

The Contradictions and Pathways of After-school Services under China's "Double Reduction" Policy

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Abstract

Since the enactment of China's "double reduction" policy, after-school services have received unprecedented attention as an important element of the policy. In line with the philosophy of building a culture of morality, the state expects students to be freed from the chaos of extra-curricular tuition and to use more of their free time to receive a variety of after-school services in a relatively equitable environment at school. Experience has shown that quality after-school services can provide students with a wider scope for development and a more holistic approach to development. However, in practice, we have found that after-school services in China still suffer from a lack of funding for schools, a lack of initiative on the part of teachers to participate in after-school services, and the fact that some students are still unable to escape the 'in-roll' dilemma. In this paper, we will analyse the causes of the contradictions in the provision of after-school services in Chinese primary schools and explore effective ways to improve the quality of after-school services.

Keywords

Double reduction; After-school service; Primary school students.

1. Introduction

On July 24, 2021, the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education", which has received wide public attention, was made public in full by Xinhua News Agency, and the "double-reduction" policy has now been officially implemented. The policy aims to effectively reduce the burden of school students, emphasizing the role of schools as the main front, and aims to improve the chaos of extracurricular training through high-quality after-school services provided by schools, which can effectively reduce the burden of students and promoting their overall development and healthy growth. In particular, the third part of the document emphasizes that schools should improve the level of after-school services to meet the diverse needs of students. This also fully reflects the importance of the state for after-school services. However, after a semester of practice, the contradiction between the various subjects under the "double reduction" policy has become more and more prominent, and it is urgent to explore a more reasonable practice path.

2. Implications of the "Double Reduction" Policy for After-School Services in Elementary School

2.1. Adhere to the Basic Requirements of the Establishment of Moral Education

The fundamental purpose of education is to nurture people, and intellectual education is an important part of it. However, most schools and parents now regard "intellectual education" as the highest goal of education, and do not take into account the overall development of students.

Thus, the "double reduction" policy is student-oriented, which has put the status of students' physical and mental health in the first place. This will not only reduce the academic pressure on students but also return the time they spent on mechanical training. To solve the problem of early drop-off and pick-up for parents, there is a higher level of demand for quality after-school services.

Under the guidance of the concept of "foster virtue through education", we can integrate physical education, labor education, and aesthetic education into the new after-school service. I believe this will be beneficial to promoting its multi-level and all-round development. Therefore, besides the heavy schoolwork, those students in the compulsory education system are able to enrich their after-school life through physical and art education, encouraging them to achieve comprehensive development.

2.2. Curbing the Continued Spread of Out-of-school Training Chaos

In terms of the social function of education, equity in education is the "greatest virtue", and educational equity is also the greatest equity.[1] However, with the general increase in educational attainment and the pressure to advance to higher education, parents of elementary school students often enroll their students in a variety of remedial classes to improve their competitiveness. As a result, the affordability of each family has significantly affected the level of education that students can access. What's more, the inequity of education becomes more pronounced as schools, which are supposed to teach knowledge, lose their original function due to the general over-learning phenomenon. This has directly led to an exponential growth in the number of out-of-school training institutions and has also given rise to a series of out-of-school training chaos: institutions misrepresenting the information about teachers and asking for prices without taking into account market conditions This has not only harmed society but also degraded the nature of education.

In these situations, students have become the tools for further education, machines for solving problems, which might lessen their ability in other regions besides test-taking. Therefore, the introduction of the "double reduction" policy can curb this chaos at the root, while mixing sports, aesthetic education, and other extended teaching modules into the school after-school services, which will lead to a much more equitable education standard.

3. The Dilemma and Contradiction Between Multiple Subjects under the "Double Reduction" Policy

3.1. School Level: The Contradiction Between the Public Good of the Double Reduction Policy and the Lack of Funding Sources

After-school service is a significant part of the "double reduction" policy and a vital livelihood project in China. It was originally set up to solve the problem of parents being unable to pick up their children from school in time and is of strong public interest. As such, we cannot maintain school services by increasing the financial burden on parents. However, the "double reduction" policy has placed greater demands on schools' existing after-school services and has increased the amount of funding required.

There have been different voices in the community in response to this phenomenon. Some believe that the government should pay for the full cost of after-school services, but the vast majority of people agree that the government should subsidize them and that schools and parents should reasonably bear part of the running costs. A government-paid approach can indeed minimize the financial pressure on students' parents. However, in the context of China's reality, there are wide disparities in educational standards between different regions. The financial levels difference between governments in remote and developed areas may lead to a lack of funding for after-school services in remote primary schools. According to public service

theory, after-school services are quasi-public services, which should be subsidized by the government and charged at the discretion of primary and secondary schools [2]. Therefore, a combination of appropriate fees from the parents and government financial support can effectively expand the sources of funding for after-school services, which may ensure the quality of after-school services.

3.2. Teacher Level: The Tension Between the Responsibilities of Teachers and the Corresponding Remuneration

In the existing school structure, teachers are the mainstay of all school activities. That is to say, quality after-school services cannot be provided without the involvement of original teachers in schools. However, with the enactment of the "double reduction" policy, after-school services, which could have been coordinated through shifts before, have now become an obligation for teachers, resulting in a significant increase in their workload and responsibilities. In these situations, teachers are required to use their former non-working time to do more work with the same standard of salary. This has led directly to a steep decline in teachers' autonomy concerning after-school services, as well.

However, there are still two main strategies in place: one is to link the quality of after-school services to teachers' performance pay; the other is to link the selection of titles and other awards to teachers' participation in after-school services. The second of these strategies is very unreasonable, as those teachers who participate in after-school services under this reward system are largely 'forced' to do so, due to the inside-out mentality of award and merit assessment. [3] The first method, on the other hand, is more in line with teachers' psychological expectations. However, the question of how to set the amount of the subsidy still needs to be explored in practice at a later stage.

3.3. Student Level: The Contradiction Between Substantive Load Reduction and Disguised In-rolling

The original intention of the "double reduction" policy was to free students from the overload of extra-curricular classes and gain much more chances to try various activities besides studying tasks in their leisure time, thus greatly improving the students' overall quality. This should have been a boon to parents as their children would have more opportunities and access to quality education in a relatively fair educational environment. However, from the first term's practice, many parents, influenced by the inertia of the original 'in-roll', are still concerned that the school's 'load-shedding' initiative will cause their children to lose their original competitiveness in the future. Based on the after-school services provided by the school, some parents who are better off still hire private tutors or participate in non-compliant classes to help students with their over-learning needs. In this way, the burden on students will increase rather than decrease, making it difficult for the "double reduction" policy to be truly implemented.

4. Study on the Path of Optimizing After-school Services under the "Double Reduction" Policy

4.1. Improving the Academic Assessment Mechanism for Students and Eliminating the Score-based Approach

The main reason for the resistance to the implementation of the double reduction policy is that society still uses marks as a criterion for singly evaluating students' academic performance. This mechanical and schematic approach to education has curtailed the possibility of diversifying students' development, which has prevented the real value of the "double reduction" policy from being realized.

In order to alleviate this phenomenon, there are three major actors - society, schools, and students' parents - that we can look at as solutions. Firstly, the Ministry of Education and other social actors should change the incorrect concept of education evaluation and curb the spread of the "focus only on scores" culture in society. Accordingly, we should improve the system of process evaluation for students, to provide more possibilities and space for students' development. Secondly, schools should not only focus on the academic standards that students can achieve in the short term but should also optimize the curriculum and form of after-school services in conjunction with sports, aesthetic education, and other elements. This will provide a solid foundation for the implementation of the "double reduction" policy. Finally, parents of some students should not be overly anxious but should learn to respect the laws of physical and mental development of their children, arrange family education according to the psychological characteristics of children at different ages, and focus on the overall development of students.

4.2. Improving the Reward System for Teachers and Employing Professional Teachers from Outside the School

Through interviews and field observations, we can understand that the dissatisfaction of frontline teachers with the current implementation of after-school services is relatively common. Some of the teachers felt that the subjects they taught were not relevant to the content of the after-school service, and this situation has put a lot of pressure on them to prepare extra lessons. What's more, a majority of teachers find it difficult to get a fee that matches their work and is not motivated enough to participate in after-school services.

In response to this phenomenon, the state and other entities should improve the corresponding incentive mechanism so that teachers can be reported accordingly for their work, thus forming a virtuous cycle. In addition, for some of the more specialized after-school courses, professional teachers from outside the school could be hired to teach them. This will not only significantly improve the quality of after-school services received by students but will also help unemployed teachers who were originally engaged in after-school training to find employment again, thus killing two birds with one stone. In a good after-school atmosphere, teachers should also be able to grasp the students' needs and teach them according to their different characteristics, so that they can grow with them.

4.3. Seize the Opportunity of "Double Reduction" to Enhance the Quality of After-School Services

Before the "double reduction" policy was enacted, most of the after-school services provided by primary schools in China were characterized by a single form and a simple curriculum. In many countries around the world, the experience of after-school services is worthy of our reference. In Sweden, for example, students are systematically assessed in pedagogical and psychological terms before the after-school service is launched, and afterward, students from different years are brought together in a "leisure school" to carry out inclusive activities. [4] In Japan and the UK, a more mature system of after-school services was developed in the 1980s to help students improve their overall quality through a variety of extra-curricular activities and skills training.

Therefore, schools in China can also seize the opportunity of the "double reduction" policy to learn from the good experiences of other countries and develop school-based after-school services according to local conditions. At the same time, a small number of districts could also take the lead in trying to involve students of different ages in after-school activities to see if they have the desired effect. Overall, China's after-school service system still has much room for development, and schools need to continue to draw on their experience in the field to build a more mature and universal model.

5. Conclusion

In view of the current situation, China's after-school service model still has a series of contradictions and areas for improvement due to the relatively short time since the implementation of the "double reduction" policy. However, we can still protect school finances, improve the quality of after-school services and increase the efficiency of services for students by coordinating the efforts of the government, schools and teachers. With the continuous improvement of the after-school service model and its effectiveness, the "inward roll" of the community will be largely alleviated and the recognition of after-school services will continue to grow.

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