.
The data in Figure 9 provides two important insights into education internationalization in China. The first is that Chinese families were clearly seeking more access to international education as the number of international schools rose rapidly. The second is that domestic private education was gradually taking over embassy-run and state schools in providing international education opportunities. With the ban on international divisions in public schools the government was signaling that international curricula would be taken over by the private sector which is reflected in Figure 9. Thus, there was a growing likelihood that families seeking access to international education in China would enroll their children into a private school. In addition to the policy ban on international classes in public schools, the reforms allowed private international schools to offer relevant fee-paying extracurricular courses, such as international exam preparation courses. These courses were likely attractive to both student families who sought opportunities to send their children abroad and private education investors who gained an avenue to obtain investment returns by providing value-added education services.

Figure 9: The trends in international education in China

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24 See policy details in section 1.2.
Private school financing

Gradually, private schools formed a financially sustainable industry which relied on multiple funding channels. Given the increase in the numbers of private schools, it is unsurprising that the overall income of private schools also increased from 2.6 bn RMB in 1996 to 420.6 bn RMB in 2017 as shown by Figure 10. Specifically, the income of private secondary schools rose from 1 bn RMB in 1996 to 99 bn RMB in 2017 while the overall income of private primary schools increased from 1 bn RMB in 1996 to 64.5 bn in 2017. However, the income of regular primary and secondary private schools still accounted for a relatively small proportion of the overall private education income which means private kindergartens, vocational schools and universities attracted the largest amount of funds into the private education sector.

Figure 10: Private education financing in China

First, the data in Figure 10 showed an increase of private education financing following the introduction of the Private Education Promotion Law in 2002 which formalised the concept of “reasonable returns” on investment and legalised an avenue for investors to profit from establishing private schools. Second, another increase in funds can be seen post 2012 when the MOE Opinions on Encouraging Private Funds to Enter the Educational Field to Promote the Healthy Development of Private Education were introduced to facilitate education investment and minimize policy obstacles. Thus, it can be argued that private schools remained an
attractive investment avenue in China despite an increasingly sophisticated policy framework with significant restrictions on obtaining profits from the private education industry. According to Figure 10, it might be largely due to private kindergartens, vocational schools and universities that were not regulated as strictly as private schools at the compulsory education stage.

The second important point emerging from the data on private schools’ income is that the proportion of state funds for private primary and secondary schools rose significantly from 4% and 4% respectively in 2007 to 18% and 15% in 2017 as shown in the pie diagrams of Figure 10. This means that the Chinese government has been gradually extending its financial support to the private education sector, with the lack of state resources at the early stages of the private education reform slowly being rectified and more funds becoming available. In terms of private investment funds, Figure 11 shows that non-state income of private schools, which included money coming directly from private investors, donations, commercial activity, and other non-state funds, increased significantly for both private primary and secondary schools. Specifically, Figure 11 showed that private secondary schools’ non-state income in 2017 constituted 84.2 bn RMB, which was a 3.6 time-increase compared to 23.8 bn RMB in 2007. Similarly, private primary schools received 52.7 bn RMB of non-state income in 2017, which was an increase of 5.6 times compared to just 9.4 bn RMB in 2007. On the other hand, non-state income of other regular schools decreased over the years, falling from 67.68 bn RMB in 2007 to 49.9 bn RMB in 2017 for secondary schools and from 18 bn RMB in 2007 down to 11.6 bn RMB in 2017 for primary schools.

Figure 11: Non-state income of primary and secondary schools in China (2007 – 2017)

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25 This includes schools run by the Ministry of Education, other government departments-run schools and community-run schools.
Overall, the data showed that private regular schools were still largely dependent on non-state funds for their growth and survival, although the proportion of state support was gradually expanding. It can be argued that in addition to tuition fees and the growing income from Chinese families, financial incentives, such as reasonable returns and tax benefits offered to private schools by policymakers were some of the factors accounting for an increase in non-state income of private education.

**Regional distribution of private schools**

Finally, statistical data has shown that the number of private schools increased in all locations, not just in urban areas or large cities. Overall, the data has shown that there were 2.5 times more private primary schools and 4.3 times more private secondary schools in rural areas in 2019 than in 1994. According to Figure 12, there were 268 private secondary and 776 private primary schools in rural areas in 1994. The number of private secondary schools in urban areas (345) was comparable to the number of rural schools while the number of private primary schools in urban areas was much lower than that of the rural areas (156) in the same year. By 2019, there were more private primary schools in the cities (2150) than in the countryside (1921), which was most likely due to the high-speed urbanization which turned many villages and, correspondingly, village schools, into suburban and urban areas and, correspondingly, suburban, and urban schools. When it comes to secondary private schools, there were significantly more of them in urban (4808) and suburban (3259) regions than in rural (1153) areas in 2019.

Figure 12: The number private schools in rural, urban, and suburban areas in China (1994 – 2018)
In 2006, compulsory education was made free by the Revised Compulsory Education Law and the number of private schools in rural areas might have decreased as they were no longer allowed to charge tuition. Still, there was a higher proportion of private primary schools than private secondary schools in the countryside. This was most likely because primary schools in China are rarely boarding schools as younger children require more parental care. Thus, most primary school students attend a school in their place of residence even if they live in the countryside. On the other hand, private secondary schools, particularly senior secondary schools in China, are often boarding schools, which means that more parents are willing to send their children to suburban or urban areas for better secondary education opportunities. Private senior secondary schools also operate at the non-compulsory education stage which means they have more leeway in student admission and may be allowed to admit students from other provinces and regions of the country while private primary schools normally adhere to the principle of proximity-based admission.

1.4. Chapter summary

This chapter discussed the context and history of the private education reform in China. It was argued that while private schools first appeared in China many centuries ago, in its current form private education sector was reintroduced in 1980s following the beginning of the Opening up reforms in 1978. Subsequently, private schools went through four distinct development stages over the course of forty years of private education reform: the recovery period (1978-1987), the rapid growth period (1987-2002), the standardised development period (2002-2015) and the classified management period (2015-2021). Each of these stages was characterised by a different policy focus starting from vigorous encouragement moving on to building a comprehensive legislative framework, introducing standards, and defining the role of private schools as part of the socialist education system. This process was not always smooth and several controversial issues, such as profit-making activities and access to international curricula, have emerged. On the one hand, the central government seemed to actively encourage the development of private schools by providing inducements, tax benefits, legalising investment returns and instructing local authorities to support policy implementation. On the other hand, there were concerns about education equity, low quality private education and the existence of for-profit private schools in the socialist education system which led to restrictions and tighter control. The reform agenda seemed to have a cyclical nature with preferential treatment policies being followed by limitations and vice versa.
Statistical data analysis has shown that private education was, indeed, rapidly expanding throughout the private education reform period as there was a quick and significant growth in both the number of private schools and the number of students attending such schools in China. Within the context of the one-child policy and the general decrease in the overall number of schools, such growth in numbers indicated an increase in demand for private education, which was also shown by the rising proportion of private schools within the education industry. Having said that, the proportion of students attending private schools remained comparatively low despite its significant increase over the private education reform period. The market also experienced a period of decline in school numbers during the standardized development period when a more defined policy framework was emerging. This means that while private education has clearly been a rapidly expanding industry in China, its role in the Chinese education system remained supplementary to state schooling. One aspect where private education was shown to take the leading role was international education. The data revealed a significant increase in the number of private international schools accompanied by a decrease in embassy-run international schools and a stable proportion of public international schools due to the policy limitations. These numbers suggest that international education has, indeed, been a niche gradually taken over by private schools.

The data on private education financing revealed that the proportion of state support has been rising, yet private schools remained dependent on non-state income. On the one hand, this showed the willingness of the Chinese government to invest in private schools and their financial ability to sustain that investment. On the other hand, it also indicated that private education presented attractive investment opportunities as a viable financial enterprise in China. At the same time, private schools at the compulsory education stage were receiving significantly less investment compared to non-compulsory education. This suggested that a stricter and more standardised policy framework that emerged from the third and fourth stages of the private education reform might have been a restricting factor that contributed to private compulsory education being a less attractive sector for private education investment. Finally, the data on regional distribution of private schools revealed that private education was ubiquitous in China with the numbers of rural, urban, and suburban private primary schools being very similar by the fourth stage of the private education reform. While the number of private secondary schools in rural regions was relatively low, the number of suburban private secondary schools did not differ significantly from that of urban private secondary schools.
This means that private education was not confined to large cities and that the demand for private schools was present in the variety of contexts in China.

Overall, this poses two questions. The first is what role was intended for the private education in China as part of the socialist education system following the lifting of the thirty-year policy ban. Why was it reintroduced? The second, more complicated question, is what made private education sustainable over the course of the education reform. Why was it able to rapidly grow and evolve into a widespread supplement to public schooling? The discussion of reform history and statistical data analysis conducted in this chapter both seem to point towards policy support and growing market demand as potential answers. The next chapter will explore the literature, focus on formulating the specific research questions for this thesis and select a suitable theoretical framework to address them.
2. Literature review, research questions and theoretical framework

This chapter first explores the literature on Chinese private education reform to distinguish the main themes and debates about why private schools were allowed back into existence in China and what factors affected the development of private education during the four decades of reforms. The literature review begins with review methodology to explain how and with what purpose the publications were selected followed by the key points of contention among the researchers of Chinese private education. The review then discusses the place Chinese private education reforms occupy in the field of private education research and determine the under-studied areas within the existing literature to formulate specific research questions for this thesis. The second part of this chapter focuses on selecting an appropriate theoretical framework and conceptual tools for answering the research questions. It is argued that the capability approach offers the conceptual tools that ensure consistency in the language of analysis for both policy research and fieldwork data from Chinese private schools. Key concepts of the capability approach are defined and their applicability to both the field of policy analysis and the Chinese context is evaluated. Subsequently, the existing critiques of the capability approach are addressed considering the objectives of this thesis. The final section of this chapter situates the conceptual tools for education policy analysis within the framework of the capability approach by first defining the concept of public policy and then arguing for the applicability of policy instruments framework and the notion of policy implementation network to the study of Chinese private education reform.

2.1. Literature review

This section provides an overview of the main themes and arguments about private education reform in China to situate the topic within the broader scope of policy research and education literature.

Review resources and methodology

This literature review’s does not aim to be systematic, in terms of analysing all the available literature on a particular topic, for two reasons. First, private education reform in China is an interdisciplinary topic - it can be approached from the perspectives of sinology, policy studies, education research, business studies or international development. Attempting to comprehensively investigate all these fields would not be feasible within the scope of a doctoral thesis. The second reason is that the purpose of this literature review is not to answer a research
question but to provide context, identify gaps and situate this thesis within its field to “demonstrate how the proposed research contributes something new to the overall body of knowledge” (Levy and Ellis, 2006, p.184). However, this literature review was not conducted randomly. As Snyder (2019, p.333) pointed out, a lack of review methodology often results in ad hoc descriptions of literature without “knowledge of what the collection of studies is actually saying”. To prevent this from happening, a thematic narrative review strategy was employed inspired by what Wong et al. (2013, p.2) call a meta-narrative review “designed for topics that have been differently conceptualised and studied by different groups of researchers”.

The goal of such review is to look at the topic through “multiple different sets of eyes” and to summarize different interpretations into an over-arching narrative (ibid, p.2). The difference between a meta-narrative review and a thematic narrative strategy selected for this thesis is that instead of focussing on research traditions it discusses the key themes and debates found in literature. This is because the modern history of private education reform in China covers roughly four decades, which means that literature that studies it is even younger. Although there are undoubtedly a multitude of publications, it is too early to talk about a shift in paradigms that are a common focus of a meta-narrative review (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). In this review, several key themes, as well as points of contention, were found by looking at Chinese private education reform through the lens of different research fields in different countries. In addition, it is worth noting that key publications in relation to the varying ideas of social justice in private education and the role it plays in society, as well as the potential tensions between the roles of private and public education were also reviewed in the Introduction of this thesis to provide a wider background. The literature regarding the meaning of public policy is included later in this Chapter where it serves the purpose of introducing the conceptual framework for the analysis of private education reform policies.

Both English and Mandarin publications were included by searching through several online libraries using key words “China”, “private education”, “private schools”, “reform”, “education policy”, “private education development”, “private education policy”, “private education market” and “international private education” in different combinations. The initial search yielded over 500 relevant publications, which would not have been feasible, or required, to assess for the purposes of a thematic narrative review as “it may not be necessary to locate every available study because, for example, the results of a conceptual synthesis will not change if ten rather than five studies contain the same concept” (Thomas and Harden, 2008;
Thus, the principle of conceptual saturation was employed as a guiding principle for selecting relevant publications. This means that the goal of this review was “to provide an overview and synthesize the current empirical research” (Snyder and Engstrom, 2016, p.351) into broader categories around the key issues within which the academic discussion took place. To this end, the first step towards determining the key themes was undertaken in Peking University Library which hosts yearly reports on private education development, government education reform reports and historical publications unavailable in electronic formats. Books, rather than articles, were selected at this stage to grasp the depth of the topic necessary for conceptual saturation. Following the assessment of the contents, focus and research objectives of the reports, the broad descriptive themes were determined to be the history of private education reform, the process of education decentralisation in China, economics of private education development and the role private schools play in Chinese education modernisation.

Subsequently, an electronic search for additional publications was performed targeting these topics to uncover the points of contention and generate the analytical themes for the thematic narrative review. Only peer-reviewed academic publications were consulted to maintain the quality of the review and the libraries searched included Peking University Library, Cambridge University Library, LSE Library, the British Library, and the National Library of China. At this stage, an additional focus on regional specifics of Chinese private education development was discovered to be a big part of relevant literature, so the review was expanded accordingly. Finally, the topic was situated within the broader field of private education research and several gaps in literature were identified to assist in the formulation of research questions for this thesis.

**Key themes and literature debates**

Three main themes were identified in this review, which are 1) the reasons why private education is believed to have been re-encouraged by the Chinese government following the Opening-up reforms, 2) the role private education reform played in modernising the Chinese education system, and 3) local specifics of private education reform policies and the issues of education inequality.

1. **Reasons for private education reform and the growth of private education**

The first prominent theme in literature addressing private education reform in China is exploring the reasons behind the re-introduction of the private sector into the socialist education system plus the reasons behind the rapid increase in the number of private schools and private
school students throughout the reform period that was shown by the statistical data in the previous section.

**Lack of state resources**

One of the most widely discussed reasons was the lack of state resources to meet the needs of Chinese education (Yang and Tao, 2001; Liu, 2011; Tao, 2011; Que, 2020). It was argued that historically, private education was reintroduced due to the need to provide education to the masses when the Chinese economy was struggling and resources were limited (Liu, 2011). In the early stages of the private education reform, over 200 million students were attending about one million schools in China which led to massive funding shortages (Lin, 1999, p.17). According to Que (2020, p.22) private education in China had to respond to the disparity of education funding and supply education resources to regions where “the difference in funding resulted in relative weakness of educational development”. Hua (2009) and Tao (2011) also argued that private education emerged to share education costs and supplement state education through multi-channel investment.

However, with the growing strength of public education provision and the reduced need to make up for the lack of financial investment (Hua, 2009), some scholars believed that with the increasing restrictions private education reform in China would be taking an “exit strategy” (Hu, 2019) which means private education would be gradually eliminated as no longer necessary. Furthermore, the growing investment in public education was said to put pressure on private schools in terms of teacher salaries (Hua, 2009) and increasing competition with “government-run schools’ monopoly on school operations” (Bing, 2009, p.4). According to Schulte (2017, p.5) private education reform in China differed significantly from other developmental contexts where public schooling was inaccessible or low-quality. Indeed, public schools, when accessible, were often considered the best choice (Wu, 2012; Schulte, 2017). This means that private schools had to compete with an increasingly well-equipped public education by means other than just resources in order to attract students.

From this debate, an argument emerged that private education reform encouraged private schools to become more than just a resource supplement for the lack of state education (Dong, 2018). With the encouragement from the government, private education was said to be “a landmark achievement of reform and opening up in the new era” (Dong, 2018) with the focus on education internationalisation and modernisation. This argument is present in a large body
of literature that discussed the overall role private education reform played in education modernisation in China which will be discussed in the next section of this literature review.

**Education decentralisation**

The second reason for the reintroduction of private education was education decentralisation which began in China following the start of the Opening-up reforms with the aim to decentralize education funding (Hawkins, 2000). Financial decentralisation required regional authorities to source local funding to implement national projects which resulted in the rapid increase in funding disparities among different regions (Ngok, 2007; Mok and Ngok, 2008; Qi, 2017). Decentralised responsibilities for education development projects were also said to contribute to education inequalities (Bray and Borevskaya, 2010). As a result, private education was seen as an opportunity to compensate for financial disparities and attract more money into regional education development projects (Ngok, 2007; Qi, 2011; Wang and Chan; 2015). Some scholars argued that the growing strength of private education weakened state control over schools and introduced greater flexibility into the education system (Mok, 1997; Ngok and Chan, 2003). Overall, an agreement seems to be that education decentralisation certainly played a major role in promoting private education reform and facilitating the development of private schools in China.

On the other hand, some scholars questioned the true extent of education decentralisation in China since policies on decentralised management were less clear (Hanson, 1998; Hawkins, 2000). Chan and Wang (2009) also said that private education development was the result of controlled decentralisation rather than a bottom-up initiative due to the desire of the central government to maintain control over the education system. This led to the debates over the degree of autonomy local governments and private schools truly acquired in the process of education decentralisation (Wang and Chan, 2015; Painter and Mok; 2017). According to Wang and Chan (2015, p.97), there was “a delicate balance between autonomy and dependency” in the private education reform and no private school was completely autonomous or completely independent from the state.

**Economic transformation and the growth of middle class**

The third reason for the reintroduction of private education mentioned by the literature was China’s economic transformation which required diverse talents and human capital (Yang and Tao, 2001; Yuan, 2015; Zhang, 2012). Double-digit GNP growth, large increases in foreign
investment, rise in per capita income following the Opening-up reforms were said to contribute to economic diversification (Lin, 1999). Under these circumstances, the development of private education was argued to be the result of China’s growing openness and the needs of a market-oriented economy (Bing, 2009; Hua, 2009; Wiseman and Huang, 2011).

In addition to the country’s demand for a knowledge-based economy, it was argued that diversified economic patterns (Zhang, 2012) then attracted private funds into the education industry to meet different education requirements of the Chinese people (Lin, 1999; Yang and Tao, 2001). According to Lin (1999, p.20), as early as the 1990s economic reforms brought about a shift of social values towards self-actualization, economic interests, and social prestige. An emerging private education sector was seen as having the “potential for making big money” (ibid, p.20) which attracted entrepreneurs in China to set up numerous private schools. Yang (2003) concurred that organisers of private schools often saw themselves as investors rather than educators. Wiseman and Huang (2011) argued that with the development of private education, China went through education marketisation process which had a positive impact on the returns to education.

The needs of the growing middle class of Chinese families were also changing along with the economic trends (Lin, 1999; Yu and Ding, 2011; Hu, 2019). Opening-up reforms and the reintroduction of market economy mechanisms led to the emergence of a new class of people who wanted better education opportunities for their children and had the means to pay (Lin, 1999, p.18). In the 1990s, there were more than 50 thousand millionaires in China (Cheng, 1997, p.28) and the number of wealthy Chinese families was growing rapidly. Hua (2009, p.42) also pointed out that private schools catered not only to the children of the rich and that “the great majority of families of students studying in private schools certainly do not pertain to social strata with power and influence”. Research has shown that Chinese families had diversified educational needs, including access to international education, that private schools were equipped to meet. Hu (2019) argued that because people of different classes, interests and values had different educational demands the support private education received throughout the reform was not insignificant.

2. The role of private education reform in education modernisation in China

The second theme is the role of private schools in education modernisation in China, with the private education sector being seen by some scholars as the driver of education modernisation
It was argued that private education had sufficient incentives and resources to engage in innovative education (Lin, 1999; Tao, 2011) while public education could learn from its successes and failures (Yuan, 2015; Que, 2020). These incentives stemmed from the previously discussed needs of the Chinese families who made the choice to send their children to private schools. Private education was also said to have played a role in demonstrating high-quality teaching and motivating public schools which was conducive to reform (Yang and Tao, 2001; Zhang, 2012, p.11.; Que, 2020, p.22). From the beginning of re-emergence of the private education sector in China, private schools focussed on *quality education* which included comprehensive character development, aesthetic education, computer skills and modern education concepts in contrast to the so-called *exam education* provided by public schools (Cheng, 1997). In addition, private schools were found to integrate extracurricular tutoring into their services which was found to increase student learning outcomes (Wu, 2012; Schulte, 2017). Several scholars argued that private education played a key role in education internationalisation in China as part of education modernisation (Schulte, 2017; Su, 2019). According to the report by Deloitte (2012), private high schools experienced a growing demand for international education due to a roughly 25% annual increase in the number of Chinese students wanting to study abroad.

On the other hand, the challenges of private education reform were found to create obstacles for education modernisation in China. Scholars highlighted issues related to complicated admission policies (Liu, 2011), lack of experimentation (Tao, 2011), overly strict supervision standards (Yang and Tao, 2001), as well as contradictions between national regulations and local diversification policies (Hu, 2019). According to Yang (2009, p. 24) education authorities have been “*inflexible in addressing hot issues and public concerns*” related to private education development which caused obstacles for education modernisation. Hua (2009, p.44) argued a similar point by saying that there was a lack of “*clear-cut explanations on issues of common concern in private education circles*”. Dong (2020, p.354) also pointed out that classified management system requires improvement due to “*conceptual discrimination and institutional exclusion*” of for-profit private schools.

3. **Regional specifics of private education reform and education inequality**

A significant body of literature, particularly when it comes to Mandarin-language literature, focussed on evaluating the regional differences in private education reform and development. This is because China is a very geographically, socially, and historically diverse country, as
well as due to the impact of education decentralisation mentioned above (Hua, 2009; Wang and Chan, 2015). According to Liu (2011), local governments played a big role in promoting local characteristics while complying with national policies. Widely researched cases included Shanghai (Hu et al., 2010; Zhang, 2012; Liu, 2011), Beijing (Hu et al., 2010; Schulte, 2017) and Hainan (Liu, 2011). Some scholars argued that Shanghai’s education reform began relatively late (Zhang, 2012) but in the statistics of high school entrance examination results in Shanghai most outstanding students are from private schools (Que, 2020). Hainan received a lot of attention from Chinese scholars recently due to its attractive Sino-foreign joint venture policies (Liu, 2011). Beijing was said to have used private education to promote the reform of public schools (Hu et al., 2010) while private schools were strictly controlled by the government (Schulte, 2017, p.). Private education in poorer provinces, such as Yunnan, was found to receive greater flexibility and encouragement from the state (Schulte, 2017).

A large body of research dedicated to local private education development focussed on the issue of education inequality (Yang, 2009; Hu, 2019). In some provinces, such as Henan, the quality of private schools was said to be relatively poor and the gap between private schools in rural and urban areas was said to be significant (Hua, 2009; Hu, 2019). According to Yang (2009, p.13) this caused debates involving school management teams, government officials, lawyers, and journalists from Henan. However, some argued that the growth of private education contributed to narrowing the education gap faced by the children of migrants (Yang, 2009; Schulte, 2017). According to Hu et. al (2010) private schools expanded the scale of education opportunities and played a considerable part in the task of educating the children of the “floating population”, which is how internal migrants are described in China. Hua (2009, p.42) also argued that the role of private education in promoting education equity was overlooked by scholars and that financial pressure on the government would have been much greater without the contributions from the private sector which in turn would have restricted its ability to create equitable education opportunities.

**Chinese reforms as part of private education research**

When it comes to situating studies on Chinese private education system within the broader field of private education reform, similar themes can be found. For example, issues of education decentralisation and market competition were studied within the context of private education research (James and Levin, 1989) which was also closely connected to the issue of education equity (Lin, 1999; Henderson et al., 2020). In particular, the questions of school choice and
equal education opportunities have been previously explored (Brewster, 1986; Kane, 1992). Research on private education reform in China can contribute to these debates by expanding our understanding of the issues of school choice, decentralised education, and marketization of education in different contexts.

Wiseman and Huang (2011, p.15) argued that Chinese education policy reforms “will continue to be of central importance in comparative education research”. Furthermore, Day et al. (2020, p.43) pointed out potential benefits of comparative research on private education provision in different contexts. For example, Chinese experiences could offer an insight into the relationship between attending a private school and increased learning outcomes, which has been a point of contention for private education researchers (Klees, 2018; Gruijters, Alcott and Rose, 2020; Day et al., 2020). Of course, comparative education policy research also warns against the dangers of policy transfer outside of its original context (Crossley, 2008) which means that the outcomes of the private education reform in China may not be replicable in a different region.

Overall, the review of relevant literature has shown that private education reform in China has attracted a lot of attention from scholars in different fields and resulted in several debates over the reasons for its reintroduction and the role private schools played in the socialist education system in China. It was made clear that the economic and social consequences of the Opening up reforms, growing socioeconomic and regional inequality and education decentralisation were key factors affecting the development of Chinese private schools in addition to policy imperatives. Thus, the literature provided several answers to the questions why private education was reintroduced and what affected its growth and expansion in the Chinese context.

2.2 Literature gaps and the research questions for this thesis

This section explores the gaps in existing literature and uses the insights gained from the history of private education reform, statistical data on private education development in modern China and literature analysis to formulate the research questions for this thesis. Given that the reintroduced private education sector in China is only about forty years old, it is unsurprising that research on this topic is still catching up with the rapid changes prompted by private education reforms. The first literature gap is the lack of theory-driven research (Cheng, 1997; Yang and Tao, 2001) which creates a challenge of finding a suitable theoretical framework to incorporate the complexity of Chinese private education policy analysis. To a degree, this can be attributed to the fact that Western-born theories may not always be applicable to the Chinese
context. Only recently have sinologists moved on from the construction of China as an exotic or lacking other that is to be compared to the West using a deficit model (Weber, 1951; Elvin, 1973), to understanding China's experience on its own merits (Peerenboom, 2014; Yang, 2009). China’s relative success in dealing with the economic challenges and breakneck economic growth gave rise to the debate regarding the advantages of the Chinese developmental path (Pan, 2011; Naughton, 2010) and echoed the discussion of the so-called Beijing consensus (Ramo, 2004), which later evolved into the debate around the China model of development (Yang, 2009). This discussion included the assessment of the Chinese education system reforms as one of the key factors in China's modernisation and poverty reduction (Chen and Wang, 2001; Zhang and Zhao, 2006; Fan et al., 2004). However, there is still a lack of theory-based research on the topic of private education reform.

Secondly, there is also a lack of up-to-date research on Chinese private education reform. A literature review titled “The role and impact of private schools in developing countries” commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and published in 2014 highlighted gaps in literature when it comes to private education research in developing countries. Firstly, the review found “a lack of data on the true extent and diverse nature of private schools” (Day et al., 2014, p.3) with most evidence coming from South Asia. This may be due to the communication gap between Western and Chinese scholars. A large body of literature, dedicated to education reforms in general and private education in particular, is being written by Chinese scholars in Mandarin. Without available translations, Mandarin language skills and knowledge of how to access Chinese research databases it is impossible to integrate that literature in a paper written in English for an international audience. In addition to this lack of secondary research integration, access to primary data in China is significantly restricted. Wiseman and Huang (2011, p.3) argued that Western education researchers have had difficulties accessing “large-scale data on Chinese education ... through significant nation-level testing data or through cross-nationally comparative educational assessments”. For example, the Ministry of Education Statistical Database is behind a paywall accessible only to those who can make payments by WeChat or Alipay in RMB.

Thirdly, there is a lack of research “on the effect of international companies or chains of private schools” (Day et al., 2014) according to the UK Department for International Development. This is, indeed, a complicated topic to address even for China-based scholars due to the sensitivity of data and difficulties of access to education investment groups in China. Finally,
there seems to be less research available on secondary private education compared to higher private education. This imbalance may be because higher education institutions are more accessible and staff who work there are more integrated into the global academic community than secondary school teachers and school principals. With this in mind, this thesis focussed on private primary and secondary education and the implementation of the private education reform. By evaluating the gaps in existing literature and the main themes of Chinese private education research, it was made clear that the question of why private education was reintroduced and why the reform process went the way it did can be answered by analysing the aims and objectives of Chinese policymakers. In other words, it is the question of what private education reform in China aimed to achieve. Given that plenty of research has been carried out on the earlier stages of the private education reform, this thesis focussed on the recent polices and the current agenda of Chinese private education reform. Thus, the first question is aimed to answer was “what does current private education reform in China aim to achieve?”

The second question aimed at rectifying the lack of up-to-date empirical studies on policy implementation in Chinese private schools. Statistical analysis in the previous chapter has indicated that private education has been an attractive investment avenue as well as a growing and dynamic market. It means that policy alone could not account for the realities of Chinese private education industry. The literature review has also shown that few studies written about Chinese private education in English gained access to up-to-date empirical data, specifically access to Chinese education investment groups and local private schools. Yet analysing such data is essential to understanding not only what the goals of Chinese private education reform were but also what made it possible for private schools to evolve into a sustainable industry. To gain an insight into this issue, the second question this thesis aimed to address was “in what way and to what extent are the changes introduced by policymakers interpreted and implemented at the school level?”

To address the problem of the lack of theories applicable to the research of Chinese private education, the next section of this chapter will argue that the framework of the capability approach offers a suitable theoretical lens for the data analysis necessary to answer the research questions formulated above.
2.3. The lens of capability approach as theoretical framework

To begin with, it will be argued that the capability approach is a suitable conceptual framework for this thesis because it applies to both the analysis of private education reform policies and their implementation in school contexts. This means that the language of the capability approach can unite the two research questions and offer consistency of analysis for understanding what the reform aimed to achieve and how it was being interpreted and implemented in private schools in China. This is because the framework of capabilities can and has been applied to assessing both policy objectives and policy outcomes. The second reason is the conceptual flexibility of the capability approach which can address the problem of transferability by avoiding the bias of more specific theories rooted in ideas that might not apply outside of the cultural, social, and political context in which they were conceived. This is because the capability approach has not been conceived as a theory of justice (Sen, 1995) which means it is a framework applicable to the variety of contexts, including China. To this end, the key terms of the capability approach, such as the concepts of capabilities, functionings, resources and conversion factors are first defined. Second, the notion of education capabilities is explored to argue that the capability approach is a suitable framework specifically for education policy analysis. Third, the applicability of the capability approach to the Chinese context is assessed followed by the existing critiques and questions that emerged from the application of the capability approach to the analysis of education policymaking in China.

Defining the key terms

Prior to getting into details about the suitability of capability approach to the study of private education reform in China, it is important to define several key terms. The capability approach, developed by Amartya Sen, is “a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society” (Robeyns, 2005, p.94). It has been applied to the studies of education (Unterhalter, 2003, 2005; Walker 2005, 2019; Terzi 2005; Barnett, 2021) and was argued to be a suitable framework for education policy analysis (Sen, 1997; Robeyns, 2006; Terzi, 2005; Barnett, 2021). As Robeyns (2006, p.371) pointed out “by having a common theoretical framework that allows for a range of applications, including standard quantitative ones and standard qualitative ones, the capability approach opens up a truly interdisciplinary space in the study of well-being, inequality, justice and public policies”. Thus, the capability
approach is a conceptual framework applicable to interdisciplinary topics with the focus on policy analysis.

**Capabilities vs functionings**

According to Sen (2005, p.152), “* capabilities can be seen, broadly, as freedoms of particular kinds”. In other words, he defines capabilities as freedoms to pursue the beings and doings that individuals consider of value. Having a capability means being free to make a choice to lead a meaningful life according to one’s notion of what constitutes meaning. The outcomes of such individual choices are functionings that result from a combination of having a capability and the agency necessary to exercise the capability. In Robeyn’s words, “the distinction between achieved functionings and capabilities is between the realized and the effectively possible” (Robeyns, 2005, p.95). To illustrate, two individuals may both not have a university degree. The first individual may be unable to apply for university education due to having caring responsibilities towards family members while the second individual may be making a choice not to apply to any university because he sees no value of having a university diploma. While the functioning is the same i.e., both individuals do not attend a university, their capabilities are clearly different. The second individual, should he wished to do so, could have applied, and possibly completed a university course while the first individual’s freedom to make such choice was constrained by their family circumstances.

Figure 13 illustrates this relationship between capabilities and functionings within the framework of the capability approach. Ultimately, to get an outcome, a combination of freedom and choice is necessary (Sen, 1997, 2005). Without human agency, capabilities remain in the domain of the possible. Yet an important distinction must be drawn between a capability and a skill. A skill is typically defined as the ability to do something well and as such, may be developed to various degrees of proficiency. This means that a skill is a measurable outcome of learning. Capability, on the other hand, is the freedom necessary to do something which within the framework of Sen’s approach (2005), is to pursue an outcome that an individual considers meaningful. Thus, capability development in schools means enabling students to pursue meaningful outcomes which is different from skills that are specific trained abilities.
To illustrate, an award in robotics competition would be the evidence of student skill. At the same time, student awareness of robotics competitions, availability of facilities to prepare for such competitions in schools, and organisation of student robotics clubs would all indicate a capability.

**Capability formation: resources and conversion factors**

The process of capability formation, according to Sen (1995, 2005), consists of *available resources and conversion factors* as shown by Figure 14. The notion of resources is easily explained: they are tangible and non-tangible things such as hardware facilities, equipment, human resources. For example, a capability to call someone on the phone cannot be realised without having a device we call “phone”. In terms of education capabilities, typical resources would include school buildings, classrooms, books, teachers, computers, and other things that may be necessary for learning. Conversion factors are defined as “internal as well as external characteristics that can influence the extent to which capabilities can be enjoyed and functionings obtained” (Velástegui, 2020, p.199). Sen (1995) describes conversion factors such as personal heterogeneities, environmental diversities, family distributions, variations in relational perspectives and differences in social climate. These may include institutional arrangements, policies, personal relationships, environmental circumstances, and a plethora of other factors that would influence an individual’s ability to utilise resources. As an example, when it comes to a capability to drive a car, having a vehicle means having the necessary resource but without having driving lessons and obtaining a license as conversion factors, one is unlikely to successfully exercise a car-driving capability.

There is no exhaustive list of specified conversion factors. However, just like capabilities, conversion factors may be combined into types, which are commonly divided into personal, social, and environmental (Robeyns, 2003; Nambiar, 2013). In education contexts, characteristics like health and intelligence are personal conversion factors that have an impact on individual students. For example, a student who is physically impaired would have a lower chance of making use of a robotics lab than a student who is perfectly healthy, provided all other factors are equal. Individual conversion factors include but are not limited to things like
physical and mental health, previously acquired skills, and other individual characteristics and circumstances that make our societies diverse. Thus, by taking individual conversion factors into account, the capability approach captures “the extent of freedom open to a person” (Basu, 1987, p.75) and the effect human diversity has on the conversion of resources into capabilities (Walker, 2006, p.167).

For the purposes of evaluating policy implementation in private schools, personal conversion factors may be considered internal which means they are relevant to individual students but not illustrative of a school as a whole. On the other hand, social and environmental conversion factors may be conceived of as external. Environmental conversion factors include both natural and artificial environmental characteristics, such as climate and infrastructure. However, the analysis of environmental conversion factors would require a different set of data, such as geological surveys, urban development, and planning data, all of which goes beyond the scope of what this research aims to achieve. Social conversion factors include things like policies and regulations, hierarchies, family structures and expectations, and cultural norms (Robeyns, 2003). In other words, social conversion factors in Chinese private schools include contextual policy interpretations and factors influencing policy implementation in different localities. Thus, social conversion factors have been selected as the focus of this research.

**The use of capability approach in education policy analysis**

This section argues that conceptualising education through the prism of capability is helpful because it incorporates human agency into education research by focussing not only on the resources that students are provided with but also on the choices they do or do not make, as well as the factors that might influence such choices. Sen (1995, p. 44) called education a basic capability or, specifically, several “centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well-being”. This means people can use education to develop other capabilities and to help others or contribute to the society. Walker (2006, p.168) saw education within the capability approach as “an unqualified good for human development freedom”. For example, having the freedom to pursue university education then opens doors for an individual to socialise with other university-educated people, to qualify for high-skilled jobs in their chosen field and to increase their level of well-being. Thus, the capability approach requires that education is seen as a complex good capable of forming and enhancing other human capabilities, in addition to being intrinsically valuable. Therefore, the instrumental value of education in capability approach goes beyond seeing education as only a resource for national development (Brighouse,
2000) or the production of measurable educational outputs, such as test results (Terzi, 2007). By being conceptualised as a basic capability, education becomes not only a set of capabilities but also a way to gain access to other freedoms.

There is no specified list of education capabilities in Sen’s approach to conceptualising education. He is insistent that determining a capability list would “deny the possibility of progress in social understanding, and also go against the productive role of public discussion, social agitation, and open debates” (Sen, 2005, p.160). This stance is reasonable given that the capability approach, by its nature, is a conceptual framework and not a theory. It does not aim to explain issues such as inequality or wellbeing, instead it “provides concepts and a framework that can help to conceptualize and evaluate these phenomena” (Robeyns, 2006, p.353). For example, education capabilities include being literate and able to go to school as well as freedoms to pursue a university education and develop various skills. This does not mean that these capabilities are necessarily turned into functionings. As Robeyns (2005, p.101) pointed out, “as a liberal philosophical framework, the capability approach respects people’s different ideas of the good life, and this is why in principle capability, and not achieved functioning, is the appropriate political goal”. Thus, the capability approach has individual values and choices at its centre which explains why Sen would see a fixed list of capabilities as inapplicable to the broad range of contexts and not accounting for human diversity.

However, Sen did not argue against listing capabilities for the purpose of a particular study or an evaluative exercise if the criteria for capability selection are clear and reasonable. In his own words, “lists of capabilities have to be used for various purposes, and so long as we understand what we are doing (and, in particular, that we are getting a list for a particular reason, related to assessment, evaluation, or critique), we do not put ourselves against other lists that may be relevant or useful for other purposes” (Sen, 2005, p.159). For example, the Human Development Index\(^\text{26}\), developed with the influence of the capability approach, measures human development based on the selection of core well-being indicators, such as long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. When it comes to policy studies, the capability approach “evaluates policies according to their impact on people’s capabilities” (Robeyns, 2005, p.95). Therefore, for the purpose of policy evaluation, focussing on

\(^{26}\text{In 1990 the first Human Development Report was published. Its aim was to re-conceptualise the notion of development by looking at human freedoms and choices in different countries instead of focussing solely on economic growth (UNDP, 2022).}\)
capabilities that a chosen policy aims to address would be a valid way of defining the scope of a study without going against the basic principle of the capability approach.

Applying the concept of education capabilities to education policy analysis provides an opportunity to consider the factors that affect the way education policies are implemented and the extent to which student freedoms are expanded or restricted by education policy changes. This can be done by focusing on the process of capability formation in education settings and the distinction between education capabilities and education outcomes. Robeyns (2005) argued that the capability approach is an appropriate framework for policy assessment, including policy designs and social change proposals. It was used for that purpose in the works of Lorgelly et. al (2008), Adler and Fleurbaey (2016), Alkire (2015) and Ai-Thu Dang (2014). These studies did not focus specifically on education policy but instead employed the capability approach for measuring well-being and using it to create an evidence base for policymaking. However, they showed that defining human well-being through capabilities is gradually becoming accepted in policy research. For instance, Nussbaum (2000) suggested that it is a function of the government to provide basic capabilities to all members of the society to ensure an opportunity for them to choose a fully human good life. When it comes to education policy research, Brighouse (2000) argued that autonomy must be seen as a critical element in designing education policy. By incorporating human agency into the process of developing capabilities, the capability approach allows us to “sort out arguments that demand countries build education systems only to advance national skills development and competition” (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007, p.243). Education policy is thus recognised as one of the critical factors in how and what education capabilities are being developed or limited because it creates the conditions for learners to contest inequality and what resources it offers to generate more extensive educational opportunities.

The second argument for the use of the capability approach in education policy analysis comes from Sen (2005, p.153) who said that the capability approach “resists an overconcentration on means (such as incomes and primary goods) that can be found in some theories of justice (e.g., in the Rawlsian Difference Principle)”. This has a significant implication for education policy analysis by including factors other than resource allocation into policy design. Given that Sen views capabilities as freedoms to be or do what one considers valuable, the capability approach allows us to ask the question of what freedoms related to being in addition to doing the policy aims to expand or restrict. Moreover, Unterhalter (2017, p.2) argued that educational
relationships are “social, emotional, epistemological, normative, political, cultural and economic” and therefore many aspects of education “defy measurement”. For instance, capabilities related to citizenship are beings rather than doings and their functionings are tricky to measure. As Walker (2006, p.167) explains, “at issue for education is that economic matters are inseparable from matters of culture and society”. That is to argue that if we focus on education as means to an end and educational achievements as only measurable outcomes of one’s labour, then we risk overlooking a large group of capabilities that are being developed or not as the result of the education reform policies.

Thirdly, Walker and Unterhalter (2007) noted that policy environments may enable individual functionings by promoting a person’s relative advantage in each society. In other words, policies are linked to the institutions, which, according to Sen (1995) critically determine existing capabilities and prospects. Flores-Crespo (2007) noted that evaluating the institutional aspect offers an essential insight into the formative or restrictive nature of education capabilities. This evaluative capacity permits employing the capability approach to carry out policy analysis. According to Flores-Crespo (2007, p.60), it may also “be used for reformulating public actions and for correcting policy failures that may lead to inequality”. In terms of education policy, he argued that it may be instrumental in creating the conditions to allow education to enhance other capabilities (Flores-Crespo, 2002). Sen (1995, p.18) agreed with this point of view in his book Development as Freedom.

What is more, there is also a temporal dimension to capability development. Comim (2003) proposed to add the category of becoming to the definition of capabilities as beings and doings. Comim (2003) argued that the importance of assessing capability formation over time is particularly relevant to education capabilities because learning is “a process of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’ over a life course, and through cycles of schooling” that is a non-linear process. Factors other than reform and policy implementation, such as choices of others “might reflect some path dependence according to peoples’ own histories and evolution of their capacity of deliberation” (Comim, 2003, p.2). This means that capability formation directly resulting from education policy reform is not a foregone conclusion.

Considering the abovementioned arguments, the capability approach was chosen as the conceptual framework that could be applied to both analysing the aims of private education reform and the process of its implementation in private schools. The focus on the process of capability formation provides an opportunity to see education policy as one of the factors
affecting the development of education capabilities. Thus, it requires the analysis of a variety of contexts to determine what conversion factors play a role in promoting or restricting student capabilities and to what extent education reform policies have an impact on how private schools deliver diverse educational choices.

**Applicability to the Chinese context**

This section argues that looking at private education reform policies in China through the lens of the capability approach is helpful for several reasons. First, the capability approach provides the evaluative framework to explore “*a different set of questions about education*” (Walker, 2006, p.164). By that Walker meant its ability to offer an alternative to “*neoliberal human capital interpretations of education as only for economic productivity and employment*” (Walker, 2006, p.164). That is not to say that human capital theory is misguided in evaluating education policies from the perspective of their effectiveness in expanding market and employment opportunities. In fact, this corresponds with Sen’s (2007) view of education as a basic capability that supports the development of other capabilities, including capabilities related to success on the labour market. However, this view has been rightly pointed out to be too limiting by Dreze and Sen (2002, p.184) who argued that “*bettering of a human life does not have to be justified by showing that a person with a better life is also a better producer*”. Within the Chinese context in particular, free market mechanisms operate under the constrains of socialist governance. What this means is that education reform is not seen solely as a human capital development mechanism, it is also the responsibility of the socialist state to provide education opportunities that meet both the needs of the country and the expectation of the people. Thus, the goals of private education reform in China are likely to be multifaceted and that analysis requires the use of a conceptual framework that can account for the coexistence of public and private schools in socialist education system.

Secondly, Sen (1995) argued that evaluating education capabilities not educational outcomes is more helpful in assessing education policies because of the unavoidable differences in social identities of individuals. Though we often think of teachers as educators and students as being educated, it would be wrong to assume that any capability-building education policy would have the direct intended effect. To begin with, students are individuals capable of making “*different choices following their different ideas of the good life*” (Robeyns, 2005, p.101). Indeed, any teacher would confirm that there are never two students in one class with exactly the same educational outcomes. This is not only because of the differences in choices people
make with regards to their education but also because people may “need different amounts and different kinds of goods to reach the same levels of well-being or advantage” (Robeyns, 2005, p.97). When it comes to private education reform in China, evaluating it from the perspective of functionings might be misguided because proving a causal relationship between policy instruments and individual education functionings requires a robust statistical dataset, which is simply not accessible in China.

Furthermore, Unterhalter (2003, p. 16) also warned against assuming that “education (is) simply and unproblematically enhancing capabilities in question” without paying due attention to the failures of school management. This is particularly true in private education where school management has considerably more flexibility and decision-making power in school running affairs than public school administration would. With this in mind, it is necessary to “keep checking how well we are doing in schools and education policy implementation” because education capabilities may be both diminished and expanded when different conversion factors play a role (Walker, 2006, p.168). In China, public education is under severe constraints from the examination system in terms of curriculum provision and lacks the freedom to hire and fire teaching staff supplied by the Ministry of Education. Private schools, on the other hand, have more leeway in HR matters, student admission, curriculum development and resource allocation as was shown by the policy overview in chapter one. Thus, the capability approach allows including private school management and, more importantly, the management of Chinese education investment groups, into policy implementation analysis.

In addition, due to the absence of the pre-determined list of education capabilities, the framework of the capability approach allows adapting the analysis to the Chinese context by focussing on education capabilities promoted or restricted specifically by the Chinese education reforms. According to Laruffa (2020, p.10) education can play five different roles in capability development. Firstly, it’s direct contribution to human wellbeing which is an intrinsic role. This means that education policy could be promoting non-instrumental capabilities that nevertheless would be valuable for individuals on their own. For example, freedom to develop sports skills, learn traditional Chinese arts like calligraphy or understand classical Chinese poems may not necessarily result in art or sport related employment for most students. However, individuals may value these freedoms due to deriving pleasure from engaging in art or sport-related education activities. The second is the personal economic role which means using education to improve one’s future economic opportunities. For example,
education policy that facilitates career guidance or engagement in a variety of industry-based education in schools would facilitate individual employment in the chosen field.

The third role that Laruffa (2020) described is the economic collective role. This means the capacity of education systems to provide skilled labour for economic growth. For example, education informatisation and skill development that is required by developing sectors in the economy. In China, that would be the focus on promoting student skills required for the development of knowledge economy. The fourth role is a non-economic personal role education plays by developing individual autonomy. According to Laruffa (2020, p.10) this means developing a conception of the good life. For example, providing students with freedoms to experience and learn about a variety of societies, countries, and lifestyles would expand their freedom to conceptualise what a good life would mean for them personally. Finally, the fifth role is a non-economic collective role which means education expanding collective autonomy. In Chinese context, this would mean citizenship education which promotes the freedom to develop national identity.

Finally, the capability approach addresses the question of transferability of “Western” theories and their applicability to a different culture, a different society. Huntington (1996, p.71) claimed that “a sense of individualism and a tradition of individual rights and liberties” are “unique among civilized societies”. However, it seems presumptuous to argue that all societies must prioritise a list of values agreed upon by a particular group of people at a particular time, regardless of what their members may or may not consider valuable. Sen (2005, p.161) argued that a concept of “universality that is meant to underlie the notion of human rights is profoundly mistaken”. Burke (quoted in Lukes, 1997, p. 238) also claimed that “the liberties and the restrictions vary with times and circumstances, and admit of infinite modifications, that cannot be settled upon any abstract rule”. Contrary to the universality claims of human rights theorists, the capability approach leaves plenty of space for the realistic diversity in human values and choices. Robeyns (2005, p.108) argued that “on the theoretical level, the capability approach does account for social relations and the constraints and opportunities of societal structures and institutions on individuals”. After all, capability is only realised into a functioning when an individual exercises their agency to pursue a meaningful outcome. What this implies is that freedom to pursue a meaningful life is what drives human development. If we place people within the predetermined framework of values, regardless of the purity of our intentions, we will be creating “unfreedom” by eliminating choice from the equation. Nussbaum (2000, p.31)
drew attention to the fact that “material as well as cultural circumstances”, i.e. conversion factors, “affect the inner lives of people: what they hope for, what they love, what they fear, as well as what they are able to do”. By not having a defined list of capabilities and conversion factors, the capability approach offers the necessary flexibility to consider the cultural specifics of the society in question.

Sen (2005) goes even further by arguing that not only differences between different societies must be accounted for but also the fact that no culture is truly homogenous must also be considered. He pointed out that “what are taken to be ‘foreign’ criticisms often correspond to internal criticisms from non-mainstream groups” (Sen, 2005, p.162). In large countries such as China this kind of cultural diversity is obvious. It would be false to assume that the same social arrangements exist in schools in the capital city of Beijing as they do in Shanghai, Guangzhou or in rural Gansu, as different schools cater to different social groups which means that there may be different “understandings of wellbeing, agency, tacit and applied knowledge, criticality, creativity, equality and public good” (Unterhalter, 2017, p.2). In brief, education capability formation depends in part on social relationships that, in turn, are context-dependent entities. Having considered all the above, it can be argued that the capability approach is not only suitable for the Chinese context but also advantageous due to its flexibility in defining education capabilities and the focus on social conversion factors.

With this in mind, the research questions for this thesis were reformulated using the concepts of the capability approach but preserving the original intent:

1. **To what extent are the reform objectives for private primary and secondary education in China capability-enhancing?**

2. **In what way has local interpretation and implementation of the private education reform affected the process of capability formation in Chinese private schools?**

**Emerging questions and critiques of the capability approach**

Looking at education policy through the lens of capability approach results in two research challenges. The first is, of course, the issue of resource conceptualisation, including things like hardware facilities, teaching staff and financial support. Robeyns (2017, p.14) called these “capability inputs” which the policy facilitates if it aims to promote education capabilities. However, Sen (1995, p.33) explained that “equalizing ownership of resources
... need not equalize the substantive freedoms enjoyed by different persons, since there can be significant variations in the conversion (cultural, social, recognitional) of resources and primary goods into freedoms”. Therefore, the second, less tangible, issue that often evades quantitative policy assessment is the relationship between capability inputs and “the ability of each individual to convert the resources available to her into valued capabilities” (Walker, 2006, p.166). This relationship depends on the conversion factors that make it possible for individuals to turn resources into capabilities. The study of conversion factors is therefore the study of capability formation, which is the process dependent on both resources and contextual circumstances that facilitate or restrict the conversion of resources into capabilities. For example, the fact that a school purchased equipment that would potentially allow students to build a working robot does not directly support the claim that this school is providing students with capabilities to pursue robotics competency. In the absence of necessary conversion factors, such facilities would be gathering dust in empty classrooms. An example of a conversion factor would be a school policy to allocate time to extracurricular activities, a trip to a robotics museum to raise awareness of the field, or an invitation to a parent who works in robotics to give a lecture.

The role of human agency and the role of what the capability approach views as conversion factors in capability formation was also previously questioned in literature due to the lack of research (Liu and Zhang, 2014; Brando, 2020). Indeed, capability formation is an under researched issue within the capability approach, mainly because it requires a large body of empirical research which is expensive and time-consuming. To account for such critiques, the study of education capability formation should be differentiated from the study of the creation of functionings by understanding that they seek to answer two different research questions. The first is how education freedoms are being developed or diminished in a school setting, i.e. what conversion factors are in place that facilitate or restrict the conversion of resources into capabilities. The second is how students convert capabilities into functionings, i.e. what factors influence their ability to exercise agency and what values they hold that explain their choices. Furthermore, Sen (2007) noted that capability development for children must be seen as an opportunity and not a process freedom to account for the fact that children are not always able to exercises agency and make an informed conscious choice as an adult would. He argued

27 Process freedoms in capability approach concern the role of human agency in decision-making process. Sen does not see process freedom as part of the notion of capability (Gasper, 2017 p.347). Instead, he addresses agency by placing it in between a capability and a functioning, i.e. between something potentially possible and really achieved.
that this is also because “the child’s possibility of exercising freedom and agency is preconditioned by the existence of certain basic achievements (say, being nourished, or physically, mentally and emotionally healthy)” (Sen, 2007, p.9). Thus, by focussing on either the formation of capabilities or the creation of functionings, it is possible to use the tools of qualitative research to gather qualitative empirical data which are currently lacking in the field of capability research.

The second aspect of these critiques is the lack of conceptual detail on conversion factors. This is because whether education capabilities are being developed in schools depends on the presence or the absence of conversion factors that are not easily observed or quantified. As Unterhalter (2003) explained, schools could be both places of freedom and unfreedom. Robeyns (2006, p.371) pointed out that the capability approach “offers the underpinnings of a multidimensional empirical analysis, and stresses to a far greater extent the need to integrate theory and practice”. Both Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2000) argued that tangible and intangible factors shape people’s freedoms and should therefore be at the centre of capability assessment. According to Robeyns (2005, p.96), such factors include “effective guaranteeing and protection of freedom of thought, political participation, social or cultural practices, social structures, social institutions, public goods, social norms, traditions and habits”. This list is not exhaustive and would depend on a particular capability within a particular context. Thus, more empirical research is necessary to evaluate the role different conversion factors play in capability formation.

Next, the capability approach has been critiqued for not aligning with the idea that equality in primary goods distribution is essential (Rawls, 1971) as people who differ in intellectual capacities and skills will end up developing different capabilities given the parity of primary goods. Sen (1995) argued that in policy analysis such an approach misleadingly overlooks the true extent of capability inequality. He argues that though this view is prominent in welfare economics (Dalton, 1920; Kolm, 1969; Atkinson, 1970 as quoted in Sen, 1995), it stems more from our commitment to efficiency than our understanding of inequality. Indeed, policymaking is highly dependent on efficiency concerns. This, however, does not mean efficiency considerations substitute equality considerations, which is a critique Sen (1995) offers of the Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1971). Thus, the capability approach is equipped to consider both equality and efficiency without confusing the two by getting entangled in the normative definitions of justice.
Further, the capability approach has been criticised as being too “universal” or “cosmopolitan” in a sense that it overlooks the relationship between capability, national identity, and power (Stewart, 2005; Mandle, 2006). Indeed, little attention is paid to factors like citizenship or the idea of historical path dependency by the principal authors of the capability approach. Sen remained deliberately vague, which Walker and Unterhalter (2007, p.243) considered a conceptual advantage as the approach equips researchers with “an appropriate normative framework for cosmopolitanism”. Unterhalter (2003) did, however, criticise Nussbaum for overlooking the force of history with regard to its impact on learning arrangements in formal educational settings. This critique is particularly relevant when it comes to assessing education systems, which are intricately linked to the dominant cultural norms. Contu and Willmott (2003) even argued that such values are infiltrated by power, history, and language. That is to say, the historical process of social development influences the entire complexity of learners’ identity. However, this critique would apply to the study of functionings more than to the study of capability formation because it focuses on the factors explaining the choices people make when they act on their capabilities. This research focusses on the formation of capabilities rather than functionings which means that the way students choose to exercise their agency falls outside its scope. To summarise, the capability approach is not a flawless framework, and several major critiques must be taken into consideration when operationalising the concepts of the capability approach for a particular study.

Finally, the capability approach was critiqued for its operationalisation challenges in empirical research (Comim, 2008; Leßmann, 2012). Unterhalter (2001) claimed that education is significantly undertheorized in the capability approach and Sen's works. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) argued that many issues still require clarification, such as the relationship between capabilities and policy (Kimhur, 2020) and the ways to measure education capabilities (Egdell and Robertson, 2021). An answer to these critiques may be found in the works of Robeyns (2003), who suggested that other theories may be added to the capability approach to enhance its analytical capacity. Robeyns (2003) further explained that the capability approach, being a broad and flexible framework in essence, may require additional conceptual tools to implement the approach within the specified research context.
2.4. The conceptual tools for education policy analysis within the framework of the capability approach

As shown in the previous section, the capability approach may be critiqued for its vagueness and a lack of conceptual tools for its operationalisation in empirical education research (Unterhalter, 2001). For the purposes of this thesis, the theoretical lens of the capability approach was supplemented by the conceptual tools of policy analysis applicable to the context of Chinese private education reform. In this section, several definitions of public policy are first discussed followed by the argument that both policy design and its implementation must be assessed in a comprehensive manner to develop adequate answers to the research questions of this thesis. Second, the applicability of these conceptual tools to the context of Chinese policymaking is evaluated to argue that the framework of policy instruments (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; Schneider and Ingram, 1990; McDonnell and Grubb, 1991; Hood, 2007) and the notion of policy implementation framework (Salamon, 2001; Howlett, 2005; Kenis and Provan, 2009; Ball and Junemann, 2012; Carboni et al., 2019) serve as useful conceptual tools that supplement the theoretical lens of the capability approach and facilitate its operationalisation for empirical research.

**Defining public policy**

As private education reform in China is an example of public policy, it is essential to explain how public policy is defined for the purposes of this research. Classical definitions of public policy can be traced back to the works of Easton (1953) who defined policy as *the authoritative allocation of values* (an idea subsequently adopted by Ball (1991) when formulating his idea of policy discourse) and Dye (1972) who suggested that policy is simply *anything that a government chooses to do or not to do*. Cochran et al. (1993) offered a definition of public policy as the actions of the government and the intentions that determined the actions. While still widely cited, these definitions are too vague to assist in conceptualising public policy in a way conducive to understanding how and why policies achieve or fail to achieve their specified policy targets. First, they did not account for the myriad of ways in which policies are interpreted by *street-level bureaucrats* defined as “public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work” (Lipsky, 2010, p.3). Second, old definitions also required “elaboration and extension” (Lingard, 2013, p.116) to suit the current realities of public policy research where policy analysis is no longer “a somewhat sterile and invisible activity carried out by statisticians.
and officials in government departments” (Olssen, Codd and Oneill, 2004, p.2). Third, previously abstract definitions of public policies were said to overlook the importance of policy enactment (Honig, 2006; Ball and Junemann, 2012; Lingard, 2013). Thus, an adequate definition of public policy requires further conceptualisation of both public policy design and its implementation.

**Conceptualising policy design**

In terms of education policy design, Ball (1991) argued that policy goes beyond text and the analysis of policy formation requires “a recursive relationship between structure and agency across the policy cycle” (Lingard and Sellar, 2013, p.267). This approach first focussed on “the micro-politics inside the state that produced policy texts” in the United Kingdom following the Education Reform act in 1988 (ibid). The extent to which this framework of education policy analysis is applicable to Chinese realities has been previously questioned by Chinese scholars who argued that “understanding China’s policy requires a deep understanding of its national context and embedded cultural tradition” (Han and Ye, 2017, p.409). They pointed out that “mediation and reconciliation of conflicts are normally not achieved through public debates” in China where “the strong Confucian cultural tradition” may facilitate value consensus in policymaking (ibid) and that they “have not observed the philanthropy and edu-business in Western sense exerting a strong influence on China’s policymaking” (ibid, p.410). Therefore, caution must be exercised to avoid an orientalist bias by assuming that Chinese policies are designed in a way similar to Western policies. In any case, this debate is irrelevant in the context of this thesis, since Ball’s definition (Ball, 1991; 2016) is particularly suitable to following a policy as it develops through the various layers and networks of state actors in the process of policy production, which is not the focus of this research. As this study examines capability formation in Chinese private schools in the process of reform policy implementation, its main concern is not with how these policies came to be, but rather with understanding what they aim to achieve, how they are being understood and the conversion factors that may affect local policy implementation. This is due to the previously discussed objectives and the research questions of this study, as well as the lack of transparency inherent in the Chinese policymaking process and the unlikelihood of access to policy formulation data by a foreign researcher. Thus, this thesis conceptualises education policy design through the lens of policy literature using the conceptual tool of political science.
Howlett and Cashore (2014, p.17) defined public policy designs as “actions which contain goal(s) and the means to achieve them”. Birkland (2020) distinguished several key attributes of public policies which 1) aim to respond to a policy problem 2) are made in the public interest (however controversial it may be) 3) are interpreted and implemented by public and private actors with various motivations 4) are oriented towards a goal or desired state 5) are ultimately made by governments. Honig (2006) provided a detailed framework for policy analysis consisting of the three main elements: policy goals, targets, and tools. Goals of education policies typically seek “systematic, deep, and large-scale educational improvement” and “schools’ delivery of particular discrete programs, procedural changes in schools, and students meeting basic minimum standards” (Honig, 2006, p.10). Targets refer to people and organisations affected by the policies, oftentimes beyond the formal education systems. Finally, tools are policy instruments conceptualised by McDonnell and Grubb (1991) as mandates, inducements, capacity-building, and system-changing instruments. Howlett (2005, p.32-33) offered an overview of the literature debate concerning policy instruments and summarised that this term was understood and employed differently by scholars in various fields, such as economics and political science. The former focused on policy instruments by evaluating what the governments should do while the latter drew attention to analysing what governments were doing and why were they doing it.

Thus, as political scientists, Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007, p.4) defined policy instruments as tools or techniques “that allow government policy to be made material and operational”. Mandates are seen as strict rules imposed by the government to limit individual or collective action. The use of mandates typically implies undesirable behaviour or a lack of uniform standards (McDonnell and Grubb, 1991, p.7) as they are “rules governing the actions of individuals and agencies, intended to produce compliance” (ibid., p.6). Such rules have proximate and tangible effects and operate under the assumption that “the required actions would not occur or would not occur with the frequency or consistency specified by the policy, in the absence of explicit prescription” (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987, p.169). Mandates, or authority tools, also expect people to do what “is expected of them without tangible payoffs” (Schneider and Ingram, 1990, p.514).

Inducements, on the other hand, involve the transfer of money between different levels of government in exchange for specific activities. Thus, according to McDonnell and Elmore (1987, p.5) inducements mean the transfer of money to individuals or agencies in return for
certain actions. Within the policy instruments framework, inducements “have proximate and tangible effects” (ibid., p.139). It is assumed that “in the absence of additional money, one would not expect certain valued things to be produced, or to be produced with the frequency or consistency prescribed by policy” (ibid., p.142). Capacity-building policy instruments are also money transfers but “for the purpose of longer-term investment in material, intellectual, or human resources” (McDonnell and Grubb, 1991, p.6). The difference between capacity-building policy instruments and inducements is that the former has distant and ambiguous effects on the target education system while the latter has proximate and tangible effects directly on the beneficiaries (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987). Finally, system-changing tools involve a transfer of authority aiming at producing institutional change. They are defined as “transfers of official authority among individuals and agencies to alter the system by which public goods and services are delivered” (McDonnell and Grubb, 1991, p.6). These policy instruments aim to change the distribution of authority among institutions or individuals within the target system that would significantly change the system outcomes (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987).

In addition, Lascoumes and Le Gales (2007, p.5) offered a different classification of policy instruments separating them into legislative and regulatory, economic, and fiscal types, agreement and incentive-based instruments and information and communication-based policy instruments. Schneider and Ingram (1990) also drew attention to hortatory policy instruments that signal what goals and actions are considered a high priority by government officials. Hortatory instruments were said to appeal to values and beliefs of the target audience (McDonnell, 1994) which means that values reflected in hortatory policy instruments are perceived by policymakers as shared by the population. These approaches to public policy research allowed scholars to further conceptualise public policy design with the aim to gain a better understanding of what policies intend to achieve and how they intend to achieve it. This framework was previously used in the studies on different aspects of Chinese policymaking (Li et al., 2017; Huang, Yang, and Su, 2018; Liao, 2018), including higher education policy (Tang, 2022; Ma et al., 2023) to show its effectiveness in providing a suitable conceptual lens to evaluate the intentions and assumptions of Chinese policymakers. Huang, Yang and Su (2018, p.1111) argued that “policy documents in China are written in a highly standardized style and have a high degree of knowledge-intensiveness” and that by relying on the policy target – policy instrument framework of analysis “policy researchers can obtain objective, reproducible and verifiable research results, while reducing the ambiguity of policy research”.

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However, there is still a lack of studies applying the framework of policy instruments to private education research in China.

In this research, looking at private education policy through the framework of policy instruments allowed operationalising the concepts of the capability approach into the analytical tools within the context of the Chinese education system by assessing how private education policy contributed to conversion of commodities into capabilities. Combining the capability approach with the policy instruments framework was previously done, for example, in the works of Dong (2008), Laruffa (2018) and Yerkes and Javornik, (2018). Yerkes and Javornik (2018) operationalised the capability approach into the context of childcare policy. They argued that despite the empirical challenges that remained in conducting policy analysis with the use of the capability approach, such work offered a promising way of conceptualising policy design. Dong (2008, p.37) applied the concept of capability to the design of policy, turning its core question from what was designed into what citizens could design. This shift of focus from a post-factum assessment of a passive outcome into a domain of possibility and choice changed how policymaking was discussed. Combined with the language of the capability approach, policy instruments were no longer seen as just technical devices. Instead, the notion aligned more closely with the argument of Le Galès (2016), who claimed that policy instruments were also social devices with the capacity to regulate social relationships.

Further, identifying the type of policy instruments being employed within the Chinese private education reform also allowed theorising about how policymakers initially formulated a policy problem. The policy problem was defined by McDonnell and Elmore (1987) as the issue policymakers intended to address using specific policy instruments that they perceived to be effective. Consequently, theorising about the policy problem and the chosen policy instruments allowed conclusions to be drawn regarding the theory of action of private education reform policies, which also belongs to the domain of public policy research (Patton, 1990; Weiss, 1998). Argyris and Schon (1982) defined a theory of action as a set of principles employed to describe and justify the effectiveness of one’s behaviour. In the context of public policy, this refers to defending the efficacy of a given policy design. In the literature, theories of action are commonly used as tools of critical evaluation of public policy interventions and to assess the relationship between policy aims and outcomes (Patton, 1978). The main advantage of looking at the theory of action is that it permits exploration of the discrepancies between how the policy was supposed to work, the intentions of policymakers, and the observed outcomes following
its practical implementation. With it being so, a theory of action is seen not only as a property of actors but also as a property of policy itself (Malen, Ogawa and Kranz, 1990). Some scholars, therefore, argued that the concept of a theory of action can be used as “the analytic mechanism for tracking actual policy effects” (Malen et al., 2002, p.112). Thus, combining the concept of a theory of action with the analysis of policy instruments allows going beyond “a condensed form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it”28 (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007, p. 1) into the issues of human agency, innovation and, by consequence, capability. In this thesis, the design of Chinese private education reform policies is evaluated through the prism of policy instruments framework in Chapter 4. Finally, policy design is only one side of the coin when it comes to conceptualising education policy research. The other, no less important aspect of policy analysis is the issue of its interpretation and implementation.

**Conceptual tools for policy implementation research**

Although the extent to which policy interpretation and enactment affects policy outcomes varies across different contexts, it has become a consensus in policy studies that a “top-down” hierarchical view on bureaucracies is inadequate (Wilson, 1989). As Salamon (2001, p.11) explained, the “division between policy and administration assumed in the classical theory does not seem to work in practice” due to the complex network of public and private actors engaged in policy implementation (ibid, p.6). As many governments are said to increasingly rely on market-based policy instruments, business and civil society play an active role in the more “fluid policy process” (Hassel, 2015, p.575). In education governance, Lingard and Rawolle (2011, p.491) argued that new forms of political authority, such as a higher degree of involvement of the private sector and public-private partnerships in education, led to the “pluri-scalar” character of education policy. Under these circumstances, policy enactment is often “harder than the policy designers had anticipated” (Hassel, 2015, p.570) while the attempts to solve one policy issue may create several more (Rein, Moran, and Goodin, 2008). Education researchers are advised to look beyond the generalisations of “what works” to investigate “under what conditions, if any, various education policies get implemented and work” (Honig, 2006, p.2). Thus, when the implementation aspect of public policy is taken into consideration,

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28 Having said that, it is also essential to keep in mind an argument of Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) who claim that policy instruments are not “neutral devices”, and as such, they may produce unintentional outcomes regardless of the objectives pursued by policymakers. This means that when evaluating the generated results, it is crucial also to assess the factors that might have influenced the way policy instruments worked in certain circumstances.
it may be conceptualised as “a politically, socially and historically contextualized practice or set of practices” (Olssen, Codd and Oneill, 2004, p.3).

One of the widely used approaches to a theoretical conceptualisation of policy implementation in various contexts is through the notion of a network. The definitions of policy implementation networks vary from purpose-oriented policy implementation networks defined as networks consisting of autonomous actors who make a joint effort towards a common purpose (Carboni et al., 2019), to public policy networks defined as the connections between jurisdictions and organisations that deliver public services (Jeongho Young Hoon, 2015). Mintrom and Vergari (1997) applied this concept to education policy analysis by arguing that reform-oriented networks play a role in public education reform accountability. Kenis and Provan (2009) reviewed the concept of networks in public policy research to draw attention to the lack of consensus about their role in policy implementation and the presence of exogenous as well as endogenous factors affecting their performance. Ball and Junemann (2012) argued for the rise of “network governance” in education in England with the focus on “the interactions between actors and groups within education policy-making fields and their influence on the policy process” (ibid, p.4). They pointed out that the state should neither be overestimated nor underestimated in its influence over education policy as networks of governance interrelate markets and hierarchies (ibid, p.9). Hassel (2015, p.569) also argued that while there are still “high expectations” of the problem-solving capability of public policies, “a new debate about the limits of the state and state responsibility emerged” (ibid, p.570). It was argued that, in some countries, government activity transformed from being “largely restricted to the direct delivery of goods or services by government bureaucrats” to a “dizzying array of loans, loan guarantees, grants, contracts, social regulation, economic regulation, insurance, tax expenditures, vouchers, and more” (Salamon, 2001, p.2). Furthermore, policies also operate in different contexts and various resource environments with education policies being enacted in schools with diverse histories, infrastructures, leadership, and staff capabilities as well as different learning challenges (Ball et al., 2012).

To account for such heterogeneity of education policy implementation process, Honig (2006, p.2) provided a heuristic model which illustrates the dimensions of education policy implementation in practice and research (Figure 15). It includes the interactions between policies, which set specific goals and utilise specific tools; people, who are both the targets and
the participants in implementation with their individual beliefs, knowledge, and values; and places “or contexts that help shape what people can and will do” (ibid).

Figure 15: Dimensions of contemporary education policy implementation in practice and research

![Diagram showing Dimensions of contemporary education policy implementation in practice and research]

This approach is useful in shedding light on the extent to which policy outcomes may represent or fail to represent policy intentions and why education policies may “not work” or, rather, work differently in different circumstances. Provan and Kenis (2008, p 229) pointed out the discrepancy between the attention that policy implementation networks received in academia and “the knowledge we have about the overall functioning of networks”. On the one hand, administrators may be “set adrift with only vague or conflicting guidance” on the policy targets and tools along with the insufficient authority to act (Salamon, 2001, p.10). On the other hand, different actors of policy implementations “have their own perspectives, ethos, standard operating procedures, skills, and incentives” (ibid) which means policy interpretation and enactment may depend on what actors play a role in the process. Furthermore, different contexts also present diverse institutional settings which vary across different political systems and institutions, making some public policies more likely to be enacted over others (Immergut, 2008). Under these circumstances, the capabilities of government policies to “alleviate social problems” comes into questions as policymakers “now seem to increasingly accept the nature of societies as unequal and imperfect” (Hassel, 2015, p.570). Thus, policy implementation research needs to focus on how the interactions among people, places and policies unfold in different contexts and “provide robust, grounded explanations for how interactions among them help to explain implementation outcomes” (Honig, 2006, p.2).
When it comes to policy enactment, the concept of policy implementation network permits to argue that policy implementation in Chinese private education sector does not happen on its own, but is a human led, and more importantly, human interpreted process. Academic literature has previously been critiqued for regarding Chinese education policymaking “as a purely top-down process with decision-making power held by a selected few” while, in fact, such understanding is outdated as it “has not caught up with the rapid changes that have taken place in China” (Han and Ye, 2017, p.390) of which private education reform is just one example. The notion of a network has been applied to different areas of Chinese policy research (Peng, 2004; Tang, 2004; Zheng et al., 2010; Cai, 2011), including higher education (Han and Ye, 2017). According to Cai (2011), policy network research is gaining popularity in Chinese academia though there is still a lack of consensus about the extent to which this analytical tool can account for the “unique Chinese characteristics” (Han and Ye, 2017). For instance, while Zheng et al. (2010, p.412) argued that “policy network approach may be generally helpful in understanding how policymaking works in China”, the contextual nuances of each particular policy sector and policy dimension must be considered in its successful application to Chinese realities (Han and Ye, 2017, p.392). This is because policy network theory still has a limited capacity to explain the nuances of Chinese policy design (Zheng et al., 2010) although it can be a helpful tool to incorporate the connection between public and private sector actors in Chinese policy implementation (Cai, 2011) which is crucial for the purposes of this research.

Overall, the notion of policy implementation network is a suitable conceptual tool to evaluate policy implementation in China through the lens of the capability approach as it allows the focus of the study to be on conversion factors rather than on functionings. This is because shifting the attention from policy outcomes onto the interactions among the actors of policy implementation facilitates the understanding of the mechanisms of policy interpretation and enactment (Salamon, 2001; Honig, 2006). Specifically, in Chinese private schools, policies are interpreted not only by the school leadership but also by the local “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 2010) whose values, motives and priorities may play a role in how certain policy instruments are being put into practice. Moreover, the factors affecting parental choices (Zhong, 2022) and the role student families play in policy networks are also essential conversion factors that may affect capability formation. Under these circumstances, conceptualising private education reform in Chinese schools as an outcome of interactions among various actors accounts for the diversity of existing human values and capabilities prioritised in different contexts. This assists further clarification of the notion of conversion factors and the role they
may play in the process of capability formation which is still an under-researched area of capability literature (Binder and Coad, 2011; Comim et al., 2018). In this research, the implementation aspect of Chinese private education reform is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

2.5. Chapter summary

To summarize, private education reform in China has sparked interest of education researchers both in China and abroad. A thematic narrative literature review using English and Mandarin language publications revealed three most common themes: the reasons for reintroduction of private schools into the socialist education system, the role private schools played in modernising the Chinese education system and the local specifics of the reform. Though the lack of state resources was an important reason for the encouragement of the private education sector at the beginning of the reform, the extent to which private schools are financially essential to the Chinese state was later questioned. The debate on the extent of education decentralisation revealed the tension between the delegation of education financing responsibilities to the local authorities and the desire of the central government to maintain education system oversight. Under these circumstances, private schools were shown to supplement public education provision while keeping the balance between market demands and accountability to the state.

Furthermore, research has shown that China’s economic transformation from planned economy to a market oriented-economy and then potentially to a knowledge-based economy created a favourable environment for the growth of private schools due to their ability to meet the diverse educational demands of Chinese families. Private education reform was also argued to have played a positive role in modernising the Chinese education system by encouraging innovative, international, and diverse education projects as well as incentivising public schools to follow good examples. On the other hand, some research highlighted the challenges of private education reform such as low-quality schools, education inequality, and policy obstacles. Overall, while the Chinese experience with private education reform was shown to have the potential to offer a lot of insight for private education researchers, there are still several under-researched aspects of private education reform in China, such as a lack of theory-driven research, gaps in available data, poor integration of Mandarin and English literature, little research on private secondary education and education investment groups. Based on these findings and combined with the insights gained from the history and context of the private
education reform discussed in chapter one, two initial research questions were formulated for this thesis.

After that, the chapter focused on selecting a suitable theoretical framework for answering these questions with the aim to define a common language for the analysis of policy objectives and their interpretation throughout policy implementation process. It was argued that the concepts of the capability approach can be operationalised to work with both policy formation and policy implementation data to draw conclusions about private education reform in China. First, the difference between the concepts of resources, capabilities, conversion factors and functionings was discussed to explain the process of capability formation as it was theorised in the capability approach literature. Then, the notion of conversion factors was pointed out to be essential in expanding our understanding of how education capabilities can be developed. After that, the chapter explained the concept of education capabilities and the role of education within the framework of the capability approach. It argued that the approach is an appropriate theoretical framework for education policy analysis due to the suitability of its conceptual tools for incorporating human agency, resisting an overemphasis on resources, and paying due attention to socioeconomic, cultural, institutional, and other relevant factors influencing education policy implementation.

It was then argued that the concepts of the capability approach can be applied to the context of Chinese private education reform because it offers an alternative to neoliberal human capital interpretations and has the conceptual flexibility to account for the analysis of market mechanisms within a socialist education system. The focus on capabilities instead of education functionings in policy analysis also allows relying on obtainable qualitative data instead of aiming for statistical datasets inaccessible in China. In addition, it is also conceptually flexible enough to incorporate a variety of regional contexts and educational capabilities targeted by the Chinese private education reform. Furthermore, the capability approach was argued to be suitable for analysing private education specifically because of its emphasis on conversion factors in capability development with school management and Education Investment Groups being an important aspect for consideration. With this in mind, the two research questions were reformulated into the language of the capability approach.

In the next section, this chapter discussed the emerging questions and critiques of the capability approach. Firstly, it was shown that while an important relationship between capabilities, resources, and conversion factors occupied the central stage of capability formation research,
it remains an understudied aspect of capability studies. It has not been agreed on how exactly conversion factors operate and what the specifics of resource conversion would be in different contexts. Secondly, the capability approach has been criticised for its universality, a lack of specific methodology for measuring capabilities and misalignment with other theoretical frameworks. These critiques, while having merit, were argued to be less relevant for this research since it does not attempt to measure capabilities or make a theoretical argument about social justice. Ultimately, the capability approach is a beneficial framework for this thesis due to its likely applicability to the context of Chinese private education and the suitability of its conceptual tools for analysing the type of qualitative data that is required to answer the selected research questions.

The final section of this chapter provided details about the conceptual tools for policy analysis used to complement the theoretical framework of the capability approach. It was argued that a more holistic definition of a public policy, of which private education reform is an important example, needs to incorporate both the aspect of policy design and its implementation. Following the conceptualisation of policy design, the section suggested that the framework of policy instruments is a suitable analytical tool to operationalise the concepts of the capability approach into a feasible research design. Finally, the notion of policy networks was discussed to argue for its suitability to both the capability approach and the study of Chinese private education reform.
3. Methodology and research design.

This chapter consists of five sections which describe the research design and explain why this design was appropriate for the chosen research questions, why it was feasible, and how its internal validity was ensured. The first section includes methodological foundations, such as the research questions and the type of data required to answer them, followed by the level and logic of analysis to argue in favour of a qualitative, rather than a quantitative design. The second section provides detail on policy analysis methodology, including the strategy for private education reform policy document selection. It then explains how the conceptual tools discussed in the previous chapter were operationalised into a policy analysis strategy to formulate the answer to the first research question.

The third section explains fieldwork organisation and argues for the use of a multi-site multi-method approach to collect necessary data to answer the second research question. It defines schools as cases, gives details on the interview protocol formulation followed by ethical considerations for private school campus visits. Subsequently, pilot case strategy is explained, and the methodological implications of pilot cases are assessed in the post-pilot interview protocol refinement and case selection. The rationale for a multi-site multi-method fieldwork approach is detailed, guided by replication logic and the pursuit of the opportunity to learn. Subsequently, interview data analysis is discussed, involving coding and interpretation of interview data using NVivo, employing abduction and retroduction logic supported by the case-quintain strategy. Finally, the chapter addresses validity concerns by explaining how the internal validity of the research design was ensured, particularly regarding interview data collection and findings interpretation.

3.1. Methodological foundations

Methodological foundations of this research include the research questions, determining the type of data required to answer the chosen research questions, and the choice between qualitative and quantitative research methods followed by the level, dimensions, and logic of analysis.

Research questions

To reiterate, research questions formulated in the previous chapter are as follows.
1. To what extent are the reform objectives for private primary and secondary education in China capability-enhancing?

2. In what way has local interpretation and implementation of the private education reform affected the process of capability formation in Chinese private schools?

Required data and a qualitative multi-method research design

Clarifying the type of required data is the second necessary step in developing the foundations of a research design. Stake (2006, p.30) cautions that “anticipating an unstructured, open-ended study is a road to failure”. This is because it risks collecting data disconnected from the research questions or data that is incomplete. The chosen research questions focus on two different aspects of capability development in Chinese private schools: private education reform policy and its implementation. The first aspect requires documentary data on private education reform policies to understand policy objectives and policy interpretation by the local authorities. The second aspect needs data on capability formation at a local level, including the way policies are understood and the factors that facilitate or restrict their implementation. Thus, as Bardach (2019, p.69) summarises, “almost all likely sources of information, data and ideas fall into two general types: documents and people” in policy studies. The kind of data necessary to answer the research questions of this study came from the two main sources: policy documents and private schools’ campus visits for in-depth qualitative interviews combined with observational data collection. These data requirements also informed the need for the qualitative multi-method research design.

Pawson (2006) noted that good science employs research methods befitting the chosen research topic. However, when the focus is on education policy analysis, there is no absolute priority given by scholars to either quantitative or qualitative designs (Fischer, Miller, and Sidney, 2007). Although this study used descriptive statistics for triangulation and context-setting purposes, a qualitative research design was needed to answer the research questions for two main reasons. The first was that the problem under consideration was ill-defined, which according to Yin (2009) implies the lack of a definitive borderline between the phenomenon in question and its context. This means that Chinese private education reform implementation and its influence on the process of capability formation in private schools was seen as a contextually informed phenomenon due to the high degree of diversity in local policy interpretations and education market conditions. Quantitative methodology is not suitable for ill-defined research.
problems because of the difficulties they present for the clear identification of independent variables. Stake (2006) also noted that the contexts and narratives of ill-defined problems produce so many nuances and internal contradictions that they elude straightforward methods of conceptualisation required to develop the necessary instruments for quantitative research. This is echoed in the way research questions were formulated to reflect the importance of context, which created the need to focus on data depth. Thus, a qualitative approach provides a better means to meet the research objective.

The second reason why a qualitative design was selected were the specifics of the capability approach which is famously challenging to operationalise in quantitative research. For example, it has been critiqued by Sugden (1993) and Srinivasan (1994) for being too conceptually complex to be successfully applied to quantitative data due to the absence of established capability lists and the difficulties of measuring capabilities. Chiappero-Martinetti (2008) further clarified that the absence of a definite metric and algorithms to carry out interpersonal comparisons of capabilities is seen as an obstacle to the practical application of the capability approach via a quantitative research design. Thus, while capability measurement and comparison remain a challenging task within the conceptual framework of the capability approach, qualitative methodology offers the tools to study the process of capability formation, making it a suitable approach for the research objectives of this study. Finally, qualitative methods can accommodate the contextual diversity of the research problem space and the selected research questions that focus on uncovering the relationship between Chinese private education reform policies and the process of capability development in private schools in different regional contexts.

**Level, dimensions, and logic of data analysis**

This research focuses on the level of analysis that pertains to the nature of capability formation and “can be partially or fully reflected in the way in which the phenomenon has been conceived and conceptualized” (Chiappero-Martinetti, 2008, p.285). This means that applying the lens of the capability approach to education policy analysis leads to a high degree of intrinsic complexity, accommodating several different dimensions of analysis and taking into consideration different variables. With the absence of a capability measurement objective, preserving the spirit of the intrinsic complexity that characterizes the capability approach was feasible by focusing on the specific dimensions of analysis relevant to the aims of this research. According to Chiappero-Martinetti (2008), the three dimensions of analysis applicable to the
use of the capability approach in policy studies are 1) the unit of analysis 2) the context of analysis; and 3) the relationships among the elements involved. In this research, the first dimension of analysis was private schools that had been defined as units of analysis. The context of analysis followed the Chiappero-Martinetti’s (2008, p.280) framework and considered a plurality of socioeconomic and institutional contexts in addition to “heterogeneous social constraints and cultural norms” affecting capability formation in Chinese private schools. As Chiappero-Martinetti (ibid) pointed out, the adoption of such a multidimensional perspective allows the researcher to draw clear boundaries for the vaguely defined concepts of the capability approach. Finally, the third dimension of analysis was exploring the linkages between the chosen private schools as units of analysis and the context of analysis, determining the types of present conversion factors and their role in the process of capability formation.

Moving on to the logic of analysis, the tools of abduction and retroduction were used to analyse the data. Both abduction and retroduction are qualitative analysis methods of inference, which according to Meyer and Lunnay (2013) are underutilised. The terms were developed in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, who, according to Chiasson (2005), did not indicate any conceptual difference between the two. However, Danermark et al. (1997) argued that abduction and retroduction were essentially different with abduction aiming at asking questions about the theoretically unexplained observations and retroduction focusing on going beyond the empirically observed data. This distinction is precisely why these two approaches are commonly used together with the aim of grasping the depth of phenomenon under investigation. Specifically, abduction is seen in line with induction and deduction (Kapitan, 1992) and, contrary to these two, allows analysing the data that falls outside of the research premise or the theoretical framework (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013). Habermas (1978) argued that abduction is an essential mode of inference for stimulating the research process, which according to McEvoy and Richards (2002) and Curry et al. (2009) focuses on the way the events might have occurred rather than establishing law-like rules as deductive logic does. Meyer and Lunnay (2013) further defined abduction a tool of developing associations enabling the researcher to distinguish non-obvious relations and connections. In other words, abduction aims to understand the unexpected, thus becoming the logic of generating new concepts and ideas.

Retroduction is defined by Sayer (2004) as a technique that allows hypothesizing about a generative mechanism based on empirical observations. This notion is rooted in the idea that
generative mechanisms themselves are non-observable entities influencing the phenomenon under investigation (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014), which means any conceptualisation about them requires a certain degree of intuitive interpretation. In such circumstances, retroduction is useful because it offers a thought experiment compatible with doing a case-study. As Meyer and Lunnay (2013) pointed out, it depends on the researcher identifying the circumstances integral to the phenomenon in question to uncover the contextual factors which led to the emergence of generative mechanisms. This is a useful tool for policy implementation analysis as it incorporates the notion of conversion factors influencing capability formation in Chinese private schools.

Danermark et al. (1997) described five strategies for making retroductive inferences and explained that the usage of these strategies depends on the specifics of a particular research project. The first strategy is counterfactual thinking, which is defined by Coricelli and Rustichini (2010) as the process of reflection on how differently the events might have occurred in alternative circumstances. Tetlock and Belkin (1996) argued that counterfactual thinking is an alternative to situations where controlled experiments are impossible. This strategy is useful for evaluating the role of contextual factors in capability formation as well as questioning the dependence of findings on the way the research was conducted. The second strategy introduced by Danermark et al. (1997), are social and thought experiments described as a way of analysing social interactions, which is useful in evaluating observational data to support the conclusions drawn from qualitative interviews. The remaining three strategies for retroductive inferences are the assessment of pathological cases, extreme cases, and comparative case studies (Danermark et al., 1997). The difference between pathological and extreme cases is that the former are typical cases while the latter are cases where mechanisms under consideration exist in a purer form (Danermark et al., 1997). Both are of value when assessing education policy, although extreme cases are easier to identify than pathological ones as the empirical evidence collected on the extreme cases tends to be less controversial. Finally, it is critical that abduction precedes retroduction in a case-study data analysis because, as Danermark et al. (2002) explain, the case should be sufficiently reconceptualised.

3.2. Policy analysis methodology

This section focusses on the strategies for policy document selection and analysis. First, it explains how national-level policy documents relevant to the Chinese private education reform were selected to ensure that no essential policies were overlooked, and that the selection bias
was minimised. Second, it describes the conceptual tools used for the analysis of selected policy documents and argues that a policy instruments framework (McDonnell and Grubb, 1991; McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; Schneider and Ingram, 1990) provides an opportunity to combine the concepts of the capability approach with the analysis of Chinese private education reform policies, theorising about the reform objectives. Finally, the section introduces the three-step policy document analysis strategy that combines the framework of policy instruments with the notion of capabilities to formulate the findings that would answer the first research question.

**Document selection strategy for policy analysis**

Given the vast amount of information available on private education reform in China, defining the scope of policy analysis was essential to avoid collecting too much or irrelevant policy data that would be more likely to confuse than to inform, if no control measures were taken. To address this challenge, Young and Ryu (2012) offered two mechanisms of secondary data collection: **available technical assistance** and the **careful tailoring of the type of data being collected to the research question**. This research design employed both these mechanisms.

First, to ensure that the selected policies were directly relevant to the research questions, a review of several Chinese language research publications was undertaken in Peking University Library. Ten publications were selected with the help of the library online catalogue using key words such as “private education reform” “China” “education policy” and “private education development”. These publications (Qu and Zheng, 2001; Wang and Ye, 2002; Li et al., 2014; Huang, 2016; Zhang, 2016; Zhou and Zhong, 2018; Zhu, 2018; Fan et al., 2019; Zhou, 2019; Dong and Yuan, 2020) were selected based on their similarity to this research in terms of the problem space and their focus on private education reform in China, as well as the peer-reviewed status of a publication. They were read through to create a preliminary list of key national-level private education reform policy documents. This was important not only because the most salient policies were easily discovered, but also because it helped to distinguish essential policy documents that might have been overlooked by a data base search because they did not have “private education” in their title. Such a strategy also aimed at efficiently minimising selection bias by ensuring the relevance of the selected documents to the research problem and by providing access to the relevant documents within a reasonable timeframe.

29 Such is the use of available databased with the help of keywords; the use of search engines and data analysis software such as NVivo.
Second, once the preliminary list of policies was established, **available technical assistance** Young and Ryu (2012) was used to expand the list by searching the available policy databases for related documents. All databases were originally searched in Mandarin Chinese. This is because the information on the few available English-language versions of policy databases was found to be incomplete, lacking the newest policy documents, commentaries, or links to relevant news articles commonly available in Mandarin. The first database was the official website of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (available at: http://www.moe.gov.cn/). The second was the comprehensive Opening-up Reform Database (available at: http://www.reformdata.org/records/). The third was the official website of the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China (available at: http://www.npc.gov.cn/). The fourth was the official website of the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China (available at: http://www.gov.cn/). Relevant policies were checked across all four databases to ensure that, first, they had not been cancelled and, second, that all the relevant amendments and adjustments were included in the analysis.

The third step in the creation of the policy data corpus was adding the documents that the previously selected policies had been referring to in the text. Doing so helped ensure the comprehensive understanding of the reform process by tracing the roots of selected policies and looking at documents in the form of a policy bundle or data corpus that could be linked over time rather than as independent documents. As a result of this three-step strategy, a comprehensive list of fifty private education reform policy documents was created. These documents were translated into English using Tencent Smart Office Service Platform (available at: https://www.iflyrec.com/) developed in China specifically for transcription and translation purposes. This platform was chosen for the better quality of translation and improved accuracy compared to existing alternatives. The reason for opting to work with translated policies during the policy analysis was the target language of this research. Given that the results were to be written in English, it was more time-efficient to translate the documents than to go back and forth between the two languages throughout the writing process. All excerpts

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30 It was found to be common in Chinese policy documents that they refer to the previous policies in their preamble. For example, interpretation or implementation opinions would quote the policy they interpret or implement, and some documents would also quote previous iterations and policies they are based on.

31 All translated documents were subsequently checked manually to ensure the accuracy of translation and its faithfulness to the original document.
and quotations were later double-checked manually to ensure the accurate representation of meaning. The full list of fifty selected policy documents is available in Appendix 1.

**Policy analysis strategy**

Policy documents were analyzed in Microsoft Excel with the aim to formulate the theory of action of the private education reform through the lens of the capability approach by exploring the policy problems and assumptions behind the mix of policy instruments. Three cycles of analysis were used illustrated by Figures 1-8. Figure 1 shows the first cycle of analysis where the policies were categorized according to the year of publication and legislative body, such as the NPC (National People’s Congress), the MOE (Ministry of Education), the State Council, the State Education Commission, the CPC (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China) or the Ministry of Justice. The earliest year of publication was 1982 and the latest year was 2021.

Once all the policies were categorized in chronological order, each of the fifty pre-selected national level policy documents was downloaded and read in full in Mandarin. During this initial reading, summary notes were made in English to include the focus of the document and the key sections relevant to the private education reform. These summary notes were later used to quickly browse through the list of policies before each subsequent cycle of analysis and during the writing up stage. After that, the translated versions of all policy documents were used for the first cycle of analysis when the policy excerpts containing all five types of policy instruments were put together into one section as shown in Figure 16. The second cycle of analysis is illustrated by Figure 17.

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32 It is important to note that this document selection strategy refers to the list of national-level policy documents. These were later traced down to their local interpretations by the provincial/city governments in selected localities by tracking the policy title through the local government websites. The list of local policies is also available in the appendices.
At this stage, all policy instruments identified during the first cycle of analysis were sorted into five different categories: mandates, inducements, system-changing, capacity-building, and hortatory. A detailed description of each policy instrument category was included in the Excel table to double-check the correct instrument identification during the second cycle of analysis. These descriptions were taken from Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) and McDonnell and Grubb (1991). To this end, policy instruments were put into the table as direct quotations from the policy documents translated into English. Where clarification was necessary, the original versions of policy documents in Mandarin were consulted to make comments or adjustments to the translations.

Finally, the third cycle of analysis focussed on the policy problem and the theory of action behind each of the analysed policy documents, as illustrated by Figure 18. Howlett (2004, p.49) called for a more nuanced understanding of policy instruments and “the complexity of multiple instrument mixes” (Bernelmans-Videc et al., 1998; Linder and Peters, 1998). Thus, policy instruments were not only analysed independently, but also as part of the emerging mix of policy instruments unique to each document. This is because evaluating policy instruments as a mix could provide a more comprehensive insight into the formulation of policy problems.
which was conducted according to the framework suggested by McDonnell and Elmore (1987)\textsuperscript{33}. 

*Figure 18: The third cycle of analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy problem notes</th>
<th>Theory of Action notes</th>
<th>Capability development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What kind of capabilities does the policy aim to develop?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What kind of capabilities does the policy restrict?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subsequently, the analysis of policy instruments and policy problems was conducted to theorise about the theory of action behind the private education reform in China combined with the concepts of the capability approach to answer the first research question of this thesis. To this end, the selected policy documents were repeatedly read through following the results of the policy instruments analysis to distinguish the types of capabilities that were targeted by policymakers. This was done using the coding strategy advised by Saldana (2009) which included the first cycle of descriptive coding, writing of analytic memos and the second cycle of thematic coding.

In the first coding cycle, descriptive codes were used with the aim to distinguish different capability elements in each policy document by describing each element in a short phrase. These codes were written in the form of coding notes next to the policy problem and theory of action notes compiled during the analysis of policy instruments. Descriptive coding was accompanied by writing several analytic memos described by Saldaña (2009) not as data summaries but as tools to reflect on the coding process and the emerging themes. Analytic memos focussed on questions such as “are these policies targeting the expansion of student freedoms and in what ways?”, “what aspects of teaching and private school management do these policies aim to change?”, “are these policies revising a previous policy and do they provide an explanation for doing so?”, “what policy problems can be connected to the need for capability expansion?”, “do these policies create obstacles for exercising student freedoms in private schools?”, “how does each policy relate to other policies on the list?”. The goal was to question the assumptions of policy instruments analysis and comprehensively evaluate each policy through the lens of the capability approach.

\textsuperscript{33} The details of what kinds of policy instruments were connected to what kinds of policy problems are discussed in chapter 4.
In the second coding cycle, the reflections and first cycle notes were used to accompany the final read through the policies with the goal to develop conceptual organisation (Owen, 2014; Saldana, 2009). The themes and patterns were analysed to arrive at the four broad types of capabilities targeted by the Chinese private education reform. These types of capabilities were 1) 21st century capabilities, 2) practical capabilities, 3) cross-cultural capabilities and 4) citizenship capabilities. The results of this policy analysis are written up in chapter four of this thesis which goes into detail on the content of each capability type and the relationship of policy instruments analysis to capability formation.

3.3. Fieldwork organisation

This section of the research design provides detail on how fieldwork was organised. First, it argues that a multi-site multi-method design was a suitable approach to fieldwork organisation because it provided an opportunity to collect required data on education capability formation in Chinese private schools and understand the way reform policies influenced this process. Second, it explains why schools were selected as cases and how in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted on school campuses. The interview strategy is presented, including an argument for the semi-structured interview format, principles of formulating interview questions and ethical considerations. Third, how and why pilot school visits were carried out is explained to argue that pilots were essential for methodological purposes in this research as they allowed for the refinement of the interview protocol which strengthened internal validity of the research design. Finally, the principles of post-pilot case selection are described to argue for the use of replication logic in case selection and the focus on the balance of typical and atypical cases and give an overview of what kind of data was collected during private school campus visits in China.

Multi-site multi-method data collection approach

The main reason why a multi-site multi-method fieldwork organisation design was chosen was its ability to accommodate the data necessary to theorise about the process of capability formation and the conversion factors behind this process. First, since the capability formation process is a complex phenomenon, its understanding required multiple data collection methods to reach the necessary data depth. Multiple fieldwork sites offered an opportunity to reach this level of depth as they were not restricted to a specific data collection technique or a design feature (Stoecker, 1991). Furthermore, multi-site fieldwork organisation was a suitable...
research design for education policy implementation analysis. As Pawson (2006) noted, policies are seldom effective in all contexts to a similar extent. In a country so culturally, geographically, and economically diverse as China, this is particularly important. In fact, this diversity has been affecting policymaking in China for decades, often resulting in highly experimental and gradual developmental policies (Heilmann, 2008). This is why multiple cases are helpful for policy research in the different type of social realities surrounding policy implementation.

For the purposes of presenting the findings of this research, each fieldwork site was called “a case”. Schools were selected as cases for both theoretical and practical reasons. In terms of the theoretical grounds for this choice, qualitative research designs require embraceable cases (Stake, 2006). That is not only because too much data leaves no choice but to resort to quantitative analysis but also because of the need to grasp the depth of the phenomenon, not its scale. This research did not aim to assess how many private schools were developing how many capabilities but rather to explore the conversion factors behind the process of capability formation using the context of private schools as the opportunity to learn. It aimed to establish the links between the obtained data and research propositions which, according to Yin (2009), could only be done when the feasibility of a case is considered. Selecting schools as cases permitted rapid determination of the scope of the case as a structured entity, as well as drawing parallels between the selected cases. In practical terms, given the time and labour restrictions of doctoral research, choosing schools as cases provided a clear and feasible way to carry out fieldwork. Yin (2009) and Creswell (2007) also pointed out that cases are of particular use when it comes to exploring complex social phenomena that could provide multiple data sources by integrating multiple types of data and providing qualitative explanations. In other words, focussing on multiple sites as cases allowed the integration of secondary statistical data, observational data collected through campus visits and interview data into one comprehensive framework of analysis.

In addition, the suitability of fieldwork organisation to the selected theoretical framework of the capability approach had to be considered. A multi-site fieldwork organisation is a suitable approach to operationalising the theoretical premises of the capability approach into a research methodology given that there is no list of education capabilities and the understanding of how capabilities turn into functionings is very context-dependent (Sen, 1999). While starting with

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34 Such sources include observational data, documents, interview transcripts and statistical data, to name a few.
a specified design logic (Platt, 1992), schools as data collection sites are flexible in data collection and analysis. This makes them capable of dealing with the complexity of capability approach concepts while remaining specific enough to provide an insight into context-dependent conversion factors. As Hollywood et al. (2012, p.5) argued, this approach allows embracing the range of capabilities by examining “the process for the individual, their freedoms or opportunities, rather than only focusing on observed choices, outcomes or achieved functionings”. This made selecting schools as fieldwork sites relevant to the way research questions were formulated as it illuminated what Stake (2006, p.28) called interactivity: the ways in which the activity of the case related to the context. This means that multiple fieldwork sites accounted for the variety of context-specific educational capabilities while fitting into the general theoretical framework and ensuring the consistency of findings.

To conclude, the need for a multiple rather than single fieldwork site stemmed from the way the research questions were formulated. In studies where the object of inquiry is the relative contribution of contextual factors to the formation of capabilities, an intensive study of such factors is required (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Schools as cases differ in a variety of ways and therefore are not approximations of an experiment (Siggelkow, 2007), but rather a way to discover “better-founded knowledge of the nature of mechanisms and their properties” (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014, p.31). In the case of this research, such mechanisms were the conversion factors that promoted or restricted capability development in selected private schools.

**Interview strategy**

The aim of a qualitative interview is typically to gather data that would offer an insight into the respondent’s experiences enabling the researcher to distinguish key elements of the phenomenon under investigation. Pawson and Tilley (1997) argued for theory-led interviewing and divided the interviewees into practitioners and subjects with the former offering expert knowledge on policy implementation and the latter having the first-hand experience of its effects. This divide makes sense for public policy analysis as it allows for theoretically informed data collection, which, in turn, reduces the likelihood of “divisions and disconnections between empirical data and theoretical analysis” (Smith and Elger, 2014, p.131). It is nevertheless a little narrow as it assumes that informants from the practitioner category are necessarily experts (Macdonald and Hellgren, 2004) and that subjects necessarily lack expert knowledge. In this research, interviewees were members of the school leadership
team which made them both practitioners who engaged in policy implementation and subjects who experienced the policy effects.

For the purposes of this research, a semi-structured interview format was selected, since a semi-structured interview “allows the researcher to probe the roles of each stakeholder in multiple dimensions” (Yeong et al., 2018). This means it is flexible enough to adjust the interview process to follow a particular narrative that emerges during the conversation with the help of prompts. Previous research has shown that using recall prompts greatly enhances interview accuracy by minimizing misinterpretations by the researcher (Lamb et al., 2007) and seeking clarification to avoid miscommunication. Brewer (2002) also demonstrated that prompting is an effective technique to elicit a greater variety of themes from a single interview with semantic cueing, repeating responses and prompting additional responses increasing interview yield by a half. Weller et al. (2018) indicated a similar pattern with 50% more domain items discovered within a single interview with the use of probing. They further argued that prompting played a greater role in the interview yield than the number of responses per interviewee (ibid). Thus, extensive probing was employed throughout all interviews for better data yield.

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews let us clarify, rephrase, and go back to the previously unfinished narrative. This was particularly important for interviewing people in one’s non-native language which was said to create challenges in “rapport building” (Yeong et al., 2018) because language fluency may be associated with professionalism. Thus, in addition to extensive readings of policy documents and Mandarin language articles, several versions of interview questions, translated into Mandarin and paraphrased, were used throughout the semi-structured interview process. For example, the question about policy mandates was formulated in terms of “greater standardization”, “policy imperatives” and “local policy environment” to use based on the preferred language of the interviewee to explore their interpretations of policy objectives.

Moving on to the principles of formulating interview questions, it is often suggested that the interview questions should be formulated based on the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon derived from the secondary materials and preliminary research findings (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012; Kim, 2010; Turner III, 2010). In this research, statistical data and the policy background discussed in chapter one informed the initial formulation of the interview questions. However, the interview instruments (such as interview principles and protocol) also had to “pass the reliability and validity tests before being considered as a reliable tool” (Yeong
et al., 2018). While several scholars (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001) argued that the quality of findings would be a good benchmark to judge the validity and reliability of interview instruments, this judgement can only be passed after the data have been obtained and analyzed. Thus, other strategies were used during the interview design stage (Krefting, 1991) to ensure that interview questions were based not only on the understanding of the phenomenon, but also on methodological principles grounded in previous research.

First, the way interview questions were formulated aspired to go beyond creating a narrative account of events and gain an insight into what Archer (2003) called inner conversations which have the power to be causally efficacious for both individuals and society. That means they should “form the basis for analyzing the interplay of social contexts and generative mechanisms” (Smith and Elger, 2014, p.129). In other words, the aim of the interview questions was to prompt the discussion of conversion factors that interviewees believed affected capability development in Chinese private schools. Second, the interview questions had to be consistent with the research objectives and cover all research questions. Third, the interview questions were formulated in a neutral manner to “remove any elements that might imply incompetency of any stakeholder” and “not to influence the respondents’ thinking process” (Yeong et al., 2018). Finally, all interview questions, while initially formulated in English, were translated into Mandarin Chinese with the aim to convey the meanings and essence of interview questions instead of attempting to maintain style or vocabulary. The questions were subsequently proofread by a Mandarin native speaker colleague with an appropriate training in qualitative interviewing to ensure consistency of meanings, clarity, and easy understanding for the purposes of the conversation-based inquiry (Yeong et al., 2018).

To improve the quality of interview data, it is suggested that the researcher should keep refining the interview protocol using evidence-based strategies (Yeong et al., 2018). For the purposes of this research, the interview questions were refined using the four-step Interview Protocol Refining Framework (IPR) (Yeong et al., 2018). The first step was ensuring greater consistency between the interview questions and the research questions and objectives, which was done by putting the pilot interview questions into the interview protocol matrix. The matrix (Appendix 3) included background information and the two main research questions to reflect the way

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35 Generative mechanisms are defined according to Bhaskar (1978), who views them as causal powers that produce observable events. The outcome of such mechanisms is contextual and depends on other factors, such as other generative mechanisms (Smith, 2006). As a result, they offer explanatory power for current events but cannot be used to predict the occurrence of a similar outcome in different circumstances in the future. This concept is similar to what Sen (1995) calls conversion factors in the capability approach.
they corresponded to the interview questions. The second step of the IPR framework was the making of an “inquiry-based conversation”. According to Yeong et al. (2018), once the alignment between the interview questions and research objectives is ensured through the interview protocol matrix, the proposed interview questions must be refined to suit daily conversation norms. While it was reasonable to first formulate the interview questions using academic language to clearly tie them to the research questions, once the link was established, it was important to ensure that the questions could be easily understood, and additional prompts had to be prepared for a variety of conversation styles (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Given that for the purposes of this research the interview questions were translated into Mandarin, this refinement happened at the same time as translation. The full list of initial interview questions used during the pilot school visits can be found in Appendix 4.

The third step, which included obtaining feedback from experts and colleagues on the interview protocol, was aimed at examining “the protocol structure, length, writing style and ease of understanding” (Yeong et al., 2018). The Activity Checklist for Close Reading of Interview Protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016) was used to ask the reviewers to mark “yes” or “no” answers on the set of 15 items. Peking University researchers were asked for feedback in addition to colleagues from Cambridge. Finally, pilot testing was the fourth step to ensure the reliability of interview questions with several interviews carried out to collect the initial data and make sure that interview instruments could fulfill the research objectives (Dikko, 2016). Following the advice from previous research (Kim, 2010), pilot interviews were conducted in the real environment with private school administrators, such as Principals and Heads of Divisions. Prior to getting into details about pilot cases, ethics of interview data collection must be considered.

Ethical considerations

This study was carried out according to the Ethics Checklist of the Faculty of Education (as of 2019), ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 4th edition, 2018) and fieldwork guidelines of Peking University (as of 2019). Based on these documents, the following ethical issues were considered.

- Informed consent and the right to withdraw

36 An example of a completed Activity Checklist can be found in Appendix
An essential principle of ethical research is informed consent of all the participants (BERA, 2018; Yin, 2009). This means participants were made aware of the nature, purposes, and methods of the research before consenting to participate. The role of the researcher and the role of the participants were communicated before data collection to ensure transparency and honesty in carrying out the fieldwork. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw (BERA, 2018) from the study at any given time and permission was asked for any form of audio or video recordings.

- Anonymity and privacy

All participants remain anonymous in the data collection process. Pseudonyms were chosen to represent participants’ contribution (Piper and Simons, 2005) to the study with an effort made to ensure they cannot be recognised by either the public or those in the know (BERA, 2018). No information received during data collection was shared with other participants except for the cases when interviewees were asked to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of their contribution. Participants were explicitly informed of their confidentiality and how the findings would be eventually reported. The research policy of Peking University (developed by the PKU ethics committee) protects research participants from any repercussions for research participation and under no circumstances is it legally obligatory to disclose participant identities to the authorities.

- Participant protection

A careful effort was made to ensure participant protection from any physical or emotional harm (Fontana and Frey, 2000), avoid any feeling of intrusion or deception (BERA, 2018) or causing stress to the participants (Creswell, 2009). Quotations or interview excerpts will only be made public for thesis submission and defence, including any related conference talks and publishing while under no circumstances will the real identities of the participants be disclosed. Furthermore, information that would make it possible for their identities to be inferred, such as school names, specifics of school address and so on, will have been removed from the quotations.

- Data storage and protection

Participants were informed of how the data received during fieldwork would be stored and processed by the researcher. All collected data is protected according to the Data Protection
Fieldwork data was stored on my personal computer and USB devices and remained inaccessible to others. To ensure non-traceability of research (Cohen et al., 2000) the original interview recordings and transcripts were destroyed following the final presentation of research findings.

**Pilot school visits**

Four pilot private school visits (Appendix 5) were conducted in autumn 2019 in Guangdong province of China. Out of the four cases, three were private schools funded by education investment groups or businesses and one was a state-funded school. Two schools were in Guangzhou and two in Dongguan which is a smaller city in Guangdong province. The population of Guangzhou was estimated to be around 15 million people while the population of Dongguan was about a half of that at the time of pilot school visits. All four cases provided access to international education, and all were non-profit schools. Tuition fees and the number of students varied significantly across the four cases as did the curriculum and admission policies. These cases were not independently selected because the schools were visited as part of the research group from Peking University on fieldwork for a similar research project. Therefore, these cases were used primarily for methodological purposes and the data gathered during pilot visits were used for interview protocol refinement and gaining experience of undertaking fieldwork in Chinese private schools by observing more experienced researchers in the field. The data were not used in data analysis for the purposes of answering the second research question of this thesis because the interview questions were adjusted for independent fieldwork following the analysis of pilot cases.

During the pilot school visits, plenty of opportunity was found for observational data gathering, such as taking photographs of campus facilities, posters of curricula, class schedules, and teaching materials. Express permission of school management was obtained prior to any photographs being taken during each visit. Following the campus tours, there were also opportunities for one-on-one interviews with representatives of the school management. In two cases, Principals and Vice Principals were interviewed while in the other two schools the interviews were conducted with the Heads of International Divisions. During these pilot interviews two objectives were pursued. The first was to test the interview questions formulated prior to commencing fieldwork to see if there were any unclear or ineffective questions, as well as gather additional information on issues that might have been overlooked. The second was to
become familiar with the process of doing fieldwork in Chinese private schools and the way private education system in China was structured and organised.

**Post-pilot interview protocol refinement**

Subsequently, the interview protocol was refined based on the experience of pilot data collection. First, it became obvious during the pilot interview process that body language and the tone of the conversation could provide non-verbal cues about how open the interviewee was being and the sensitivity of the topic. Maintaining the interviewee’s trust and making them comfortable with the interview was the priority for successful data collection that would be both reliable and comprehensive. Therefore, subsequent interviews would always begin with a casual introductory question which was easy to answer while extensive probing and specific questions were replaced with broad open-ended questions if the respondent appeared uncomfortable. This was found helpful to build rapport, gauge the style of the conversation and the preferred language of the interviewee. Second, it was also found that background questions were more useful than previously anticipated in eliciting key themes during the interview. For example, a general question such as “what kind of curriculum do you offer and why?” was found to be useful in prompting interviewees to discuss policy impact on curriculum development. Thus, the background section of the interview protocol was expanded to include several prompts with the possibility to follow up salient elements that the respondents might bring up at the beginning.

Third, it became clear that it was more fruitful to switch between interview questions following the natural progression of the conversation rather than attempting to follow a fixed order of questions. If the interviewee deviated from the set sequence of the questions, it was useful to maintain the possibility of rearranging the questions to follow the interviewee’s thought process. Therefore, although questions had been pre-arranged within the interview matrix, they were subsequently reformulated into an open-ended theme-starter question with several thematic prompts which the interviewer would use as necessary. This enabled switching between the themes naturally following the interviewee’s train of thought with greater flexibility and a more natural conversation style while still ensuring that all research questions were covered.

Fourth, more open-ended probing was found to be essential to gather data that would fall outside the preconceived interview framework because when the interviewees were given a
specific aspect to focus on, they tended not to elaborate outside of the given topic. To address this challenge, an open-ended question, such as “is there anything important that you believe I have overlooked in my research?”, was included at the end of each interview section to capture any additional thoughts of the interviewee and give them the opportunity to develop unanticipated themes (Yeong et al., 2018). At the same time, certain questions could be discarded if they did not appear to be relevant to the specific circumstances of the interviewee. For example, questions related to the international curriculum would only be used in schools that offered it.

Fifth, the pilot interviews demonstrated that inquiring after a specific policy might not be the best approach to gain an insight into how it is interpreted and implemented. In one interview, the policy about education internationalization in Guangdong province was known by different names to the interviewer and interviewee which caused confusion. In another, the interviewee did not seem comfortable discussing a specific policy either due to the lack of knowledge about it or due to the perceived sensitivity of the issue. In either case, it was more productive to pose open-ended policy-related questions, wait for the interviewee to bring up specific policies and then use the probing techniques to obtain more comprehensive data. Thus, specific policy-related questions were discarded from the interview matrix. As a result of the adjustments described above, the updated interview protocol matrix (Yeong et al., 2018) was developed for the post-pilot interview data collection (Appendix 6).

**Post-pilot site selection rationale and criteria**

Moving on to the rationale of site selection for post-pilot fieldwork, Malinowski (1922) advised that a researcher should begin knowing what they are looking for but not restricting themselves to the tentative plan. According to Small (2009), sampling and case logic approaches to fieldwork offer different languages of tackling data collection. Small (ibid, p.24) further clarified that, as the logic of standard survey research where the number of units is predetermined, sampling “is meant to be representative; all units should have equal (or known) probability of selection; and all units must be subject to exactly the same questionnaire”. However, it has been previously pointed out that “serious problems are likely to develop if one chooses a very small sample in a completely random fashion” (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, p.295). This is because a sampling approach is aimed at descriptive questions about a population with the validity of findings being judged based on their representativeness, which is problematic with a small number of fieldwork sites. *Case logic*, on the other hand, is said to
be “more effective when asking how or why questions about processes unknown before the start of the study” (Small, 2009, p.25), which aligns with the objectives of this research. It requires *purposive methods* of site selection (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, p.295) to enable the researcher to select the most appropriate cases. This study followed what Yin (2009) called *the logic of replication*, which implies that the next case is selected based on how likely it is to replicate first case findings or offer the possibility of strongly contrasting results which can be used to test and modify emerging ideas. In this approach, the goal was to understand the case, not to generalize from it (Burawoy, 1998).

Thus, the main guiding principle in site selection was its *relevance to the quintain*, which is “an object, a phenomenon or a condition to be studied” (Stake, 2006, p.6). In this research, Chinese private education reform was the phenomenon under consideration or the *quintain*. As specified in the beginning of this chapter, the fieldwork element of the research design was aimed at gathering data about the variation of private education reform policy interpretation and implementation at the local levels. This was based on the analysis of the national and local level private education reform policy documents carried out prior to the commencement of fieldwork data collection. Exploring territorial variation of a national-level phenomena through multiple cases was said to be a common approach (Dosek, 2020, p.472) as “this usually implies that the explanation is based on local factors, and national context may account for some contextual nuances but does not interfere with the main causal mechanism” (Dosek, 2020, p.473). Indeed, policy document analysis of Chinese private education reform policies indicated a high degree of decentralisation and variety in local policy interpretations, which makes it reasonable to allocate the importance to a diversity of local contexts in case selection.

Figure 19 illustrates the geographical distribution of fieldwork sites, which included the northern, southern, southeastern, and central areas of China. The western provinces were not included due to their political sensitivity in the Chinese context and travel restrictions, which would not only make data collection in these regions logistically challenging, but also put in question the ethics and integrity of any data obtained there. The focus of site selection was on the possibility of uncovering the mechanisms and examining the process (Lamont and White, 2008) of private education reform interpretation and implementation in these distinct contexts. As Dosek (2020, p.475) pointed out, “exploring territorial heterogeneity within a single country” is essential to gain an understanding of the varying influence of national-level factors (i.e.

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37 Specifics about the policy analysis findings can be found in chapter 4 and chapter 6 of this thesis.
private education reform policy) in the territory (i.e. different provinces and cities). The process of case selection was sequential, as each new fieldwork site provided “an increasingly accurate understanding of the question at hand” (Small, 2009, p.25). Under these circumstances, the number of cases was unknown prior to the completion of the study as the aim was to conclude fieldwork when little further “surprising” information was obtained from a fieldwork site.

Figure 19: Territorial distribution of fieldwork sites (including pilot cases)

The first visits were carried out in Beijing where I was based as a research fellow of Peking University Graduate School of Education, followed by Shanghai due to the expected diversity of private education reform policy interpretations, indicated by the analysis of the local policy documents in Beijing and Shanghai. While both were first-tier cities with mature private education markets, Shanghai local policies were found to have a higher degree of internationalisation and openness which was important for the assessment of cross-cultural capability formation. Beijing, on the other hand, had tight policy regulations for private schools, long-established supervision mechanisms and strict licensing regulations, which made it a suitable location to evaluate private education reform policy implementation in a highly regulated policy environment. At least four case-schools, located in different urban districts, were visited in each city to account for the probability of local policy implementation variations at the district level in large megalopolises. Subsequently, private schools in Xian and Chengdu were visited to explore the contextual diversity of private schooling in inland provinces and the
implementation of private education reform in second-tier Chinese cities with less mature private education markets. Chengdu as a fieldwork site was chosen due to its reputation as the centre for private education development in the West of China, as the analysis of local policy documents indicated a dynamically evolving private education market and the ambition of the local government to develop 21st century student capabilities to “catch up” with the coastal cities. Xian, on the other hand, was found to have more conservative local private education policies with the focus on citizenship and practical capability formation, which made it a fieldwork site capable of providing data about these capability sets. Similarly to first-tier cities, at least four schools were visited in second-tier cities to explore the diversity of local conversion factors and provide opportunities for data triangulation.

The second criterion for site selection was what Stake (2006) called *an opportunity to learn*, so the importance of a single case was its ability to provide desired information (Burawoy et al., 1993), which in this research was the data about private education reform policy implementation in Chinese private schools. Specifically, fieldwork sites were evaluated from the perspective of potentially “similar mechanisms, dynamics, and processes” (Simmons, 2016, p. 31), such as private schools belonging to the same education investment group or private schools located in the same local jurisdiction and governed by the same local authority. For instance, one of the schools visited in Chengdu belonged to the same education investment group as another case-school visited during fieldwork in a different location. In addition, three of the other case-schools located in three different cities visited during fieldwork also belonged to one cross-provincial education investment group. This provided an important opportunity to evaluate the role of school leadership in private education reform implementation and theorise about actor-based conversion factors, given that the literature review in Chapter 2 revealed a gap our understanding about the role of Chinese private education investment groups in education reforms. Indeed, Yin (2013, p.327) also argued that researchers relying on case logic in site selection need to “connect the theory to the extant literature, or alternatively, to use their findings to explain the gaps and weaknesses in that literature”.

In addition to data collection in Shanghai, Chengdu, Beijing and Xian, cities such as Taicang, Xuzhou, Hefei and Haikou were selected to explore the way private education reform was being understood and implemented in smaller cities with diverse characteristics. Taicang was

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38 Policy analysis and interview data in Chapter 6 support this claim.
39 More specifics about the role of triangulation in this research design can be found in the section about validity.
selected to explore the context of a satellite city in close vicinity of Shanghai megalopolis with many families living in Taicang and being employed in Shanghai. It provided an opportunity to learn about a private school catering to migrant families, those unable to afford a school in Shanghai or unwilling to rely on local public education. Xuzhou was a unique opportunity to explore a local campus of a well-known cross-provincial education investment group operating in a city which is small (by Chinese standards) yet located in Huaihai Economic Zone, playing an important role in the Belt and Road initiative. Hefei was first considered an interesting fieldwork site for its landlocked location and its status of the capital city of Anhui province, which is a moderately prosperous region of China. Compared to Xian and Chengdu, which were also inland fieldwork locations, Hefei was found to have stronger ties to coastal areas and is favoured by Shanghai-based education investors. However, its private education market is relatively small with fewer international schools than Shanghai, Beijing, Xian, and Chengdu and only one campus of Canadian International School that can be considered exclusive. This provided an opportunity to explore parental demand and the role of school leadership in what can be considered an “average” private education market. Haikou, on the other hand, was chosen for its unique status of the future centre for international education designated to it by the national-level education policies. While the private school market in Haikou is quite new, it was expected that local authorities would prioritise cross-cultural and 21st century capability formation to meet the directive of the central government which was mentioned by several of the interviewees in other locations with advice given to me to approach private schools in Haikou.

An opportunity to learn as a selection criterion was also reflected by the diversity of school site characteristics, which aimed at gathering the data on the role of school resources in the process of capability formation. With some exceptions, most private schools visited throughout fieldwork operated large campuses capable of accommodating hundreds, if not thousands, of students and staff. Among nineteen school cases, four schools had a small campus of under one hundred students. Out of the four, two had large facilities but few students and two schools had both a small campus and a small number of students. Another four cases were schools facing land constraints due to their location in central urban districts. Typically, schools in Chinese city centres were old and well-established while new campuses were being built outside of

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40 Following the introduction of Hainan Free Trade Zone, which is expected to be in place by 2025, the strategy for the development of education on the island during the fourteenth five-year plan (2021-2025) promoted Haikou preferential policies for private international education.
densely populated districts due to shortages of land which is required by the government for sport facilities as well as a limited capacity to expand the campus in the future.\(^{41}\) Out of nineteen fieldwork cases, eight were classified as “old” because they had been established pre-2016, which was a year of major national policy changes for private education\(^{42}\). Eleven cases were “new” campuses opened post-2016. Out of eleven new campuses, two were opened in central city areas while twelve were located on the outskirts of the city or in newly developing economic zones.

Furthermore, according to Small (2009, p.21) deviant or unique cases are “especially interesting, because they provide for ways of developing or extending theories”. In this research, the definition of “a typical site” versus “an atypical site” followed Mitchell’s (1983) logic of scientific inference. Mitchell (1983, p.188) argued that the issue of distinguishing typical cases “betrays a confusion between the procedures appropriate in making inferences from statistical data and those appropriate to the study of an idiosyncratic combination of elements or events which constitute a case”. While statistical inference is “the process by which the analyst draws conclusions about the existence of two or more characteristics in some wider population from some sample of that population”, scientific inference is “the process by which the analyst draws conclusions about the essential linkage between two or more characteristics in terms of some explanatory schema” (ibid, p.199-200). Schofield (in Gomm, Hammersley and Foster, 2000) also argued for a balance of typical and atypical cases in effective multiple-site research design. To this end, a balance of private schools managed by locally established, cross-provincial, and international education investment groups was attempted with two independent private schools belonging to individual investors also included in case selection. This was done to explore the role of conversion factors related to school leadership synergy in capability formation. Moreover, two exclusive private schools belonging to very strong international brands, local private schools with mid-range tuition fees as well as low-fee private schools were selected to focus on the role and diversity of parental demand in private schools catering to different kinds of Chinese families. Further, to obtain diverse data on context-based conversion factors, fieldwork sites included private schools established not only during the standardised development and classified management periods of private education reform when most private

\[^{41}\text{This is partly a licensing issue, since obtaining a new license in a central city district is challenging and partly an expansion strategy for boarding secondary schools that do not rely on location in school enrolment.}\]

\[^{42}\text{Change into classified management system, including non-profit and for-profit schools. This was elaborated on in chapter one.}\]
schools were set up, but also two schools established during the rapid growth period of the reform.

The information about each selected school site and their respective geographical locations can be found in Appendix 8. No further specific information about school sites can be provided due to the ethical consequences it would have on the integrity of data collection. It would compromise the anonymity of the participants because certain reasons for site selection were directly related to unique characteristics of a school. For example, given that the cities where schools were located are specified for the purposes of findings presentation, revealing which specific school sites belonged to the same investment group in which locations would make the investment group and, by consequence, school sites, easily identifiable. Similarly, although the data on tuition fees in each school was used in site selection and helped identify the place a school occupied on the local market, revealing such information would be unethical as one could easily discover the information about which schools charged the specified amount in a given city. At the same time, hiding geographical locations to provide more details about each case was not possible due to the objectives and the focus of this study. This is because research questions targeted local policy interpretations and the role of contextual factors in private education reform implementation which means the analysis of local policies and private education market conditions in various geographical locations was an essential element of the findings and one of the main strengths of the research design.

**Accessibility and data collection process**

Finally, the matter of accessibility and detail was another guiding principle for the fieldwork. As Stake (2006) explained, it is often possible to gain a better insight from an atypical but more accessible case than from a typical but less accessible one. Therefore, the issue of gaining access to private schools that were willing and interested in taking part in this research was very important. Prior to campus visits, school management received all the required documents, including my ID, proof of health and genuine status as a PhD candidate, as well as detailed outline of how the obtained data would be protected from an ethical perspective.43 Oftentimes my visits had to also be approved by the local education authorities which was done by the school leadership on my behalf. All interviewees expressed enthusiastic interest in this study and consented to contributing their time as my field visits normally involved spending several

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43 This has been specified in the section about ethical considerations.
hours at each school site. As an expression of my gratitude, I offered to give a free talk to the students on the topics of learning a foreign language or gaining admission to top-tier Chinese and British Universities based on my personal experience. Sometimes I was taken up on the offer and sometimes not.

None of the interviewees were personally known to me prior to the commencement of fieldwork, nor did I have any prior knowledge of the selected schools. Contact with potential interviewees was established by means of WeChat which was used to provide them with the detailed description of the objectives and the focus of this study. Proof of affiliation to the University of Cambridge and Peking University was often requested along with a negative COVID-19 PCR test result, according to the pandemic measures in place at the time of school visits. When travelling domestically, I was required to register with the local authorities on arrival and submit my passport number, Health Code information and the address of my stay. To be able to visit the selected schools, the “Green travel card” was required which showed my recent (14-days) travel history based on the data from my cell phone provider. If I visited any of the locations where a confirmed covid-19 case was discovered, the cell phone provider would submit data to the app and the card would turn red (reflecting the name of a place I visited where a case was found), which would make me unable to travel.

Two types of data were collected during fieldwork visits: interview and observational data. Interviews were conducted with school leadership, including Chinese and International Principals, investment group managers, Heads of Schools and Divisions, such as International Divisions. Interview recordings and notes were collected following each interview to be stored on a personal hard drive for the duration of this research. All interviewees were classified as “principals” for findings presentation purposes to prevent them from being recognised by a specific job title. Following interview data analysis, interviewees were divided into Chinese and International Principals for findings presentation purposes. Interviewees were selected based on their expertise and leadership position thereby ensuring their involvement in private education reform policy implementation in private schools. Thirty-two interviews in total were carried out during nineteen school visits. In terms of observational data, campus visits revealed the availability of different sorts of facilities including sport facilities such as

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44 This was done to illustrate the findings that stemmed from the specific structure of international private schools in China which will be further discussed in chapter six.

45 The details about the interview process, strategy and interview protocol refinement have been discussed earlier in this chapter.
swimming pools, football, tennis courts, golf courts, basketball, tennis facilities and gyms. All campuses had a wide range of sport and exercise related resources with more expensive campuses providing more expensive equipment. Data on resources also included the availability of art and crafts related facilities, such as music rooms, painting equipment, Lego, and library spaces, as well as IT resources, such as computer rooms, 3D printing, AI and robotics hardware. These resources varied greatly across the schools with different special characteristics and tuition fee level. Finally, data on catering facilities, student dormitories and classroom equipment were also collected to make a comprehensive overview of the types of resources a school had available. This was used to gain an insight into resource availability in each case and triangulate interview findings on capability formation.

Permission was obtained from school administration every time photographs were taken on a campus tour, but precautions were still necessary to avoid revealing specific information about the fieldwork locations. First, all photographic evidence was selected in a way that would not reveal any personal information of the students or staff. Although data on teacher profiles and student achievements was collected and used for the purposes of analysis, it was not included in the pictures in this thesis. Second, no school names were included in the photos that were arranged in a random way unrelated to the geographical locations, which means any photo could be from any of the 19 school cases. While a small possibility exists for the school facilities to be recognised by those who work or study there, these precautions were deemed sufficient to protect the identities of the interviewees as photographic evidence was not directly connected to interview quotes in findings presentation. Thirdly, while some resources were directly reflected in the photos, such as arts, books and sports facilities, some non-tangible resources were theorised about by proxy, such as when pictures of student’s work written in English served as evidence of the school having English teachers in classrooms or displays of IB / A-levels plaques being taken as signs that the school had access to foreign curricula.

Approach to interview data analysis

Although it is a popular approach to use a comparative technique to analyse multiple cases (Levy, 1990; Perkmann, 2007), there are also substantial arguments against it. For instance, Stake (2006, p.82) argued that a research design which relies on multiple fieldwork sites is not at all suitable for comparing cases. In his view, an advisable approach would be a “case-quintain dialectic” (ibid, p.46), which is a theme-based approach where the findings are organised in terms of their relevance to understanding the quintain as a whole while
maintaining the uniqueness of every case. Therefore, the approach to interview data analysis was based on the relevance of the data to the quintain which in the case of this study was the education reform in Chinese private schools. Stake drew attention to the need to look beyond the simple assessment of similarities and differences and evaluate the assertions about the phenomenon (ibid, p.57). This is relevant to the understanding of private education policy implementation as an individual element within a more comprehensive education ensemble\(^4\), which according to Robertson and Dale (2015) evaluates educational outputs together with the more comprehensive social and individual outcomes. This approach did not entirely avoid the comparison but instead emphasised a different way in which the parallels were drawn, which meant developing an argument about the types of capabilities prioritised by private schools and the conversion factors that were facilitating or restricting the process of capability formation.

Interview data coding was undertaken using NVivo software. All interview recordings were first transcribed through the Tencent Smart Office Service Platform (available at: https://www.iflyrec.com/). While all transcriptions were checked manually to ensure accuracy, the platform was found to be reliable and significantly more accurate than other available transcription software options. For example, platforms such as Scribie, TranscribeMe, Trint and Transcribe were also tested but were found to be unable to accurately convert Mandarin recordings into written characters. Thus, the Tencent Smart Office Service Platform was eventually chosen for transcribing purposes. Following transcription and accuracy check, Mandarin interview texts were translated into English using the same software platform. Interview notes were used to check the accuracy of transcriptions and translations in addition to reading through both Mandarin and English versions of interview data. Then, the files of transcribed interview recordings in English were uploaded into NVivo for coding purposes. All identifiable information was removed at this stage to make sure the data were appropriately anonymised for findings analysis and presentation purposes. A preliminary step to data analysis was data familiarisation when all the uploaded transcripts were thoroughly read through to gain a general understanding of the contents and obtain initial insights into the data corpus.

Interview data were then analysed through the means of coding. To develop major coding categories to be used in NVivo, the conceptual framework of the capability approach was used combined with the findings obtained from the private education reform policy analysis.

\(^4\)“Education’ as an ensemble, must be seen as the unity of multiple determinations; there can be no effective understanding of the individual elements of the ensemble, without an overall understanding of it collectively, and it is this that led us to refer to it as an ensemble” Robertson and Dale (2015, p.156).
Hollywood et al. (2012) noted that coding as an analytical technique is commonly used in studies of capabilities due to its capacity to add depth and insight. The goal of such coding is to break down the complexity of cases and capture both the typical and the atypical categories. The key benefit is the ability to formulate thematic elements from the data when the theoretical framework does not provide a strict list of categories, which was also the case with the application of the capability approach to policy implementation analysis. Thus, there was a need to develop distinctive expressions (Blumer, 1986) specific to the study of education capabilities in private school settings in China and assess the emergence of distinctive themes that required unique names. Under these circumstances, the researcher was the crucial research instrument tasked with searching for correspondence or patterns in data.

Saldana (2009) recommended descriptive and evaluation coding as suitable techniques in policy analysis, the former providing a categorized inventory and the latter allowing to draw logical inferences. It was pointed out (ibid, p.4) that coding should aim at the transition between data collection and analysis and be, in essence, “an interpretive act”. It is also a cyclic process, catering to the logic of retroductive inquiry. To facilitate this process, a three-step coding strategy was developed for the purposes of interview data analysis in this research. The first round of interview data coding aimed at discovering how school management understood and interpreted the aims of private education reform. Given that the analysis of private education policy documents indicated four different types of capabilities targeted by the reform, the initial coding scheme focussed on searching for themes that would match one of the four capability types: 21st century capabilities, practical capabilities, citizenship capabilities and cross-cultural capabilities. Text segments were extracted and labelled at this stage to correspond to the descriptive interpretations of different capability sets. The way different capabilities were interpreted and understood was of particular importance at this stage of data analysis to cross-reference policy analysis findings with the interview data. This process aimed to assess whether the capability sets distinguished by means of policy instruments analysis and the theory of action of Chinese private education reform were reflected by what interviewees were attempting to do in operating their schools.

The second round of coding aimed at analysing the data that fell outside of the coded patterns to search for unexpected interpretations of the target capabilities. At this stage, the descriptive themes across different fieldwork sites were reviewed to identify consistencies and discrepancies in data with the goal to identify broader patterns and variations in private
education reform policy interpretation at the local level. At the same time, any gaps between policy intentions and actual implementation, which could indicate the presence of potentially restrictive conversion factors were identified and labelled for further consideration. Meaningful quotes or exemplars from the interview responses that exemplified key findings were extracted for findings presentation while the initial drafts of the findings’ chapters were being written. The writing process corresponded to the cyclical nature of the coding process, taking several months, and undergoing several different argument iterations to revisit and refine the themes, codes and narrative, allowing for a deeper understanding of the data to evolve from researcher’s reflexivity.

Finally, the third round of interview data coding focussed on conversion factors and followed the logic of retroduction to formulate coding notes from data patterns by searching for themes related to the factors seen by the interviewees as facilitating or restricting capability development in private schools. This was done in two different ways. First, the data around the sections of the interviews where certain capability themes had been discovered during the first round of coding were read again. Second, the interview question matrix that had been developed during the refining of the interview protocol was consulted to point towards the questions and parts of interviews that originally targeted the information about conversion factors. The findings were then interpreted in relation to the policy analysis, shedding light on whether private education reform was achieving its intended capability development in private schools and what conversion factors were influencing policy implementation. The identified analytical themes and sub-themes were synthesised to construct a coherent narrative which explained how different conversion factors interacted to shape the capability development process within the policy implementation network. Figures were created to visually represent key findings, policy implementation network in Chinese private schools and the interactions among the actor-based and context-based conversion factors. Finally, data limitations were considered to reflect on how the methodological, conceptual and data collection limitations might have influenced interview data analysis, which were then acknowledged as research limitations in Discussion.

3.4. Validity concerns

According to Stake (2006, p.88), the tradition of discussing the validity of knowledge claims related to social reality dated back to Aristotle and Plato. Gliner and Morgan (2000) claimed that validity involves judging the quality or the merit of the conducted study, which means that
evaluating whether the findings are valid is usually a post-factum process. However, to ensure that they withstand scrutiny, it is important to think about how to justify validity before the study is carried out. This section argues that external validity concerns are not applicable to this study and focuses on addressing internal validity of interview data and findings’ interpretations. The interview data validity is ensured by achieving salience and balance of perspectives necessary for data depth while the internal validity of findings is based on theoretical generalisation and data triangulation methods.

**Interview data validity**

The first thing to consider was the number of interviews required to claim the internal validity of acquired interview data. On the one hand, it is often advised to continue interviewing until saturation is reached (Weller et al., 2018). This is because the larger the sample size, the higher is the likelihood of obtaining new elements with each interview. However, even under the circumstances when complete thematic saturation is reached, it is hard to say for sure whether the domain is limited or whether the interviewer did not do enough probing (ibid). On the other hand, there are also studies that argue that the aim of qualitative interviewing is not to collect all possible ideas or elements but rather the most salient ones. For example, Weller et al. (2018) explored the issues of saturation and salience in the interviewing process and argued that “saturation may be more meaningfully and more productively conceived of as the point where the most salient ideas have been obtained”. In other words, they argued that for qualitative studies, the key is to ensure that the most important ideas and themes are discovered. Guest et al. (2006) also showed that 12-16 interviews are adequate to obtain most salient themes while Hagaman and Wutich (2017) discovered that the three most salient themes could be easily obtained within the first 16 interviews in each of their four studies. Weller et al. (2018) demonstrated that ideas reported by one out of five respondents on average are likely to be captured with 95% likelihood within the first 14 interviews given the independence of the themes.

The second approach is less dependent on the domain size and the number of responses per each interviewee and allows utilizing a smaller sample size without the loss of depth (Weller et al., 2018). Such depth, according to Weller et al. (ibid) is reached through extensive probing and a greater number of responses per person interviewed. They argued that “a small sample

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47 Saturation is understood as the situation when less than one new element or idea is added with each additional interview. This concept is dependent on the domain size of the study.
(n= 10) can collect some of the most salient ideas, but a small sample with extensive probing can collect most of the salient ideas” (ibid, p.1) which is why interview protocol design and refinement were essential for this research. To ensure interview data validity, this research did not aim to achieve saturation due to the feasibility constraints and the unknown domain size of the phenomenon under investigation, but instead focused on salience, i.e. obtaining the most prevalent themes and ideas with the use of extensive probing and a smaller sample size.

The second consideration for interview data validity was the format of interviews. As Smith and Elger (2014, p.119) argued, the information that is an outcome of successful interviewing reflects “richly textured accounts of events, experiences, and underlying conditions or processes, which represent different facets of a complex and multi-layered social reality”. To provide the balance and variety of perspectives required to achieve this (Stake, 2006), interviews with key informants were conducted in a format of an individual interview or a focus group. The data were obtained through extensive interviews with school and investment group leadership, including interviewing different members of school administration separately. The semi-structured format of the interviews captured the perceptions and understandings of interviewees on the pre-determined set of questions with an opportunity to follow the interviewee's lead and explore previously untapped concepts. Under such circumstances, the interview process was not merely creating a record of interviewee's words but was providing what Smith and Elger (2014) call “mutual construction of meanings”. This was necessary to ensure that the data collected throughout the interviews reflected contextual variations, differences in perspectives and provided a detailed account of how interviewees understood and interpreted policy objectives of the Chinese private education reform in their practice of school management.

Validity of findings

The internal validity of findings was ensured by relying on the concept of theoretical generalisation and employing the methods of triangulation. To begin with, this research aimed at theoretical, rather than statistical generalisation due to the impossibility of ensuring external validity in the qualitative case-study about policy objectives and implementation of Chinese private education reform. This means the findings of this research cannot be extrapolated into other contexts, societies, and settings because of both the limited sample size and the focus on contextual specifics of each case. Stake (2006) also argued that the idea of statistical generalisation in case-studies compromises the uniqueness of cases and would not inform
practice. In other words, qualitative findings of case-studies reject the necessity for a statistically representative sample in favour of theoretical generalisation. In this study, such kind of generalisation was based on the case context and its relationship to the outcomes i.e., what factors influenced the way policy constrained or promoted educational choices. Pawson (2006) offered clarification on how such generalisations are possible. He argued that the trinity of context, mechanisms and outcomes had to be addressed where mechanisms are the engines of change in the system, which work differently under different circumstances. Therefore, by analysing the relationship between context and outcomes, it becomes possible to hypothesise about the generative mechanism and arrive at a **theoretical generalisation**\(^{48}\). Thus, it is argued that for the purposes of this study, internal validity considerations had to be prioritised over any attempt at generalising the findings.

When it comes to internal validity, methodological and design considerations were necessary to ensure the reliability of knowledge claims produced from the findings. This study employed triangulation methods to help establish the internal validity of the research design, which meant relying on multiple data sources in findings interpretation (Yin, 2009) and using more than one approach to data collection (Denzin, 1978). Denzin (1978) coined the term **triangulation** by describing four types of possible triangulation, including theory, investigator, data, and methodological triangulation. In the case of this research, investigator triangulation was not possible because only one person carried out the whole project. Theory triangulation was also not very suitable since the research had a pre-established conceptual framework of the capability approach. Thus, triangulation was understood in this research as the technique that allowed “*the construction of plausible explanation about the phenomena being studied*” (Mathison, 1988, p.17) to make sense of what Mathison called **convergence, inconsistency, and contradiction**.

These three elements occurred in data analysis because the key informants for this research were people. Mathison (1988, p.15) explained that **convergence** occurs when “*data from different sources, methods, investigators, and so on will produce evidence that will result in a single proposition about some social phenomenon*”. **Inconsistency** happens when “*multiple sources, methods, and so on [generate] a range of perspectives or data that do not confirm a single proposition about a social phenomenon*” and **contradiction** results “*in opposing views

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\(^{48}\) This approach rejects the understanding of causation developed by David Hume (1949) in a way that according to Pawson (2006) permits the researcher to see reasons as causes, which can become generalisations.
of the social phenomenon studies” (ibid). As Lewontin (1995) pointed out, the reason inconsistencies and contradictions happen in interview-based data analysis is simply that people lie: not always intentionally, and not always to the researcher, but often to themselves. Secondly, this is also because meanings do not occur with integrity (Maxwell, 1992), which means qualitative design requires the researcher to be particularly careful with how he or she reinterprets the data when no interpretation is ever entirely repeatable (Flick, 1998). As a result, the main purpose of data triangulation in this research was to account for inconsistencies and contradictions in data interpretation.

This was done by both redundant data gathering and setting up procedural challenges to formulate the explanations (Preissle and LeCompte, 1984). In terms of data collection, multiple data sources were used in this study to analyse capability formation in Chinese private schools, such as observational data, interview data and policy documentation data. Furthermore, two or three people were interviewed in each case school to rely on data from different respondents. Observational data on school resources were also used to for triangulation purposes as the analysis of resources in the capability approach, albeit instrumental, is far from unimportant Robeyns (2006). By taking notes of the available resources, such as sports facilities, teacher profiles, curriculum arrangements, library books, computer equipment and facilities available for extracurricular facilities, it was possible to triangulate interview claims with the reality of a school. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to this kind of redundant data gathering as the way to ensure the credibility of findings in a multiple-case study in general. Stake (2006, p.33) also argued that data triangulation is about making sure that the researcher does not read too much into the situation or oversimplify to ensure the meaning grasped from an interview was, indeed, the same meaning that the interviewee meant to convey (Stake, 2006, p.33). Thus, the approach to data collection in this research included pilot cases and interview protocol refinement, as well as a combination of different interview techniques for semi-structured interviews, such as both specific questions and general prompts.

When it comes to procedural challenges, the first one employed by this study was what Stake (2006, p.37) called member-checking, which meant asking the interviewee to contribute towards the study by making them read the interview excerpts used in the dissertation and check the researcher’s interpretation to ensure accuracy. Not all interviewees agreed to do this either due to time constraints or lack of English proficiency. The second procedural challenge was asking experts and non-experts for additional perspectives on how the findings might be
interpreted (Stake, 2006). This was done with the help of Peking University network and by asking a few of the fellow China researchers to read and comment on the results chapters. Stake (2006, p.33) claimed that in a case-study, each significant finding requires a minimum of three confirmations to assure the researcher that no meanings were overlooked. These procedural challenges also clarified the interview meanings and provided the different ways in which the case could be seen (Silverman, 2006). To summarise, this section addressed internal validity concerns by explaining how interview data was collected to provide data variety and depth, as well as how findings were formulated with the aim to achieve theoretical generalisation and interpretation accuracy through data triangulation and procedural challenges for data analysis.

3.5. Chapter summary

This chapter explained the methodological foundations and the research design of the thesis. It was argued that a qualitative research design is suitable for exploring capability development in Chinese private schools and the relationship between private education reform objectives and policy implementation. The chapter then provided details on policy document selection and translation methods followed by the three cycles of policy analysis strategy aiming at distinguishing the mixes of policy instruments and policy problems that permitted theorising about the objectives of the private education reform in China through the lens of the capability approach.

After that, a justification for the selection of a multi-site research design for fieldwork organisation was argued to be due to both theoretical and practical considerations as schools presented embraceable units of analysis capable of providing the required qualitative data for exploring the process of capability formation in Chinese private schools. The section then explained the principles of selecting school cases, formulating interview questions, ethical considerations and the development of the interview protocol using the IPR framework. Pilot cases were used to test the research design and gain an insight into the specifics of data collection in Chinese private schools. Following the analysis of pilot interview experiences, the interview protocol was refined based on the methodological insights gained during the pilot visits and it was then argued that the logic of replication was suitable for post pilot case selection.

Subsequently, this chapter provided details of data collection process, school site access and post-fieldwork data analysis, including the types of data collected, the way it was coded and
how the coding results were interpreted. NVivo was used to analyse interview data through the three rounds of coding that aimed at discovering how capabilities targeted by the private education reform were interpreted in Chinese private schools and what conversion factors were seen by interviewees as affecting the process of capability formation. It was further argued that the use of abduction and retroduction logics was appropriate for case-study data analysis to formulate the answer to the second research question and that the case-quintain dialectic approach was an effective writing up strategy. Finally, validity-related concerns were explored to argue that internal validity of the research design took precedence over external validity concerns due to the inapplicability of statistical generalisations to this study. The internal validity of interview data collection procedure and the interpretation of findings was ensured with the help of data triangulation methods combined with procedural challenges aimed at arriving at a theoretical generalisation.
4. Private education reform in China as a capability-enhancing policy.

The analysis of statistical data and literature review in the first two chapters of this thesis has shown that the reintroduction of private education in China made a significant impact on the Chinese education system. The numbers of private schools and private school students have grown rapidly since 1980s, as a comprehensive legislative framework was being put into place by the Chinese government. It was argued that the conceptual framework of the capability approach provided a suitable lens to examine the private education reform by focussing on what made private schools sustainable and what role private education was playing in the modernisation of the Chinese education system. This chapter discusses the findings of policy analysis with the aim to formulate an answer to the first research question which asks, “to what extent are the reform objectives for private primary and secondary education in China capability-enhancing?”

To begin with, the notion of a capability enhancing policy is not a new idea. Otto, Walker, and Ziegler (2017, p.301) noted that “the concept of capability-promoting policies is not only a political philosophical concept, but also a feasible and meaningful approach to analysing policy limitations …and conceptualising real-world policies”. This is because the language of the capability approach avoids focussing on what policies typically cannot achieve and that is a guaranteed outcome. Assessing the policy documents of the Chinese private education reform through the lens of their relationship with capability formation allows instead to concentrate on their intention, which may then be interpreted and implemented differently in different circumstances.

One definition of a capability-enhancing policy can be found in the works of Laruffa (2020, p.1) who explained the concept of capability-enhancing social policy by saying that “at the individual level, social policy should increase the number and variety of valuable options open to individuals”. When it comes to education policies, Laruffa (2020, p.9) pointed out that it would be misguided to assume that any education policy is capability-enhancing simply by virtue of promoting skill development. Indeed, if the policy promotes skill development that is not facilitated by the socioeconomic circumstances, individual freedoms to act with these skills remain limited. For example, in a society that is isolated from the outside world, individual capability to speak a foreign language would be restricted even if their education would provide them with the skill to do so. This is because capability enhancing education policy cannot operate in a vacuum, without an organic connection to its implementation contexts. Thus,
creation of viable choices is what defines a capability enhancing policy rather than promotion of skills.

The first half of this chapter argues that this definition fits the Chinese private education policies by applying the lens of policy instruments framework (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; McDonnell and Grubb, 1991) to private education reform analysis, which indicated that its theory of action is to expand peoples’ freedoms through the provision of diversified and accessible educational choices and increasing both the quantity and the quality of these choices. According to policy instruments theory, a theory of action can be derived from “both the particular rationales that are articulated by policy actors and the internal logics of the policy” (Malen et al., 2002). In this chapter, the internal logic of the private education reform policies is examined in the first section to demonstrate how the reform of Chinese private education can be conceived as a capability-enhancing policy by targeting the expansion of educational choices through a complex set of policy instruments. In the second section, policy rationale is examined through the analysis of hortatory policy instruments that designate certain reform goals and values as a high priority of policymakers (Schneider and Ingram, 1990). It is argued that reform rationale was signalling the focus on meeting people’s expectations by providing viable and diversified educational pathways. The section ends with a summary of how the emerged mix of policy instruments targeted capability formation in Chinese private schools.

The second half of the chapter determines the main types of education capabilities promoted by the reform by analysing the selected policy documents and grouping target capabilities into 21st century capabilities, citizenship capabilities, practical capabilities, and cross-cultural capabilities. It shows that while private education reform consistently targeted the delivery of these capabilities in private schools, the language of the policy instruments remained vague and provided enough space for policy interpretation by the local authorities, according to the circumstances of each region, as well as flexibility of policy implementation in private schools within the scope of the emerging legislative framework.

4.1. Internal logic of private education reform: Enhancing capabilities through choice creation

This section covers the internal logic of the private education reform to argue that the use of specific policy instruments suggests the aim of the private education reform to be the expansion
of educational choices for Chinese families by ensuring that private schools provided diverse, viable and flexible education opportunities. The policy instruments analysis framework, as developed in the works of McDonnell and Elmore (1987), Schneider and Ingram (1990) and McDonnell and Grubb (1991), is used in this chapter to analyse private education reform policy documents. This framework consists of policy instruments, policy problems and assumptions of how the policy might achieve the desired outcome – its theory of action. The use of different kinds of policy instruments, including *inducements, mandates, capacity-building, and system-changing policy instruments* implies different assumptions about the issues that they attempt to address and what could bring about change. For example, the use of mandates would imply that policymakers believed that “*action would not occur with desired frequency or consistency*” without the use of forceful rules (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987, p.141). The assumption behind the use of inducements would be that “*valued good would not be produced with desired frequency or consistency in absence of additional money*” while capacity-building policy instruments would imply that existing knowledge, skill, or competence was seen by policymakers as insufficient to achieve objectives (ibid, 0.141). Finally, system-changing policy instruments would assume that “*existing institutions, existing incentives cannot produce desired results*” (ibid, p.141).

This framework is applied to private education reform in China to uncover the assumptions and policy problems behind each type of policy instrument and explore the mix of policy targets as summarised in Appendix 12. Overall, the private education reform used all four types of policy instruments targeting a diverse set of policy problems, including the insufficient quantity of private schools at the beginning of the reform process, low quality of educational services and choices delivered by private education, policy overregulation and the abuse of rights of private schools, the misuse of private education funds and excessive profit-making activities of the school owners, and the lack of long-term investment and capacity to deliver modernised education opportunities for the 21st century. The assumptions behind the use of different types of policy instruments are that policymakers saw the capacity for growth on the private education market but understood that incentives were required to achieve policy targets and that, in some areas, capacity-building and clear standards were needed before the targets could be achieved. The resulting mix of policy instruments suggested that the private education reform aimed to create a modernised and diverse system of private education that would supplement public schooling while remaining accountable to the government through the mechanisms of supervision, transparency, and quality control. This combination of
diversification, quality control, and flexibility of educational opportunities can be conceived of as facilitating the expansion of freedom for the Chinese population to make educational choices they consider valuable. In the next few sections, each type of policy instruments will be assessed to provide details on how these conclusions were reached.

**Inducements: incentivising choice creation**

Private education reform put into place numerous inducements, which remained a consistent policy instrument throughout the reform period. As early as 1987, Provisional Regulations on running schools by social forces by the Ministry of Education offered “commendations and rewards” for outstanding privately-run schools. This was later institutionalised into the Education Law of the PRC (1995) and State Council Regulations on running schools by social forces (1997) which proclaimed that “rewards shall be given to organizations and individuals that have made outstanding contributions to the running of schools by social forces”. These inducements, while aiming to attract more investors into the developing private education sector, failed to provide any specifics on what kind of rewards private school owners could expect or how they could apply to be given any. Thus, the instrument was largely experimental, leaving it to the local authorities to determine what criteria private schools had to meet to be considered “outstanding” and what rewards would be given to them.

In the 21st century, inducements became more specific. The Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development, published by the State Council in 2001, hinted at the legal possibility of obtaining investment returns by stating that “the legal funds from full-time primary and secondary schools organized by social forces can be appropriately arranged to reward school organizers after sufficient school development funds are reserved” and reiterating the responsibility of the local governments to formulate relevant specific measures. The Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC (2002) was the first policy with a comprehensive set of inducements, indicating that the national government considered insufficient the rather limited incentives they had put into place. First, private education was incentivised to enter disadvantaged and underdeveloped areas in exchange for state support and financial rewards which stated that “the State takes measures to support and encourage non-governmental organizations and individuals to establish and run non-public schools for the development of education in ethnic minority areas and in outlying and poverty-stricken areas”. Second, People’s governments at or above the county level were encouraged to set up special funds for financing the development of private schools and for rewarding and
commending the collectives and individuals that made outstanding contributions to the development of private education. Most importantly, the Law stipulated that “the investor may obtain a reasonable amount of requital from the cash surplus of the school”. Overall, this Law can be seen as the key inducement-focussed policy within the Chinese private education reform, as the government was building a more comprehensive legislative framework for the operation of private schools.

Implementation Rules for the Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC that came out in 2004 further clarified that “measures to support” were, indeed, financial incentives. The Rules included an inducement mechanism in the form of preferential loans for the school’s own development and relevant state credit preferential policies for private schools that had been established in western regions, remote and poverty-stricken areas, and ethnic minority areas. This was further aimed at pushing private schools to provide education opportunities to disadvantaged groups. Several policies after that, including the Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium-and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020), reiterated the availability of rewards and commendations for the organisers of private schools, specifying the provisions on the deduction of private education welfare donations before income tax.

The Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress on Amending the Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC and the amended Private Education Promotion Law in 2016 added the supplementary endowment insurance money for teachers and staff in private schools to the list of established inducements and specified the previously stipulated tax deduction for enterprises supporting private education at 12% of the total annual profit. This aimed at encouraging private education investment groups as, by this time, it had become a common model for private schools in China to be established not by individual owners, but by the collective effort of education investment groups. Education investment groups were further incentivised by the Opinions on Further Adjusting and Optimizing the Structure and Improving the Use Efficiency of Educational Funds passed by the State Council (2018), which aimed at increasing the proportion of social investment in total education funding by offering financial rewards and donation incentives to the “social forces” that invest in private education. Finally, Implementing Regulations of the Foreign Investment Law (2020) emphasised preferential tax and finance policies for foreign businesses and individuals involved in educational undertakings.

49 More details on education investment groups are available in chapter six.
The lens of the policy instruments framework suggests that a policy problem that inducements aimed to address was the low quantity of desired outcomes or insufficient frequency with which such outcomes occurred (McDonnell and Grubb, 1991). In terms of private education reform in China, this would mean not enough private schools to deliver expected educational choices, low engagement of social forces in the education sector and the need to elicit desired performance. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the underlying assumption of consistent use of inducements must have been the belief that private education sector in China had space for growth and development, which meant offering financial incentives would mobilise the existing capacity (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987, p.141). Indeed, the growth of private education investment groups after the reintroduction of private education indicated that such capacity had been present in China. The theory of action for these inducements would be that money would increase the performance of private education and facilitate the development of desired education opportunities. As financial policy instruments, aimed at expanding the number of private schools and incentivising private investors to enter the field of education, the inducements used in the Chinese private education reform can be conceived of as capability enhancing as they incentivised choice creation for Chinese families. This means the more private schools there were, the more those who did not wish to choose a state school had access to alternative education pathways.

**Mandates: ensuring the quality and diversity of educational choices**

In the context of the private education reform in China, both undesirable behaviour and a lack of standards were addressed through mandates that aimed at codifying the behaviour of private schools (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987). The policy problem can be formulated as the absence of a comprehensive legal framework for the operation of private education at the beginning of the reform, as well as low-quality education services provided by some private schools. Thus, it can be assumed that, by putting more rules into place, the policymakers believed in the capacity of the private sector to comply and improve the quality of educational opportunities. Specifically, policymakers focussed on standardising the rules for education internationalisation, teaching materials and school management practices while still leaving enough room for diversity of policy interpretations.

In 1985, the Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Education Reform set out the ground rules by stipulating that education reforms had to be resolute and cautious, with emphasis on experimentation. This focus on experimentation was further specified in the Decision on Basic
Education Reform and Development (2001), which mandated that all localities had to establish educational and teaching reform experimental areas and experimental schools to explore, experiment and promote new curriculum materials and advanced teaching methods. Diversification remained a priority in the joint circular on implementing Private Education Promotion Law (2003) that mandated that all localities had to “actively explore new ideas, new methods, and new measures to promote the healthy development of private education” and the 13th Five-year Education Development Plan (2017) that encouraged social forces and private capital to establish schools and educational institutions in a variety of ways to provide diversified educational products and services.

From the beginning of the reform, mandates also aimed at ensuring the quality of international education. The Outline of Education Reform and Development in China (1993) mandated that “school textbooks had to reflect the outstanding civilization achievements of China and the world and the latest development of contemporary science, technology and culture”, teaching materials for primary and secondary schools had to be diversified “under the premise of unifying basic requirements” and that the school management system and model of ordinary high schools had to be diversified. Yet shortly after, “foreign parties” were prohibited from establishing schools at compulsory education level by the Provisional Regulations for Sino-Foreign cooperation in running schools (1995). This shows that while access to international curriculum was encouraged, direct involvement of international schools from abroad into the Chinese education system was strictly controlled. As international education became more popular in China, the Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development (2001) mandated that, starting from elementary schools, foreign language courses had to be gradually offered uniformly by region. However, the Implementation Rules on the Supervision and Administration of For-profit Private Schools (2016) then mandated the emphasis on Chinese culture and national curriculum to balance the presence of international education in private schools.

Third, mandates also addressed the issue of private school teaching quality by specifying that teachers hired by private educational institutions had to meet the teacher qualifications prescribed by the state in the State Council Regulations on running schools by social forces (1997). The Action Plan for Education Promotion for the 21st Century, published in 1998, further increased these requirements, stating that a certain percentage of full-time teachers and
principals of high schools in economically developed areas had to have a master’s degree, though the policy did not specify the percentage.

Quality-related mandates continued to be used throughout the classified management period of the private education reform. The Implementation Rules on the Supervision and Administration of For-profit Private Schools (2016) included Article 25 that stated that the teachers employed by for-profit private schools had to have the teacher qualifications or relevant professional skills qualifications prescribed by the state, and private schools had to comply with the People’s Republic of China Teachers Law, The People’s Republic of China Labour Contract Law, and other national laws. Private education was mandated to invest a certain percentage of tuition fees into teacher training by the State Council in 2016 while the 13th Five-year Education Development Plan (2017) called on the governments at all levels to establish more transparent education industry standards, strengthening monitoring and supervision.

Fourth, to prevent the misuse of school funds and improve the quality of private education, the Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC (2002) stated that the fees collected by private schools had to be used mainly for educational and teaching activities and the improvement of the school operation. Implementation Rules for the Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC (2004) further declared that state subsidies, fees collected from students, loans and donated property did not belong to the sponsors of private schools. The Interim Measures for the Management of the Collection of Private Education Fees (2005) mandated the standard of academic education and accommodation fees for private schools had to be determined according to the actual costs. Finally, the Package Amendments to Education Laws (2015) banned schools, organized using financial funds or donated assets, from being established as profit-making organizations. Thus, ensuring that private education investment was used appropriately remained a consistent target of policy mandates throughout the reform.

In addition, private education reform included mandates that aimed to clarify the policies and reduce overregulation. For example, in 1996, educational administrative departments were prohibited by the State Education Commission from passing policies on their own to charge private schools any supervision fees, which was an attempt to set boundaries for the local governments that appeared to have been taking advantage of the newly emerging system. Once the Private Education Promotion Law was passed in 2002, the Joint circular on implementing the Private Education Promotion Law (2003) mandated all local governments to conduct a comprehensive review of relevant local laws and regulations and revise those that did not meet
the provisions of Law with the aim to remove policy obstacles. This was further confirmed by the Notices on the National Education System Innovation Pilot (2010), which mandated to “clean up and correct various discriminatory policies” against private education. Several Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) then stated that “as long as social forces invest in education, as long as it is not a field that is prohibited by laws and regulations and does not harm the interests of third parties, social public interests, and national security, the government shall not restrict it”. These mandates, removing unnecessary restrictions, were aimed at addressing the policy problem of overregulation of private education at the local levels.

Overall, private education reform included a variety of mandates that sought to address the issues of low-quality private education, unclear or controversial policy regulations, unsupervised profit-making activities, the lack of investment into school development and unclear rights of private school students and staff. The theory of action would be that the issues of the quality of educational choices provided by private schools could be resolved through clearer standards and stricter supervision preventing the abuse of school-running activities for personal gain of private school organisers while at the same time legalising experimental and diversified educational practices. In terms of capability formation, the “progressive removal of unwanted obstacles” can be seen as an indication of a capability-enhancing policy (Otto, Walker, and Ziegler, 2017, p.303), because the mandates paid close attention to outdated policy revision and ensuring that the legal rights of private schools were not abused. Furthermore, mandates, aiming at higher quality of diverse education opportunities, indicated an increase of accountability within the private school system in China that can be seen as conducive to capability formation.

Capacity-building: modernisation and diversification of educational choices

Overall, there were two aspects of capacity-building throughout the period of private education reform. First, long-term investment in the modernisation and diversification of educational opportunities provided by the private sector and, second, investment in public-private cooperation mechanisms. Both aspects aimed at tackling the perceived policy problem of insufficient ability of private education to meet the diverse and shifting needs of the Chinese families. At the beginning of the reform, capacity-building instruments were offering asset support without allocating much state funding to financing private education. For example, as
early as 1993, the Outline of Education Reform and Development in China emphasised that the local governments had to increase investment in the construction of housing for school faculty and staff to significantly improve the housing conditions during the Eighth Five-Year Plan period. The same policy also stated that the government had to address the shortage of resources in schools of all levels and types, including private schools, and increase the funds used to purchase equipment, books, and materials. Subsequently, the Education Law of the PRC (1995) stated that, while private school operating expenses had to be raised by the respective sponsors, the people’s governments at various levels could provide them with appropriate support. To this end, the State Council Regulations on running schools by social forces (1997) stipulated that where the construction of private educational institutions required the use of land, local people’s governments at or above the county level had to incorporate it into their planning and prioritise relevant arrangements.

The Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC (2002) introduced further capacity-building instruments. Specifically, measures, such as financial aid and the lease or transfer of idle state-owned assets in support of private schools, were stipulated. Second, preferential taxation policies for private education were first mentioned, though lacking specifics. Third, it reiterated the previously established land provision policy by saying that where a private school was to be constructed or expanded, the local people’s government had to provide preferential treatment in accordance with the regulations on the use of land for and construction of public welfare undertakings. These capacity-building instrument prioritised asset redistribution where land was used not only to supply resources for private schools, but also to guide the opening of new school campuses in developing urban districts and areas most in need of education opportunities, according to development planning of the local governments.

In addition to asset transfers, the Chinese government was also building the capacity of the private education sector by purchasing education services from private schools, including providing students in the areas of limited public-school resources with places in private schools. According to the Implementation Rules for the Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC (2004), if the county-level people’s government entrusted private schools to undertake compulsory education tasks, it had to allocate corresponding education funds based on the number of students receiving compulsory education and the per-student education funding standards of local public schools that implemented compulsory education.
Capacity-building through public-private cooperation continued throughout the classified management period of the private education reform. For instance, Several Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) put into place the government and social capital cooperation (PPP) model which was a capacity-building policy instrument aimed to “encourage social capital to participate in the construction and operation and management of educational infrastructure and provide professional services”. This was particularly important as it established a channel for private sector to receive public funds.

Moreover, capacity-building policy instruments were introduced to promote different aspects of private education, such as attracting teachers, managers, purchasing assets and accessing resources and facilities for the successful operation of private schools. Specifically, the Implementation Opinions on Encouraging and Guiding the Entry of Private Capital in the Fields of Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2012) called on the local governments to “subsidize private schools to improve their management level and strengthen the construction of teachers”. The Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress on Amending the Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC and the amended Private Education Promotion Law (2016) allowed governments at and above the county level to formulate specific local measures, such as purchasing services, student loans, scholarships and grants, leasing, and transferring idle state-owned assets, to incentive private education. In the same year, Several Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) stipulated the need to improve service policies for private school teachers’ household registration transfer, which was essential to give private education an opportunity to attract qualified teachers willing to relocate from a different city or province.

Finally, capacity-building policy instruments targeted education modernisation by encouraging investment in modern technology, informatisation and practical capabilities. The 13th Five-year Education Development Plan (2017) focussed on educational service outsourcing and providing schools with specialized services such as “informatization course packages”, practical training, teacher training, management support, quality monitoring, and employment guidance, as an important part of government education services supplement. The China Education Modernization 2035 plan (2019) promoted access to modern technology in private
schools to “accelerate the reform of the talent training model and realize the organic combination of large-scale education and individualized training”. The Implementation Plan for Speeding up Education Modernisation (2018-2022) established a “smart education demonstration zone”, to carry out the construction of national virtual simulation experiment teaching projects and implement artificial intelligence to promote the construction of teaching teams and building an “Internet + Education” supporting service platform accessible to all schools.

Thus, the Chinese government was investing in the long-term capacity development of the private education sector through various means, including asset transfers, such as land and housing, public-private cooperation mechanisms, purchasing equipment and services, subsidies, as well as helping private schools attract teachers and access modern education technology. According to the policy instruments framework, it can be assumed that policymakers believed that diverse and long-term investment goals were necessary to compensate for the lack of capacity and ensure that private schools provided educational choices desirable for the changing needs of the Chinese society. In terms of capability development, these capacity-building policy instruments aimed at long-term sustainability of the private sector and its ability to provide modernised education opportunities through the increasing supply of both tangible and intangible resources.

**System-changing: authority transfers**

Overall, system-changing policy instruments aimed at optimising the management of the increasingly complex private education sector by redistributing the authority to the local levels of the government, establishing new government bodies with specific education reform-related responsibilities, and increasing transparency. It can be assumed that policymakers saw the inefficiencies within the education reform and the policy obstacles to the “healthy” development of private education and attempted to rectify the inefficiencies by both creating more supervisory bodies and delegating the authority. In addition, management of complexity within the private education sector has led to the creation of the classified management system of private education and, in some respects, the division of responsibilities between private and public schools.

First, system-changing policy instruments included the introduction of third parties into private school supervision, as well as the establishment of additional governmental bodies to focus on
the development of private education. In 1985, The Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Education Reform established the National Education Committee to be responsible for the major policies of education, coordinating the development of the entire education reform and the education work of various departments, and uniformly deploying and guiding the reform of the education system. In 1998, the China Education Development Foundation was established on the basis of the China Elementary and Secondary School Preschool Teacher Award Foundation to raise education funds through multiple channels, including private investment. These new organisations were tasked with education reform research and oversight.

The Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC (2002) further specified that to improve the quality of private schools, local governments had to entrust public intermediary bodies with the arrangements for assessing the level and the quality of education, announcing the results of the assessment to the public. In 2010, the State Council established the National Education System Reform Leading Group to review major guidelines and policy measures for the education reform, guide its implementation, and coordinate major issues. Thus, on the one hand, private education reform governance was made more comprehensive, as larger state resources were directed towards its goals but, on the other hand, these organisations had some overlapping responsibilities and required efficient communication to successfully fulfil their purpose.

Second, system-changing policy instruments introduced a redistribution of educational tasks between private and public education sectors. In 2013, Measures for the Management of International Divisions in Senior High Schools prohibited any future international divisions in public schools. This signalled a clear division of priorities. While public schools were supposed to facilitate Gaokao (University Entrance Examination) preparation, private schools were tasked with delivering international curricula in addition to the domestic programmes in China for students preparing to go abroad. Furthermore, system-changing policy instruments targeted the classified management of private education, introducing the division into for-profit and non-profit private schools. The Package Amendments to Education Laws (2015) amended Article 8 Paragraph 2 of the Education Law regarding the organization of non-profit schools, allowing for-profit private schools to exist. This was done to eliminate the legal barriers to exploring the classified management of private schools and leave room for the educational administration to explore and standardize the process. This introduced further division into the system of private education with non-profit private schools gaining a similar status to public
schools and more access to state finances combined with preferential school management policies.

Third, private schools were gaining more autonomy throughout the education reform in terms of enrolment, school management, HR practices and asset management. The Implementation Opinions on Encouraging and Guiding the Entry of Private Capital in the Fields of Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2012) stipulated the need to implement the autonomy of enrolment in private schools. The regional education administrative departments were given permission to allow schools with standardized and strict management to independently determine the scope and annual plans within the approved scale of enrolment. Private schools below the middle level of compulsory education were given autonomy to recruit students at the same time as local public schools, in accordance with the approved school scale. Furthermore, private schools could independently formulate development plans in accordance with the law, set up internal organizations, hire teachers and staff, and manage school assets and finances. Finally, private schools at the basic education stage were allowed to independently carry out educational and teaching activities on the premise of completing the nationally prescribed courses. This expansion of private school autonomy aimed at preventing the abuse of power at the local levels of governance, as well as relieving the authorities of micromanaging responsibilities. At the same time, the policy maintained clear boundaries of such autonomy determined by the state.

Finally, several system-changing instruments were put in place to promote transparency and reduce the authority of private education organisers over school finances through increased supervision and openness to the public. Several Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) established a disclosure system for private schools and a punishment mechanism for “violations and untrustworthiness” to include schools that violated the rules and their sponsors in the blacklist. The Implementation Rules on the Supervision and Administration of For-profit Private Schools (2016) stipulated in Article 46 that “local education, human resources and social security and other relevant departments shall supervise the financial assets of for-profit private schools by implementing audits and establishing supervision platforms”. Thus, system-changing policy instruments aimed at ensuring the viability of diversified educational choices targeted by the private education reform by increasing transparency and third-party involvement in the reform process, while also
maintaining the flexibility of policy implementation by expanding the autonomy of private schools within the scope of the emerging legislative framework.

4.2. Hortatory policy instruments: people-oriented education diversification as reform rationale

Based on the analysis of hortatory policy instruments, this section argues that the rationale for reforming private education in China was to develop additional education pathways and provide access to alternative education opportunities that would benefit the Chinese population. As was pointed out by Schneider and Ingram (1990, p.521), hortatory policy instruments do not “insert factual information or resources into the decision situation”, but focus instead on motivating the audience through imagery, labels, and proclamations. For example, the image of China as a great learning country in the New Era or the proclamations of the people-oriented nature of education reforms in the Implementation Plan for Speeding up Education Modernisation (2018-2022). This section illustrates the themes of diversity, people-oriented reforms, and local experimentation, which can be traced throughout all stages of the reform, particularly in the standardised development and classified management periods, as policymakers seemed to have grown more confident and consistent with their reform justifications. Diversified educational choices included the encouragement of international education, pilot, and experimental projects, as well as simply providing an alternative to public schooling. According to Schneider and Ingram (1990, p.519), the assumption behind selecting specific hortatory instruments is that the values proclaimed within the policy would align with the values of the target audience. In the case of private education reform in China, these values were diversification of educational choices with the aim to meet the changing expectations of the Chinese families.

For example, the Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010 – 2020) called for mobilizing “the enthusiasm of the whole society to participate, further stimulate the vitality of education, and meet the multi-level and diversified educational needs of the people”. The Notices on the National Education System Innovation Pilot (2010) further deepened this rhetoric by emphasising the following main targets for the education reform: 1) strive to solve major practical problems through people-oriented reform; 2) promote the diversified development of ordinary high schools and encourage ordinary high schools to have their own characteristics; 3) take whether the reform can promote the overall development of people and meet the needs of the economy and society
as the starting point; 4) adhere to adapting measures to local conditions and encouraging bold experiments in local schools. These hortatory policy instruments signalled not only the importance of educational diversity, but also the need for the diversified education system to meet the needs of the Chinese population by providing them with viable educational choices.

Furthermore, the Suggestions on formulating the 13th five-year plan for national economic and social development, published by the Central Committee of the CPC in 2015, also stated that social forces and private capital were needed to “provide diversified educational services”. The 13th Five-year Education Development Plan (2017) then included a section on private education reform which encouraged social forces and private capital to establish schools and educational institutions “in a variety of ways” and provide “diversified educational products and services”. It specifically mentioned informatization, development of practical capabilities and, giving “full play” to the role of market mechanisms and supporting “the cultivation of new forms of education”. The Plan also linked education reform to innovation, modernisation, and cultivation of talents by stating that China “must increase investment in people, face modernization, face the world, and face the future”. People were seen as “the core element of national development”, so ultimately meeting the needs of the population was said to mean catering to the needs of national development.

Finally, the Implementation Plan for Speeding up Education Modernisation (2018-2022) painted a picture of desired outcomes of education reforms and modernisation. According to the Plan,

“The results of educational reform and development will benefit all people more equitably, the ability of education to serve economic and social development will be significantly improved, the “hot” and difficult problems of education that are of social concern will be effectively alleviated, and diversified choices of high-quality education will be created. Resources will become more abundant, education opportunities for the people will be further expanded, and important progress will be made in building a great learning country.”

These targets were conceptualised through the notion of *Lide Shuren*50, which became one of the main hortatory policy instruments as a widespread justification for the education reform “with Chinese characteristics for a New Era”. Thus, the analysis of hortatory policy instruments has shown that Chinese policymakers signalled education diversification as a

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50 The concept of the integration of Chinese traditional culture with moral, physical, and aesthetic education.
major reform priority and encouraged private schools to innovate, expand educational choices and modernise their education provision to meet the increasingly varied educational needs of Chinese families. To summarise, a complex mix of policy instruments emerged that indicated that the Chinese private education reform can be conceptualised as a capability-enhancing policy, which is illustrated by Figure 20.

Figure 20: Private education reform as a capability-enhancing policy

The theory of action of the reform was argued to aim at the expansion of educational choices and pathways available to Chinese families. Education diversification, which occurred as private schools were being given the freedom and encouragement to focus on a variety of elective courses, characteristics, and curricula, including the delivery of international education,
led to the expansion of freedoms of students to make educational choices different from those offered by public schools. In addition, the set of quality-control mandates within the policy instruments mix was aimed at ensuring that these diversified educational choices are not only possible in theory, but also viable and accessible to a wide range of students in practice. Specifically, tuition fee standards and supervision of financial assets of private schools, as well as policy revisions, were aimed at ensuring that private schools had their legal rights protected and operated on a variety of levels, not limited to providing educational opportunities to the wealthy. The policy instruments remained vague and allocated a lot of freedom of interpretation to the local authorities to reduce overregulation and emphasise the need for innovative and experimental projects within the private school system. This means that private education reform aimed at systemic diversification while not overregulating the type of educational choices private schools could provide, leaving space for contextual adjustments and local experimentation within the scope of the law. Finally, the people-oriented nature of the reform was repeatedly signalled through the hortatory policy instruments which also indicated that policymakers were attempting to deliver on the expectations of the Chinese population by facilitating the provision of valuable education options.

4.3. Four types of capabilities prioritised by the private education reform

Having argued that private education reform in China can be conceptualised as a capability-enhancing policy, this section distinguishes specific sets of capabilities it aimed to develop. Based on the analysis of education reform policies, four groups of capabilities were determined to be the focus of private education reform: practical capabilities, cross-cultural capabilities, citizenship capabilities and 21st century capabilities. All these types of capabilities can be matched to at least one of the roles education is said to play in enhancing capabilities (Laruffa, 2020, p.10). Specifically:

- Practical capabilities, such as freedoms to practice arts and sports, freedoms to develop industry skills and other diversified abilities, can play both an intrinsic and instrumental role, depending on whether an individual sees them as a hobby or a career.

- Cross-cultural capabilities, such as the freedom to access international education, learn a foreign language and interact with foreign cultures, may play an economic personal role, as well as a non-economic personal role, by equipping individuals with valuable

[^51]: Discussed in detail in chapter two
career skills and giving them an understanding of *infinite diversity in infinite combinations* that is our world.

- Citizenship capabilities, such as freedoms to have a national identity and knowledge of one’s own culture, can play a non-economic collective role by promoting socialist values and non-economic personal role by giving individuals a feeling of group belonging.

- Twenty-first century capabilities, such as freedoms to exercise critical thinking, be proficient in modern technology and solve complicated problems through innovation, creativity, and cooperation, could adopt an economic personal role, as well as economic collective role, by creating skilled workforce for economic growth.

This section discusses the results of policy analysis pertaining to these four groups of capabilities to illustrate how they were targeted by Chinese policymakers throughout the private education reform.

**Practical capabilities**

The encouragement of characteristic courses and specialities within private education provision goes back to the State Council Regulations on Running Schools by Social Forces published in 1997. Article 27 gave schools the power to “*independently decide on the establishment of specialties in accordance with relevant state regulations*”. The definition of “specialties” was to be locally interpreted and would vary on a case-by-case basis. In 2001, the Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development, also published by the State Council, introduced some specifics into what kind of practical capabilities education reform was targeting. All schools at the level of compulsory education were mandated to offer art courses in accordance with national regulations to improve the quality of art education and teaching. Although art education has always been part of both public and private education in China, state schools were facing constraints on how much emphasis they could put on arts, as pressure to perform well in national examinations favoured compulsory subjects, such as math and Chinese language. For students who aimed to dedicate their time to building a foundation for a career in arts, the majority of public schools would have been an increasingly poor choice. In addition to arts, the Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development (2001) also mandated the development of “*comprehensive practical abilities*” through the establishment of elective courses and extracurricular activities. Such extracurricular activities would also be easier for
private schools to develop because of greater autonomy in the allocation of resources and funding channels established during the reform. The policy encouraged ordinary high schools to set up technical courses, while primary and secondary schools were mandated to “actively carry out science and technology popularization activities”. Furthermore, the Decision stated that education had to be combined with production, labour, and social practice to cultivate well-rounded development of students.

To further encourage the focus on practical capabilities, the Implementation Rules for the Law for Promoting Private Education of the PRC (2004) stated in Article 31 that the administrative departments of education, the administrative departments of labour and social security, and other relevant departments had to organize relevant awards and evaluations, art and sports activities and projects for private schools. High schools, in particular, were encouraged to innovate in developing their characteristic courses, because they were not part of the compulsory education system. The Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium-and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) further mandated private schools to develop characteristic courses and promote students’ ability to adapt to society and employment, increasing their entrepreneurship innovative, practical, and compound talents.

This emphasis carried on into the second decade of the 21st century. Notices on the National Education System Innovation Pilot, which distributed diverse education reform tasks in different localities in 2010, encouraged Shandong Province, Hunan Province, and Chongqing City to specifically “promote the diversified development of ordinary high schools and encourage ordinary high schools to have their own characteristics”. Suggestions on formulating the 13th five-year plan for national economic and social development, passed by the Central Committee of the CPC in 2015, stated that in order to do so, China was going to “take the enhancement of students’ sense of social responsibility, innovation spirit, and practical ability as key tasks and implement them throughout the entire process of national education”. This included both private and public, compulsory, and non-compulsory parts of the education system. Subsequently, the China Education Modernization 2035 plan, published in 2019, further emphasised the need to improve students’ practical abilities by paying attention to the unity of “knowledge and action”. Overall, while private education reform policies consistently targeted the delivery of practical capabilities with the focus on arts, extracurricular activities, and entrepreneurship, the language of the policymakers remained vague with little clarification given on what characteristic courses were expected to develop these abilities. It
provided space for local authorities to engage in policy interpretation and formulate local rules specific to each locality’s circumstances, as well as gave flexibility for private schools to innovate new characteristic courses, aimed at providing practical education capabilities to their students.

**Cross-cultural capabilities**

Cross-cultural capabilities were a second area of reform involving two aspects of education internationalisation. Early reform policies focussed on encouraging schools to provide opportunities for international exchanges and access to foreign education. More recent policies emphasised the development of Chinese education opportunities which would be competitive and recognised within the international arena.

To begin with, the Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development (2001) placed emphasis on foreign language education as early as elementary schools by stating that foreign language courses had to be offered gradually and uniformly. Then, the Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium-and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) encouraged the development of cross-cultural capabilities to equip students with an international perspective, familiarity with international rules, and the ability to participate in international affairs and competitions. It encouraged schools to “*learn from the internationally advanced educational concepts and educational experience to promote China’s educational reform and development*”. Thus, cross-cultural capabilities included not just access to foreign language education, but a more comprehensive set of policy objectives.

With the increasing popularity of private education, foreign investment in the Chinese education market also grew, so the Implementation Opinions on Encouraging and Guiding the Entry of Private Capital in the Fields of Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2012) were put in place to better regulate Sino-foreign cooperation in education. They gave freedom to private schools to use domestic and foreign funds to carry out cooperation in running schools in accordance with the law. This facilitated foreign investment, opening of private schools to overseas curricula, the introduction of “*high-quality overseas educational resources*”, education concepts, and teaching methods. However, the same policy also placed several restrictions on internationalisation in private schools. The proportion of foreign funds was limited to under 50%, overseas courses introduced by private schools had to
be reported to the provincial education administrative department for review, and overseas teaching materials had to be reviewed and approved.

Suggestions on Formulating the 13th Five-year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2015) mandated “extensive cooperation in education, science and technology, culture, tourism, health, and environmental protection to benefit local people”, once again indicating that cooperation with the outside world was seen as something of value to the Chinese population. The Law on the Promotion of Private Education was amended in 2016 to further establish education internationalisation objectives and encourage private schools to expand cross-cultural capabilities for their students. Article 68 of the amended Law of the Promotion of Private Education encouraged foreign exchanges and cooperation in education to promote the internationalization of education and “support schools and other educational institutions in introducing high-quality educational resources”. Educational foreign exchanges targeted the introduction of international private school brands into the Chinese market in addition to Chinese based private schools, establishing relationships with foreign schools and organisations. At the same time, the Education law was also amended to include the promotion of informatization and internationalisation to improve the “modern national education system”.

Since 2016, private education policies began to focus not only on the introduction of international education resources and concepts into the Chinese education system, but also on the development of internationally competitive Chinese private schools and the opportunities to tell “the Chinese story” on the world stage. For example, Several Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) stipulated that private schools had to “strive to build a group of internationally influential and competitive private education brands” through innovation in high-quality education courses and management. Thus, private schools were now seen as ambassadors of Chinese culture and their students as future representatives of China on the international stage.

The China Education Modernization 2035 plan, published by the State Council in 2019, carried on with this trend by promoting Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools. This policy offered support to the establishment of a “high-level Chinese and foreign cultural exchange mechanism”, the expansion of the field of humanistic exchanges, and the promotion of mutual understanding and mutual learning of “civilized exchanges between Chinese and foreign people”. Its follow-up policy, the Implementation Plan for Speeding up Education
Modernisation (2018-2022), specifically mentioned the “Belt and Road” initiative. It encouraged schools to participate in cultural exchanges as part of the initiative, specifically in the areas such as arts and sports. All these national level policies indicated the need for private education to focus on expanding cross-cultural opportunities and offering internationalisation capabilities to their students. Overall, the reform focussed on expanding students’ access to international education concepts, scientific achievements, foreign language education, cultural exchanges, and study abroad. Yet this access was not unlimited, with certain financial and curriculum limitations set on what private schools were able to deliver.

**Citizenship capabilities**

Private education reform targeted citizenship capabilities by focussing on the promotion of *socialist values* on the one hand, and *traditional Chinese culture* on the other. In detail, the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues of Comprehensively Deepening Reform (2014) introduced an Amendment to the Education Law, which clarified the concept of core socialist values. According to the Amendment, socialist core value system included “the sense of social responsibility, innovative spirit, and practical ability of the educated”. According to Article 3 of the same document, Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics laid the foundation for these values and provided the guidance for the education reform. In 2015, the Amendment to Article 5 of the Education Law also stated that education had to serve socialist modernisation and be integrated with “productive labour and social practice” to produce “socialist builders”. In the same year, the Suggestions on formulating the 13th five-year plan for national economic and social development (2015) mentioned Deng Xiaoping’s Theory along with Xi Jinping’s series of speeches and the notion of the Chinese Dream. The policy placed these ideas at the centre of developing students’ understanding of the Chinese national values and their capability to feel belonging to their home country.

The promotion of socialist values was closely connected to Party building in schools and the construction of youth Party organisations. The Opinions on Strengthening Party Construction in Private Schools was published in 2016 to set a comprehensive framework for the development of Party organisations, which were made compulsory in primary and secondary private schools to cultivate “good ideological and moral character” and promote the spirit of patriotism “in the hearts of students”. The document repeated the concept of socialist builders and successors, whose education was to be based on all-round moral, intellectual, physical, and
aesthetic development. A new “Famous Teacher Project” was put forward to support ideological teacher training and promote teachers with “strong political skills”, professionalism and a strong ability to teach.

In the same year, the Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) encouraged the construction of Communist Youth Leagues in private schools. This Party organisation was seen as the main link between the students and Party cadres aiming at promoting the familiarity with the Party structure, ideology, and operations among the students in private schools. The Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) reiterated the importance of Party organisations and instructed private schools to strengthen ideological guidance and “firmly grasp the Party’s leadership” to maintain harmony and stability of private education. The 13th Five-year Education Development Plan (2017), published by the State Council, further emphasised the importance of Party building in the context of Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools. It introduced a mechanism for Party organizations to participate in decision-making and supervision which placed staff Party members at the core of school management. Thus, specific mechanisms were put into place for citizenship education within the private school system.

Another aspect of citizenship capabilities was the promotion of traditional Chinese values and the opposition to ideological globalisation. Quite explicitly, the Opinions on Strengthening Party Construction in Private Schools (2016) instructed schools to oppose the spread of the so-called “universal values” of the West. This was expected to be achieved through the promotion of ideological and morality courses, as well as access to teaching materials related to traditional Chinese culture. Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) mandated the introduction of moral education and strengthening the construction of teaching materials related to the traditional Chinese culture combined with relevant teacher training.

The Implementation Rules on the Supervision and Administration of For-profit Private Schools (2016) emphasised the importance of familiarising the students with “Chinese excellent traditional culture” in private schools. Citizenship education was also included in the China Education Modernization 2035 plan as one of the key concepts for advancing education modernisation. The Implementation Plan for Speeding up Education Modernisation (2018-
then specified the “New Era Lide Shuren” project as the focus of value education, which included traditional Chinese values and the development of ethnic education.

Overall, citizenship capabilities were viewed as an essential component of private education reform as freedoms for students to engage with the traditional culture and values of their home country to understand modern China, regardless of the type of curriculum they choose to pursue.

21st century capabilities

The Action Plan for Education Promotion for the 21st Century (1998) illustrates the logic behind the development of 21st century capabilities in Chinese private schools. According to the policy, “in the coming 21st century, the knowledge economy centred on high and new technology will dominate. These trends indicate that education will undergo profound changes in the future. We should prepare as soon as possible to meet new challenges”. Following the Action Plan, several key private education reform policies continued to focus on preparing students for the requirements of the modern society. For example, the Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development, published by the State Council in 2001, stated that efforts had to be made to equip schools with multimedia teaching equipment, educational software, and facilities to receive educational programs transmitted by satellites. This was done in the context of establishing education and teaching reform experimental areas and promoting the opportunities for experimental schools to explore advanced teaching methods and curriculum materials. The Decision (2001) further mandated that all localities had to establish model high schools that would implement education modernisation. The Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium-and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) clarified this objective by stating that several regions had to carry out diversified experiments on high school running models and “develop special courses to explore training methods such as flexible school systems”.

Education informatisation was also mentioned as a priority of the education reform in the Suggestions on Formulating the 13th Five-year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2015), which emphasised the development of remote education. After that, the Implementation Plan for Speeding up Education Modernisation (2018-2022) stressed the need to accelerate the innovation and development of smart education by establishing a “smart education demonstration zone” and building an “Internet + Education” service platform, carrying out national “virtual simulation” experimental teaching projects, and implementing
artificial intelligence to promote the construction of teaching teams. The China Education Modernization 2035 plan further deepened education informatisation by targeting the construction of intelligent campuses and coordinating an “intelligent teaching, management and service platform”. The policy stipulated the use of modern technology to accelerate the reform of the talent training model and realize “the organic combination of large-scale education and individualized training”.

In addition to focussing on education informatisation and the use of advanced technologies in education, the Plan also stipulated the need to develop critical thinking, independent learning, problem-solving and other capabilities related to the socioeconomic needs of the 21st century. Private schools were instructed to pay attention to the cultivation of emotions and attitudes; “making full use of various curriculum resources to cultivate students' ability to collect, process and use information”, and carrying out research learning to train students to ask questions, research and solve problems. Plus, schools were encouraged to promote cooperative learning, mutual exchanges and communication among the students and teachers. China Education Modernization 2035 further focussed on the 21st century capabilities by mandating the implementation of innovative teaching methods such as “heuristic, inquiry, participatory and cooperative teaching methods” to innovate talent training. The plan emphasised the innovative spirit of future talent training and instructed schools to “vigorously promote the modernization of educational concepts, systems, content, methods, and governance”.

Overall, this group of capabilities was the least specific within the policy documents, consistently indicating its general importance to the private education reform yet leaving the specifics to be determined at the local level. It was clear that policymakers encouraged a greater focus on the use of modern technology in education and holistic education practices in private schools without any specific restrictions being established at the national level.

4.4. Chapter summary

To summarise, this chapter answered the first research question: “to what extent are the reform objectives for private primary and secondary education in China capability-enhancing?” by conceptualising Chinese private education reform as a capability-enhancing public policy aiming to create educational choices that student families, who would not see public schooling as a feasible or valuable opportunity, would consider both valuable and viable.
The first section discussed the internal logic of the private education reform by examining the mix of mandates, capacity-building, and system-changing policy instruments within the private education legislative framework at the national level. Policy problems and assumptions were determined to theorise about the theory of action, which was argued to be the *controlled diversification of the education system* through the expansion of viable and accessible educational opportunities delivered by private schools. Policy instruments were formulated in a vague manner conducive to flexible local interpretations, as regional governments were tasked with the formulation of contextual specifics and carrying out experimental projects. Hortatory policy instruments were then examined to uncover policy rationale, formulated by the policymakers as the need to meet the diverse education needs of the Chinese population and modernise the national education system. It was then argued that this mix of policy instruments targeted diversification, viability, and flexibility of educational choices, which can be conceptualised as the expansion of freedoms of the Chinese students to make education choices they consider viable. Thus, Chinese private education reform was argued to be a capability-enhancing policy.

Subsequently, this chapter argued that private education reform targeted four different groups of capabilities: *practical capabilities*, such as access to learning sports and arts; entrepreneurship and industry knowledge; *cross-cultural capabilities*, related to language study, cultural competencies and international education; *citizenship capabilities*, related to socialist values and traditional Chinese culture; and *21st century capabilities*, such as innovative education, development of collaborative, heuristic and leadership education opportunities. Yet the language of the national policies remained vague with the space for local interpretations and flexible policy implementation at the school level. The next chapter will focus on analysing case-study findings to explore how the private schools in this study interpreted and prioritised education capabilities targeted by the reform policies.
5. Capability interpretations and resource availability in selected private schools

This chapter consists of five sections which discuss the fieldwork data analysis and begin to answer the second research question which is “In what way has local interpretation and implementation of the private education reform affected the process of capability formation in Chinese private schools?” To do so, the chapter explores the types of capabilities prioritised in different private schools in China and the way the four groups of capabilities targeted by the private education reform (21st century capabilities, citizenship capabilities, practical capabilities, and cross-cultural capabilities) were understood by the interviewees. The interview data analysis is triangulated with the help of observational data, not only to check that schools had the resource capacity to deliver capabilities they claimed to prioritise but also to illustrate a variety of resources that the selected private schools had available. It is then argued that while these private schools in China focussed on all four capability groups targeted by the private education reform, the way school leadership understood and prioritised these capabilities varied on a case-by-case basis.

Each group of capabilities was split into thematic categories that emerged from the interview data coding with the aim to provide an insight into how case private schools interpreted the reform objectives. For example, 21st century capabilities were understood by the interviewees as opportunities for the students to develop communication, collaboration, independence, innovation, and information literacy abilities. Citizenship capabilities were seen as freedoms to be Chinese citizens who are patriotic and knowledgeable about traditional Chinese culture and the core values of socialism. Practical capabilities involved access to pursuing sports, arts, and crafts, as well as gaining industry knowledge and career advice. Finally, cross-cultural capabilities were understood by the selected private schools as opportunities for their students to study abroad, learn foreign languages and acquire soft power skills. In the following sections, each of these thematic categories will be discussed and interview excerpts will be provided combined with photographic data to illustrate the specifics of each capability group as it was interpreted by the interviewees.

5.1. Practical capabilities

The first category of capabilities targeted by the private education reform was practical capabilities that according to policy analysis referred to the freedoms to pursue applied knowledge, “hand-on” abilities, sport, and artistic abilities. While encouraging artistic hobbies
and sports, the government policies stipulated only the minimum requirements for the number of class hours, size of running tracks and football or basketball fields, which were the same for public and private schools in each region. This means that while all private schools were expected to ensure their students had the capability to develop practical skills, the focus of the school varied on the case-by-case basis.

Practical capability development was seen by private school leadership as achieved through characteristic courses or specialties of a particular school. The themes found in the interview data can be divided into “sports”, including the promotion of different kinds of ball games, swimming and more “exclusive” sports like golf or rock climbing, access to “arts and crafts”, including various kinds of handicrafts, fine arts, hobbies, and musical instruments, and the “career and industry” category that referred to field trips, engagement with labour market, higher education, and expert knowledge. Interview keywords matching each theme can be found in Appendix 9.

To begin with, the interviewees saw the provision of sports facilities as school specialties and took pride in the choices they offered.

“We offer rugby, we offer drama, we offer different sports. We offer even the basic ones, how to make coffee, and then what is more important is we have what is called the House System. Sounds like Harry Potter? Yes.”

Case 7, Chinese Principal

“We will bring the students’ works to the public for an open exhibition. Let our children's works go out of the classroom and connect with the community.”

Case 6, Chinese Principal

Observational fieldwork data indicated that access to sports and arts was ubiquitous, presumably because these capabilities were explicitly stipulated by the policymakers using clear standards. The difference was, however, in the degree of choice that schools offered to their students. A school with more resources, be it higher tuition income or larger investments, would have the facilities to offer courses such as rugby, rock-climbing, and horse-riding while a campus with limited resources would focus on meeting the minimum policy requirements. The photos in Picture 1 provide an illustration of the kind of sports facilities available in
different private schools. Every case school had a large playing field with running tracks, though newer campuses in developing neighbourhoods had much larger space than smaller city centre schools. Facilities for different ball games and regular exercise were available on every campus while more niche sports were rarer. Only a few schools had facilities for golf or rock climbing and those were first-tier city campuses. One exception was a newly built school in the third-tier city that boasted a giant swimming pool, shown in the picture below. Overall, there was a correlation between how diverse sports facilities seemed to be and school’s location in a first, second or third tier city.

Picture 1: Sports facilities in selected private schools

Source: fieldwork visits

The same was true when it came to arts. Picture 2 illustrates art facilities in private schools. Music and painting were available in every visited school while courses like photography were not. Indeed, these appeared to be highly dependent on the kind of resources the school had and the amount of investment it received from its education group. Having student paintings exhibited on campus was a common trend in most schools, as well as having music rooms equipped with instruments such as pianos, drums, and guitars. Crafting facilities were more of a rarity with only several visited schools having the resources to provide handicraft lessons as
illustrated in pictures 2.2 and 2.8. These required more expensive facilities and were seen on campuses with a higher tuition fee threshold. Interestingly, in many cases there seemed to be a fusion between traditional crafts and modern technology.

Interviewees talked about arts and crafts courses as part of extracurricular programme that private schools in China were encouraged to run, some of which were included in the tuition fees, and some of which had to be paid for and provided an additional revenue source for the school.

| Picture 2: Arts and crafts facilities in selected private schools |

Source: fieldwork visits
“We have school classes here on Saturday, and there are special carpentry courses here. Yes, you can see their works here, wood crafts. Then you can see that the black ones are carved with laser, and then these holes are carved with laser, and then the patterns are also carved with laser.”

Case 16, Chinese principal

When a school lacked the facilities to develop sports and arts capabilities, it was possible to partner with another private institution to outsource these courses to a third party. This solution received support from the policymakers when the new regulations on after-school classes came out in 2021严重 restricting the training in compulsory subjects that private training centres would be allowed to offer directly to the students.

“In our school, in addition to our normal Chinese courses and foreign courses, we also have some development courses, so the development courses are divided into two parts. The first part is some development courses offered by our teachers themselves, such as art, painting, sand painting and photography. Another part is that we bring some interest classes that children sign up for outside to the campus, such as rock climbing, robots, taekwondo, even equestrian, sailing and so on. We bring them from outside to the school”.

Case 17, Chinese Principal

The third theme among practical capabilities were career development and industry related opportunities, which were talked about in the context of industry engagements and career education. Due to smaller class sizes, private schools could ensure a much smaller teacher-student ratio and provide individual career support to their students. Thus, interviewees saw practical capability development as means of providing students with opportunities to gain an advantage on the labour market and in university applications. For example, museum education was mentioned by the interviewees when talking about career education. Several cases also introduced the classes that focussed on developing unique culture-specific capabilities for the students based on their ethnic background or regional culture.

52 Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and Off-campus Training Burden of Students in Compulsory Education by The General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council instructed all localities to no longer approve new subject-based off-campus training institutions for students in the compulsory education stage, and existing subject-based training institutions were to undergo a new approval procedure. Details available here: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-07/24/content_5627132.htm
“In fact, museums can provide a lot of courses, such as tea culture, such as beauty or etiquette. We will turn it into a small topic, which will be offered next semester.”

Case 6, Chinese Principal

“From last month, parents from different ethnic cultures have been invited to enter the class, and the children in the class have been invited to share their family culture, their family origin, their family’s local characteristic snacks, for example, there is a father in Inner Mongolia, who wears clothes with that special thing, and then comes to the class to introduce it to the children.”

Case 2, Chinese Principal

“But in the future or in the present, it (white-collar or business jobs) will be replaced by VR, so the elimination rate in the future, which is also some of these industries, so it is also causing our parents and us to think together, causing our teachers to think together, then we will draw a picture of some of these experiments together (in class), so we must be ability oriented.”

Case 6, Chinese Principal

Observational data showed that in nearly all private schools class sizes did not exceed forty students with many schools keeping the number of students in one group under thirty, which is significantly fewer than in most public schools where the numbers could go up to fifty or sixty students in one class. The photos in Picture 3 show the resources available for industry related practical capability development. These were highly dependent on the specialty of the school. For example, in one case the school was focussing on aircraft and airplane building (Picture 3.2). In another, students were working with 3D or laser printers to cut wood and create handmade products (Picture 3.7). In another school, a lab for STEM experiments was created to offer students an opportunity to engage in practical science activities (Picture 3.6). In all cases, handicraft resources were an exception rather than a rule with most schools still focussing on arts and sports as their main avenue for practical capability development.
To sum up, providing students with practical capabilities that would allow them to develop skills in sports and arts was seen as both the responsibility that private education was given by the policymakers and the way to stand out on the market. Providing opportunities for less common skill development was also described as a way to market the school offering facilities for activities typically pursued by the elite and upper-class families worldwide, such as golf or advanced robotics.

5.2. Cross-cultural capabilities

As a result of interview data coding, cross-cultural capabilities mentioned by the interviewees could be divided into “study abroad”, “languages” and “soft power” categories. The “Study abroad” category included the capability to access international curricula, the capability to prepare for and sit international examinations, the capability to apply to universities abroad and the capability to join international exchanges. The “Languages” category referred to the capability to learn a foreign language, such as English while the “Soft power” category
involved the capability to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, the capability to understand different cultures and international trends and the capability to be a member of the international community.

“Study abroad” was the most common theme when it came to cross-cultural capability development due to the massive demand that was said to exist on the Chinese private school market for international education opportunities. According to the interviewees, Chinese families were not well-versed in the intricacies of international curricula when private international schools gained popularity in the early 2000s, so they acquired an aura of exclusivity and opportunity.

“International education 20 years ago was completely different from now. ... 20 years ago, it wasn’t even the Internet age, was it? Cyber something information was very, very much limited. ... At that time, the information was more closed than it is now. Parents didn’t know what to learn. There were very few schools, especially very few international schools, so it was very important to get the first chance at that time”.

Case 18, Chinese Principal

However, interviewees agreed that things have changed. With China’s increasing integration into the international education system, private schools have gained more experience in teaching foreign curricula, families have familiarised themselves with international education concepts and the government has put more specific policies in place. Thus, interviewees talked about international education with Chinese characteristics meaning the integration of advanced educational concepts and pedagogy developed abroad with the local education tradition.

“I personally think that international courses do not mean that you learn foreign courses. International education should have your own national things, plus the advantages of other countries, which is called international education”.

Case 16, Chinese Principal

“There are foreign teachers in primary and junior high schools. They only teach English or a small part of science in English. But this science is mainly based on the syllabus of domestic
science textbooks, which integrates international teaching methods or some teaching concepts of international teachers, so that students can expand their career in this area”.

Case 17, Chinese Principal

In terms of access to international curricula, case private schools were found to offer their students a wide variety of choices. Most schools provided a choice between an American and a British curriculum, in addition to the mandatory National curriculum, instead of specialising in just one type. The interview data indicated that students were given the opportunity to engage with a variety of courses and the flexibility to change the curriculum according to their needs and future education pathway.

“We have the curriculum which is combined with the National curriculum. So, we use the common core. So, these are two content standards in terms of the teaching of pedagogy standards that we are implementing, the PYP and then for secondary school, we are also using common core as a content standard and then we are migrating to Cambridge, IGSC right? And then also for high school, then we have more variety”.

Case 3, Chinese Principal

“IB, PYP then we have the Chinese curriculum also integrated with our IB curriculum up until the end of grade nine. And we also offer now advanced placement AP, we also offer American AP and then we also offer IGSC, we are also somewhat aligned with common core in the United States as well. It's a very heavy curriculum, but it sounds very impressive”.

Case 5, International Principal

On the one hand, this provided students with nearly unlimited opportunities to pursue their chosen education so long as their family could afford the tuition of a suitable school. On the other hand, it also put a lot of pressure on students in international private schools where both domestic and international courses were compulsory. Interviewees agreed that such high-pressure environments were challenging for the students. However, they also said that public schools did not lack academic pressure, just that the kind of pressure was different. While public education was said to be test-oriented, making students memorise a large body of knowledge and practise test papers to pass exams, international education appeared to take a more holistic but no less academically challenging approach.
“So, the most important difference between internationalization and college entrance examination is that it is not based on test scores to decide where you can go, but a comprehensive evaluation. Maybe my grades are not the best, but if I have a patented invention, I can go to a very good school. For example, my math, I participated in the Olympics, won a gold medal, there may be a very good school that will accept me.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

“For example, if he likes liberal arts, he can learn some subjects with higher difficulty in liberal arts, while science can be less difficult, so it is more convenient to learn, so he has more time and energy to learn liberal arts. On the other hand, he likes science very much. He can learn AP in science, right?”

Case 9, Chinese Principal

**Assistance in university application** was also something selected private international schools were found to provide to their students. In mature international education markets, well-established international schools would have specially trained staff members for college counselling, or sometimes even entire departments dedicated to university application. This was said to not only to provide students with the capability to study abroad, but also to increase the school brand by advertising successful admission to top universities. Plus, exchange programs were also developed by international private schools as part of study abroad efforts. This was only mentioned by interviewees in older international schools with long histories or by education group managers with the resources to support international exchanges.

“We’ve never really had exchanges with London because of the age groups of the children and that could be something in the future. But we have had exchanges between the schools in Asia, like Thailand. So, for example, in Beijing, a group of children from Bangkok came over for a week. We sent some of our students to Bangkok.”

Case 8, International Principal

“Our school is similar to (American name) School as a sister school. Yes, we send exchange students to each other every year. Then last year, the international class established a student exchange relationship with another school in Boston, Plymouth, and the school district there.”

Case 16, Chinese Principal
In terms of resource availability, many schools had both an international and a domestic department that would share the resources, including libraries and study materials. Further, even non-international private schools were found to have a study abroad advisor that would help students with their application to foreign universities if they wished to pursue that path. All international departments had foreign staff and international teaching materials, though the number of foreign teachers and their qualifications varied with more expensive international departments being able to attract highly qualified staff. Picture 4 illustrates the resources for study abroad capabilities, such as foreign textbooks, access to international examinations, partnerships with international organisations, such as Cambridge Assessment, and strategic partnerships with foreign universities. Private schools would also often display university admission offers obtained by their students. These were not included in the pictures since they would illustrate functionings rather than resources and compromise student identities.

Picture 4: Study abroad resources in selected private schools

Source: fieldwork visits
The second theme of cross-cultural capability development were language related capabilities, which in most cases meant English language. All interviewees mentioned speaking English as a valuable capability for their students due to reasons not limited to study abroad.

“First and foremost is English. As much as they love math and science, it is really the level of the innovation, expectation of that English ability.”

Case 5, International Principal

“First of all, it encourages students to learn foreign languages well. Our foreign languages are our specialties. At the same time, for example, our international high school also accepts different textbooks, such as a Lai No53, which has been done before. It can expose students to textbooks from different places.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

However, throughout the field visits it became obvious that only private schools with a highly recognised brand succeeded in equipping most of their students with English fluency. This was likely because such schools were able to attract students with a solid language base in the first place, as well as due to their ability to recruit and retain more experienced staff members. Foreign languages other than English remained a rarity with only three interviewees mentioning the availability of such classes. It is hard to say what languages were most popular but French, Russian, Japanese, and Spanish were mentioned in the interviews.

“Then our language must move from a single foreign language to multilingual learning, including the understanding of culture from a single culture to a multicultural one. So, this year, our music teacher is studying English music education at the Russian National Normal University...We may pay more attention to the countries with strong language, for example, we will have some communication and exchanges with Southeast Asian countries in the future, including last year, I went to Sri Lanka with my daughter to visit the schools.”

Case 6, Chinese Principal

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53 Teighan Laino – children’s books, such as “Tom Shark”. 162
Another aspect of language learning was preparation to sit international English examinations that are necessary to apply to universities abroad, such as A-levels or AP, as well as English language qualifications such as IELTS and TOEFL.

“American universities don’t know A-level. They don’t know what A star stands for, but if I give them GPA, they will be very clear about the student’s situation. ... But to the British, IELTS, they know how the students are. ... So, this kind of equivalent will have some problems, so we still divide our curriculum into the North American direction and the Commonwealth direction. I think it is to make them not suffer losses in the application process.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Picture 5: Foreign language learning resources in selected private schools

Source: fieldwork visits
In terms of resources, observational data was relatively straightforward: all schools had English teachers but not all English teachers were equally qualified. It was said to be common in schools with more qualified English teachers to have student works displayed to impress the parents and visitors. These works also demonstrated student access to English-taught international courses on subjects other than languages. While more expensive schools had a clear advantage in attracting better qualified teachers by offering higher salaries, international schools in first tier cities with modern infrastructure were also in a better position to attract qualified foreign professionals, according to the interviewees. As information on teacher profiles could not be included in the photos to protect personal information of the staff, Picture 5 presents proxy evidence of language teaching resources in private schools, such as student works written in English, English literature, and use of English in science and math classes. When it came to the availability of foreign language literature in libraries, all case schools were found to be well-stocked regardless of their tuition fee level or geographical location.

Besides language learning and study abroad, cross-cultural capabilities mentioned by the interviewees included the ability to be a member of international community and familiarity with the soft power of culture. This would imply familiarity with major international works of literature, music, and film, as well as knowledge of foreign holidays and festivals. According to the interviewees, familiarity with soft power was important to develop student capabilities to communicate effectively with people from different cultures, negotiate and understand cross-cultural conflict resolution. Several interviewees pointed out that these elements of international education were no less important than study abroad and that cross-cultural capabilities meant more than preparing students for foreign schools and universities.

“In fact, the goal of internationalization is to enable students to get some skills and knowledge, and to ensure that they can stand in an international society in the future. If you can stand in an international company, in fact, it depends on cooperation, communication and harmony. Therefore, our students in this school should first understand a few ideas, learn to communicate with others, and learn to cooperate with each other.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

“It is still in line with the education of all countries in the world, including some educational concepts that we all agree with. It is by no means just going to school abroad.”

Case 4, Chinese Principal
In terms of resource availability, many schools had things like Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings books in their libraries, Christmas celebration parties, Halloween dress ups, and information about international news and major events available on school boards. However, it was mostly limited to the English-speaking world with a distinct lack of any resources for students to familiarise themselves with cultures from Africa or South America, for example. The photos in Picture 6 provide an illustration, including library books (Pictures 6.1 and 6.4), cultural exchange souvenirs (Picture 6.5) and flags of foreign countries used in decorating the campus (Pictures 6.2 and 6.3).

**Picture 6: Familiarity with foreign culture in selected private schools**

Source: fieldwork visits
5.3. Citizenship capabilities

Core socialist values and the values of traditional Chinese culture were mentioned by most interviewees when asked about citizenship capabilities. According to interview data coding, the group of capabilities that may be united under the term “citizenship” included things such as the capability to be a Chinese citizen, understand and experience Chinese culture, feel national pride and be a patriot of your homeland. In the Chinese context, these also included being a “builder of socialism”, understanding socialism with Chinese characteristics and party-building. Overall, these capabilities can be grouped into “culture and history” and “socialism” categories. The first category includes traditional cultural concepts and the capabilities to be a “global citizen with a Chinese soul”, introduce Chinese culture to foreign citizens and understand the history, the cultural heritage, and the origins of the Chinese nation. The second category are ideology-related capabilities, including the capability to be a party member and a “builder of socialism”. Citizenship capabilities are the only category where not all interviewees were forthcoming with information due to the perceived sensitivity of the topic in the Chinese context. As a result of interviewee choices during the interviews, four out of the nineteen cases did not provide data on these capabilities.

The first theme related to Chinese culture and history was often mentioned in connection to international education and foreign curriculum. Interviewees felt it was important to ensure that private school students developed a sense of Chinese identity and did not blindly absorb foreign culture without any appreciation for their cultural roots.

“I think internationalization with Chinese cultural characteristics is a key point, I would not like to see very pure internationalization in schools, because our children are too young, they do not have a sense of self-awareness and self-cultural identity, they will regard internationalization as their own culture.”

Case 2, Chinese Principal

Furthermore, there seemed to be a sense that citizenship capabilities are an important part of education not only because the students need to have a sense of national identity, but also because, with a growing number of Chinese children studying abroad, their knowledge of the home culture is a valuable tool in cross-cultural exchanges and communication. In other words, interviewees felt that their students would be able to represent China in foreign educational institutions and companies if they had “a Chinese soul”.

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“I can share with you a small detail, that is, every time we teach children, in essence, we also have reservations about our Chinese classics, and every time we say to the children, you should not blindly advocate other countries’ things are good, your own Chinese traditional culture is also very good. We don’t send you abroad to make you into a person who doesn’t take Chinese culture. I hope you can become a person who says you have a Chinese soul, and I hope you can introduce Chinese traditional culture in English when you go abroad.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Interviewees in all private schools stressed the importance of Chinese culture, traditions, history and understanding of what makes China unique on the global stage. For example, they talked about culturally informed extracurriculars where students exercised their knowledge of traditional Chinese concepts to design products, as well as the importance of calligraphy, traditional Chinese paintings, festivals, and customs.

“This is the picture of the design made by the students themselves. Then they put it on the product. There is the logo of our school at the bottom, and then this is their trademark called the student system. That is to say, instead of the pattern designed by themselves, they adopted the design concept of tile, which is the tile on the top of the traditional Chinese house. Yes, this is a sacred road, this is a road, and this is also very beautiful. This is a dragon, which is a bit of a Chinese tradition.”

Case 16, Chinese Principal

“Chinese brush is also very influential in the world, I feel that the words written with such a soft pen are so powerful, in fact, it is amazing. Our calligraphy has become the traditional culture of our country, so although our children seldom use brushes now, as China’s intangible cultural heritage, it is also necessary for our Chinese children to learn.”

Case 14, Chinese Principal

In terms of resource availability, all case schools demonstrated evidence of resources related to promoting the knowledge of Chinese culture and history. For example, it was common for private schools to invest in facilities related to traditional Chinese culture classes, such as calligraphy equipment, musical instruments, and traditional opera and dance. In addition, some campuses had monuments dedicated to prominent Chinese cultural figures, such as Confucius,
or elements of décor related to traditional Chinese culture concepts, arts, and crafts. The photos in Picture 7 provide an illustration of the resources available in selected private schools for the development of citizenship capabilities related to traditional Chinese culture and history.

Picture 7: Traditional Chinese culture familiarity in selected private schools

Source: fieldwork visits

The second theme of citizenship capability development was **party-building and understanding of socialism**. This included creating school organisations for students and staff, as well as politics courses appropriate for different age groups. According to the interview data, the idea of socialist education as a strategic issue for China was an important element in making citizenship capabilities a priority in private schools. In this regard, private and public school appeared to be working towards the same objective. While interviewees mentioned building a socialist identity as one of the school’s priorities several times, it did not happen unless they were explicitly prompted to elaborate on this topic. Interestingly, schools in Xian and Beijing seemed to pay more attention to this theme, rather than Shanghai and Chengdu, which indicated that these capabilities were lower on the priority list in more internationalised city environments. This observation was confirmed by visiting Haikou and Xuzhou, the two cities with newly developing economic zones, which were also less focused on citizenship, compared to cross-cultural capabilities.
“So, we haven’t started yet, but we have the young pioneers and there has to be a designated space for that. So that will go out next year. It just wasn’t enough time or the structures of the events to be up here to fit that in, but that’s something we will be doing. And that’s for certain age groups, we must have space for the communist party representatives.”

Case 8, International Principal

“There are also some national courses, basic courses, and we also need to emphasize the socialist core values in the political course. To put it bluntly, you think that the normalization of international education is nothing more than that its students should have socialist core values, right?”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

Picture 8: Core socialist values in selected private schools

Source: fieldwork visits

In terms of resources, all schools had socialism related books and literature on Xi Jinping’s thought in the libraries, as well as books written by other prominent Chinese leaders. The photos in Picture 8 provide an illustration with the last picture taken in one of the school libraries. All school campuses, including international schools, had socialist décor elements,
socialist moral education as part of their curriculum and spaces designated for party activities. In fact, several times “Party member activity room”, shown in Picture 8.5, was a designated space for the interviews. In addition, many of the interviewees, including teachers and principals, were party members. Though there were more patriotic student works on display in some cases than others, there did not seem to be a correlation between how much emphasis a school placed on socialist teachings and its geographical location. Interestingly, in one international school there was a plaque calling on students to speak Mandarin in that classroom (Picture 8.2).

Overall, all campuses appeared to have sufficient resources for citizenship capability development. However, these capabilities never occupied a central stage in an interview. Furthermore, culture and history themes were more often independently brought up by the interviewees than the theme of socialism because, in several cases, private schools emphasised the engagement with traditional culture as part of their marketing strategy to cater to the parents who wanted their children to maintain “a Chinese soul” when receiving secondary or tertiary education abroad.

5.4. 21st century capabilities

According to the interviewees, 21st century capabilities were not seen in private schools just as a policy directive but rather as an essential type of capability to ensure the successful development of China as a country in the future. This meant enabling students to develop 21st century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, digital literacy, independence, leadership, innovation, and problem solving. References to the needs of the future were present when interviewees were asked about the goals of private education reform and the objectives of their school, as illustrated by the interview excerpts below.

“We are now talking about the improvement of comprehensive quality, so that students can get comprehensive development in all aspects and be more able to adapt to the future society.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

“Parents recognize how important (it is) to educate their kids to be able to deal with this kind of uncertainty that will be more and more in the future. ... So, they need to have education to help their kids to cope with this kind of uncertainty, right?”
Case 2, Chinese Principal

“I think if you look at it through the lens of China’s rise, right? Can China’s rise depend on talent only from China, um? But unlike the United States, ... China does not have that kind of availability to attract talents from aboard, right? Only a certain company like Huawei is able, they primarily set up shops in Russia, or they hired Russian talents, but not on a large scale, right? We’re not an immigrant country. So that means the Chinese education system needs to produce that talent somehow.”

Case 3, Chinese Principal

This kind of understanding shows a degree of uniformity between what the reform policy aimed to achieve and what the school leadership, as well as parents, considered meaningful. However, while there was a trend among private schools to emphasise the importance of “21st century” capability development, the specifics of how interviewees understood and explained what their school was doing to deliver these capabilities varied. Thus, 21st century capabilities mentioned by the interviewees were divided during the coding process into three categories which were 1) communication and collaboration, 2) independence and innovation, and 3) information literacy. Communication and collaboration referred to things like teamwork, group projects, social skill development, negotiation and debate, presentation skills, community service. Independence and innovation involved character development, creativity, autonomy, confidence, leadership, inquiry, research and problem-solving. Information literacy meant digital literacy, media awareness, advance technology use. This section will now discuss these three main themes and the extent that the resources available to different schools provided the base for 21st century capability development.

The first common theme when it comes to 21st century capabilities was the focus on information literacy and opportunities to familiarise the students with advanced technology development. Despite requiring expensive resources and a significant investment, interviewees consistently referred to these capabilities as an indication of school quality. Robotics, AI, and coding seemed to be the most common characteristic courses in private schools and were often mentioned by the interviewees as a specialty of the school. The quotes below illustrate how different schools focussed on these capabilities by either offering hands-on extracurricular classes or incorporating digital literacy into the curriculum as part of other subjects.
“This is their robot production venue. The materials hanging on the wall are all their usual materials. They design and make robots by themselves, and then participate in an international competition of Vex, an international organization.”

Case 16, English teacher

“This is a robot teacher. You can probably see that these are all robots made by children themselves. Robots are built with some standard parts. You have to know that Lego is a standard part. The child first designs a robot. They have to design the whole shape and function, including its power device and its program, and then operate it. Like a robot, its power device, including its induction, its reaction when it encounters an obstacle in the course of driving, and then how to control it through the program, involves many disciplines.”

Case 15, Chinese Principal

“Children in the third grade begin to use 3D printing pens, and then children in the fourth to sixth grades begin to use 3D printers, and then older children will begin to teach them. In fact, many children have been involved in programming since childhood. All these technological things are introduced to children as an interest class in our school.”

Case 13, Chinese Principal

In terms of resource availability, all case schools were equipped with computer classrooms at a minimum. While less expensive schools in terms of tuition fees had resources for IT and coding classes, more prestigious and expensive schools were equipped with robotics, AI, and VR facilities. During campus visits, computer rooms and robotics labs were routinely shown to have the latest facilities that the school purchased to facilitate information literacy classes. Compared to very impressive sports and music facilities that were seen as nothing special, even a small AI classroom was specifically pointed out during a campus tour. The photos in Picture 9 illustrate the kind of resources for 21st century capability development that were observed throughout the fieldwork visits to case schools. Two pictures show typical computer classrooms available in every school (Picture 9.2 and 9.4). The other three illustrate more unique facilities found in schools that specialised in promoting 21st century technology use, such as robotics and artificial intelligence. The resources matched the interview data in every case and while robot battle grounds shown in Picture 9.1 were a unique characteristic of one of
the schools, all schools were regularly using their facilities to give students an opportunity to engage with novel technologies and develop digital literacy skills.

Picture 9: Information literacy facilities in selected private schools

Source: fieldwork visits

The second common theme in the interview answers related to 21st century capability development was the notion of going beyond the traditional teacher-centred Chinese education system based on rote learning and memorisation to develop communication and collaboration abilities. Interviewees talked about rearranging classroom layouts, encouraging students to join debate and speech competitions. There was a pattern in interview data showing that private school leadership understood the need to reform the traditional teaching methods by paying more attention to collaborative and communicative tasks to successfully meet the socioeconomic, technological, and educational needs of the future.

“In fact, sometimes we have changed sitting posture in class. For example, we will do it in groups, so it is convenient to discuss and explore a knowledge point together. The biggest
innovation in the classroom is the biggest change, which is no longer the traditional mode that teachers talk, and students listen to them.”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

“Then we propose that children in the classroom must learn to communicate, cooperate, think, manage themselves, and study, not just learn to memorise questions.”

Case 6, Chinese Principal

Picture 10: Communication and collaboration learning resources

In terms of available resources, most schools, particularly those in first-tier cities, had common spaces available for the students to interact freely. In Beijing and Shanghai, private schools even had coffee shops on campus. The photos in Picture 10 illustrate typical classroom layouts that were believed by the interviewees to promote collaboration and communication among the students (Pictures 10.4 and 10.5). It was very common to arrange discussion spaces in the school library and put encouraging posters on school walls to promote teamwork (Pictures 10.3 and 10.2). Some schools also demonstrated pictures of
previously held debates, quizzes, and other events that the school invested its resources to organise (Picture 10.6). Every case school had a library and communal spaces and nearly every case school had at least a few classrooms with rearranged seating layouts. The main difference seemed to be in how well-decorated and visually appealing these spaces were with more expensive schools investing in higher quality materials.

Finally, the third theme in 21st century capability development was independence and innovation when interviewees spoke about changes in teaching methods to develop innovation and independence, including skills like critical thinking and creativity. Interview data has shown that when asked about innovation and modernising their classrooms, many respondents talked about holistic education, reforming assessment methods, and international curriculum. The latter theme featured more prominently in the interviews with international private schools that saw the advantages of combining IB, inquiry-based learning or international curriculum with the Chinese national curriculum.

“Thematic teaching, and then our assessment is actually very different from public schools, that is, we track every aspect of students every year, and then we make a variety of comparisons, ... but we are not talking about scores. It's about the development of all aspects. For example, in mathematics, I will look at how the child is in geometry, how he is in algebra, and where they should go in each grade. In fact, it is a bit of a reference to the British AREA model.”

Case 11, Vice Principal

“If you want your outcome to just be the barrage of information infused into a student, Chinese curriculum is probably the way to do it, just keep pounding it ... every day from seven in the morning till seven at night. But if you're trying to instil some form of creativity, some sort of feedback, giving them the ability to do work on their own in groups, then I would always think western curriculum lends itself a little better to creativity.”

Case 13, International Principal

This does not, of course, mean that private schools were opposed to traditional Chinese education or considered it obsolete. More specifically, they saw the need to enhance both the curriculum and the pedagogy to provide their students with the capability to develop 21st century skills. In fact, the idea of “holistic” curriculum as a necessary step towards preparing
students for the 21st century was present in several interviews. The interviewees saw curriculum reform as evidence of a systematic change required to adjust the education system to the 21st century.

“All our courses are based on our courses in China, and then we made a lot of comparisons with the British curriculum system. We found that, for example, mathematics. ... So, I found that there are many good places in our curriculum system. Isn’t Britain also introducing Chinese mathematics curriculum now? However, if we only teach these knowledge points in China to our children, it is not enough for us to cultivate holistic education.”

Case 11, Vice Principal

“We call it holistic, whole person. ... in our education, we are constantly adding some units, which cannot be taught through articles and mathematics in textbooks. And these things are something we can touch, so that children can get help to move forward into the future.”

Case 2, International Principal

In terms of resource availability, this group of 21st century capabilities relied mostly on the non-tangible resources such as having qualified teaching staff capable of delivering inquiry-based learning for example. It is hard to determine which hardware facilities would be necessary to promote innovation or independence capabilities, such as critical thinking for example, which is why the photos in Picture 11 illustrate proxy evidence of non-tangible resources such as qualified teaching staff and access to relevant curriculum. The first picture (11.1) was taken at the science fair to illustrate how the school developed opportunities for students to engage in stem subjects in a creative way, the second photo (11.2) was taken in a school that had teachers allocating different leadership responsibilities to the students, picture 11.4 illustrates the results of inquiry-based learning while picture 11.5 was taken in a school where English teachers used mind-maps as new learning tools. In terms of geographical locations, more economically developed districts in case cities would have schools focussing on these capabilities to a greater extent while little to no evidence of these kind of resources was found in private schools that operated in poorer neighbourhoods.
Overall, 21st century capabilities, while mentioned quite often, remained a vague concept for many interviewees. Firstly, they seemed to have relied on education internationalisation in understanding these capabilities. Secondly, education informatisation and the use of advanced technology in classrooms were seen as an essential part of preparing students for the 21st century world. While all interviewees were aware of these capabilities and claimed they were a priority for the school, only pricier international private schools were able to invest in more than classroom layouts and computer rooms.

5.5. Chapter summary

To summarise, this chapter presented the interview findings answering the question of how education capabilities, targeted by the Chinese private education reform, were interpreted in selected case schools. The data have shown that the way target capabilities were understood varied significantly, with more prestigious and expensive schools having access to a more
diverse and high-quality set of resources. As a result, this created a variety of local interpretations which led to capability formation process having different priorities and different focus in selected private schools. Specifically, it was argued that developing practical capabilities was understood as the need to open characteristic courses, carry out museum education and field trips, as well as industry engagement activities. The themes of sports, arts and crafts and career and industry were distinguished from the interview data on practical capability formation. Little variation in practical capability interpretation was found throughout the selected cases with most differences accounting for a discrepancy in tuition fees charged by the school, rather than its geographical location.

In terms of cross-cultural capabilities, this chapter argued that the selected private schools interpreted them through the themes of studying abroad, language learning and soft power familiarity. A variety of interpretations has been observed when it came to international education opportunities, with some cases focussing on integrated curriculum called international education with Chinese characteristics and others delivering a wide range of foreign curricula, in addition to the compulsory National curriculum. Private schools in mature markets were found to be better equipped to assist students in university applications abroad and more likely to offer languages other than English as elective courses. However, all schools were found to focus on English proficiency and preparing students for international English examinations, regardless of their geographical location or level of exclusivity. It was also common for private schools with International Divisions to interpret cross-cultural capabilities through the concept of soft power engagement and provide students with knowledge and experience of foreign holidays, literature, art, and culture.

The least variety of interpretations was found in the category of citizenship capabilities, which were uniformly understood as either familiarity with core socialist values or understanding of traditional Chinese culture, or both these themes. The theme of traditional Chinese culture familiarity was particularly prominent in international private schools where leadership and parents expressed the desire for students to retain a “Chinese soul” while gaining proficiency in foreign languages and studying foreign courses. Case schools in Xian and Beijing were found to pay most attention to socialist value education, while cities with more internationalised environments, such as Shanghai, Chengdu, Haikou, and Xuzhou, tended to emphasise traditional Chinese culture as a key citizenship capability.
Finally, 21st century capabilities were interpreted by the selected case schools through the themes of communication and collaboration, independence and innovation, and information literacy. This group of capabilities was prioritised by most private schools with a growing understanding of the future challenges and the socioeconomic needs of modern China. Interviewees were found to take pride in facilities and courses that their schools offered for 21st century capability development, such as IT labs, robotics equipment, VR, and 3D printer facilities. Schools in mature markets were found to focus on more advanced pedagogical innovations, inquiry-based learning, and heuristic development of their students. However, all schools were paying attention to new classroom layouts, extracurricular events and developing a more “holistic” curriculum.

In terms of resource availability, all case schools, regardless of location or tuition fee levels, were found to be well-equipped with the hardware necessary for capability development that their leadership talked about. While the presence of resources did not directly imply success in equipping students with the kind of educational capabilities that a school claimed to prioritise, all schools were successful in passing government inspections and retaining students, which allows inferring that private education reform policies were being implemented, i.e. the schools attempted to deliver on target capabilities. The quality of resources was found to be diverse, depending not only on the tuition fee level of a school, but also on its focus and curriculum.
6. Capability formation process in selected private schools

This chapter examines the process of capability formation in selected case schools by determining the conversion factors which influenced the way resources were utilised to develop the four capability groups targeted by the private education reform. The chapter builds on the capability interpretation and resource availability findings to answer the second research question: “In what way has local interpretation and implementation of the private education reform affected the process of capability formation in Chinese private schools?”

First, the concept of a policy implementation network, which consists of school leadership, student families and local government authorities, is introduced to argue that education policy implementation happening at the school level is not a straightforward top-down process. Instead, it is an outcome of interactions that happen among the actors constituting the policy implementation network within the context of a case. In other words, fieldwork data analysis provided evidence of dynamic interactions among actor-based and context-based conversion factors conducive or restrictive to capability development at the local level. The outcomes of such interactions were unique to each mix of conversion factors and accounted for the differences in how capabilities were being formed in different private case schools.

The second section of this chapter applies the lens of the capability approach to evaluate the impact that the interaction among the actors of the policy implementation network had on the process of capability formation in selected private case schools. It argues that actor-based conversion factors may play both a promoting and a restricting role in capability formation depending on the interactions within a unique mix of conversion factors in each case. The section distinguishes two most salient themes from the interview data analysis to illustrate such interactions among actor-based conversion factors, such as the interaction between parental demand and local policy priorities, and the interaction between local policy priorities and school leadership synergy.

The third section of this chapter discusses the interaction between actor-based and context-based conversion factors. Context-based conversion factors are conceptualised as more stable forces that emerge over time from local institutional and market conditions. Interview data analysis revealed two main context-based conversion factors that played a role in capability formation in private schools: market competition and market demand. The chapter ends with a
summary of the argument to formulate a concise answer to the question of how fieldwork findings help understand the process of capability formation in selected Chinese private schools.

6.1. Policy implementation network

This section introduces the concept of a policy implementation network to argue that policy implementation in Chinese private education sector does not happen on its own, but is a human led, and more importantly, human interpreted process. While this concept has been previously used in policy analysis (Jeongho Young Hoon, 2015; Wagner, Torney, and Ylä-Anttila, 2021), it has not yet been applied to the analysis of Chinese private education reform implementation. The definitions of policy implementation networks vary from purpose-oriented policy implementation networks defined as networks consisting of autonomous actors who make a joint effort towards a common purpose (Carboni et al., 2019), to public policy networks defined as the connections between jurisdictions and organisations that deliver public services (Jeongho Young Hoon, 2015). Mintrom and Vergari (1997) applied this concept to education policy analysis by arguing that reform-oriented networks play a role in public education reform accountability. Kenis and Provan (2009) reviewed the concept of networks in public policy research to draw attention to the lack of consensus about their role in policy implementation and the presence of exogenous as well as endogenous factors affecting their performance.

In this research, the concept of a policy implementation network is defined as a net of interactions among private school leadership, local authorities and student families affecting the process of target capability formation in selected private schools. Conceptualising this process through the policy implementation network offers an opportunity to identify the actors of private education reform policy implementation in China and the interactive relationship between them. It also draws attention to the dynamic nature of education policy implementation in China, which means it was found to be dependent on local relationships and circumstances. In other words, the interaction among the actors of policy implementation network creates actor-based conversion factors which can both promote and restrict student capabilities. Figure 21 illustrates the concept of policy implementation network as the foundation for the capability formation process in the context of Chinese private education reform.

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An exogenous theory of network performance claims that the performance of a network is a function of the external criteria used to assess the network, and that network participants and managers may have little control over these criteria (Kenis and Provan, 2009).
Thus, this section will first explore the roles school leadership, local authorities and student families play in interpreting and implementing the objectives of the private education reform and explain why these three actors were found to be instrumental in the process of reform policy implementation. It will be argued that school leadership in Chinese private schools goes beyond the administrative team to include education investment groups and that local authorities were given an increasingly prominent role in policy interpretation as a result of education decentralisation reforms in China. Finally, student families in China were found to be highly involved in education, which means they not only invested financial resources in private education sector, but they also voiced their demands and expectations which shaped the way selected private schools operated in the Chinese context.

**School leadership**

In the context of private education in China, school leadership means the *owners of the school, administrative leadership team, and school principals*. Fieldwork experience suggested that many private schools in China, with a few exceptions, belonged to education investment groups of various scales. Depending on the budget and the history of the investment group, there were some that operated a few campuses within one city or province and some that managed multiple kinds of private schools across different provinces. This means that one investment house can own and operate private schools in different locations, sometimes in different regions. One example would be Hailiang Education group founded in 1995 that manages over 100 primary
and secondary schools across 14 provinces and cities in China. The Chairman of the group also serves as a Vice Chairman of the Primary and Junior High School Branch of the China Private Education Association established in Beijing in September 2021. A prominent example of a local education group would be Beijing Jingcheng Education Group founded in 1992 operating several campuses in Beijing, including an international school campus. Similarly to Hailiang Education, the Chairman of Jingcheng Education Group serves as a Vice Chairman of the Primary and Junior High School Branch of the China Private Education Association. While not visited during fieldwork, these two education groups illustrate the two different approaches private education conglomerates take in China. The first one is the business of scale. Hailiang Education group operates by expanding into new markets and utilising its brand to attract students from second and third-tier cities. With roots in Hangzhou in the coastal Zhejiang province, over the years Hailiang opened schools in Ninghai, Lanzhou, Wuhu, and other less developed areas. Utilising the advantages of Zhejiang’s province favourable private education policies, Hailiang Education was also the first basic education private investment group listed on the United States stock market. Jingcheng Education, on the other hand, is a “boutique” education group focussed on diversifying its services on the Beijing private education market. One of the oldest private education groups in Beijing, it established Jingcheng Famous Teachers Club, Famous Principals Club, and Famous Educators Association to facilitate education and pedagogical research. It won multiple awards over the years including “Beijing Private Education Advanced Unit”, “Chaoyang District Private Advanced School” and “2008 Beijing Olympic Education Demonstration School”. Jingcheng illustrates a more exclusive approach to branding with fewer school campuses but more public and social engagement.

In addition to the management team from the investment group, there are “general” school principals and heads of different levels of education, such as the Head of primary school, the Head of junior high school and the Head of senior high school. A “General” principal is the highest administrative position in a school managing Heads of Divisions who in Chinese context are also called “principals”. In case of international private schools, two “general”

55 Further details are available at: https://www.hailiangedu.com/about.html
56 Further details are available at: https://www.canedu.org.cn/site/content/5703.html
57 In 1992, Zhejiang province introduced the strategy of Rejuvenating Zhejiang via Science and Education and in 1999, it launched a campaign of prominent counties of education. In 2002, it raised a strategic goal of establishing and developing Zhejiang as a Prominent Province of Education In 2006, an outline for establishing a prominent province of education was drawn up. In 2010, the Provincial Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) was released.
principals are typically responsible for different aspects of school management. A Chinese principal would deal with the investment group management, government, school Party organisations, local staff, and school budget. An international principal, depending on their level of Chinese language and knowledge of the Chinese society, would be responsible for marketing, parental education, hiring of international staff, branding and international outreach. On paper, they occupy a similar level of hierarchy but when it comes to major decision-making, international principals were found to often be excluded. This is likely because international principals are, by definition, foreign citizens prohibited from joining the Communist Party. The laws, however, mandate that all major decisions in private schools should be made through consultation and approval of the local party organisation. While it is not possible to argue that all Chinese principals of international private schools in China are Party members, this was the case in all schools included in this research. The relationship between the school principals and the leadership of the investment group was often found to be rather complicated. However, it was a major factor determining how smoothly school leadership operated as the actor of policy implementation in selected case schools.

Local authorities

What constitutes local authorities has changed over the course of private education reform. Now, a Municipal Education Commission in each city is the main education authority under the supervision of a Municipal People’s Government. The Municipal People’s Government may publish a city-wide interpretation of a national policy document and leave it for the Municipal Education Commission to provide more details. These two administrative bodies are responsible for the local interpretation of the central policy and its implementation within the local context. In addition, a Municipal Party Office may play a role in policy implementation. A level down from the Municipal authorities are the district level Education Commission and district level People’s Government. Documents published by the district level authorities typically contain administrative procedures and very specific details on things such as, for example, the process of applying for a school licence: a list of documents, number of copies, timeframe, appeal methods. In this way, a nationwide policy can be tracked down to the local level to see what priorities different localities have had throughout the reform. This section argues that because of education decentralisation policies, local governments gained

59 “The Opinions on strengthening party construction in private schools” published in 2016 mandated that private schools place party organisation funding within the school budget and seek party approval for any major decisions.
considerable control over the local private education sector which made education reform implementation dependent on local government priorities.

Ngok (2007, p.145) suggested that in the Chinese context “… decentralization refers to the relinquishing of central government control and assigning responsibility for the provision and management of education to the local levels.” Arguably the origins of this process of educational decentralization can be traced to the Opening-up reforms in the 1980s. For example, the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure (1985) stated that the major policies had to be centralized, and unified, and specific methods should be flexible and diverse, and could not be rushed into force. This Decision meant that local governments were given the authority to deliver basic education for the first time since the establishment of the PRC (Ngok, 2007, p.145). Most importantly, it meant financial decentralisation to relieve the central government from having to reallocate basic education funding to different localities. According to Ngok (2007, p.146), primary education was then funded by village level governments, junior high schools became the responsibility of towns and townships, and senior high schools were funded by county level governments. Furthermore, township and county governments have borne most of the education financing, such as teacher salaries, since 1998.

The Outline of Education Reform and Development in China (1993) continued education decentralisation by encouraging the development of education “in line with the reality of our country and each region in accordance with the principle of combining unity and diversity”. Local governments were granted more autonomy in enrolment, teaching plans, teacher salaries and tuition fees. In addition, localities were encouraged to legislate by publishing more policy documents at the local level. In 2001, State Council Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development put forward the three-level curriculum management system and placed the responsibility for curriculum development on local authorities and schools while also setting out a clear framework of the national curriculum. The document stipulated that “the state formulates an overall plan for the curriculum development of primary and secondary schools, determines the national curriculum categories and class hours, formulates national curriculum standards, and guides the implementation of primary and secondary schools in a macro-level. Based on ensuring the implementation of national curricula, local areas are encouraged to

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60 According to the Notice of the Ministry of Finance on Further Doing a Good Job in Education and Technology Funding Budget Arrangement and Ensuring he Timely Issuance of Teacher Salaries (1998)
develop local curricula adapted to the region, and schools can develop or select courses that suit their own characteristics”. The Implementation Plan for Speeding Up Education Modernisation (2018-2022) published by the State Council furthered education decentralisation by directing the government to “deepen the reform of simplifying administration and delegating power, combining decentralization, and optimizing service, promote the transformation of government functions, and build a new relationship between the government, schools, and society”. Thus, a comprehensive decentralisation of education governance has been accompanying Chinese private education reform with the focus on decentralising education funding channels, curriculum management, school operation, and supervision.

Private education has been an important part and an illustrative example of this decentralisation. In 1987, MOE Provisional Regulations on Running Schools by Social Forces stipulated that the education administrative departments of all provinces could formulate specific management measures based on these regulations and the actual conditions of their respective regions, which would be implemented after being approved by the provincial people’s government. Thus, the development of private education in 1980s was both an indication of decentralisation of education reform and an avenue for local authorities to encourage experimentation within the scope of the national policy framework. In 1997, education decentralisation was further encouraged, and local governments given the right to arrange preferential land policies for private schools based on local conditions according to the State Council Regulations on Running Schools by Social Forces.

In 2016, the classified management of private education was put in place with each locality being given the power to implement it according to the local circumstances. This meant different cities could establish different paperwork requirements for obtaining a licence and local governments could offer various financial and tax incentives to direct private resources to newly developing urban areas or districts that experienced a shortage of education resources. In the same year, the Implementation Rules on the Supervision and Administration of For-profit Private Schools gave local authorities the power to determine the scale of for-profit private schools below the middle school level and strengthened the rules for annual inspections by local departments of education on the matters of HR, and social security and annual financial reports.
At the same time, the Opinions on Strengthening Party Construction in Private Schools (2016) stipulated that the local party organizations generally belonged to the education department of the county or city party committee. This meant that the specifics of local school Party organisation’s job and operating process were to be formulated by the local authorities. Finally, Several Opinions of the State Council on Encouraging the Operation of Education by Social Forces and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private education put forward the general principle of “negative prohibitions” in 2016, dictating that what was not explicitly prohibited by the national policy had to be allowed. Thus, different cities and provinces received the power to establish their own inducement policies according to the local needs and resource availability. Given the comprehensive nature and the consistency of education decentralisation policies described above, it can be argued that the way local governments interpreted national private education reform policies and the way they set implementation priorities became an essential factor of policy implementation, making local authorities the second key actor of policy implementation network.

Student families

Student families are argued to be the third key actor in policy implementation along with the school leadership and local authorities. First, in addition to education being a highly valued good in Chinese society, birth control policies, such as the one child policy, created an environment when all family resources have been focussed on educating one child.

“We (Chinese families) are six adults raising one, three families raising one child.”

Case 5, Chinese Principal

Second, since private education generally required a bigger financial investment than public schooling, Chinese families that chose to send their children to a private school were found to make such a decision based not just on school availability, but also on their values and expectations. Interview data has shown several key reasons why Chinese families choose private education. First, state schooling in China was said to be geared towards two major examinations – the high school entrance examination (Zhongkao) and the university entrance examination (Gaokao). With classes averaging fifty students and teaching quality being judged by exam performance, interviewees claimed there was little room for pedagogical experiments or time for delivering individualised teaching in state schools where students faced rote learning, memorization and long self-study hours with dedication and discipline. Therefore,
many families turned to private education as an alternative to the high-pressure environment of public schools.

“Shanghai and Shenzhen have changed, there are already some families that do not want children to study as hard as the college entrance examination.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

“They take the gaokao, they do well, they go to a university. That's plan A. Our school has a couple of interesting plan Bs and Cs, and I think that’s one of the appeals of our school. If your son or daughter is not the typical Chinese: driven, successful, motivated, mathematically minded student, then we have four different options.”

Case 13, International Principal

“The so-called new education is that parents do not want their children to memorise questions all day at the most precious age of their lives, that is, for the sake of scores, at the cost of their children's physical and mental health. That is, they think that children's learning is one aspect, but people should grow up in an all-round way. Then the educational philosophy of our private school is compatible with these parents.”

Case 15, Chinese Principal

In addition to those who simply wanted to avoid the grilling for examinations, there were also cases of migrant children who did not qualify for local state school admission because of the household registration system (Hukou) that tied social benefits to the place of one’s registration. Under the normal circumstances, when a family moves to a different city or province outside of their household registration area, a parent’s employer (called Danwei) would take care of school places for children of employees. China have also put policies in place to help children of migrant families receive education in the place of their parent’s work61. However, it requires a lot of paperwork and may be viewed by some as unnecessary, especially if a family temporarily moves to a workplace that is considered a “worse” location than their original Hukou. If a family is unwilling to go through the paperwork or meet the requirements of a

61 Opinions on Further Improving the Work of Compulsory Education for Children of Migrant Workers in Cities, published by the General Office of the State Council in 2003, stated that development and reform departments had to include compulsory education for children of migrant workers in urban social undertaking development plans, and include the construction of schools for children of migrant workers in urban infrastructure construction planning. Available here: http://www.gov.cn/ztzl/ywjy/content_470391.htm
Hukou transfer, they would choose a private school that has the license to accept students with a different Hukou status.

“Because parents may not have a registered permanent residence in the place where they work, and they can’t go to school locally, so they can only choose private schools.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

“(City name) also has a lot of outsiders, and then there are many surrounding cities, such as Lu'an, Huainan, Anqing and Suzhou. In the surrounding cities, these parents come to work, and their children can’t be sent to public schools, so they will consider sending them to us.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

These two reasons for choosing a private school were common in all cities: first-tier Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, second-tier Haikou and Hefei, or third-tier Xuzhou, Taicang and Suzhou. There were also notable differences between the cases when it came to why parents chose a private school over a public school. For example, the interviewees agreed that Beijing has a very strong public education system with prestigious state schools affiliated to Beijing universities coveted by many Chinese families. In this case, private schooling is often a second choice when admission to a high-quality public school is unattainable because of low exam results of a child or unsuitable registration status of the parents.

“It has a lot to do with the characteristics of the city. For example, Beijing will be more political, so parents will always choose this kind of high-quality public school first.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Shanghai, on the other hand, has a long history of private education with several well-established private school brands, including international schools. Public education has been improving with the increase in education investment from the Shanghai local government. Therefore, parental choice depended more on access to a better brand, be it a private or a public school.

“In fact, it depends on what area primary school they live in. Then they will try to get into the best school near this area, whether it is private or public.”

Case 10, Chinese Principal
Chengdu, a dynamically developing city far from the coast, could be characterised by the desire to catch up with the coastal cities. Families in Chengdu were said to be gaining wealth and the desire for their children to compete with peers in Shanghai and Shenzhen. Therefore, choosing to pay for a private school in Chengdu was more than simply an alternative to high-pressure state schooling.

“I think it goes back to both parents getting away from the traditional Chinese system of education and society. You want to send your kids to the same societal level. You’re driving the latest model of Mercedes; you want to be going to a school where the other parents are driving the latest model of Mercedes.”

Case 5, International Principal

Overall, while some regional variation in family reasoning could be explained by market factors and socioeconomic trends, fieldwork revealed that it was mostly the type of the school that would attract certain types of families. Private schools with higher tuition fees would attract wealthier families while schools with lower tuition fees would cater to the lower and middle class. There were also affordable private schools with very low tuition fees for families with below average income located in third-tier cities. Plus, the price of the school was found to be particularly important when it came to boarding private schools that could attract families from different regions. In addition to tuition fee thresholds, newly built campuses in developing districts tended to attract migrant families that purchased more affordable property in suburban areas while central city schools catered to local elites and families native to the area. Finally, school focus and characteristics courses it offered also accounted for the kind of parents it would attract.

In addition, student families in China were found to demand accountability from private schools and oversight from local authorities. Parents were said to be increasingly knowledgeable about modern education practices and developments in pedagogy, so they were able to see if a school was delivering on the required capabilities or not.

“In the last few years, I can see the Chinese parents have become very educated. They know what they want, and they know how to check.”

Case 7, International Principal
Consequently, it was common for Chinese parents to report misbehaving schools to the local authorities, demanding conflict resolution and oversight. There have been numerous reports of parental complaints online with the local Education Commission responding by suspending classes and closing some private schools. Thus, student families played a big role in how a school defined its priorities and participated in education policy implementation, making them the third key actor of policy implementation network.

To summarise, this section discussed the concept of a policy implementation network and argued that school leadership, local authorities and student families constituted the three main actors of policy implementation and interpretation in private case schools. This was argued to happen partly due to the decentralised nature of the Chinese education system giving space for local authorities to exercise discretion in how national level policies are interpreted within the framework provided by the central government. At the same time, student families were said to directly influence the operation of private school by choosing whether to pay tuition which was said to result in their expectations and requirements being taken into consideration by the school leadership. Under these circumstances, school leadership had to balance parental expectations with local policy priorities for the school to remain successful on the market. The next section will elaborate on this idea by combining the concept of a policy implementation network with the framework of the capability approach to argue that the interaction among the actors of policy implementation is what creates actor-based conversion factors.

6.2. Actor-based conversion factors

This section focuses on the interactions among parental demand, policy priorities and leadership synergy as the main actor-based conversion factors in the process of capability formation in selected case private schools. Parental demand is defined as the expectations that student families in China, not only parents, have of the capabilities that a private school can deliver to their children. Policy priorities refer to the way national private education reform objectives are interpreted and prioritised by the local authorities. School leadership synergy is defined as effective cooperation among senior administrative team members in private schools, private school principals and investment group management.

62 For example, a recent case in Shanghai, where parents reported a private school for not delivering the expected level of teaching quality while overcharging tuition. Details available here: https://wap.xinmin.cn/content/31417156.html. Plus, a case in Suzhou Xiangcheng District, when parents reported private schools to the authorities for school’s teaching philosophy being inconsistent with the enrolment publicity on the grounds of “fake marketing”. Details available here: https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/608488164
First, details are provided about the extent to which the alignment between parental demand and local policy priorities has had an impact on the formation of specific groups of capabilities, including cross-cultural capabilities, citizenship capabilities, 21st century capabilities and practical capabilities. It argues that while 21st century and practical capabilities were found to be prioritised by local authorities and student families in a variety of contexts, cross-cultural and citizenship capabilities were the points of misalignment for these two actor-based conversion factors in some cases.

Second, the role of school leadership in balancing parental demand with local policy priorities is addressed by exploring the way that the relationship within senior management teams in Chinese private schools promotes or restricts the influence of these conversion factors. The section draws attention to the relationship between Chinese and International principals in international private schools, their interaction with foreign staff members and investment group managers to argue that private education reform policies related to admission, textbooks and examination played a restrictive role in capability formation when private school leadership synergy was lacking.

**Parental demand and local policy priorities**

The most salient theme that emerged from the interview data analysis was *parental demand as a major actor-based conversion factor* in the process of capability formation in selected private schools. Through the interview analysis, families in China were shown to be highly involved in the operation of private schools and have considerable expectations of what the school was supposed to deliver to their children. According to the interviewees, it was because families were highly aware of the fact that they were giving up free state-funded education and, therefore, felt entitled to receive a higher level of services and more multifaceted education opportunities.

“*Kids and parents expect all the extracurricular activities that are not academic. The field trips, the assemblies, the musical performances, Christmas parties, all this other stuff that you don’t get in a public school. All those things need to go hand in hand with the pedagogy.*”

Case 5, International Principal
“I think parents are actually changing. They want to go to a famous school, and they will gradually diversify, just like when we evaluate students, from the score theory to the all-round development of morality, intelligence, and physique, including all aspects of your life.”

Case 8, Chinese Principal

The interview data have also shown that while all interviewees pointed out increasingly sophisticated parental expectations, schools with higher tuition thresholds educated children from wealthy families whose parents were business owners, top managers, highly skilled professionals, or investors. These types of families were not only willing to invest in their child’s education but were typically more aware of 21st century education practices. Therefore, a school had to meet the expectations of these families by providing students with the opportunities for character development, innovation, and collaboration. At the same time, cheaper schools with fewer resources and less investment in teacher training were shown to struggle with finding the right balance between family expectations and capability development. Finding this balance was described by one of the interviewees as being on a “yoyo”.

“When they sent the child to our school at the beginning, they wanted to say that the child could not only learn cultural lessons well, but also have a comprehensive development and so on, which we can understand, but in fact, it would be difficult to implement it, because of the child’s ability, ... then parents will change their minds, and they will feel that the school is not strict, not only in the aspect of education after class, but also in all aspects.”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

“We also meet parents here who are the most serious and dogmatic... They will think that the education and methods of public schools are the best in the future. They will choose to leave.”

Case 2, Chinese Principal

Meeting high parental expectations was said to be the cornerstone of a private school survival, which is why the way school leadership managed the changing and, perhaps, contradictory, family expectations affected the success of capability development in that school. Typically, an old private school in a market such as Beijing or Shanghai would have an established niche, but in newly developing markets, such as Xian, the lines were somewhat fuzzy. This means that the same school may be the choice of different families, with different needs, simply due
to the overall lack of school choices on the market. This was shown to be the case in Xian, Hainan, and Xuzhou where private schools had a diverse group of students from different backgrounds.

“In our current region, there will be some parents whose family conditions may not be relatively good, or whose family is relatively rich, but they may not have the awareness to invest in their children. This kind of parents will be satisfied with the current free courses. Relatively speaking, there are still some people who work in the government or go abroad to work by themselves, whose vision is broad. They demand that more characteristic courses will be carried out in the future. Each family has different needs, so we will open a fee-based course later to meet their needs.”

Case 15, Chinese Principal

Losing parental support due to unmet expectations was said to carry a high reputational damage most private schools would be unwilling and unable to afford.

“Many schools offer A-level courses, how do parents choose? Now, they also look at the introduction of the school, including the reputation of the school”.

Case 4, Chinese principal

“So, in fact, parents have thousands of requirements for this, so they are very demanding, because they need to integrate the two aspects together, and there is a lot of pressure on the school”.

Case 13, Chinese principal

Thus, selected private schools were found to pay close attention to parental demand in setting their priorities, including investment in education resources necessary for capability development.

**Cross-cultural capability formation**

High parental demand was said to exist for international education, which in some cases was, and in some cases was not a local policy priority. As previously mentioned, due to the ban on the international departments in public schools, private education has become the only option for many students who wished to study in an international school. Thus, families which had
the means and the plan to send their children abroad would normally opt for private schooling to gain access to international curriculum, assistance with international examinations and English learning.

‘Parents in China, the more they learn about the IB and the more the students learn about the IB, they want to send their kids to the IB system.’”

Case 5, International Principal

“In fact, whether it is a student’s parents or a teacher, they have a desire to pursue outside knowledge. They want to see the outside teaching materials, the outside world, for curiosity, or they think it has something to do with their work in the future.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

On the one hand, this is because a degree from a respectable foreign university remained a desirable feature on the Chinese job market since it not only proved a degree of fluency in a foreign language to the potential employers, but also equipped students for a future career in an international corporation, or even the government. With more international businesses entering the country, language skills became a valuable commodity on the labour market even for those who did not seek a study abroad experience. However, public schools were said to have limited resources, both in terms of class hours and foreign staff, to create capabilities for students who sought language fluency.

“Our world is getting smaller and smaller, whether it is the current Internet age, or the speed of our communication and transportation development ... we can all see that if you do not have such a language skill, then a lot of your development is limited, so parents will certainly be more and more aware of this problem and can work hard to cultivate their children’s English language foundation.”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

On the other hand, there was also a growing demand for what interviewees referred to as an international mindset that ultimately meant the capability to develop cross-cultural skills, including soft skills like negotiation and the ability to understand and engage with foreign cultures. Interview data revealed that this demand often stemmed from personal work and
travel experiences of Chinese families, who were increasingly exposed to the international community.

“And so now parents are realizing that, for example, from their own work experiences, how important it is to have an international mindset and education to experience going abroad and then return here.”

Case 3, Chinese Principal

“When domestic students, Chinese students choose (our school), they often value the cultivation of bilingual and bicultural talents, not only to learn English, but also to cultivate bicultural talents in all aspects of international courses from an early age.”

Case 5, International Principal

Overall, parental demand as a conversion factor was shown to both facilitate and restrict capability formation depending on other conversion factors present in the context of each school case. For example, in cities where cross-cultural competencies were also high on the policy priority list, and there was a substantial economic need for internationally competent personnel, private schools actively engaged in cross-cultural capability formation so long as they met the basic policy requirements.

“Because they all (families and authorities) think that as long as you stand on the point of integration of China and the West, you can get more opportunities.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

Specifically, cross-cultural capabilities received attention in Beijing because of such alignment of policy priority and parental demand. For instance, Modernization of Education in the Capital 2035 explained that education reform in Beijing was vital due to its unique position as the national political centre, the cultural centre, and the international exchange centre. The plan set out to “resolutely eliminate all out-of-date ideas and institutional defects” and implement major pilot education reforms. It also instructed schools to “participate extensively in global education governance and share the successful experience of Beijing’s educational reform and development”, aim to unite the people, cultivate talents, and benefit the people. The goal of education modernisation in Beijing was formulated to say that “after another 15 years of hard work, by the middle of this century, the capital’s education will reach the forefront level of
developed countries and become an advanced education city with world influence”. Priority was given cross-cultural exchanges, cultural communication skills and access to international education pathways.

Furthermore, the special strategic status of Beijing as the capital meant that the local government wanted to have international influence which explained the focus on promoting internationalisation in private schools. Modernization of Education in the Capital 2035 focussed on coordinating education reform in Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei province to “cultivate and gather international talents” and deepen the Belt and Road educational exchanges, as well as exchanges between China and foreign countries in the field of education and Sino-foreign running of schools. In addition, the Implementation Plan for Further Adjusting and Optimizing the Structure and Improving the Use of Educational Funds in Beijing published by the General Office of the Beijing Municipal People's Government in 2020 further emphasised the coordinated development strategy of Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei province, including the joint construction of the “Belt and Road” education initiatives and education opening to the outside world.

A similar pattern of alignment between parental demand for cross-cultural capabilities and local priorities could be seen in Shanghai where the authorities were very ambitious in developing cross-cultural capabilities. The policies included the aim for Shanghai schools to be on par with “world’s advanced level” and “strive for first-class” according to the Outline of Shanghai Municipal Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020). The Outline also set the goal for Shanghai to become a central city for international educational exchanges. Notice of the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Private Education in Shanghai (2017) offered support to private education to “cooperate and exchange with overseas educational institutions and strive to build a brand of private education with international influence”. This included the introduction of high-quality educational resources from abroad as well as domestic innovation.

Moreover, the Implementation Plan of Shanghai Municipality for Accelerating the Modernization of Education for 2020 set up “a number of Shanghai teacher training practice bases overseas” to support teachers and principals with foreign professional development opportunities. The Plan also instructed schools to expand the scale of foreign students and recruit international students “with enthusiasm”. Schools were supposed to improve their provision of foreign curricula and standardize the use of overseas teaching materials. Finally,
the policy offered support to schools that taught “non-common languages”, mandated an increased number of foreign language elective courses in primary and secondary schools and instructed schools to support outstanding students with study abroad opportunities. These policies, when aligned with parental demand for international education opportunities, access to foreign curricula and language learning, were said to be the reason for private schools to prioritise and invest in the development of cross-cultural capabilities.

However, the view of international education was shown to be very different in first and third tier Chinese cities. In addition to the pathway to an international career and studying abroad, international education was seen by some families as an alternative to the exam-oriented, test-based study environment of public schools. For example, families in Hefei and Taicang might not even consider future immigration, just aim for education to facilitate job opportunities on the domestic market. Thus, there were private international schools that operated under a domestic license which meant that the students had an opportunity to both study international curriculum and participate in the college entrance examinations in China. Parental demand for cross-cultural capabilities in such schools was based on the idea that international education concepts and pedagogy would be beneficial for holistic development of a child. Interviewees pointed out that many parents held the view that an international school would provide their children with more comprehensive learning opportunities, conducive to children’s personal growth.

“Parents in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, especially in Shanghai, are born to accept that their children can go abroad or even not come back. But once you are further in the mainland, parents often just think that going abroad to study and taking the college entrance examination can both lead to a university degree, and they don’t think there is any difference.”

Case 13, Chinese Principal

“They think their child is not suitable for this kind of college entrance examination. So, they are looking for another direction, right, so there are a little more of this kind of people.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

“In fact, parents also see this kind of channel, which can bring children’s personal growth, future career development, and even the possibility of realizing this kind of class leap, providing a better channel.”
Case 1, Chinese Principal

This was not, however, a view necessarily shared by the local authorities. Emphasis on exam performance remained strong in China for both public and private schools. This meant that private schools experienced frequent inspections and were required to submit detailed reports on their students’ exam scores. For example, in Xian, the development of private education was expected to be closely coordinated with the development of public school system in terms of new school construction, teacher development and resource sharing. The Implementation of the National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020) published by the General Office of the Shaanxi Provincial People’s Government in 2010 “insisted” on keeping state-run schools as the main education provider in the province with private schools focussing on general high school education.

Moreover, local government investment in public education in Xian has been steadily increasing over the past few years. The 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Education in Shaanxi Province (2018) allocated an increased amount of per student funding which amounted to 400 yuan in small classes, 800 yuan in primary schools, 1000 yuan in junior high schools, 800 yuan in senior high schools. Thus, Xian was trying to catch up with the coast, while its public school system was still understaffed and underfunded. Implementation Opinions on Further Adjusting and Optimizing the Structure to Improve the Effectiveness of the Use of Educational Funds published by the General Office of the People's Government of Shaanxi Province in 2019 banned “the construction of luxury schools beyond the standards”. Resource shortage and the relative unfamiliarity of local authorities with private education resulted in a much more rigid reform policies in this region.

Under these circumstances, policymakers in Xian prioritised practical and citizenship capability development while paying less attention to cross-cultural and 21st century capabilities. For instance, Shaanxi Education Modernization published by the People’s Government of Shaanxi Province in 2019 promoted “the organic integration of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labour education”. According to the policy, this meant developing practical abilities through close integration of education with industry, productive labour, and social practice. In addition, the policy laid out the coordination mechanism for education reform that supported “in-depth educational cooperation and exchanges with the south-eastern coastal areas with faster and better educational development”. This was followed by the emphasis on informatisation, digitalisation and the use of AI in education.
Overall, Xian encouraged private education to supplement the shortage of quality education capabilities, provide technology and human resources, and meet the socioeconomic need for practical education capabilities, industry, art, and physical education. As a result, parental demand for holistic international education in private schools that were under the requirement to participate in centralised examinations in regions such as Xian, where local authorities did not prioritise cross-cultural capability development, was losing its capacity to serve as an effective conversion factor for cross-cultural capability development.

On the other hand, there were also circumstances when parents placed less value on cross-cultural capabilities than local authorities or the school leadership did. For example, this was the case in Hainan, where the local authorities prioritised the development of a new Economic Development Zone, with the emphasis on international education, while the demand among the parents for these capabilities was shown to be much smaller than in first-tier cities, i.e. Beijing and Shanghai. In such cases, parental demand served as a negative conversion factor which means it inhibited rather than promoted cross-cultural capability formation according to the interviewees.

“Maybe years ago, many parents thought it might be a good investment. I might be able to let my children go abroad. Now more parents think going abroad is just an experience.”

Case 14, Chinese Principal

Low level of familiarity with international education concepts and misguided expectations of both parents and students created a challenge, so some private schools engaged in parental education to explain the actual differences between the international education they provided and domestic education opportunities.

“I think in their mind that is the antithesis of a public school. They have no idea what that means. Does that mean that you’re free the whole day, you get to decide your own classes? That you dress the way you want to dress, there are no uniforms? You don’t have to do homework? People are smiling and are nice all day, no strictness, no policies, no guidelines. So, I think there’s been this re-education of the Chinese public and the Chinese youth to what international education is.”

Case 5, International Principal
Thus, parental education was an essential channel for private school leadership to reconcile parental demand and local policy priorities. Fieldwork data analysis has shown that interviewees talked about parental education as a way to manage expectations when asked about the challenges of policy implementation when it came to cross-cultural capabilities. This means that in absence of effective communication between the school and student families, policy priorities would play a restrictive role due lacking understanding of their objectives and implementation leeway.

**Citizenship capability formation**

The development of citizenship capabilities was shown to be a more prominent example of frequent misalignment between parental demand and policy priorities. Interview data has shown that when parental demand aligned with the local policy priorities, it put citizenship capability development to the forefront of school leadership consideration, which is why interviewees in these schools actively discussed moral education and traditional Chinese culture classes. In cases when local policy priorities did not match parental expectations, school leadership faced many challenges of balancing the two.

To begin with, the interviewees did not talk about parental demand as much as they did when asked about other types of capabilities, i.e. 21st century capabilities or cross-cultural capabilities. When asked specifically about parental expectations, most interviewees focussed on capabilities other than citizenship. Three cases stood out because interviewees explicitly talked about parental expectations of education opportunities related to traditional Chinese culture. These cases belonged to less mature private education markets, two from a second tier and another from a third-tier city. Although it is not possible to argue that private schools in first-tier cities did not face parental demand for citizenship capabilities, the data indicated that family priorities may differ there.

“There are also some parents who I know are like this. They especially like Chinese classics, such as the Book of Songs and some ancient Chinese. They want their children to have more contact with these things. So, they have a private school where some teachers specialize in teaching these things. They send their children to such classes in the school.”

Case 16, Chinese Principal
“In fact, the parents who send them to our school still hope that their children could go abroad or stay as I just said. Therefore, the double demands of parents are still part of the reason. In our school, maybe parents also hope that if their children do not go abroad, they will stay and take our domestic courses. Then there are also some parents who do not choose our school to go abroad. So, in our school, traditional culture is very important.”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

“To be sure, private schools must have aspects that parents value and attract parents, so that parents will give up their free public education degrees ... Whether from the curriculum or from the school management point of view, including the school's various moral education activities and so on, parents recognize this.”

Case 14, Chinese Principal

Local authorities, however, paid close attention to those capabilities in every region. For instance, with the status of the capital as the forefront of socialist national development, policies placed private education in Beijing under tight supervision and required intensive party-building and development of core socialist values. The Implementation Opinions of the Beijing Municipal People’s Government on Encouraging Social Forces to Establish Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2018) mandated ideological and political theory courses to introduce socialist theory with Chinese characteristics and “integrate core socialist values into the whole process of education and teaching”.

Accelerating the Modernization of Education in the Capital Implementation Plan (2018-2022) instructed schools to integrate national art into the curriculum and make “Chinese excellent traditional culture” part of school aesthetic education. The policy also mandated the unified use of Marxist theory and other ideological and political education in teaching resources in private and public education. Modernization of Education in the Capital 2035 published by Municipal Party Committee and Municipal Government in 2019 introduced the concept of Lide Shuren into the city education reform which meant the integration of “Chinese nation outstanding traditional culture” into moral education, physical and aesthetic education. These policies placed private schools in Beijing under intense pressure to deliver citizenship capabilities and invest in resources to promote access to traditional Chinese culture and party-building activities for their students.
Similarly, Chengdu Municipal People’s Government banned the replacement of the national curriculum with “local courses and school-based courses” and forbade the use of unapproved teaching materials, according to the Several Measures to Promote the Healthy and Standardized Development of Private Education (2019). In addition, Chengdu Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) published by Chengdu Municipal People’s Government in 2010 prioritised moral education “with patriotism as the core content”. Finally, the Further Regulations on the School-running Behaviour of Private Schools and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2016) encouraged private schools to adhere to the socialist direction of running schools and “fully implement the party’s educational policy”. Party leadership in private schools was to be enforced through incorporating party organisation construction into the school charter according to the Encouraging Social Forces to Establish Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2018).

In Shanghai, party-building also played an important role in education policy. The Outline of Shanghai Municipal Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) mandated the strengthening of Party organisations in private schools and the improvement of the system of supervisory commissioners and Party construction inspectors. Implementation Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education published by Shanghai Municipal People’s Government continued this trend in 2017 by clarifying the details about Party building in private schools, including mandating that Party Secretaries entered the board of directors, and that Party building was an important element of the annual inspection in private schools.

Shanghai Education Modernisation 2035 published in 2019 set out the goal to “cultivate builders and successors of socialist cause with Chinese feelings, Shanghai spirit and global vision” which set Shanghai apart from other regions where global vision mandate was less prominent. The policy emphasised the importance of cultivating the traditional cultural identity of the Chinese nation while recognising the multi-cultural nature of the world, according to the Outline of Shanghai Municipal Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020). This was different from Beijing and showed that Shanghai was so integrated into the international landscape as the centre for opening-up reforms, that local authorities had to pay attention to its multiculturalism within the language of the policy.
Local authorities in Xian took citizenship capability development as one of the key priorities. Xian government emphasised the introduction of moral education in private schools, including ideology courses, spiritual education, and traditional Chinese culture learning. The 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Education in Shaanxi Province, which was published by the Shaanxi Provincial People’s Government in 2018, instructed schools to cultivate core values of socialism and to “vigorously carry out activities such as Chinese classics recitation, standardisation of Chinese character writing and promote intangible cultural heritage entering campuses”. Compared to the vagueness of general mandates in Beijing and Shanghai, the government of Shaanxi Province named specific projects such as strengthening the revolutionary traditions and Yan’an spiritual education, as well as introducing students to the “red education bases such as Yan’an and Zhaojin” as part of moral education. Moreover, Implementation Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education published by Xi’an Municipal People’s Government in 2019 mandated Party organisations to be established with three or more party members in all private schools, in addition to making the construction of a Communist Youth League necessary for a private school license to be approved. Finally, Shaanxi Education Modernization (2019) declared that ideological and moral education had to include Xi Jinping’s socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics into the list of moral teachings.

As a result, leadership in private schools had to maintain close communication with student families to take their suggestions and concerns into consideration, while at the same time carrying out parental education. This meant that school leadership flexibility was an essential conversion factor in education capability formation when parental demands did not align with local policy priorities. When the leadership was able to adjust to the parental demand in timely manner and communicate well with student families, the school was able to maintain the balance between the parental demand and policy priorities.

“There will be some parents who have their own understanding of education. They will have some ideas and requirements about what they can get from others. They will communicate with the school, and they will also select some schools that meet their needs.”

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63 Yan’an is a sacred place of the Chinese revolution and the cradle of New China. The CPC Central Committee and revolutionaries of the older generation, including Mao Zedong, lived and struggled in Yan’an for 13 years from 1935 to 1948. Zhaojin, a central base area of the Red Army, witnessed one of the key stages upon which modern Chinese history played out.
Thus, parental education and clear communication between the school leadership and student families was once again shown to be essential for capability formation when the priorities of the policy implementation network actors differed.

“The principal is really busy, because in fact, an international department is equivalent to a big accident. In fact, his responsibility is that all aspects of a large school may need to be managed. It does not mean that the director of the international high school only needs to educate academics. He needs to manage everything, including the attendance of students and the communication with parents, as well as all aspects of administrative departments in the school. Then all these things need to be done. Yes, I also found that it is a Chinese characteristic.”

“But in junior high school, it’s very difficult for you to teach. Basically, you can’t teach. No matter how you reorganize, in fact, ordinary Chinese parents are not learning all the time. This kind of parents can’t be educated. And since junior high school, the child has actually been very rebellious, and he is not willing to listen to what the teacher said.”

Parental demand for 21st century capabilities was found to be stronger in Shanghai, Chengdu, and Beijing while practical capabilities were more in demand in Xian, which aligned with the local government priorities. Chinese families found themselves willing to pay for smaller classes and smaller teacher/student ratio to afford their children individual opportunities to obtain assistance with learning difficulties in addition to a wider choice of after-class activities.

“And how can private schools compete with public schools? You must be innovative in all aspects of your teaching content, teaching methods and teaching ideas, and after doing this well, the effect does appear. Then it can attract more parents to send their children to private schools.”

Case 9, Chinese Principal
“Outside Shanghai, it is often difficult for private schools to compete with public schools, partly because the government has been strongly supporting, especially recently, the government’s economic situation has been developing, so public schools are getting more and more support.”

Case 13, Chinese Principal

Artistic and sports education was in demand in all case schools. Some Chinese families were looking to develop their child’s art skills or find a pathway for them to pursue an athletic career. This meant that they chose to enrol their children in a private school that focussed on the Chinese National curriculum, but which would also have an emphasis on arts or sports their child was interested in or excelled at.

“Our private education and international education may need to look at the comprehensive development of children. A child who does not do well in exams, but he is a musical genius, no problem, right? Maybe my child’s score is not good, but when he comes to this school, he becomes very happy and healthy, and sports are very good, which is also a good education.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

The interviewees pointed out that families that were willing to spend thousands of yuan on tuition fees were also willing to engage with the school to negotiate access to practical capabilities to hold the management accountable for the marketing promises made during their child’s admission.

“They are very positive and active for doing all these like very detailed things, interests. Especially if they are rich.”

Case 8, Primary school teacher

“Most of them are still in the middle class, and there are more families like intellectuals, who have higher expectations for their children, and then pay more attention to their children’s training besides school.”

Case 4, Chinese Principal
Although public schools were also instructed to develop practical capabilities, the level of accountability was rather low because free education gave more authority to the school than to the parents in deciding on how to allocate study hours.

“I: I just realised that you have a public school next to you, right? How do parents choose, for example, to go to a private school or a public school, they are also in one place?

R: Is the quality of education, it is the quality of education in Haidian District, Chinese private schools can compete with public schools, private schools have good quality”.

Case 4, Chinese principal

“I think private schools like ours have played a very important role in promoting this process. Because I came from a public school, but my understanding of private schools has become more profound over the past few years. I think they have played a supporting role for those groups with differentiated needs. This is because if you are in a public school, it should be said that the channels and resources all children get are relatively similar”.

Case 12, Chinese principal

At the same time, if families in public schools still searched for these opportunities, they would just choose to go to private training institutions to obtain what private schools included in their tuition.

“For example, they say that for grade one kids in China, if they just wanted to go to the Chinese education, 1 year of extra curriculum activity or extra curriculum program, will cost anywhere from 100,000 RMB. That is the same amount of tuition that they pay to schools like us.”

Case 3, Chinese Principal

While parental demand for 21st century and practical capabilities did not depend on geographical location and was prevalent throughout different types of schools, these two groups of education capabilities were also highly encouraged by the local authorities. For example, 21st century capabilities were emphasised in Beijing by the Educational Reform and Development Plan for Beijing during the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan Period (2016-2020) which instructed schools to reform the curriculum system to both conform to the modern educational concepts and have Beijing characteristics. The policy mandated to “enhance student’s ability
to independently choose test subjects and goals for further studies” which facilitated the expansion of academic freedoms and prioritised knowledge application capabilities, participatory learning, and diverse extracurricular activities. The Plan also instructed schools to “achieve the goal of students in the compulsory education stage to basically master two sports skills and one artistic hobby”. Schools were mandated to carry out sports festivals, art festivals, science and technology festivals and scientific practice activities. The Plan clarified that these mandates were put forward in response to people’s expectations for better education opportunities and provide “rich, diverse, high-quality and innovative” practical courses.

Furthermore, Accelerating the Modernization of Education in the Capital Implementation Plan (2018-2022) published by the Education Work Leading Group of Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China mandated the reform of college entrance examination in Beijing from testing knowledge to testing abilities. It reiterated the mandate for schools to provide students with opportunities to master at least two sports skills and promote at least one hour of daily campus physical exercise. Classroom learning was to be further coordinated with extracurricular practice in support of science education, according to the Implementation Plan for Further Adjusting and Optimizing the Structure and Improving the Use of Educational Funds in Beijing by the General Office of the Beijing Municipal People's Government (2020). The policy encouraged experimental teaching, sports, and arts. Schools were to focus on football, ice and snow sports, Olympic knowledge, and facility improvement. When it came to arts, activities such as opera, ethnic art, elegant arts were to be promoted.

In Shanghai, the government gave priority to developing 21st century education capabilities which meant the focus on innovative learning, pilot education projects, and customised, individualised learning opportunities. For instance, the Outline of Shanghai Municipal Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan 2010-2020 published by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission in 2010 stressed the position of Shanghai as the national experimental zone for comprehensive education reform. The Outline emphasised the core concept of “lifelong development of every student” which according to the policy meant “the ability to actively adapt to and serve economic and social development” and “promote independent innovation”. More specifically, in upper secondary education, the policy instructed schools to “provide students with knowledge and ability to prepare to growth, adulthood and success” by adhering to characteristic development, cultivating student ability for autonomous learning and personality development, strengthening student innovative
abilities, and forming a “high-quality, diversified, distinctive and optional development pattern”. This pattern included creative thinking, independent learning, cooperation, and communication abilities.

Shanghai Education modernisation 2035 that was published in 2019 furthered the reform’s aims at 21st century capabilities by encouraging teachers to develop and apply new teaching methods and innovate teaching scenarios to “cultivate students’ innovative literacy”. Implementation Plan of Shanghai Municipality for Accelerating the Modernization of Education (2020) instructed schools to stimulate students’ interest in learning science and cultivate scientific spirit in education reform. In addition, private schools were encouraged to develop “characterises classes” and provide pluralistic education opportunities with access to diverse curriculum and advanced art classes. Finally, the Plan introduced the “guarantee mechanism of students’ extracurricular education”, including off-campus education and social practice and emphasised the construction of new school sports venues as part of core physical education curriculum reform.

In addition, Outline of Shanghai Municipal Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan 2010-2020 specified “Sunshine Sports” project as key to improve sports provision in schools, including physical health evaluation system, enhancing students’ physique and their understanding of the importance of daily exercise. The Outline also instructed schools to “actively carry out music, art, dance, opera and other artistic activities” to cultivate their aesthetic interests and the ability to appreciate and create beauty.

In Xian, the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Education in Shaanxi Province (2018) declared the student-centred and problem-oriented nature of the education reform and instructed schools to “adhere to teaching students in accordance with their aptitude” and implement new classroom teaching models such as heuristic, interactive, inquiry and cooperative learning. Implementation Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education published in 2019 further emphasised the role of private education in “improving lifelong education system and building a learning society”. Shaanxi Education Modernization (2019) prioritised informatisation and education opening up. To support innovative teaching and the development of 21st century capabilities, the policy provided exceptions to its rigid tuition fee controls for the private schools that were “committed to diversified teaching”. Xi’an Private Primary and Secondary Schools’ Kindergarten Charge Management Measures published by Xi’an Municipal People’s Government in 2020 instructed
such schools to serve as pilot schools and introduce high-quality resources and share advanced education concepts.

In Chengdu, the local government encouraged private schools to introduce innovative pedagogy and provide extracurricular classes to develop education capabilities related to innovative thinking and the ability to compete with students from coastal areas in university and job applications. Chengdu Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) placed all-rounded development of students at the core of the regional education reform. Encouraging Social Forces to Establish Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education (2018) mandated all levels and types of private schools to improve education informatization infrastructure, “gradually realize full coverage of broadband networks and the full popularization of online teaching environments and encourage qualified private schools to build smart education cloud platforms and build smart campuses”. Furthermore, Chengdu Education Modernization 2035 established the regional education innovation community in the Chengdu-Chongqing region.

However, not as much attention was given to practical capability development in Chengdu. Several Measures to Promote the Healthy and Standardized Development of Private Education (2019) included the “insistence on the unity of knowledge and practice” into one of education reform priorities. It also instructed private schools to “organise popular science education, arts and sports education” and “use landscapes, forests and lakes to organise camp education and training institutions”. Chengdu Education Modernization 2035 encouraged schools to cultivate industry knowledge in accordance with the industrial urban planning and development.

Overall, 21st century capabilities and practical capabilities were shown in the interview data analysis to be valued by all actors and cause less contention among the actors of policy implementation network. To sum up, student families, their priorities and education values played a big role in how education capabilities were prioritised and developed in private schools. When parental demand was aligned with local policy priorities, these two conversion factors put enough pressure on the school leadership to deliver on the desired capabilities. On the other hand, when parental demand and local policy priorities did not align, that had a detrimental impact on capability formation as two conversion factors were pulling schools in different directions. In such cases, the flexibility of the school leadership and their ability to balance the policy priorities and parental expectations was the main conversion factor for capability development.
Local policy priorities and school leadership synergy

The second key interaction was shown to occur between local policy priorities and school leadership synergy. To reiterate, school leadership synergy refers to the way management teams in private case schools cooperated among themselves and with the investment group management, including effective communication between Chinese and international staff members. Interview data analysis has indicated that when school leadership cooperated smoothly, it facilitated the ability of a case school to understand, interpret and implement local policy priorities, which in turn promoted education capability development.

“That is to say, even if the school is not the best, they can’t do it. The school is generally scolded. The government relationship is not glorious, and the principal is not glorious”.

Case 18, Chinese principal

“So School is also doing such a thing, that is, to communicate with the local education authorities to see if it can give our international class students to learn, that is to say, to be a registered student in the government system. In fact, from the perspective of the Education Bureau, it doesn’t make much sense. Because learning itself is managed by itself, it is a channel for you to enter the university through the college entrance examination from the domestic middle school curriculum, but the school actively strives for it, in fact, it is mainly for recruiting students”.

Case 13, Chinese principal

When there were cooperation obstacles or misunderstandings, the school would struggle to align its priorities with what was expected by the local government and, as a result, policy priorities would act as a restricting conversion factor for capability development, instead of being a promoting force.

Synergy element one: relationship between school principals

The relationship between Chinese and International principals accounted for a big part of leadership synergy in international private schools. For instance, two campuses of the same brand-name international private school chain were visited during the fieldwork. In the Beijing campus, there seemed to be a solid level of trust and mutual reliance between the two school
leaders while the foreign principal in the Chengdu campus expressed a degree of frustration with the school hierarchy.

“It’s a trust level because you have to really understand before you understand, which means you have to start with the level of trust before you actually understand why. And then the outcome of taking the time to understand why, is the trust becomes earned. But it’s not always easy to explain the (Chinese) context in a way you can understand. But if you know what you’re looking for, then you always see it. But if you don’t trust, you’ve already broken the relationship.”

Case 2, International Principal

“It’s not easy, most of it is very uncomfortable, but I try to keep the structure as western oriented as possible without parents influencing us going up and down on the yoyo on a daily basis. That’s what it is. It’s a yoyo on a daily basis. I just basically said no, I raised my voice to the administrators. I say no a lot. I showed a temper, but quite frankly, they are not stopped with the parents and so either my will or their will break.”

Case 5, International Principal

Effective communication between Chinese and International Principals was an essential factor not only because it ensured a smooth day-to-day operation of the school, but also because it facilitated the understanding and acceptance of relevant policies and improved the school’s relationship with the local authorities. For example, interview data revealed that citizenship capabilities were not a subject which local authorities were willing to compromise on, so government inspections paid close attention to socialist and cultural capabilities and held private schools accountable for any lack of effort in this direction. In private schools where International Principals were well-informed about the policy expectations and communicated effectively with their Chinese counterparts, fewer concerns were expressed by the school leadership.

“I think you got to be careful with that, eventually “Pentagonship” will catch up to you. I think those are challenges, you have a western private system being built in a Chinese environment. You have the Communist Party. The government regulations, they come in any time to go through your curriculum, tell you what to teach or not to teach, what holidays not to celebrate.”
Case 5, International Principal

“I think maybe my personal understanding is still based on ideology, because I am still very worried that if we completely open up, the ideological impact on the concept will be greater, so the state’s ideological control at this level is still very strong, so everything should be marked with Chinese characteristics. You can do it, but first of all, you have to conform to our overall concept. You can’t have any conflict with the will of the state. This is the premise of your existence.”

Case 7, Chinese Principal

As a result, the relationship between a Chinese and an International principal in international private schools was shown to be a key element of school leadership synergy that had an impact on how well the school would communicate with the parents and local authorities. In other words, this relationship, if efficient, accounted for a capability promoting actor-based conversion factor.

**Synergy element two: senior leadership and international staff members**

In addition to the relationship between the senior members of the administrative team, the second element of leadership synergy was *efficient communication between school leadership and international staff members*. In the case of international private schools offering one or several elements of foreign curriculum, there was an issue of finding a balance between cross-cultural and citizenship education. This required a team effort from all staff members, as well as a clear understanding of the expectations. It was the job of the school leadership to communicate the needs of citizenship education effectively to their international teachers. When the leadership realised that and pre-emptively educated its foreign teachers on what was expected of them in the Chinese context, the school seemed to be more successful in delivering both cross-cultural and citizenship capabilities to its students.

“For this, we actually have orientation for some foreign teachers before they come to China, we will also train them, because when you go to a different country, you have to adapt to its politics and its culture, you can’t break the law, you can’t make mistakes, so we tell them, for example, our teachers also are Christians, right? But I tell everyone: sorry, in the classroom you cannot talk about religion, also cannot encourage students to believe in religion, this is China, this is illegal, this is completely impossible.”
Case 1, Chinese Principal

In the majority of cases, avoiding the clash between cross-cultural and citizenship capability development was done through the introduction of an integrated curriculum or integrated courses. The way this was achieved differed on a case-by-case basis, but it typically included an effort of finding similarities between Chinese and foreign curricula. Schools attempted to use a variety of teaching methods and pedagogy while adhering to the national curriculum in terms of topics and content, particularly in social subjects. Integrating “core values” into such curriculum was an important element of promoting citizenship capabilities in schools that focused on preparing students for international education and careers abroad.

“At the same time, we find that if we teach the excellent courses of Chinese core values well in high school, it will be helpful to promote students’ future academic achievements, so we must integrate them with foreign countries, so now we have invented a word called integration course.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Under these circumstances, the ability of the school administration to organise the operation of the school in a manner conducive to the development of both citizenship and cross-cultural capabilities was an important conversion factor. Interviewees understood this and talked about the importance of creating an integrated learning mode where international education concepts, standards and pedagogy were used without infringing on the traditional Chinese education in sensitive subjects such as history and geography.

“We use the international standard, right? And including English math, including English inquiry, English science. So, these are using in international standard, right? So, we are meeting both requirements. For example, Chinese languages, Chinese, culture, history, and geography.”

Case 3, Chinese Principal

“In fact, when I give a lecture to new parents, I will also introduce to them that with the whole strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative, the national strategy, and the role of China on the world stage in the future, it is necessary for such bilingual and bicultural talents, because you are a representative of a big country.”
Case 8, Chinese Principal

These decisions were made by school principals, who talked about teacher development and change in the assessment of teachers when asked about integrated curriculum. There seemed to be an understanding among the interviewees that the required changes in pedagogy and curriculum could not take place without changes in teacher’s habits.

“To what extent do you let children communicate in this class? Is your communication multi-directional or directional? So, we are trying to make teachers get used to this kind of teaching method through these two months, and then we will incorporate it into the evaluation process of teachers.”

Case 6, Chinese Principal

“Including our curriculum design for teachers, if you want your students to explore your knowledge points and your subject content, you need to have a good curriculum design, classroom design, how do you step by step stimulate their interest, stimulate their potential, and guide them, which is also a difficult thing for teachers.”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

To facilitate teacher innovation, private school leadership in some case schools was more flexible about homework and assessment practices, so they encouraged teachers to experiment with different project and assignments. In other cases, these were limited by the resource availability in a particular school.

“When I don’t have an exam, I will do some funny homework that we learn from the UK or the US. Sometimes we do the homework like drawing and the structure how to succeed. It’s satellite handmade model and different types. I want to do some experiments, but we don’t have the Laboratory, I don’t have the lab”.

Case 18, Chinese Principal

Schools with good leadership synergy were recruiting and retaining foreign teachers and providing Chinese teachers with opportunities for professional development that would make them qualified to teach international education concepts. According to the interviewees, recruiting foreign teachers was important not only because they came with qualifications to
teach relevant curricula but also because the presence of international staff created an international environment necessary to develop cross-cultural capabilities.

“Of course, it will need more people from different cultures to form such an environment, so that children can understand it better, but when there are not enough children, we need foreign teachers.”

Case 2, Chinese Principal

By providing staff with more flexibility in both professional development and day-to-day teaching, school leadership facilitated the teaching of international courses and the application of “foreign educational concepts” in private schools. These concepts referred mainly to pedagogy and assessment practices.

“At first, I have had three years of experience in teaching A-levels. ... So, this book is not very suitable. So, the big challenge is this level is very high. Our students cannot connect to it, but I find that if we change it to use IGSC first, because our students already know the chemical terms so it’s easy to help them. This is my first time to teach them IGSC chemistry and I find that it’s very easy to help them understand it because they already know the knowledge concepts.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

“So why do we introduce a lot of foreign educational ideas, because foreign educational ideas, especially Dewey in the United States, right? He is student-centred, and the fundamental point of the school is to focus on the students, what the students need, and what the school should do.”

Case 9, Chinese Principal

Thus, private schools where senior leadership understood the cultural challenges that international staff members encountered in China and communicated expectations effectively, tended to experience less controversy between the focus on cross-cultural and citizenship capabilities. In addition, teacher training opportunities provided by the school leadership in some case schools facilitated the delivery of an integrated curriculum to promote the development of both citizenship and cross-cultural capabilities.
Synergy element three: school leadership and the investment group

The third element of school leadership synergy was the negotiation process with the investment group headquarters. Interviewees agreed that it was the job of a principal to negotiate with the investment group and convince them to meet the financial and non-financial needs of a case school necessary to deliver the resources for capability development.

“For example, our current education computing, TVs, tablets, including some computer multimedia, some of this equipment, the school seems to have a preliminary plan, it seems that next year we are going to invest in information technology, and then make continuous upgrades. This school has this plan anyway, but you also know that the development of our school, its hardware should be based on the investment group and their situation.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

Administrative teams in some private case schools were able to secure funding for practical capability development as a result of successful negotiation between the school leadership and the investment group. For example, in several cases scholarships were established to promote the development of arts and sports. The schools aimed at attracting talented students to raise the prestige of the school and promote the brand image. In doing so, they were creating capabilities for their students to join and participate in competitions, student clubs and extracurricular activities.

“And then there will be three more half scholarships, one for the arts, one for sports and service leadership, and one for mathematics and science.”

Case 8, Chinese Principal

“There are also scholarships for participating in sports activities. For example, you work very hard in physical exercise and have a scholarship. For example, you have participated in sports competitions outside, and you have achieved certain results, which are recognized by our school.”

Case 9, Chinese Principal
Successful negotiation with the investment group also resulted in increased student awareness and facilitated participation in various artistic and sports competitions, including on the international level.

“Robot soccer competitions, Model United Nations debate competitions, then school basketball competitions, students participating in tennis competitions in Shanghai, there are many aspects, of course, our students will also participate in the United States math competition, Waterloo math competition in Canada, they have more opportunities. The investment group will try to create all kinds of conditions for them to participate in these activities.”

Case 9, Chinese Principal

One might assume that all schools that belonged to the same investment group would have similar hardware and yet this was not the case. Campus visits to the schools of the same education group revealed that they might have completely different facilities and focus, depending on the actual local situation and the synergy of the school leadership team. For example, the campus of a large cross-provincial education group in Beijing was different from their campus in Chengdu in terms of both size and facilities, though both were new campuses. Still, schools of the same education “chain” would have a common set of “core values” such as empathy, leadership, or global vision. These core values informed the decisions of the investment group leadership to allocate financial resources to certain activities over others.

“Yes, because our office will have more schools that actually have their own characteristics, they should also have common characteristics. The common characteristics are our character.”

Case 15, Chinese Principal

For example, one investment group had industry engagement as one of its core values which explains its focus on robotics and AI activities.

“We have invested 3 million RMB in the teaching equipment of robots. The amount of investment in teaching equipment in robotics technology is very large. At present, we are focusing on aviation and technology.”

Case 15, Chinese Principal
In another case, an investment group invested in art equipment by purchasing expensive musical instruments and fine arts facilities because creativity was one of the core values. Therefore, when it came to the development of practical capabilities, investment group priorities were an important factor that affected the way financial resources were allocated to the objectives that students were encouraged to pursue.

To summarise, cooperation between international and Chinese principals, school leadership and international staff members, campus administrative team and investment group management accounted for school leadership synergy that served as one of the main actor-based conversion factors in capability formation process.

**Leadership synergy and local policy priorities**

When school leadership cooperated smoothly enough, the interaction between the school and local authorities created policy implementation flexibility that promoted capability formation in private schools.

“The government’s Bureau of Education and the Bureau of Education and Sports, the teachers they send to you, our school has the right to choose. So, the option is that there are two parts. One part is that the government gives new teachers, and we can also do without them. Second, we can keep the teachers in the existing fully equipped schools. At the same time, we can also change the management of our school. At the same time, we can inject the school managers we recruited later”.

Case 15, Chinese principal

“On the side of Northern Shaanxi, the government provides free education and health care for all, so it pays more attention to education. It attaches importance to education and has a need for cooperation, that is to say, it has a need to improve the quality of his teaching. That’s why we have the opportunity to cooperate. Then we also went to the local area to investigate, that is, to see if it meets the conditions for us to do the project. In this way, we will have a judgment after the contact between the two sides. In addition, their government is also more supportive, so we will reach cooperation. In this way, it also depends on the local government’s wait-and-see attitude towards education. Some governments may want me to do the public work by myself, because they may still want to do the public work well for the private sector. How to do it depends on the views of the local government”.
Case 15, Chinese principal

“Generally speaking, the policy of the International Department is not very obvious now, and some of them belong to the grey area. At present, generally speaking, these private international courses have such a saying when they recruit students, which is called unlimited household registration and unlimited area. I have the final say on the score line. You can take it wherever you come from. But in fact, if you don’t have a formal relationship with the education Bureau, you often can’t”.

Case 13, Chinese principal

At the same time, a lack of synergy resulted in misunderstandings, or different understandings, of policy priorities by the school leadership team which created obstacles for capability development. In particular, case-study data analysis has shown that admission, textbook and examination policies were most often misunderstood because of poor leadership synergy and provided a greater degree of policy implementation flexibility when the synergy was present. Specifically, the interviewees revealed that while proximity-based admission was a general rule, local authorities had the freedom to offer exceptional permits for cross-city or cross-provincial admission opportunities to high quality private schools. As a result, some private schools benefited from the access to a broader audience and the opportunity to select students whose needs and expectations matched the resources and curriculum of the school. For example, in Xian one education investment group had an agreement with the government to provide education services to public schools in exchange for greater leeway in its admission requirements.

“The primary school is a project that we cooperate with the people’s government of … County. This is a public school. The projects you saw before our current public school are private, and then we cooperate with real estate developers, and then this is the original school, and then the government hopes to improve its teaching level and hopes that the children will have a broader vision, through the introduction of our group’s educational philosophy”.

Education investment group manager, Xian

In Beijing, some private schools were allowed to enrol students from the district regardless of their families owning a house in the local neighbourhood.
“For private school that you can enrol anybody within the so-called Chaoyang district. And then for public school that you can only enrol somebody within to school the street.”

Case 3, Chinese Principal

However, when school leadership lacked synergy to cooperate efficiently with the local authorities, the school faced increasingly strict policy requirements.

“Now, in fact, if you want to approve the qualification, the policy is relatively strict. But on the other hand, the courses that have been offered, but the real review is not very strict at least in Shanghai, so some provinces and cities are different, some provinces and cities have more concerns about running schools, and the education authorities will be very careful about your course”.

Case 13, Chinese principal

For example, Beijing and Shanghai placed a limit on the number of private schools that may be opened in these markets. This caused difficulties for investment groups that were being pushed out of mature markets to explore emerging markets where education resource shortage created the demand for private education.

“For other cities, it is mainly because the city is developing too fast for educational resource to catch up. They opened up the door for private education, still have the policy that you, as long as you meet the criteria, you can open a school, right? There’s no limit on how many we can provide license for, all right, and Beijing started to limit some of this licensing.”

Case 3, Chinese Principal

“The government wants to protect the public schools. Because if this continues to develop, private schools in coastal cities will surpass public schools in all aspects, and public schools can only get the worst students from junior high schools.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

Another challenge was the policy mandate for private schools to introduce Chinese culture courses and knowledge of Chinese traditional concepts into the teaching of all school subjects. This put additional pressure on international schools that needed to allocate class hours to international curriculum courses in addition to the compulsory national curriculum.
“(the policy) just catered to the requirement of our National Bureau of Education last year, requiring all our private schools to fully open traditional culture courses, which means that our language, math, foreign language, music, PE, and beauty courses should be offered in an all-round way. For example, we used to be able to reduce the appropriate physical education classes. Put it in our foreign IP course, but it’s not possible now.”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

Secondly, the local textbook polices were said to be a challenge for cross-cultural capability development. At the local level, the supervision of teaching materials was outsourced to the local Education Commissions who were responsible for designating relevant textbooks and conducting school inspections. Social subjects, such as history and geography, were under particularly strict supervision as most interviewees pointed out that frequent inspections paid close attention to ensuring that history and geography teaching adhered to the established state narrative. This certainly created additional challenges for private schools that were engaged in international education.

“If we want to have a 100% international science class today, we will bring Cambridge textbooks or Western textbooks from abroad, then we will have teachers and textbooks. But when the government goes to check, they say, “Please tell me what you use and whether you use domestic ones”. Then they will check very strictly. You can’t hide it under the table at this time.”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

“This country is very open. For example, when the Education Bureau comes to check the textbooks, they don’t look at your mathematics, physics, and chemistry. You can learn whatever you want. It’s more open. When the Education Bureau comes to check our textbooks, it checks politics, history, geography.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

“First of all, China manages international textbooks, and what they manage is the part of social study involving humanities, which is the different parts of ideology, so strictly speaking, they will not manage the part of science, that is, mathematics and science, physics, chemistry and biology.”
Case 1, Chinese Principal

Although some interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of flexibility of local policies, others shared an understanding of the necessity for such policies. Specifically, several interviewees claimed that the controls were necessary to ensure students had the freedom to learn about the outside world without being pressured to abandon their national identity. Others claimed that the goal of the local authorities was the supervision of foreign ideas and concepts that entered Chinese private schools with education internationalisation. Thus, when school leadership lacked an understanding the policy priorities, they encountered more challenges in their attempts to develop education capabilities.

“They want to put a tight control. Thoughts and the ideology, right? So that’s always, I’ve witnessed this for 20 years.”

Case 3, Chinese Principal

“But we feel that China is taking this approach, which makes sense. Why? Because in the process of international education, it involves an issue of sovereignty, the issue of educational sovereignty. In fact, every country must firmly control its own education in its own hands. No matter any country, whether you are a socialist country, a capitalist country or any other Islamic country, it must be controlled by itself. Because this involves a fundamental issue of a country, so your international education, so the international education with Chinese characteristics mentioned earlier is actually based on this point.”

Case 9, Chinese Principal

“Then there is also a fact that China is gradually realizing that the cultivation of our so-called mainstream values of Chinese ideology is very important to students, so we also say that, for example, we cannot see American History in Chinese courses. I can open world history, Chinese history, but you cannot use American textbooks. Because in many international events, people’s judgments are different, right?”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Furthermore, while some interviewees claimed that they strictly adhered to the policy, others pointed out that the policy did not mean that foreign textbooks could not be used to prepare students for international examinations in history, geography, and other social sciences, which
would be a restriction of cross-cultural capability development. In such cases, different ways of ensuring that students were equipped for international examinations were used depending on the school. For example, one way of introducing these materials was said to be re-publishing foreign textbooks as domestic materials following a review by a Chinese publishing house.

“The Chinese publishing house will help you to publish here after the review, so this time of course it can be used. So, whether you buy them through import and export companies, we call them satisfactory books, imported books, or books published in China, they all solve the problem of ideological review.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Next, examination policy had an indirect negative impact on practical capability development in private schools that struggled to maintain leadership synergy. International private schools that did not give out state diplomas were exempt from the unified provincial and national examinations, but most private schools still offered students the state certificate which means they were required to participate in state exams.

“I think the college entrance examination model is unable to change itself, the college entrance examination cannot change itself, so what will it inevitably lead to? It will inevitably lead to the study of high school and junior high school for the college entrance examination”.

Case 13, Chinese principal

This put pressure on schools to perform well because state examinations were the basis for public school rankings. These rankings were said to play a very important role in attracting families to the school and could promote or damage the school brand.

“I: The quality of the school, does that mean the quality of the exam results? Or is there something else?

R: Overall, including the overall development of children’s growth, these tests are an important indicator”.

Case 4, Chinese principal

Consequently, some private schools would find themselves in a position similar to many public schools that may face the parental demand, but lack the means to allocate time to sports, crafts
or artistic hobbies to meet such demand. When school leadership lacked synergy and struggled to understand policy priorities, schools were unable to effectively deliver the national curriculum, international courses, and examination preparation in addition to traditional Chinese culture teaching.

“That is to say, we do not advocate that children only do written homework. Well, we will combine some, for example, some extracurricular interests or activities or activity points, that is, to give them as much homework as possible. Of course, some of the traditional ones are because after all, children have to participate in exam-oriented education. That is, we still have to go to the joint examination with the public schools and pass the examination, so the quality of teaching must be guaranteed, so the children’s grades must be paid attention to.”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

However, when school leadership cooperated effectively both internally and with the local authorities, private schools acquired greater flexibility of extracurricular provision. All interviewees mentioned characteristic courses, either included in the tuition fees or paid for by the student families. While the national policy required all private schools to ensure children engaged in sports and arts on a par with public school students for practical capability development, the local authorities were made responsible for specifying the number of hours and the standards for the facilities. Under these circumstances, smooth cooperation within the school leadership team promoted better relationship with the authorities and ensured that private schools had the opportunity to introduce a broad range of extracurriculars based on the local demand, school focus and access to resources in a particular school.

“For example, our country mainly requires that the first and second grades should have art, science, fine arts, sports, and then music, which is required by the state. Then we will join our application courses in the first and second grades.”

Case 15, Chinese Principal

Effective leadership synergy also resulted in better communication with the local authorities during inspections. When school leadership was found to have a good understanding of policy objectives, it was possible for them to communicate well with inspectors and created a feasibility feedback channel when local authorities could receive accurate information of the
progress and challenges that policy created for a school, in addition to giving school leadership advanced warning on the content of inspections.

“You got a third approach, which is where the government comes in and they say the parts they are going to check, which tells you how they’re going to check, (such as) specifically want the Chinese history taught ... We want to see all your Chinese history units.”

Case 2, International Principal

Finally, successful interaction between school leadership and local policy priorities was conducive to cross-cultural capability formation as it created a common understanding of what those capabilities meant for the future of Chinese society. China’s need for a globally minded and internationally competent talent pool to sustain its developmental ambition had become increasingly obvious, and when school leadership understood this, it was possible for the school to receive support from the local governments.

“R: At the 19th National People’s Congress, our Xi Dada said that future talents, if China should be able to produce talents in the future, we must go to the world-class vision.

I: What is the world-class vision?

R: You haven’t contacted foreign teachers, you haven’t been abroad, you have not been out of international courses, you have not even played with foreigners, how do you contact the international vision, how do you have an international vision, right? Like these things, we all have to design them in our daily classes and children’s daily activities.

I: Right, so can we say that the government encourages this kind of internationalization?

R: Of course, if you look at our current policy of “One Belt and One Road”, it is not to encourage internationalization?”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Moreover, local policies specifically promoted internationalisation in certain regions, such as in cities where Free Trade Zones or Special Economic Zones were established. In first-tier cities education internationalisation was seen as a given by the interviewees but in emerging markets, such as Haikou and Xuzhou, interviewees stressed the importance of policy support for international education. Thus, policy implementation flexibility gained through the
interaction with local authorities provided private schools with several competitive advantages that helped them fulfil their role in the education reform by focussing on cross-cultural capability development. These advantages included pilot projects in SEZs, special permits at the local level, support of innovative teaching and pilot education projects in cooperation with the local authorities.

“In fact, the current plan of the free trade port is to plan until 2050. Secretary Shen Xiaoming also mentioned at the press conference of the State Council last week that you plan until 2050. At that time, the people who will work are now in kindergartens. Therefore, we should not only introduce talents, but also train talents. In the process of training, concept of (international school) is particularly suitable.”

Case 8, Chinese Principal

In addition, some private schools also cooperated with local authorities in education research. This was found to be the case for well-established reputable private schools in first-tier cities where the interviewees stressed the importance of having a direct communication channel to policymakers, which provided them with the opportunity to express concerns, offer suggestions and insights. In return, these schools we able to be part of policy-making dialogue.

“For example, we have formed ... an international curriculum alliance with some schools in Pudong. We are the International Curriculum Research Centre under the Pudong Education Bureau as a partner. There are about 10 schools in total, and we will submit something we would like to mention to each school every year. Everyone is interested in doing teaching demonstration research of some join topics. I think the support of the government is one aspect.”

Case 11, Vice-Principal

Thus, leadership synergy was essential for local policy priorities to serve as a positive conversion factor in the capability formation process in private schools. While admission, textbook and examination policies remained a complex issue for private schools to balance, effective synergy among the school international and Chinese leadership, investment group and administrative teams, allowed private schools to engage in efficient teacher training and integrated curriculum development to address these challenges. To summarise, it was argued that parental demand and local policy priorities could align or come into conflict, which determined whether they facilitated or restricted the process of capability formation in selected
case schools. Similarly, school leadership synergy determined whether parental demand was taken into account and how it was balanced with the local policy priorities. A lack of such synergy resulted in the other two conversion factors being capability restrictive instead of capability promoting.

Figure 22. Actor-based conversion factors within the policy implementation network

As illustrated by Figure 22, this section argued that the interaction between student families and school leadership created the communication channel for family expectations to be explicitly known to the leadership which promoted relevant capabilities in private schools as school leadership strived to meet parental demand. On the other hand, private schools engaged in parental education by organising meetings with student families, classes for parents and other events to influence what local families saw as valuable education capabilities. When it came to local policy priorities, this section argued that the feasibility feedback channel for local authorities when policies created implementation challenges for private schools was created, if school leadership demonstrated synergy in communicating with local policymakers through the school party organisations and during regular inspections. In addition, this also facilitated the understanding of policy priorities by the school leadership which accounted for a capability promoting rather than a capability restricting conversion factor.
In cases when school leadership was unable to balance parental demand and local policy priorities, case schools were found to struggle to remain on the market. Due to a high degree of parental engagement in education in China, it was not uncommon for parents to demand oversight and conflict resolution from the authorities through the established communication channels which would put pressure on the local governments to address parental concerns by working with the school, publishing policy interpretations, and increasing supervision of private education. All these interactions were dynamic and susceptible to rapid changes following the shifts in education trends, market demands and values of the actors of policy implementation. To predict these dynamics would be extremely challenging for policymakers which means that capability-enhancing policy design had to allow enough flexibility in its selection of policy instruments. The implication would be that the use of hortatory policy instruments in the national level policy documents throughout the private education reform was essential to communicate national priorities and signal the objectives of capability development in private schools to the local authorities.

6.3. Context-based conversion factors

This section discusses the role of context-based conversion factors in the process of capability formation in selected case schools. Such conversion factors played an important role in capability formation process because all interaction among policy implementation actors happened within certain contexts. In other words, the way education capability formation happened in private schools depended not only on the actors of the policy implementation network but also on the environment in which they operated. Context-based conversion factors are thus argued to be similar for schools operating in similar institutional and socioeconomic contexts, including the same market, history of private education development and similar institutional conditions. Compared to actor-based conversion factors, they are not as dynamic, they that take time to evolve and change following the long-term changes in the local private education environment. In this section, the role of market competition and market demand in how capabilities were prioritised by the case schools will be discussed. Market competition was defined as the competition with both public schools and other private education providers, which influenced, most importantly, the way cross-cultural and practical capabilities were prioritised. Market demand was defined in terms of the needs of local businesses and other academic and social organisations, which were said to push private case schools to focus on practical and 21st century capability development.
Market competition

The first context-based conversion factor that emerged from the interview data analysis is market competition. Market competition refers to the state of public and private education provision in the region where a private school operated. With the increased investment in public education over the past decades, state-funded schools were said to be able to provide high quality education opportunities, particularly in large first-tier cities such as Beijing, Chengdu, and Shanghai. For example, interviewees in Beijing agreed on the strength of the public education system in the capital and pointed out that families would prefer a public school over a private one due to better reputation.

“In fact, it has a lot to do with the characteristics of the city. For example, Beijing is more political, so parents will always choose this kind of high-quality public school first. But just as you asked the other two cities, Shanghai and Shenzhen have changed, there are already some families there that do not want children to study as hard as the college entrance examination.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

“Other cities are not the same (compared to Beijing), that is, private schools are relatively mature, the number is large.”

Case 4, Chinese Principal

The opinions about the Shanghai market differed among the interviewees. Some pointed out that private education in Shanghai enjoyed a much stronger position due to its long history and comparatively large foreign influence in the city. Others, however, said that the government investment in public school facilities over the recent decade has made it difficult for private schools without a large endowment to compete on the market.

“In fact, the real high schools in Shanghai are public schools. Why? Because the government of public schools made a lot of effort more than ten years ago, or even 20 years ago, and invested a lot in all aspects of hardware facilities. For example, Shanghai built 10 new technological schools nearly 20 years ago. At that time, the investment was more than 100 million yuan. Every school was 100 million yuan.”

Case 9, Chinese Principal
Thus, public schools constituted an increasingly tough competitor for private schools. Interview data indicated that private schools saw practical capability development, as well as 21st century capability development, as a competitive advantage that allowed them to offer additional value to students who chose to give up state-funded education. This pushed private education to develop characteristic courses and tailor it to their branding.

“For example, if our school has a golf driving range, then public schools will not do it, because they think it is high consumption, but golf is actually a community sport in many foreign countries, right? It's also cheap.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Interview data analysis has also shown that market competition with public schools as a context-based conversion factor for capability development had a different degree of importance in different localities. For example, mature markets like Beijing and Shanghai faced saturation and, as a result, pressure to innovate and deliver novel education capabilities which meant that private schools were no longer able to attract students in mature markets by simply providing better hardware, such as building a bigger training field. With many strong state-funded players and brand-name private schools of excellent reputation, mature markets pushed private schools to focus on quality education capabilities that would meet the needs of student families.

“I think it’s because they no longer have a shortage of educational resources, right? So, they kind of see that this market is somewhat saturated right now. It’s into the competition phase. So, most likely in about 5 years, there will be consolidation. Some schools may not survive.”

Case 3, Chinese Principal

The market context also played a role in determining how much flexibility school leadership was given to provide fee-paying extracurriculars. For instance, in mature markets, such as Beijing and Shanghai, mechanisms of outsourcing provision of extracurriculars and offering fee paying classes without overstepping the policy had long been established.

“So, in our school, for example, how do I introduce this kind of resource? I find a very good golf coach, and I tell him that you have to give my students classes free of charge. If the students
are good, and interested people are willing to pay for this kind of one-to-one VIP course, you can take the money yourself, and I don’t want your money.”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

Furthermore, the financial constraints of public education provided an avenue for private school to compete on the grounds of characteristics courses. When school leadership had the flexibility over fundraising and budget allocation, they were able to compete on the market successfully.

“Private schools have a great advantage in this respect, and in addition to international education, we also have some art classes and some characteristic classes, which are mainly more flexible, while public schools have a rigid rule that you must do the national curriculum.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

“Public schools can also do this, but public schools are not very motivated to do this. Our private schools have a lot of motivation to do it, because it is the requirement of the market. Then there are (others), not only our private school, but they also pay special attention to students’ sports and art, because this is the comprehensive development of a person, so we will also invest a lot in sports, such as various sports facilities, and the implementation of art.”

Case 9, Chinese Principal

In newer markets, it was not so much the competition with the public sector, as the competition among private schools that promoted capability formation. For example, in Chengdu, the environment was shown to be markedly different from first-tier cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai. When local markets did not have many strong public schools, the niche was increasingly being occupied by new private schools. Although Chengdu had several highly regarded public schools with excellent reputation, the notion of Chengdu as the centre of international education in Western China made it particularly attractive for private education investment groups. As a result, more and more private school campuses have been built in Chengdu, which lead to intense competition among the private schools. This was particularly conducive to cross-cultural capability formation because private schools had to differentiate themselves from the competition to attract students.
“I was principal of (number) high school, a public school that opened in 1998, our reputation as the oldest school in that city helped me to run that school. Even in my short period of time there, two new huge private schools opened, our facilities just could not compete.”

Case 5, Chinese Principal

Furthermore, interview data revealed that market competition was typically a positive conversion factor when it came to cross-cultural capability development. Most international schools were private and, with the ban on new international departments in public schools, internationalisation of Chinese education has mainly become the task for private schools. Thus, market competition pushed private schools to focus on what other market players could not deliver, including access to international education that would differentiate a private school from public education. This is because private schools had both the motivation and the capacity to develop cross-cultural student capabilities in response to parental demand when public education was not equipped for this task.

“But there are more private schools, at least like our private schools, I think we should do what public schools can’t do, for example, public schools can’t do well if they are internationalized, because this is not a criterion for evaluating them, they have no enthusiasm to do it, but our private schools can do internationalization very well, right?”

Case 1, Chinese Principal

One aspect of this push that often came up in the interviews was a stronger focus on foreign language study with access to international staff.

“I just said that English is our main characteristic. Foreign teachers. We can guarantee that children have 8 foreign teacher classes a week. We will not talk about this in other public schools in (city).”

Case 17, Chinese Principal

Another aspect was assistance with international examinations and comprehensive assessment. International schools attempted to survive on the market by ensuring that a significant number of students consistently gained admission to internationally well-ranked universities.
“In fact, I think a truly international school, like Shanghai or other, in fact, its tests must be diverse, I think it should be related, but because our students have a current situation that the level of students is not enough, and now we need to have very good students to go to a very good university. Only in this way can we prove that we are a good place, so we will be relatively weak in this respect.”

Case 18, Chinese Principal

At the same time, public schools remained a viable alternative to families in all markets, so the survival of any newly built private school was not guaranteed. Interview data indicated that private schools did not always have superior facilities or were able to provide a more diverse range of choices compared to state education. Schools that advertised capabilities they were unable to develop risked going bankrupt and losing investors.

“Investors do not know where their money goes, because there are many private schools now, which have liquidity from real estate or other sources, but their original enterprises are depressed, and the funds are forced to be invested in education, because they think that the flow of funds to education is a relatively stable, reliable, and valuable area. As a result, private education in China is now developing in a region where supply exceeds demand.”

Case 18, Investment group manager

“I think we have probably better provision (than other schools in the area), for example, I don’t know many schools that have an indoor swimming pool, but a lot of schools have a running track and field, so I think the answer is yes and no, it just depends.”

Case 8, International Principal

In some regions, state-funded schools were just as well-equipped and resourceful as private schools. For example, a public school in Xian, which had the most advanced facilities seen throughout the fieldwork, including a gym, a massive swimming pool, a theatre, several restaurants, and fully equipped science labs. The school was said to be a special government project, aimed at attracting highly qualified personnel to the newly established Economic Development Zone by providing education opportunities for the children of employees who desired capabilities comparable to Shanghai or Beijing. Although this case was undoubtedly atypical, it served as an indication of public schools becoming a development tool, similar to
private education, which was found to be encouraged to enter developing regions to promote economic growth.

Overall, market competition as context-based conversion factor indicated that when private schools were forced to compete with state education, they were not always able to provide better education capabilities. In addition, the competition with other private schools was said to be growing, particularly for newly established private schools. This put pressure on private school leadership to negotiate with the investment group and the local authorities for resources and preferential policies, which meant that school leadership synergy once again was shown to be a key actor-based conversion factor that would, if efficient, promote capability formation in the context of market competition.

Market demand

The second context-based conversion factor that played a role in capability formation in private schools was *market demand for workers qualified for employment in modern companies, multicultural environments and with advanced technologies*. This market demand was said to come from both international businesses employing staff members in China and domestic corporations, including governmental and state-owned organisations. First, Chinese organisations were said to be keen on academic and business communication with the international community, aligning with the parental demand for cross-cultural capabilities. Thus, private schools reacted to this socioeconomic trend by investing in resources for the formation of these capabilities.

“So, in fact, including one of my college classmates, who is now teaching English at Dalian University of Technology, he told me last summer vacation that they actually received a lot of demand, that is to say, they need this kind of compound talents, who know English and have an additional major, and at the same time have this kind of multicultural adaptability. He said that there was a special shortage.”

Case 8, Chinese Principal

“(The city) has 31 German corporations and they employ a great deal of the population here in the city. So, if your son or daughter becomes fluent enough in English, there’s immediately a very close and personal ability to get in with one of these companies which has a certain appeal.”
Case 13, International Principal

This conversion factor was said to play a bigger role in schools that operated campuses in newly developing city districts or Special Economic Zones. This is because such development projects attracted businesses, real estate developers and international investment, which created a demand for schools that would cater to the local needs. Despite the pandemic slowing down these market trends, the interviews revealed that the demand for international education within the newly developing urban areas in China was increasing. As a result, some interviewees believed that the market for international education had the potential for massive growth in the future.

“We cannot lose our brains. We can’t lose our best minds of the next generation. How do we keep them? Every report that I read is that China is planning on building 500 international schools in the next five years. And that won’t even be enough to even scratch the surface of what’s needed with 1.5 billion people on the horizon.”

Case 13, Investment group manager

In addition to cross-cultural capabilities, interviewees stressed the importance of market demand for practical and 21st century capabilities. This element was more prominent in emergent private education markets such as Xian, Xuzhou, and Hefei, where private schools were shown to adopt a specialty based on the local industry focus.

“Many of the children in our school ... are very close to the airport, so there are quite a number of children whose family background is an aviation practitioner, and parents may work in the airport. So, we choose the aviation characteristic course as our school’s course because of family education background, because a considerable number of our children, some of the family members are engaged in work, our course is aviation, including our department construction, as well as some robots in science and technology.”

Case 15, Chinese Principal

Even in mature markets the school leadership could not afford to overlook the market demand. In particular, this was due to the demand for 21st century capabilities that was very evident in first-tier cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai.
“Our private schools have a lot of motivation to do it, because it is the requirement of the market. Also pay special attention to students’ sports and art, because this is the comprehensive development of a person, so we will also invest a lot in sports, such as various sports facilities, and the implementation of art. So, in this way, you make education more suitable for the future development. In fact, the future education is mainly aimed at the cultivation of people, because we have emotions. How can we defeat robots? We wonder, don’t we?”

Case 9, Chinese Principal

Figure 23. Actor-based conversion factors and context-based conversion factors within the policy implementation network

Overall, context-based conversion factors were said to play a role in pushing private schools to follow through on their marketing promises and utilise resources for capability development. Although market realities were different in different tier cities, all interviews demonstrated the importance of market demand and market competition as conversion factors for capability development. Figure 23 puts the interaction of actor-based conversion factors within the policy implementation network in the context of market competition and market demand to account for the context-based conversion factors and emphasise the importance of local contextual
circumstances in affecting the priorities of policy implementation actors and promoting accountability.

Thus, this section argued that increasingly tough competition with public schools for attracting good students meant that private schools had to offer them valuable education capabilities worth giving up state-provided free education. The main group of such capabilities were cross-cultural capabilities because private education possessed several competitive advantages in this regard, including access to more overseas resources, more flexibility in sourcing foreign staff and the opportunity to offer international curricula. Second, it was argued that in emerging private education markets practical capability development was seen as a competitive advantage due to market demand for this kind of talents from the employers of students’ parents. In more saturated and mature markets private schools prioritised 21st century capability development to keep up with market trends and satisfy the market demand. In all cases, interviewees felt their school had to offer unique education opportunities to build or maintain their brand and succeed on the market in the context of increasing competition and demand.

6.4. Chapter summary

To summarize, this chapter formulated an answer to the second research question which was asking “In what way has local interpretation and implementation of the private education reform affected the process of capability formation in Chinese private schools?”

First, it elaborated on the concept of policy implementation network and argued that it provides an insight into the private education reform policy implementation process by drawing attention to its dynamic and actor-based nature. It was argued that school leadership, student families and local authorities all played a role in how private education reform was being interpreted and what kind of capabilities were prioritised and to what extent. In addition to the administration team of the campus, school leadership in Chinese private schools was shown to include the managers of the education investment group that owned a school chain, whose priorities played a big role in how the school responded to policy imperatives. Second, local governments in China were argued to have acquired considerable authority over the process of national policy interpretation due to the consistent education decentralisation policies over the past four decades. Third, student families were shown to play a key role in how a school implemented private education reform due to a high degree of parental engagement in education in China, as well as the ability of student families to put pressure on school leadership
by either pushing a school off the market by taking their tuition fees to the competitors or supporting its viability by purchasing additional education services. It was then argued that the interactions among the actors of the policy implementation network accounted for the actor-based conversion factors promoting or obstructing the process of capability formation.

The second section explored these interactions by defining parental demand, local policy priorities and school leadership synergy as key actor-based conversion factors. Interview data indicated that while parental demand for all four types of capabilities targeted by the private education reform was present, the focus and priorities of student families differed depending on the geographical location and the type of private school. The section further argued that when parental demand aligned with local policy priorities, the combined weight of two conversion factors strengthened school accountability for capability formation and put pressure on the school leadership to deliver required capabilities. Cross-cultural and citizenship capabilities were the focus of this section as the misalignment of priorities was shown to be rare in case of practical and 21\textsuperscript{st} century capability formation. It was suggested that when parental demand did not align with local policy priorities, both turned into negative conversion factors restricting the process of capability formation due to controversial expectations. Thus, school leadership synergy was the decisive actor-based conversion factor in alleviating these negative conversion factors by means of parental education and negotiation with the local authorities.

School leadership synergy as a major actor-based conversion factor referred to the cooperation among private school administrative teams, including Chinese and foreign administrators in international schools and investment group management in private schools that belonged to a chain. Case-study data analysis has shown that when school leadership lacked synergy, the school had a much harder time understanding, interpreting, and implementing local policy priorities. The lack of leadership synergy also prevented the school from acting efficiently on policy imperatives and turned local policy priorities into a negative conversion factor in capability formation. Interview data indicated that admission, textbook, and examination policies that reflected local government priorities were most often seen as a challenge for capability formation when misunderstood by the school leadership. On the other hand, in schools where leadership demonstrated greater synergy, the interaction between school leadership and local authorities facilitated policy understanding and implementation. The second section of this chapter illustrated this argument by focusing on the issue of teacher
training and the integrated curriculum that was being developed in many private schools in China. It was argued that in cases when school leadership cooperated effectively, they managed to avoid overstepping policy boundaries by innovating their curriculum to incorporate both policy priorities and parental expectations and training their staff to develop desired capabilities.

The third section of this chapter discussed the role of context-based conversion factors, such as market competition and market demand. Market competition referred to the state of public and private education provision in local areas. Across all cases, it was clear that when a school faced intense market competition, it served as a positive conversion factor for capability formation, because it pushed school leadership to innovate and enforced accountability. However, the types of capabilities promoted by market competition varied by location. In mature markets, such as Beijing and Shanghai, public schools were said to be well-funded and capable of providing excellent education opportunities. To differentiate themselves, private schools were pushed to focus on cross-cultural capabilities to take advantage of the policy restrictions on international divisions of public schools. In newer markets, such as Chengdu and Xian, practical capabilities and 21st century capabilities were shown to be promoted by market competition, in addition to cross-cultural capabilities. This was because new private education markets lacked saturation and were susceptible to quick changes of the market players. Under these circumstances, parental demand was also more fluid and dynamic than in older markets. As a result, school leadership synergy was essential for a private school to survive the intense competition of the Chinese private education market by delivering on the required education capabilities.

The second context-based conversion factor addressed by this chapter was market demand. Market demand referred to the needs of local businesses, social, academic organisations, and enterprises. On the one hand, this factor influenced parental demand as student family members employed by local companies tended to perceive relevant industry skills as necessary for their children to find future employment. On the other hand, it also had an impact on the policy priorities of the local governments as they tended to take market demand into consideration. It was then argued that private schools operating in Special Economic Zones, Development Zones or newly built city districts were given more policy implementation flexibility by the local authorities due to the market demand for specific capabilities.
Discussion

This research focussed on the analysis of Chinese private education reform through the lens of the capability approach and addressed two main research questions. The first research question explored the aims of the ongoing private education reforms, specifically concerning private primary and secondary education in China. The analysis of national level policy documents with the help of the policy instruments framework allowed conceptualising private education reform as a capability-enhancing policy that aimed at expanding the freedom, in the sense of capability, of Chinese families to pursue education opportunities that they considered valuable. The mix of mandates, inducements, capacity-building, system-changing and hortatory policy instruments was argued to aim at diversification, viability, and flexibility of interpretation of the educational choices that private schools were supposed to offer to the students.

The second research question focussed on examining the role of local policy interpretation and implementation in the process of capability formation in selected case-schools. It was argued that the decentralised nature of private education governance in China and the vagueness of national level policy formulation provided space for a variety of policy interpretations, which accounted for the diverse capability priorities at the case level. Furthermore, it allowed for the operation of a mix of actor-based and context-based conversion factors unique to each case school, which influenced the way private schools delivered target capabilities, including practical capabilities, cross-cultural capabilities, citizenship capabilities and 21st century capabilities. Specifically, the actor-based conversion factors, such as parental demand, leadership synergy and local policy priorities, which were conceptualised through the notion of the policy implementation network, consisting of local authorities, school leadership and student families interacting within the context of local private education market conditions.

The role of policy priorities was argued to be both capability promoting and capability restricting, depending on the interaction among the conversion factors within the policy implementation network, in addition to education market competition and market demand. Thus, this research drew attention to the conceptual gap in the capability approach framework, which does not seem to pay sufficient attention to the interaction among the conversion factors and the impact such interaction has on the process of capability formation. This discussion first goes into detail on how the findings contribute to further conceptual development of the capability approach by focussing on what can be learned about the process of capability formation from the insights of the Chinese private education reform. It focusses on enhancing the theoretical understanding of how the interaction among various conversion factors affects
capability formation, followed by the assessment of the strengths and limitations that the use of capability approach presents for education policy researchers. Subsequently, the discussion addresses the bigger question of the role private education can play in education system reforms by exploring the implications of the findings for the issues of education equity, school choice and education policy implementation.

Further conceptualisation of the capability formation process

The findings supported the previously established notion that while resources are an essential part of the capability formation process, there is no linear correlation between the number of resources and the speed or scope of capability development (Robeyns, 2021) and that their actual use affected how capabilities were formed (Solomon, 2018; Yizengaw and Agegnehu, 2021). This thesis focused on the conversion factors that were said to determine both the investment into school resources and capability priorities in selected private schools, as illustrated by Figure 24. These conversion factors, divided into actor-based and context-based, interacted differently in different case schools, depending on the priorities of the actors of policy implementation and the local market conditions. While the relationship between conversion factors, resources and capabilities tends to take the central stage in capability literature (Mabsout, 2011; Kelleher, 2015; Robeyns, 2017; Vecchio and Martens, 2021; Azmoodeh et al., 2022), all types of conversion factors are seen as a bridge between resources and capabilities (Sen, 1995, p.33), lacking specific conceptualisation of how exactly they work and to what extent the same conversion factor may facilitate or restrict different capabilities as part of a unique mix (Comim et al., 2018). Instead, the capability approach tends to consider conversion factors from the perspective of inequality (Nambiar, 2013; Hobson, 2018; Grabowska, 2021) with the aim to account for the differences in capabilities of people in possession of similar resources (Sen, 1995) or to provide suggestions on narrowing social inequalities (Egdell and McQuaid, 2016; Bößler, 2021). Sen (1995; 2005) explained that conversion factors are characteristics that could affect the functionings due to their role in converting resources into capabilities, since different individuals make different use of available resources. In case of individual conversion factors, little explanation is necessary: the fact that a physically disabled person has a harder time achieving the functioning of mobility compared to a fully abled person is self-explanatory. However, when it comes to social conversion factors, little elaboration exists on their specific roles in the capability formation process (Binder and Coad, 2011). Comim et al. (2018, p.233) had previously pointed out this
conceptual flaw by saying that “it is unclear how the conversion factors combine and interact with each other” within the framework of the capability approach.

Figure 24. The role of conversion factors in capability formation process in selected private schools

- The interaction within the mix of conversion factors plays a greater role in capability formation than each independent conversion factor
- Dynamic interaction is possible in the context of decentralised private education governance and policy vagueness at the level of national policy formulation
- Accountability among the actors of policy implementation is conducive to capability formation

This research argued that in the context of education policy implementation in selected Chinese private schools, such interaction involved parental demand, leadership synergy and local policy priorities. These actor-based conversion factors were conceptualised within the notion of policy implementation network, as findings indicated that the vagueness of the private education reform at the level of policy formulation and agenda setting allowed for a variety of local policy interpretations and provided space for the actors of policy implementation network to interact in the diverse contexts of a decentralised education system. While the process of policy decentralisation in China has been well documented (Lewin and Hui, 1989; Law, 2002; Mok,
2005; Sun, 2010), its role in private education development has generally been linked to greater commercialisation and marketisation (Ngok, 2007; Liu, 2009). This research drew attention to the role of decentralised private education governance in reform policy implementation and the creation of policy implementation networks at the case level, which included school leadership, local authorities, and student families. Within the debate about top-down and bottom-up policy implementation (Matland, 1995; Balamurugan, 2021), the analysis of the Chinese private education reform appeared to align with the idea that a lack of freedom to adapt policies to the local conditions increases the likelihood of policy failure (Palumbo et al., 1984; Viennet and Pont, 2017) due to the differences in parental expectations, school leadership synergy and education market conditions observed in different regions of China. Figure 24 shows how these findings fit into the conceptual framework of the capability approach by expanding our understanding of how conversion factors operated within the context of private education policy implementation in selected case schools.

In detail, previous research has shown that parental involvement in education could improve learning outcomes (Park et al., 2011; Hunter and Clarke, 2020), facilitate diversified school choices (MacKenzie, Hayden and Thompson, 2003; Sliwka and Istance, 2006), and motivate student achievement (Hill, 2022). On the other hand, a high degree of parental involvement in schooling could result in the lack of communication or distant relationships with schools (Ule et. al, 2015; Gokturk and Dinckal, 2018), creating a challenge for education policymakers by producing increasingly diverse demands (Sliwka and Istance, 2006). This research demonstrated that while parental expectations and involvement in selected private schools varied on a case-by-case basis, it could play both a promoting or a restricting role in policy implementation, depending on whether parental priorities aligned with the priorities of school leadership and local authorities. Furthermore, when it comes specifically to the analysis of education, Unterhalter (2003b) argued that, although the application of the capability approach framework proved fruitful, Sen failed to consider the complexity of the school setting, specifically the differences between capability formation process in different modes and forms of schooling. For instance, parental demand played a more prominent role in Chinese private schools because parents were able to put pressure on the school leadership to deliver on the desired capabilities.

Under these circumstances, school leadership synergy was shown to play a key role in balancing parental demand and local policy priorities, which supports recent research on the
importance of school leadership in education policy implementation (Szeto, 2020; Gallagher, 2021). Conceived through the lens of a network, social relationships had been argued to restrict the agency of network actors (Hamilton, 2011), which appeared to be true for private school leaders, who had to balance local policy priorities with parental expectations in selected case schools. Scholars had previously drawn attention to conflicting values, principles and desires influencing policy interpretation in schools (Ball, Maguire, and Braun, 2012; Flessa, 2012), principals orchestrating school transformations (Bryk et. al, 2010) and management adjusting their work to the context of policy implementation (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, 2008) while delivering radical reforms (Gunter and Forrester, 2009). In this research, school leadership synergy was defined as effective collaboration among senior administrators of private schools and education investment groups, which was an essential actor-based conversion factor in the process of capability formation in selected private schools. In particular, the findings emphasised the challenges of cross-cultural communication in international schools and the defining role of investment managers in determining private school values, marketing strategy and access to resources. While leadership issues in international schools are well-researched (Magno, 2013; Sapaprot et al., 2018; Pan, 2020), the operation of education investment groups in China is a newly emerging research topic (Day et al., 2014) with most relevant literature available only in Mandarin (Ming, 2009; Zhang, 2019; Zhang and Zhu, 2022). This research has demonstrated that private schools of the same education investment group could have a very different synergy with investment managers, which would facilitate or restrict the diversification of education opportunities in selected case schools.

However, the findings also drew attention to the accountability of private education providers that was established within the policy implementation networks. Specifically, two factors were shown to create accountability in the implementation of the Chinese private education reform in selected private schools: state supervision and parental demand. While it is often argued that market mechanisms replace state involvement in education with increasing privatisation (Ndimande and Lubienks, 2017; Dovemark et al., 2018; Hogan and Thompson, 2020), this was not entirely the case in China. This research argued that private education reform involved a controlled diversification of the education system with marketisation under state supervision, including frequent inspections, detailed financial reports on private investment, and specific local policies regulating the autonomy of private schools. Thus, private school leadership in selected private schools was found to be accountable to the local authorities through multiple
supervision channels, emphasising the role of the state in education privatisation and marketisation (Rönnberg, 2011; Hogan and Thompson, 2020).

Furthermore, previous research on private school accountability tended to focus on the extent to which private schools can be held accountable when in receipt of public funds (McTighe, 2005; Finn et al., 2009; Turati et al., 2017; Garnett, 2021) while not as much research exists on the role of parental demand in ensuring private school accountability (Garnett, 2021; Xie, 2022). In the Chinese context, parental expectations of private education services were argued to put pressure on school leadership to deliver on the marketing promises and provide the desired educational opportunities or risk reputational damage, being reported to the authorities or losing the students. Due to specific local government supervision policies in China, the role of parents in ensuring private school accountability was shown to go beyond market accountability or “parents as consumers” (Apple, 2006) towards the notion of an accountability triangle, adding the relationship between the government and student families to bureaucratic and market accountability of the school leadership (Xie, 2022).

To summarise, the separation of conversion factors into personal, social, and environmental conversion factors (Sen, 2001; Robeyns, 2005; Crocker and Robeyns, 2009) without addressing the question of how these different factors interact with each other creates a conceptual vacuum around different groups of conversion factors, which results in oversimplification of the policy implementation context. Case findings indicated that conversion factors, are not, in fact, independent entities and that the interaction among them accounts for the difference in the priorities given to the formation of education capabilities targeted by the private education reform. Thus, the interaction among different conversion factors may have a bigger impact on capability formation than the nature of particular conversion factors. Provided that the capability approach is intended as a conceptual framework rather than a theory, it is possible that Sen’s lack of attention to the interaction among the conversion factors is intended to incorporate a variety of interaction contexts and issues under consideration. However, it has become clear that further conceptualisation of the nature of conversion factors and their role in the capability formation process is necessary for capability approach to serve as an effective analytical framework in qualitative studies. Furthermore, research is needed to further explore the extent to which different mixes of conversion factors and the interaction between them affects the process of capability formation.
The strengths and limitations of the capability approach in education policy research

One of the conceptual strengths that the use of the capability approach can create for education research is that it provides a useful lens to evaluate the challenges of socially just education provision discussed at the beginning of this thesis. This is because the capability approach facilitates more “non-ideal, empirically informed, ‘directly useful’ theories” for conceptualising socially just education that are easier to translate into practice (Robeyns, 2017, p.152). This research has shown that policy implementation process may be a complex, multifaceted and context-dependent phenomenon where policy targets (i.e. capabilities) are being interpreted in prioritized as an outcome of multiple interactions within distinct mixes of actor-based and context-based conversion factors. Thus, “trade-offs between different values, power imbalances between different social groups, unintended consequences of justice-enhancing interventions and policies, or interests of individuals and groups that may conflict with concerns for justice” (Robeyns, 2017, p.152) must be considered in policy evaluation research. According to Robeyns (ibid), transcendental\textsuperscript{64} approaches to social justice may not be equipped to address these issues as mainstream philosophical literature may be highly abstract and “rather detached from questions about policy design or political feasibility”. As Sen (2010, p.245) pointed out, “the grand partition between the “just” and the “non-just,” which is what a theory of transcendental justice yields, would leave a society on the “non-just” side even after all the feasible reforms that are accepted as being justice-enhancing have been carried out”. Sen (ibid) further exemplified his proposition by explaining that reforming a system of health insurance in the United States in way that would enhance the capability of tens of millions of Americans to access medical care would be an advancement of justice, but it would not ultimately make an American society “just”. In addition, Drydyk (2012, p.27) pointed out that a focus on the ideal structures for a just society may be counter-productive, because “the ‘equal’ exchange of labour for a basket of goods produced by equivalent labour still treats people unequally if they have different needs”. These needs may be determined not only by social arrangements and objective circumstances but also by individual values. Yet when policies are evaluated based on their impact on individuals’ capabilities to lead the lives they value, it may offer a more straightforward approach to operationalise abstract concepts of social justice into practical policy evaluation research.

\textsuperscript{64} “Transcendental” theories of justice, according to Sen (2010, p.243), focus on identifying perfectly just societal arrangements.
With this in mind, the second strength of the capability approach as a theoretical framework for education policy research is its ability to incorporate the values, priorities and negotiations that affect education policy implementation into the framework of analysis. Tikly and Barrett (2011, p.3) argued that within the capability approach, education “quality” can be “understood in relation to the extent to which it fosters key capabilities that individuals, communities and society in general have reason to value”. This approach emphasizes individual agency and the importance of people having the freedom to make choices that align with their values and aspirations, which may account for the challenges and inconsistencies of education policy implementation. Applied to policy evaluation, it presupposes that “policy should be designed so that it enables each individual in society to live with dignity” (Taylor, 2020, p.314). Tikly and Barrett (2011, p.12) further argued that a focus on capabilities in policy evaluations means “paying attention not only to the means for realising a quality education but to the cultural norms and values that either enable or stifle the development of these capabilities for different groups of disadvantaged learners”. This is because the concept of capability formation goes beyond the simple focus on education resources in order to emphasise the need for education policies which enhance students’ well-being by providing educational choices that are not only feasible, but also valued by those who they affect. For instance, this research has indicated that implementing a capability-enhancing private education reform may provide millions of students in China with an avenue to pursue diversified education opportunities that they value (such as international, athletic, or artistic education) which is not necessarily feasible in public schools. Yet it does not mean that these policies would make the Chinese education system comprehensively “just” since practical investigations of various ways to advance justice (or reduce the existing injustice) in society require “comparative judgments about justice to the extent they can be sensibly made” (Sen, 2010, p.244). Thus, the capability approach draws attention to the fact that equal distribution of primary goods (i.e. education resources) may be an inadequate standard for policy evaluation. It argues that not only inequalities of well-being freedom but also inequalities of agency freedom must be considered when issues of social justice are concerned, as both individual and social aspects of agency can be incorporated into the framework of capability research (Claassen, Wijsgerige Ethiek, & OFR - Ethics Institute, 2017, p.1297).

Having said that, the application of the capability approach framework to the analysis of Chinese private education reform implementation also suggested the notion that private schools provide diverse education opportunities simply due to the wealth of resources (Graddy and
Stevens, 2005; Miranda et al., 2010) to be debatable. The selected case schools were found to uniformly invest in basic resources yet vary according to their prioritised education capabilities when it came to more advanced resources, such as international teaching staff, specific arts and crafts or niche sport facilities. In first-tier Chinese cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, private schools were argued to be in competition with a fully equipped public education sector, which was said to provide comparable, if not superior, education facilities. Under these circumstances, private schools were found to attempt to innovate and diversify the educational choices they provided, instead of investing in larger quantities of resources, such as bigger training grounds, more classrooms, books, or computers. In second-tier cities, such as Chengdu and Xian, the resource gap between public and private schools was more profound, but education investment groups were said to be pragmatic about resource investment, and school resources appeared to be good indicators of what capabilities were the focus of a particular case school. These findings aligned with the understanding that no consistent relationship necessarily existed between educational choices and school resources (Hanushek et al., 1996; Hanushek, 1997; Davies and Davies, 2014) and that factors like family background of students who attend private schools (Yang and Kayaardi, 2004; Goldring and Phillips, 2008), and the parental expectations may play a more important role in determining the opportunities of private school students (Gruijters, Alcott and Rose, 2021).

When it comes to the challenges that the application of the capability approach to education policy analysis can create, the first is reconciling the key role of values in capability formation process with “the fact that all education is inherently value-laden and values forming” (Vaughan and Walker, 2012, p.495). On the one hand, the capability approach claims that individual values lie at the core of capability priorities (Sen, 1985; Burchardt, 2009) and they determine the choices people make when pursuing education functionings (Cockerill, 2014). On the other hand, education is said to have the capacity to influence, change or create student values (Brighouse and Swift, 2003; Roesgaard, 2016; O'Flaherty et al., 2018). Citizenship education, in particular, has been studied from a policy perspective (Thornberg and Öguz, 2016; Banks 2017; Veugelers, 2021) to question whether education could promote citizenship development (Nussbaum, 1998). In this research, the focus on conversion factors in studying the formation of non-measurable, or hardly measurable, capabilities, such as citizenship capabilities, pointed towards a clear distinction between the choices that private schools created for their students and the functionings that students could achieve, which means that the freedom to form agency goals may be incorporated into the framework of the capability
approach in addition to agency freedom (Burchardt, 2009). Thus, the capability approach suggests a holistic view of education policy targets, acknowledging that education policymaking is not only about acquiring skills but also about fostering personal development and social engagement and enabling “an individual to learn and to develop their values and agency goals, rather than something that only transmits or reproduces particular values” (Vaughan and Walker, 2012, p.496). However, this argument indicates that while the capability approach may provide a valuable evaluative framework for education policy research, it offers less specific guidance on how to design and implement effective education policies.

Specifically, while the focus on expanding students’ freedoms to pursue education they consider valuable can result in “more concrete justice enhancing policy proposals” (Robeyns, 2017, p.159), it is unclear how to determine what different individuals value at a particular time and whose values should be considered. Tikly and Barrett (2011, p.9) suggested that our understanding of education quality “must draw on an appropriate informational base concerning the kinds of capabilities that learners, parents, communities and governments have reason to value”, which implies that such comprehensive information base exists. Yet assessing capabilities (and values) in a comprehensive manner requires collecting data on various dimensions of people's lives, which can be resource-intensive and challenging because “values are of course contested” (Tikly and Barrett, 2011, p.12). As Drydyk (2012, p.27) illustrated, “a society with a fully protected array of political liberties is, for liberals, more just than one in which only a few liberties are poorly protected; a society in which every person enjoys fair equal opportunity is for Rawlsians more just than one in which only a few people do”. In other words, some people may value access to free state-funded education regardless of social backgrounds, economic resources and political or religious affiliations of student families while others would have reason to value religious schools over secular education and special-needs or individualised curriculum over a universally enforced one.

As Robeyns (2017, p.154) pointed out, the notion of “having reason to value” remains embryonic in the capability approach and little conceptual development has been done to see whether there is a “a solid unified rationale on the basis of which a full account of justice could be developed”. Under these circumstances, the emphasis on a wide range of capabilities might lead to trade-offs in policy decisions, focusing on fostering certain capabilities in education might come at the expense of others, making it challenging to make practical policy choices. Sen (2010, p.244), however, argued that a universal account of capabilities may not be
necessary or sufficient to “be able to compare different distributions of capabilities in judging the advantages that different persons have” or pursuing comparative questions. In his view, the capability approach is flexible and can be applied to diverse cultural, social, and economic contexts, which makes it suitable for analysing education policies across different countries and communities. Thus, although emphasizing human agency and the importance of enhancing individuals’ freedom to make valued choices can be a valuable tool for analysing and assessing policies in terms of social justice, there are distinct conceptual boundaries when it comes to applying the capability approach to policy formulation and development.

When it comes to the specific limitations of this thesis, the main one is its sole focus on education capabilities targeted by the private education reform. This limit was intentional to make the research design consistent and replicable, as well as to make the scope of data analysis embraceable for a single researcher. While conducting interviews in a manner targeting both the capabilities outside of the framework of the private education reform and the capabilities prioritised by policymakers might have offered a more comprehensive picture, the aim of this thesis was to analyse how capabilities were formed in the process of policy interpretation and implementation. Thus, education capabilities that might have been delivered by private schools but not targeted by the private education reform policies fell outside the scope of this work. Finally, this research only focussed on the process of capability formation, which means specifically on the role of conversion factors in the use of private school resources and the creation of diversified education choices for Chinese families. It did not explore the extent to which these choices were acted upon or realised into functionings by the students attending the selected private schools. This could be an avenue of future research with interviews being conducted with private school students and their families to evaluate the extent to which they pursue capabilities targeted by policymakers and the individual conversion factors that may impact their ability to do so.

The implications for the role of private schools in education system reforms

This thesis argued that the main role of private education in Chinese education reforms has been diversification of education opportunities available to Chinese families. Case-study data indicated that private schools were not always seen as superior to public education and were not the first choice for everyone in China. Instead, they were said to be chosen by the families seeking education opportunities unavailable in public schools, such as arts or sports-oriented education, access to an international curriculum or a particular industry focus. This means that
private schools, while remaining largely supplemental to state education provision, played an important role in education system reforms in China by catering to the growing proportion of the Chinese population with unique or particular educational needs. Thus, the findings indicated that private actors in the education system may not necessarily be better, or worse, than public institutions, just that they are different (Walford, 2005; Goldring and Phillips, 2008; Egalite, 2016).

Yet if private schools are to contribute to more comprehensive education provision, the insights from the Chinese experience drew attention to two main challenges policymakers faced when relying on private schools as a supplement to state education. The first issue was the challenge of managing the failure of market mechanisms, which situates the findings within the research of market-driven education provision (Scott, 2011; Boyask, 2020; Kerr and Ainscow, 2022). On the one hand, some scholars previously argued that education diversification is achieved mainly by introducing school choice and marketisation of the education system (Chubb and Moe, 1988; Whitty and Power, 2000; Boyd, 2007). Marketisation was claimed to typically accompany education privatisation (Marginson, 1993; Hogan and Thompson, 2020) resulting in more cost-effective schools (DeAngelis, 2021) and more success in developing individualised education opportunities for the students (Chowdhury and Synthia, 2021). Furthermore, a detailed study by Belfield and Levin (2005, p.141) demonstrated “consistent evidence of a link between competition (choice) and education quality”. The competition between public and private education providers, specifically, was found to increase the quality of education provision (Ghandour, 2021). Thus, private education research has found evidence of education diversification being a positive outcome of privatisation, which the findings of this research also support. While this thesis did not attempt to measure the quality of education opportunities provided by the selected private schools, the findings indicated that market competition could promote the diversification of educational choices by influencing the priorities of the school leadership, local authorities, and student families.

On the other hand, the influence of market mechanisms on private education development was previously questioned (Aurini and Quirke, 2011), as public policies were said to be more effective in producing diversified education options than market mechanisms (Lubienski, 2006; Balsera, 2016). This is because introducing private actors into education systems was shown to cause issues of low-quality education in the absence of appropriate rules for school competition (Wennström, 2020), with market failures resulting in rent-seeking behaviour of
private education providers (Baum et al., 2018) and contributing to the emergence of “shadow education” (Dawson, 2010). The Chinese private education system has also been susceptible to market failures (Zhang, 2016; Zhou, 2019) with policymakers introducing greater standardisation to manage the unintended consequences of increased diversity of private education provision (Zhou and Zhong, 2018). This research indicated that, in the context of decentralised private education governance in China, the management of market failures within the private education market was complicated by the diversity of local regulations.

China is well-known for policy flexibility and experimentation at the local levels of governance (Corne, 2002; Heilmann, 2008; Lim, 2017), which can be conceptualised as “experimentation under hierarchy” (Heilmann, 2008, p.2; Tsai and Dean, 2014). Previous research argued that local policy actors in China had the capacity to generate innovative policy options through experimental education reforms (Han and Fu, 2022) while operating in the context of ambiguous reform boundaries (Florini et al., 2012). However, the analysis of national level policy documents in this research indicated that the central government was putting in place revised regulations and mandating local governments to remove outdated practices, minimise the obstacles for private education development and guarantee the legal rights of private education providers. Thus, flexibility of policy interpretation, while in theory conducive to more effective policy implementation based on context-specific adjustments, in practice had the potential to perpetuate regional disparities, with some local governments introducing counter-productive measures to micromanage the operation of private schools and other regional governments suffering from corruption or disengaging from education reform management due to bureaucratic barriers. This raises the question of unintended negative consequences of decentralised private education policies on the government’s ability to address market failures. While most previous research focussed on the effects of fiscal decentralisation on public education (Busemeyer, 2008; Letelier and Ormeño, 2018), the issues of private schools and decentralisation were argued to require further research (Turati, Montolio and Piacenza, 2017), specifically on the issue of decentralised management of private education and school accountability.

Nevertheless, this research also found evidence of local authorities formulating preferential policies for successful private schools and innovating local mechanisms for private education development tailored to the needs of the region. Similar to other education systems, it involved guiding private investment into areas with a lack of education resources (Walford, 2005) and
establishing public-private partnerships (Van Gestel et al., 2014; Amjad and MacLeod, 2014; Crawfurd, 2017). First, private schools in China were found to sometimes open new campuses on city outskirts and in newly developing urban areas. These campuses were being built “in the middle of nowhere”, often together with the surrounding infrastructure, financed by the education investment group or its investment partners. On the one hand, it could be a development tool for local authorities, allocating or renting land out to a private school with good reputation, attracting families to developing districts on the principle of proximity-based admission to a prestigious school (Dong and Li, 2019). Attracting private education resources to serve the needs of urbanisation and city planning was found to be a common strategy in the Chinese context (Feng and Lu, 2010), with this research also finding evidence of education investment groups receiving land in districts where local authorities required supplementary education resources.

On the other hand, variations in the implementation of proximity-based admission principle across different regions were said to cause oscillation of housing prices (Zhang et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2021) with investment groups inflating housing prices to make profit off the families wishing to gain admission to a reputable private school by purchasing a house nearby. This research found variation in how local authorities were said to address this challenge, with Xian and Beijing introducing specific regulations banning local private schools from selling school places together with real estate purchases. However, more research is needed on the relationship between decentralised policy implementation and the role of education investment groups in regional development in China. This research need is complicated by the lack of data availability and the difficulty of gaining access to the accurate data on the activity of Chinese private education investment groups.

In addition, more research is required on the format and nature of private-public partnerships established in China. Fieldwork indicated that private schools with good reputation and quality resources could be tasked with public school assistance, such as one case school in Chengdu found to be helping train public school teachers in the city and another private school chain, headquartered in Xian, said to have taken over the management of a provincial public school. Since the focus of this research has been on education reform implementation and capability formation in private schools, these cases of public-private cooperation fell outside of the problem space posed by the selected research questions, which is why they were not explored in detail in this thesis. Recent research drew attention to the shifting nature of public-private
cooperation on the Chinese education market (Liu, 2023) as recent policy revisions were said to severely affect for-profit activities of private schools and their relationship with the public sector (Xin, 2021; Liu, 2023), particularly as public schools were mandated to withdraw from private school operations in late 2021. A better understanding of how the updated policies influence the relationship between public and private schools in China is needed, in addition to more research on whether the positive experiences of private schools and their innovative or experimental projects could be sustainably transferred into public schools.

The second major policy challenge in terms of the role that private education can play in providing diversified educational choices to Chinese families was found to be the issue of education equity. The issue of inter-regional education disparities in China has attracted the attention of scholars since the 1990s as the cross-provincial education gap increased rapidly over the last two decades of the 20th century (Tsang, 1996), which was argued to result from an overall increase in social inequalities between the coastal and the inland provinces (Zhang et al., 2012). Some studies supported the opinion that education inequality was promoted by the decentralisation of the education system, which discouraged education investment in poor regions where local authorities were focused more on the short-term benefits of economic growth (Lin, Sun, and Huang, 2011). Yet there was also some evidence of narrowing inter-regional inequality in education with Yang, Huang and Liu (2014, p.3) arguing that over the thirteen years from 1996 to 2008 both the national and the cross-provincial Gini coefficient decreased considerably and that education inequality in the rural provinces of Tibet, Qinghai and Gansu was reduced by 29%, 38% and 27% respectively while in the urbanised areas like Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin the decrease was 20%, 15% and 16% respectively between 1996 and 2008. Thus, the evidence shows a controversy about the extent to which China has been experiencing education inequality and the role of education decentralisation in promoting education disparities.

The findings of this research pose a question of the extent to which the growth of private education may have contributed to education inequality in China by providing not only more diversified, but also more exclusive education opportunities. The topic of education diversification by means of privatisation has long sparked a debate about education equity (Whitty and Power, 2000; Oh, 2011; Sahoo, 2017; Gamsu, 2021) with claims made about private schools being biased against immigrant families (Farre, 2018; LaFleur, 2023), unattainable for the poor (Nambissan, 2012; Mousumi and Kusakabe, 2020) and therefore
promoting social inequalities (Baum, Abdul-Hamid, and Wesley, 2018). This research questioned the idea by arguing that private schools were often seen as a viable choice for migrant families in China, in addition to being widespread in rural areas and offering a wide range of tuition fee standards. Fieldwork data indicated that private schools were often chosen by the families from outside the selected cities, as they did not qualify for public school places or were not willing to change their hukou. In addition, the schools visited throughout fieldwork varied significantly in terms of education costs, from very expensive elite institutions to low-cost campuses in developing areas. While this does not imply that selected private schools provided equal education opportunities to everyone, the findings align with the evidence of private education having the capacity to benefit lower-income and migrant households (Alderman et al., 2001; Alderman, Kim, and Orazem, 2003; Wan, 2022).

In the Chinese context, this was likely resulting from a high degree of state regulation of the private education market, with classified management system turning private schools at the level of compulsory education level into non-profit organisations and tuition fee standards being formulated according to the local market and policy conditions. The question of equity was found to be an important theme in national level policy documents, particularly with the beginning of the classified management period of the private education reform in 2016, as more standards were introduced to curb excess profit-making activities of private schools and increase the viability of private school choices for Chinese families. This trend continued with more equity-motivated private education policy changes coming out in the past two years, including the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education, published by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council in July 2021 and further revisions to the Private Education Promotion Law, which are still being interpreted and implemented across different localities. These policies were said to aim at reducing education inequalities and providing Chinese families with more access to quality education opportunities, regardless of whether they choose a public or a privately-run school (Zhong, 2022; Liu, 2023). However, more research is needed on how these recent policy changes will affect the operation of private schools in China and if a more equitable private education sector will emerge as a result.

In addition to previously mentioned research limitations related to the framework of the capability approach, this research has two main limitations when it comes to private education
policy discussion. The first limitation is that this thesis did not explore the way Chinese private education reform policies were being formulated. The field of Chinese education policy research tends to focus on policy assessment and implementation (Zeng and Jin, 2001; Ling, 2017; Wang, 2018; Lin, 2019). This is mainly due to data access restrictions related to the non-transparent policy formulation process in China. Yet the analysis of how priority education capabilities are determined by policymakers could offer an insight into policy problems and how policy agendas are framed, which would complement the conclusions reached in this research by the means of policy instruments analysis (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; Schneider and Ingram, 1990; McDonnell and Grubb, 1991). Second, due to the nature of the qualitative research design, no statistical generalisation can be made of the findings (Stake, 2006, Pawson, 2006), which was discussed in detail in section 3.5 of chapter 3. The timeframe and scope of doctoral research also limited the number of interviews and school visits that could have been reasonably conducted, which means that the findings are not statistically representative and may not be reliably generalised to include every private school in China. Instead, this research focussed on theoretical generalisation (Pawson, 2006) achieved through the internal validity of the research design and the use of case-study methodology.

To conclude, this thesis argued two main points. The first is that education capability formation, in the context of Chinese private education reform, has been a process of complex interaction among actor-based and context-based conversion factors at the case level. It depended on the priorities of policy implementation actors and could both promote and restrict certain capabilities, accounting for the differences in resource investment and capability priorities at the school level. The second main point is that the role of private education development, throughout Chinese private education reform, has been the diversification of educational opportunities available to Chinese families. It was achieved through the process of decentralised private education governance and local policy interpretations, combined with an increasingly comprehensive legislative framework for state supervision and management of private school activities, aimed at enhancing equity, quality, and viability of private education as a supplement for state schooling.
References


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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. The list of national-level policy documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legislative body</th>
<th>Policy document title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 1982</td>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>Chairman Peng Zhen’s report to the Fifth Session of the National People’s Congress Article 19 of the amended Constitution</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 1985</td>
<td>CPC, CC</td>
<td>The Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Education Reform</td>
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<td>3 1986</td>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>Compulsory Education Law</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 1987</td>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>MOE Provisional Regulations on running schools by social forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 1993</td>
<td>State Council</td>
<td>Outline of Education Reform and Development in China</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 1994</td>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>Teacher Law of the People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>7 1995</td>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>Education Law of the PRC</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 1995</td>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>Provisional Regulations for Sino-Foreign cooperation in running schools - this document was repealed on September 20, 2004, in accordance with the &quot;Notice of the Ministry of Education on Repealing Certain Regulations and Other Normative Documents&quot; Jiaozheng Law [2004] No. 9</td>
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<td>9 1996</td>
<td>State Education Commission</td>
<td>Opinions on the Funding of School Management by Social Forces</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>CPC Central Committee, NPC, MOE, MOLSS and MOJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>MOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Body</td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>NDRC, the MOE and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>NPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>NPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>NPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>MOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>MOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>NPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Central Committee of the CPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>NPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>NDRC and the Ministry of Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>NPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>CPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>MOE, the MCA, the SAIC, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Welfare and the State Commission Office of Public Sectors Reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>MOE, the SAIC and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>State Administration for Industry and Commerce and the Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Ministry of Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>MOF and State Administration of Taxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>The State Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>NPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>State Council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2. Lists of local policies

### Beijing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legislative body</th>
<th>Document title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2018 Beijing Municipal People’s Government</td>
<td>The Implementation Opinions of the Beijing Municipal People’s Government on Encouraging Social Forces to Establish Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2018 Beijing Municipal People’s Government</td>
<td>Measures for Classification and Registration of Private Schools in Beijing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2018 Beijing Municipal People’s Government</td>
<td>Measures for the Supervision and Administration of For-profit Private Schools in Beijing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2019 Municipal Party Committee and Municipal Government</td>
<td>Modernization of Education in the Capital 2035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Legislative body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>General Office of the Beijing Municipal People's Government</td>
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</table>

**Shanghai**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Document title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Shanghai Municipal Education Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Shanghai Municipal Education Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Shanghai Municipal People's Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Shanghai Municipal People's Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Shanghai Municipal Education Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Shanghai Municipal People's Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2019</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
General Office of the Shanghai Municipal People's Government

Implementation Opinions on Further Adjusting and Optimizing the Structure and Improving the Use Efficiency of Educational Funds in this Municipality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legislative body</th>
<th>Document title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 2016</td>
<td>Sichuan Provincial Department of Education</td>
<td>Further Regulating the School-running Behaviour of Private Schools and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 2017</td>
<td>Municipal Education Bureau</td>
<td>&quot;Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for the Development of Education in Chengdu&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 2018</td>
<td>People's Government of Sichuan Province</td>
<td>Encouraging Social Forces to Establish Education and Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 2019</td>
<td>Chengdu Municipal People's Government</td>
<td>Several Measures to Promote the Healthy and Standardized Development of Private Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 2021</td>
<td>Chengdu Municipal People's Government</td>
<td>Chengdu Education Modernization 2035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 2021</td>
<td>Chengdu Bureau of Education</td>
<td>Measures for the Asset Management of Private Schools in Chengdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Legislative body</td>
<td>Document title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2018 Shaanxi Provincial People's Government</td>
<td>The 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Education in Shaanxi Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2018 Xi'an Education Bureau</td>
<td>Implementation Measures for the Classification and Registration of Existing Private Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2019 General Office of the People's Government of Shaanxi Province</td>
<td>Implementation Opinions on Further Adjusting and Optimizing the Structure to Improve the Effectiveness of the Use of Educational Funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2019 Xi'an Municipal People's Government</td>
<td>Implementation Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Private Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2019 The People's Government of Shaanxi Province</td>
<td>Shaanxi Education Modernization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2020 Xi'an Municipal People's Government</td>
<td>Xi'an Private Primary and Secondary Schools’ Kindergarten Charge Management Measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Xi'an Education Bureau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 3. Initial interview questions matrix – pilot interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview questions</th>
<th>Background information</th>
<th>RQ 2.1: what capabilities are private schools focussing on?</th>
<th>RQ 2.2: what conversion factors play a role in capability formation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1: Could you tell me a little about your school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2: In your opinion, what are the aims of private education policy reforms?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3: In your opinion, why was (province) chosen to be the demonstration area for the internationalization of Chinese education?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4: What do you think is the role of international schools in modernizing private education in China?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5: Are there any students from outside of the city in your school? Tell me more about the admission process for these students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6: Has your school had any experience with student or staff</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q7: The new policy encourages the joint establishment of schools by Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangdong. From your experiences, under what circumstances would this be possible? What kind of school would be established? What challenges, if any, do you foresee for this new policy implementation?

Q8: What kind of paths do students in your school choose for themselves upon graduation? Going abroad or participating in the Gaokao?

Q9: In your opinion, how does your school increase its brand recognition?

Q10: How do you envision the role of your school in the process of modernizing the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>education system in (city name)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11: What do you think about the possibility of cooperation between stronger and weaker private schools and private and public schools in the area? Under what circumstances would your school participate?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12: Please, tell me more about scholarship programs in your school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13: Please, tell me more about the cooperation and communication with local government and ministry of education?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14: What do you think is the aim of greater standardization encouraged by the policy?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4. Pilot interview question set in English and Mandarin

Background questions about the number of students, the history of the school and the curriculum choices. 关于学生人数、学校历史和课程选择的背景问题。– Accepted and expanded with theme prompting and conversation probing.

General questions about private education reform / 关于民办教育改革的基础问题

1. In your opinion, what are the aims of private education policy reforms? 在您看来，民办教育政策改革的目标是什么？– Accepted, moved to prompting.

2. In your opinion, why was Guangdong chosen to be the demonstration area for the internationalization of Chinese education? 在您看来，为什么选择广东作为中国教育国际化的示范区？– Paraphrased into a broader question.

3. What do you think is the role of international schools in modernizing private education in China? 您认为国际学校在中国民办教育现代化中的作用是什么？– Accepted, moved to thematic probing under the general question about education internationalization.

Policy-specific questions / 具体政策问题

4. Are there any students from outside of the city in your school? Tell me more about the admission process for these students. 你们学校有来自外地的学生吗？请告诉我关于这些学生的录取过程的信息。– Accepted, moved to thematic prompting regarding school admission.

5. Has your school had any experience with student or staff exchange with schools in Hong Kong or Macao? If yes, how do you evaluate such exchanges? If not, under what circumstances would such exchanges be possible? 你们学校有没有与香港或澳门学校交换学生或教职人员的经验？如果有，请问您如何评价这种交流？如果没有，在什么情况下可以进行这种交流？– Discarded as too specific.

6. The new policy encourages the joint establishment of schools by Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangdong. From your experiences, under what circumstances would this be possible? What kind of school would be established? What challenges, if any, do you foresee for this new policy implementation? 新政策鼓励粤港澳合办学校。从您的经验来看，在什么情况下这是可行的？建立什么样的学校？您预计这一新政策的实施会面临哪些挑战？– Discarded as too specific.
School-specific questions 关于学校具体的问题

7. What kind of paths do students in your school choose for themselves upon graduation? Going abroad or participating in the Gaokao? 你们学校的学生毕业后会选择什么样的道路?出国还是参加高考? – Accepted to be used as a theme prompt.

8. In your opinion, how does your school increase its brand recognition? 在您看来，学校是如何提高品牌认知度的? – Discarded as too specific.

9. How do you envision the role of your school in the process of modernizing the education system in (city name)? 您如何看待你们的学校在（城市名称）教育系统现代化进程中的作用? – Paraphrased to enquire about the role of private education in education system reforms.

10. What do you think about the possibility of cooperation between stronger and weaker private schools and private and public schools in the area? Under what circumstances would your school participate? 您认为该地区较强和较弱的民办学校和公立学校之间合作的可能性如何？你们学校在什么情况下会参加? - Paraphrased, partly used as a theme prompt.

11. Please, tell me more about scholarship programs in your school? 请告诉我关于你们学校的奖学金项目的更多信息? - Accepted, used as a thematic prompt.

12. Please, tell me more about the cooperation and communication with local government and ministry of education? 请告诉我关于当地政府和教育部与学校的合作和交流的更多信息? - Accepted, used as a thematic prompt.

13. What do you think is the aim of greater standardization encouraged by the policy? – 您认为民办教育政策鼓励更大程度标准化的目的是什么? Discarded as an assumption-based question.
Appendix 5. An overview of pilot school cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pilot case number</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>Guangzhou, Guangdong province</td>
<td>Guangzhou, Guangdong province</td>
<td>Dongguan, Guangdong province</td>
<td>Dongguan, Guangdong province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>City population</strong></td>
<td>About 15 million</td>
<td>About 15 million</td>
<td>About 7.3 million</td>
<td>About 7.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of ownership</strong></td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Public (with a privately owned division)</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classification</strong></td>
<td>International, non-profit, boarding</td>
<td>International division of public school, non-profit, boarding</td>
<td>International, non-profit, boarding</td>
<td>Dual-language program, non-profit, boarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foundation year</strong></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>1962 (Reopened in 2009)</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management</strong></td>
<td>A university and an education investment group</td>
<td>Education ministry of Guangzhou and the local Communist party branch</td>
<td>A university and a major local company</td>
<td>An education investment group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tuition fees (annually)</strong></td>
<td>48,000 – 99,000</td>
<td>2,000-5,000</td>
<td>99,000-125,000</td>
<td>20,000-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of students</strong></td>
<td>About 2500</td>
<td>About 3000</td>
<td>About 700</td>
<td>About 300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
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<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Levels of education</strong></th>
<th>kindergarten</th>
<th>Primary/secondary</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>primary/secondary</th>
<th>No high school yet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Curriculum</strong></th>
<th>Mixed curriculum: PIEP, CEP, IEP, AEP, Hong Kong curriculum, Domestic curriculum</th>
<th>IB curriculum, AP, A-levels</th>
<th>American common core-based independently developed curriculum</th>
<th>Domestic curriculum with the use of foreign materials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Admission process</strong></th>
<th>All nationalities + local Chinese</th>
<th>Proximity-based, Chinese local students</th>
<th>Interview, test scores, all nationalities</th>
<th>Proximity-based, local Chinese students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Observational data obtained</strong></th>
<th>Photographic evidence: curriculum, schedule, teaching materials, classroom equipment</th>
<th>Photographic evidence: curriculum, schedule, teaching materials, classroom equipment</th>
<th>Photographic evidence: curriculum, schedule, teaching materials, classroom equipment</th>
<th>Photographic evidence: curriculum, schedule, teaching materials, classroom equipment</th>
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</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Interview</strong></th>
<th>With Vice-principal</th>
<th>With the Head of the international division</th>
<th>With Foreign Principal, Chinese Principal and Vice-Principal</th>
<th>With the Head of Dual-language program</th>
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</thead>
</table>


## Appendix 6. Updated interview matrix – post pilot interview refinement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview questions</th>
<th>Background information</th>
<th>RQ 2.1: How are target capabilities interpreted in selected private schools?</th>
<th>RQ 2.2: What conversion factors play a role in capability formation in selected private schools?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q1: Could you tell me a little about the history of your school?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Theme prompt 1: how has the number of students changed since the start?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Theme prompt 2: how have you been attracting good teachers?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Theme prompt 3: is the school considered expensive by the local &amp; nationwide standards? Has it always been so?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Theme prompt 4: what kind of curriculum do you offer and why?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational probing: 1) please, tell me more 2) why do you think this is? 3) how so?</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q2: what are the support mechanisms available to private schools, such as yours?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Theme prompt 1: what kind of financial support does the local &amp; central government offer?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Theme prompt 2: what kind of subsidies does the school receive?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Theme prompt 3: how does the taxation relief work?</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Conversational probing: 1) could you please tell me more? 2) anything else? 3) why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OE: What do you think of Chinese private education development in general?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OE: What is your overall opinion of the policy environment in (area)? What are the aims of education modernisation and reform?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q3: how would you say running a private school differs from running a public school?

- Theme prompt 1: does your school receive the same tax benefits and subsidies as neighbouring public schools?
  - X

- Theme prompt 2: do private schools enjoy greater policy flexibility?
  - X

- Theme prompt 3: is the admission process different for your school and how? What about curriculum?
  - X

Conversational probing: 1) anything else? 2) why do you think this is? 3) how so?

OE: what do you think is the role of private schools in education modernisation and reform compared to public schools?

Q4: what are the current challenges for the development of private schools?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 1: what kinds of challenges are private schools best equipped to handle?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 2: have you experienced any difficulties in implementing new policies?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 3: what do you think the future challenges will be?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational probing: 1) could you please tell me more? 2) anything else? 3) why?</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5 (for international schools): why have you decided to offer international curriculum?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 1: how has this curriculum been received by students, teachers, and parents?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 2: how does the government encourage</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 3: how is international education with Chinese characteristics understood in your school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 4: what are the difficulties of incorporating international curriculum into the Chinese curriculum?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational probing: 1) why is this? 2) do you think this might change? 3) could you please tell me more about this?</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OE: what do you think is the goal of international education in China?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6: in what way do private schools contribute to education equity?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 1: Are there any scholarship programmes in your school? What are they?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme prompt 2: Do you think private schools are exclusive in China?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>Final open-ended question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme prompt 3</strong>: What opportunities do private schools offer to students that are a) valuable b) not available in public schools?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational probing: 1) how so? 2) has it always been so? 3) anything else?</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OE: what is your opinion of education equity in China?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final open-ended question</strong>: would you like to add anything that we have not yet covered? OR is there anything else relevant to education reform &amp; modernization in China that I have overlooked in my questions?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 7. The final list of interview questions formulated in English and Mandarin

Q1: could you tell me a little about the history of your school? Q1: 请给我介绍一下你们学校的历史？
• Theme prompt 1: how has the number of students changed since the start?
  主题提示 1: 自学校建立以来，学生人数有变化吗？
• Theme prompt 2: how have you been attracting good teachers?
  主题提示 2: 你们学校是如何吸引好老师的？
• Theme prompt 3: is the school considered expensive by the local & nationwide standards? Has it always been so?
  主题提示 3: 以当地和全国的标准来看，这所学校贵吗？一直都是这样吗？
• Theme prompt 4: what kind of curriculum do you offer and why?
  主题提示 4: 你们提供什么样的课程，为什么？

Conversational probing: 1) please, tell me more 2) why do you think this is? 3) how so?
对话探索: 1）请告诉我更多的信息？2）您认为这是为什么？3）这个有什么原因？

Q2: what are the support mechanisms available to private schools, such as yours? Q2: 像你们这样的民办学校有哪些支持机制？
• Theme prompt 1: what kind of financial support does the local & central government offer?
  主题提示 1：地方政府和中央政府提供什么样的财政支持？
• Theme prompt 2: what kind of subsidies does the school receive?
  主题提示 2：学校获得哪些补贴？
• Theme prompt 3: how does the taxation relief work?
  主题提示 3：税收减免是如何进行的？

Conversational probing: 1) could you please tell me more? 2) anything else? 3) why?
对话探索：1）您能告诉我一下更多吗？2）还有别的吗？3）为什么？

OE: What do you think of Chinese private education development in general?
您对中国民办教育的发展有什么总体看法？

OE: What is your overall opinion of the policy environment in (area)? What are the aims of education modernisation and reform?
您对（地区）政策环境的总体看法是什么？教育现代化改革的目标是什么？

Q3: how would you say running a private school differs from running a public school?
Q3：您认为开办民办学校与开办公办学校有什么区别？
• Theme prompt 1: does your school receive the same tax benefits and subsidies as neighbouring public schools?
主题提示 1：您的学校是否获得与公立学校相同的税收优惠和补贴？
- Theme prompt 2: do private schools enjoy greater policy flexibility?
主题提示 2：民办学校是否享有更大的政策灵活性？
- Theme prompt 3: is the admission process different for your school and how? What about curriculum?
主题提示 3：您的学校录取流程是否不同？如何不同？课程呢？

Conversational probing: 1) anything else? 2) why do you think this is? 3) how so?
对话试探：1）还有吗？2）您认为这是为什么？3）怎么会这样？

OE: what do you think is the role of private schools in education modernisation and reform compared to public schools?
与公立学校相比，您认为民办学校在教育现代化和改革中的作用是什么？

Q4: what are the current challenges for the development of private schools? Q4：当前民办学校发展面临哪些挑战？
- Theme prompt 1: what kinds of challenges are private schools best equipped to handle? 民办学校最有能力应对哪些挑战？
- Theme prompt 2: have you experienced any difficulties in implementing new policies? 您在执行新政策时，遇到过什么困难？
- Theme prompt 3: what do you think the future challenges will be?
主题提示 3：您认为未来的挑战是什么？

Conversational probing: 1) could you please tell me more? 2) anything else? 3) why?
对话探索：1）您能告诉我一下更多吗？2）还有别的吗？3）为什么？

OE: What do you think of Chinese private schools in general?
您对中国民办学校的总体看法如何？

Q5 (for international schools): why have you decided to offer international curriculum? Q5: （国际学校）为什么决定开设国际课程？
- Theme prompt 1: how has this curriculum been received by students, teachers, and parents? 学生、教师和家长对本课程的评价如何？
- Theme prompt 2: how does the government encourage education internationalisation? 政府如何鼓励教育国际化？
- Theme prompt 3: how is international education with Chinese characteristics understood in your school? 你们学校如何理解有中国特色的国际教育？
- Theme prompt 4: what are the difficulties of incorporating international curriculum into the Chinese curriculum?
主题提示 4: 国际课程融入中国课程的难点是什么？

Conversational probing: 1) why is this? 2) do you think this might change? 3) could you please tell me more about this?

对话探究：1）为什么会这样？2）您认为这种情况会改变吗？请告诉我一下更多关于这方面的情况？

OE: what do you think is the goal of international education in China?

您认为中国国际教育的目标是什么？

Q6: in what way do private schools contribute to education equity? Q6：民办学校在哪些方面促进教育公平？

- Theme prompt 1: Are there any scholarship programmes in your school? What are they?
  主题提示 1: 你们学校有奖学金项目吗？是什么样的项目？

- Theme prompt 2: Do you think private schools are exclusive in China?
  主题提示 2: 您认为民办学校在中国有排他性吗？

- Theme prompt 3: What opportunities do private schools offer to students that are a) valuable b) not available in public schools?
  主题提示 3: 民办学校为学生提供了哪些 a）有价值的 B）公立学校没有的机会？

Conversational probing: 1) how so? 2) has it always been so? 3) anything else?

对话探究：1）为什么？2）一直是这样吗？3）还有其他的吗？

OE: what is your opinion of education equity in China?

您对中国教育不平等的看法是什么？

Final open-ended question: would you like to add anything that we have not yet covered? OR is there anything else relevant to education reform & modernization in China that I have overlooked in my questions?

最后一个问题：您认为还有什么与中国教育现代化&民办教育改革相关的问题被我忽略了？
## Appendix 8. An overview of school cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>School type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beijing, Daxing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Local brand, well-established cross-provincial education investment group. High school tuition fees, established in late 2010s, about 100 students in the high school international department, students attend grades 9 to 12, newly developing area close to the new airport, a large campus territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing, Haidian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Local brand, well established history, cross provincial education investment group. Established in late 2010s, about 160 students in total, 60 teachers, campus territory constrained by Haidian land shortage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing, Shunyi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Independent school, local brand, one owner, about 550 students, established in 2000s, does not belong to a group, located in an area outside the city centre with expensive real estate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing, Haidian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Independent school, local less well-known brand. Over 2700 students, established in early 1990s, located next to a public school, small campus constrained by Haidian land shortage, a new international division just opened in an Economic Development zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chengdu, Longquanyi</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Local brand, well established history, cross provincial education group. Around 100 students, 45-50 teachers, established in mid-2010s, a big campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chengdu, Xinjin Minjiang Innovation City</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Local brand, local education group, established in late 2010s, three different investors, a newly built campus, about 130 students, but campus maximum capacity is over 1500 students, 30 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City, Province</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chengdu, Jinjiang</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Small-scale private education investment group, no brand history or affiliation. Established in late 2010s, very few students, sharing a campus with another school, a beautiful campus but very limited independent resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haikou, Jangdong, Hainan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>International brand, well-established education investment group, established in 2020s, over 30 teachers, 100 student dorm spaces, over 300 students, 1800 students maximum school capacity, a wide range of available resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai, Qingpu</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Local brand, investors are an engineering construction company. 200 students, established in late 2010s, a large campus, a wide range of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai, Pudong</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Local brand with well-established history, an independent private school – no investment group affiliation. Established in late 1990s, around 2500 students, including over 260 international students, a wide range of facilities, campus territory constrained by Pudong district land shortage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai, Pudong</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>International brand, well-established cross-provincial education investment group, about 1500 students, established in early 2010s, was originally a school for children of foreigners, a large campus territory, a wide range of facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzhou, Economic Development Zone (Shanghai cluster)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Local brand, affiliation to a top-tier university in China, maximum capacity of 2300 students, established in 2020s, a large campus, wide range of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taicang Economic Development</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Large cross-provincial education group from Shanghai. More than 200 students in middle school, about 1200 overall, established in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zone (Shanghai cluster)</td>
<td>mid-2010s, big campus with limited resources, no exclusive facilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian, Xixian New District</td>
<td>Local education investment group, local brand, established in late-2010s, over 300 students, over 50 teachers, big campus in a newly developing area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian, Xixian New District</td>
<td>Local education investment group, local brand. Affiliated to three major Universities in Xian, the largest class is 39 children, young teaching staff, established in late-2010s, a few hundred students attending, a small campus, poor facilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian, High-tech Development Zone</td>
<td>An independent school with a local brand and well-established reputation. International department established in mid-2000, about 500 students in grades 10 to 12, school origins date back to 1990s, a large campus, a wide range of facilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xuzhou, Xincheng District, Jiangsu</td>
<td>Large cross-provincial education group, local brand, established in early 2010s, low tuition fees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hefei, Shushan District Anhui</td>
<td>Large cross-provincial education investment group from Shanghai, 70 students in the international department, good urban location, central, established in early 2000s, over 3000 students in total, a large campus with medium-level facilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenzhen, Dapeng New District</td>
<td>Branch of a well-established school in central Shenzhen, Established in mid-2010s, a small campus outside of the city, unique but medium level facilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 9. Interview keywords – capability interpretation in selected case schools

21st century capabilities: interview keywords

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case number</th>
<th>Key words from interviews</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>choice, dare to take risks, comfortable, comprehensive development, not just rote learning, unique, personalised self, debate, communication, common goal, cooperation, independent thinking</td>
<td>communication&amp;collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>independence&amp;innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>communication ability, character development, cooperation, holistic education</td>
<td>communication&amp;collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>skills for the future, deal with uncertainty, career skills, talents, moral education, comprehension, competence, resilience, self-control, project learning, integrated skills, interdisciplinary, comprehensive assessment, creative thinking</td>
<td>independence&amp;innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>education technology, advanced education ideas</td>
<td>information literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>inquiry based learning, choice, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, autonomy, critical thinking skills</td>
<td>independence&amp;innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>outdoor learning, cooperation, communication, vitality, ability-oriented, social communication ability, negotiation,</td>
<td>communication&amp;collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>independence&amp;innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>empathy, creativity, entrepreneurial work, group cooperation, digital skills, inquiry learning, challenge, self-awareness, self-driven, lifelong learning, independent learning, self-discipline, confidence</strong></td>
<td><strong>information literacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **skill development exceeding rote learning, cooperation, outdoor activities, problem solving skills, research-based projects** | **communication&collaboration**  
  
  **independence&innovation** |
| **leadership, inductive ability, integrated knowledge, service, personal development, discipline, self-awareness, community service, interactive learning, cooperative inquiry, debate, not just traditional testing, continuous learning, character development, humanistic literacy, critical thinking** | **communication&collaboration**  
  
  **independence&innovation**  
  
  **information literacy** |
| **imagination, interests, online learning, leadership, organisational ability, independent learning, spiritual development, EQ, problem solving skills, community service, cooperation** | **communication&collaboration**  
  
  **independence&innovation**  
  
  **information literacy** |
| **communal spaces, original work** | **communication&collaboration** |
| **holistic education, not just testing, information technology, Microsoft teams, interactive technology use, communication, cooperation, ability to learn, life skills** | **communication&collaboration**  
  
  **information literacy** |
<p>| <strong>character development for future challenges, perseverance, education concept, integrate moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and</strong> | <strong>independence&amp;innovation</strong> |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labour education, choice, not developing test machines</th>
<th>Information literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Moral education, holistic education, not just test, digital education, projects, creativity</td>
<td>Independence &amp; Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Learning methods, moral and aesthetic education, not just scores, grow up in all rounded way</td>
<td>Independence &amp; Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Communication, inquiry, Chinese soul, world feelings and good thoughts, learning methods, complement the rote learning system</td>
<td>Communication &amp; Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Critical thinking, communication, cooperation skills, social practice, interest development, creativity</td>
<td>Communication &amp; Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Critical thinking, broad knowledge of the world, inquiry learning, flexibility, student associations, autonomy, independent learning, life skills, choice, special interests, debate, projects, research, reading techniques, exploratory homework</td>
<td>Independence &amp; Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Internet technology, multimedia, equipment, educational concepts, comprehensive development</td>
<td>Information Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cooperation, communication, leadership, confidence, independent learning</td>
<td>Communication &amp; Collaboration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Citizenship capabilities: interview keywords

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case number</th>
<th>Key words from interviews</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>not forget Chinese education concepts, Chinese courses have competitive advantage, mainstream values of Chinese ideology, history controversies, geography, traditional culture, Chinese soul, use English to introduce Chinese culture, calligraphy, festivals, solar terms, filial piety, ancient, refined culture</td>
<td>culture&amp;history, socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>cultural identity, participate in globalisation, internationalisation with Chinese characteristics, self-awareness, my roots, national honour and pride, Chinese heart, history, party-building</td>
<td>culture&amp;history, socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>ideology control, economic reasons</td>
<td>socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>party-building, curriculum control, Chinese, moral education, legal education</td>
<td>socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Chinese history, historical figures, civilization history, traditional medicine, paper-cutting, calligraphy, quality development</td>
<td>culture&amp;history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>traditional Chinese education model, ideology, Chinese characteristics</td>
<td>socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>humanities for foreign, morality for Chinese students, character development, party organisation, young pioneers, party representatives, core values, ancient literature, essay writing</td>
<td>culture&amp;history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>education sovereignty</td>
<td>socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>national history courses, language, geography, politics, ideological and political courses</td>
<td>socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>tolerance, Chinese characteristics, embroidery, taekwondo, Chinese ceramics, cultural knowledge</td>
<td>culture&amp;history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>ideology courses, builders of socialism, Party education, textbooks, history, morality, national security, moral education activities, Chinese heritage, calligraphy</td>
<td>culture&amp;history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>cultural appreciation course, party building, traditional Chinese culture, solar terms, traditional festivals, socialism construction, class hours, textbooks, history, ideology, morality</td>
<td>culture&amp;history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>traditional Chinese culture, Chinese classics, ancient Chinese</td>
<td>culture&amp;history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case number</td>
<td>Key words from interviews</td>
<td>Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>golf court, community sport, student union activities, basketball games, music</td>
<td>sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>guest speakers, parent speakers, local culture talks, sports meeting, handicraft classes, tennis, football</td>
<td>sports, arts&amp;crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>diversity, craft, technologies, hobbies</td>
<td>arts&amp;crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>training besides school, characteristic courses, PPI, research study, diversified, higher education preparation</td>
<td>career&amp;industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>things outside the classroom, field trips, assembly, musical performances, sports, arts</td>
<td>sports, arts&amp;crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hands-on abilities, labour skills, aesthetic education, beauty, basketball, swimming</td>
<td>career&amp;industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 6 | museum curriculum, tea culture, etiquette, drawing, art, trips, public exhibitions of student art, swimming, programming class, age-appropriate extracurriculars, clay, drama | sports  
arts&crafts  
career&industry |
| 7 | personalised extracurriculars, biology activities, 18 different choices, rugby, drama, different sports, house activities, music, art, field trips | sports  
arts&crafts |
| 8 | theatre, swimming, art and sport scholarships, reading and composition, goal support: aircraft manufacturing or psychology | sports  
arts&crafts  
career&industry |
| 9 | expert lectures, factory and company visits, network class, research experiences, sports, tennis, golf, basketball, model of UN, business, international competitions, science and technology competitions, robot soccer, sport scholarships | sports  
career&industry |
| 10 | various labs, biology, physics, chemistry, characteristic courses, science, swimming, basketball, football, baseball, golf, hockey, frisbee, badminton, rock climbing | sports  
career&industry |
| 11 | outside of the classroom, real society skills, sports | sports  
career&industry |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Characteristic Courses</th>
<th>Career &amp; Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>characteristic courses, hobbies, baseball, golf, swimming, canoeing, sailing, fine arts, labour education, woodworking, weaving, economics classes, aesthetics education, beauty, physical fitness</td>
<td>sports&lt;br&gt;arts &amp; crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>engineers, computer scientists, pharmacists</td>
<td>career &amp; industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>reading, sports, characteristics courses, robotics, student associations, aerial vehicles, aviation industry engagement, robot teacher, Lego, engineering, art model airplanes, 3D printing, hands-on ability, ceramics</td>
<td>sports&lt;br&gt;career &amp; industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>experimental courses, fine arts, sports, music, four clubs, hands-on classes, basketball, cheerleading, career education, professional experience, computer class</td>
<td>sports&lt;br&gt;arts &amp; crafts&lt;br&gt;career &amp; industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>painting exhibition, weiqi classroom, aviation industry, joint industry projects, student clubs, sewing, handicrafts, art, Peking Opera, science and technology innovation centre, robots, programming, wood craft, lasers, carpentry courses, product making, silk scarf, umbrella, AI, engineering, photography club</td>
<td>arts &amp; crafts&lt;br&gt;career &amp; industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>accounting, business, hands-on ability, 3D printing, programming, sports, art activities, music, practical knowledge application,</td>
<td>sports&lt;br&gt;arts &amp; crafts&lt;br&gt;career &amp; industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case number</td>
<td>Key words from interviews</td>
<td>Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>internationalisation, comprehensive evaluation, US program, famous university, realise a dream, integration courses, GPA, TOEFL, IELTS, customisation, career development, personal growth, class leap, AP, motivation, opportunity, world-class vision, skills, communication, harmony, personal achievements</td>
<td>Study abroad, International curriculum, Languages, Soft skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>bilingual, multilingual and global minded, language, empathetic, service-minded, strive for excellence, different cultures, cultural standards, foreign teachers</td>
<td>Languages, Soft skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>combined curriculum, common core, PYP, IGSC, IB, extra English, internationalisation, foreign passports, overseas universities, international standards</td>
<td>International curriculum, Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>China and abroad, choice, domestic curriculum, AP, A-level, IB, UK, Australia, US, advanced</td>
<td>Study abroad, International curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>educational concepts, student-centered, localization, international perspective, textbooks</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>English level, love, care, support, IB, PYP, advanced placement, common core, international curriculum, schedule challenge</td>
<td>International curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>integration, 3.0 version of international education, thematic subjects, ability development, build a model of thinking, multilingual learning, communication and exchanges with SA, ex Sri Lanka, multi-culture, Belt and Road, Eastern Europe, history of inquiry, explore personality, comprehensive assessment, English ability, global vision</td>
<td>Study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Languages</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Soft skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>foreign schools, go abroad, rich families, American universities, AP, international department, English, Singapore curriculum, PYP, IGSC, technology, outside world</td>
<td>Study abroad</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>International curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>personal development, holistic programme, international exchanges, virtual exchanges, international sporting events, sustainability, leadership, exchanges with schools in Asia, ex Thailand, Bangkok, foreign teachers, go abroad, bilingual, international standards, bicultural talents, Belt and Road initiative, the role of China on the world stage, train talents, multicultural adaptability</td>
<td>Study abroad</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Languages</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Soft skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>American high school, AP, choice, difficulty levels, liberal arts, foreign education ideas, US,</td>
<td>Study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>International curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><strong>US, Britain, Oxbridge, Manchester, Imperial,</strong> integrated curriculum, TOEFL, international environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><strong>British curriculum, theme class, bilingual, AP, IB, inquiry, bring development, Chinese characteristics, go overseas, international education concepts</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><strong>international education concepts, comprehensive national strength, Chinese story on the world stage, differentiated education, diverse, English, pluralistic, US, Japan</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><strong>resource allocation, reform the system, fairness, international curriculum, modernisation of education, English, Singapore, go abroad</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><strong>foreign education, international standards, go abroad, just an experience, English, future society</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><strong>internationalisation, university abroad, international experience, American-style education, ability</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><strong>English, IB, AP, IELTS, TOEFL, United States, Oxbridge, sister school in the US, exchange</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>International curriculum Languages Study abroad International curriculum Languages Soft skills</td>
<td></td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>students, international class, Boston, Plymouth exchange, foreign teachers, international competitions, international exams, foreign universities, integrated course, practical ability, go abroad, university application, PS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>International curriculum Languages Soft skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>English, foreign teachers, global perspective, improve ability, career, international courses, textbook, IELTS, TOEFL, Singapore, A-level, adjustments to curriculum, integrated courses, international ideas, communication tools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Languages International curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>international competitions, international standards, English, examinations, IELTS, TOEFL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>IB, AP, integrated curriculum, international relations impact, internet age, funny homework, language challenge, international assessment, good university, reform, inclusiveness, innovation, outside knowledge, future work, international community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Appendix 11. Example of a completed Activity Checklist for the interview protocol

Please, read questions aloud and mark yes or no for each item depending on whether you see that item present in the interview protocol. Provide feedback in the last column for items that can be improved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of an Interview Protocol</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Feedback for Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview Protocol Structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning questions are factual in nature</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key questions are majority of the questions and are placed between beginning and ending questions</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions at the end of interview protocol are reflective and provide participant an opportunity to share closing comments</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A brief script throughout the interview protocol provides smooth transitions between topic areas</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewer closes with expressed gratitude and any intents to stay connected or follow up</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, interview is organized to promote conversational flow</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing of Interview Questions &amp; Statements</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions/statements are free from spelling error(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>It is politer to replace 你们学校 with 贵校.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only one question is asked at a time</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most questions ask participants to describe experiences and feelings</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions are mostly open ended</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions are written in a non-judgmental manner</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of Interview Protocol</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All questions are needed</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions/statements are concise</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions/statements are devoid of academic language</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions/statements are easy to understand</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy instruments</th>
<th>Policy Problem</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inducements:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Financial rewards for outstanding contributions</td>
<td>Not enough private schools</td>
<td>Private education has space for growth, financial incentives will increase the quantity and diversify available educational choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Subsidies and loans</td>
<td>Quantity of services is low</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Preferential tax policies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Insurance policies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Returns on investment</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Rewards for working in minority regions and poor areas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mandates:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Standards on education internationalisation</td>
<td>Low-quality private schools</td>
<td>Private education has the capacity to comply, clear rules will lead to better quality of educational choices provided by private education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Banning the misuse of school investment funds</td>
<td>Profit making prioritised over education investment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Quality supervision</td>
<td>The legal rights of students and educators unclear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reducing overregulation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Policy clarification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Standards for teachers and school staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to government e-technology platforms</td>
<td>Services provided by private schools not diverse enough</td>
<td>Private education sector lacks the capacity to support education modernisation and diversification, but long-term investment targets will create such capacity in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Ban on international divisions in public schools</td>
<td>Lack of long-term investment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Classified management of private schools</td>
<td>Private education lacks capacity to meet diversified educational needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. New institutional actors of the reform</td>
<td>Policy obstacles for private education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Transparency and third-party supervisions</td>
<td>Need for additional institutions</td>
<td>Changing the management of private education and introducing new actors into the system will increase transparency, remove policy obstacles, and increase the efficiency of private education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Expansion of private school autonomy</td>
<td>Inefficient system of private education management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>