

Dilemmas and Solutions in the Implementation of the “Double Reduction” Policy in China

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Abstract: The rapid development of society intensifies the competition in the field of education, and the fierce competition is increasingly reflected in the stage of compulsory education. In order to effectively ease the academic pressure on students and build a healthier education ecosystem, China officially implemented the “double reduction” policy in July 2021. However, a series of problems have been exposed in the process of policy implementation. Applying the Smith theory model of policy formulation and implementation, this paper studies the problems in the implementation of the “double reduction” policy and puts forward targeted optimization suggestions, aiming at providing better ideas for the implementation of the “double reduction” policy in China. According to the analysis, it can be concluded that in the implementation of the “double reduction” policy, China needs to overcome obstacles such as the stereotypes about exam-oriented education, the deviation in the target group of policy implementation, and the poor performance of policy implementation agencies. In order to optimize the implementation of the policy, it is necessary to improve the supervision mechanism and establish a legal system in the “double reduction” policy system as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the publicity of educational concepts should be taken into account and the fair development of education should be promoted.

Keywords: double reduction, compulsory education, policy implementation

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of society, the demand for talents is getting higher and higher, and people’s desire for academic qualifications and famous schools is stronger than before. In this context, the fierce competition in education is gradually advanced to the stage of compulsory education. Therefore, in the compulsory education stage, students begin to participate in a large number of after-school tutoring classes, and at the same time, they have to deal with a large amount of schoolwork, which seriously affects the physical and mental health of students in the compulsory education stage. Besides, the premature increase of academic pressure not only causes a burden on students but also on families. At present, many families are scrambling to find better after-school tutoring classes for their children. The high investment in after-school tutoring classes undoubtedly increases the economic pressure on families. Therefore, to effectively alleviate the pressure on compulsory education students, help more families out of the trap of “involution”, and improve the happiness and satisfaction of people’s lives, the Ministry of Education of China issued the Directive

on Reducing the Excessive Burden on Primary and Secondary School Students in 1955. Since then, China has continued to actively explore operational and practical methods to reduce the burden on students. In July 2021, the General Offices of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and The State Council issued Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education. It is clearly proposed that the heavy homework burden and off-campus training burden of students in compulsory education should be effectively reduced (hereinafter referred to as the “double reduction” policy). The purpose is to fundamentally solve the problems that the Chinese people are dissatisfied with, such as the excessive academic pressure on students in compulsory education and the heavy burden of family education. On October 28, 2022, the Report of The State Council on Effectively Reducing the Burden of Heavy Homework and Off-Campus Training and Promoting the Comprehensive and Healthy Development of Students in Compulsory Education showed that the “double reduction” policy has achieved remarkable results in the past year. However, it is also pointed out that the implementation of the “double reduction” policy is complex and arduous, taking a long term to achieve [1], and there are still many problems and shortcomings in the current implementation process, such as insufficient discipline training supervision and the difficult implementation of after-school tutoring. Based on this situation, this paper uses the Smith model to analyze the problems encountered in the practical implementation of the “double reduction” policy from four parts, namely the policy itself, the implementation agency, the target group, and the implementation environment of the policy. Additionally, targeted solutions are put forward. In today’s society, the problem of excessive academic burden in the compulsory education stage has been widely discussed by the public. This paper deeply explores the root cause of the problem in the implementation process of the “double reduction” policy, which not only arouses thinking but also provides new ideas for the solution to the problem.

2. Dilemmas in the Implementation of the “Double Reduction” Policy

2.1. Stereotypes about Exam-Oriented Education

In ancient China, people regarded the imperial examination as one of the most important things in life. In modern times, the concept of “knowledge changes destiny” has been deeply rooted in people’s hearts. However, due to the long-term structural imbalance of high-quality educational resources in society [2], “knowledge changes destiny” has been gradually changed into “exams change destiny” and “scores determine destiny”. After the implementation of the “double reduction” policy, such concepts will not be changed immediately, and the test-oriented education concept that unilaterally emphasizes the enrollment rate and achievement is still deep-rooted [3]. There is no denying that exam-oriented education does have its significance of existence and development in China’s education system and the entrance examination. Large-scale examinations such as the college entrance examination are needed to provide a relatively fair talent selection mechanism for society, so exam-oriented education is destined to be a part of China’s education system. However, students are forced to bear too much academic pressure too early due to too much emphasis on exam-oriented education and excessive improvement in the position of exam-oriented education in the overall education system. Moreover, ignoring everything except student achievement and taking exam-oriented education as the final goal of the entire education are also causes of this situation. Although the “double reduction” policy is being implemented in China, the change of social stereotypes takes a long term and is full of difficulties, since the introduction of an education policy can not completely solve the problem.

2.2. Deviation in the Target Group of the Policy Implementation

China has always had the problem of uneven quality education resources. There are areas with better education development, schools with better teaching results, and classes with better student scores. Parents are competing for better educational resources so that their children can get higher grades. Therefore, although the “double reduction” policy has been implemented, the focus is on the regulation of after-school tutoring institutions. Although after-school tutoring institutions need to bear certain responsibilities in the disorderly competition for educational resources, students and parents are the real demand sides. The current “double reduction” policy cannot meet the needs of parents who intend to obtain better quality educational resources. Therefore, it is difficult to implement the “double reduction” policy in many areas. Such competition is also affected by the “theater effect” [4]. In a theater, if the audience in the front row chooses to stand up to watch the play, they will block the audience in the back row. At this time, although the audience in the back row is unwilling to stand up to watch the play, they have to stand up to watch the play in order to obtain a more “equal” experience. As a result, the entire audience of the theater either voluntarily or involuntarily chooses to stand up and watch the play. The “theater effect” in education is more amplified. Some children get higher grades through after-school tutoring, and other children’s parents had to send their children to after-school tutoring as well, in order to ensure their children receive a “fair” education, stand on the same starting line with other children, and get higher grades. At present, the competition for educational resources is becoming more and more fierce. Although the “double reduction” policy is implemented, parents and children are not willing to remain backward, so on the whole, there are still a lot of extracurricular subject tutoring classes in various forms of management.

2.3. Poor Performance of Policy Implementation Agencies

The implementation of the “double reduction” policy is significantly affected by the understanding and implementation ability of the executive agencies and their members [5]. At present, among the overall policy measures of the “double reduction” policy, the part that requires the most participation of the executive agencies is mainly the inspection of extra-curricular tutoring institutions. However, such measures have only played a role in big cities. In relatively backward cities, enforcement agencies are less proactive in implementing policies, inspections are generally conducted after reports are received, and the quality of inspections is also low. In the face of sudden inspections, many after-school tutoring agencies can get away with extremely simple tricks. At the same time, few enforcement agencies will take the initiative to inspect after-school tutoring agencies when they have not received relevant reports. Such a policy implementation mode with low initiative undoubtedly brings living space for many after-school tutoring institutions under the policy. In fact, it also blocks the further landing of the “double reduction” policy, resulting in different levels of implementation of the “double reduction” policy across the country.

3. Optimization of the Implementation of the “Double Reduction” Policy

3.1. Establishing a Nationwide Public Service System for High-Quality Compulsory Education

An important way to fundamentally reduce students’ excessive learning pressure is to comprehensively narrow the differences in inter-school education within the region, well operate every school at the doorstep, and end the disorderly competition for high-quality education resources. It is possible to promote the sharing of excellent principals, professional teachers, and high-quality high school enrollment opportunities and resources through exchange and job rotation

and integrated education [6], as well as the new mechanism of fair allocation of high-quality resources such as the balanced allocation of high-quality high school enrollment indicators to ordinary middle schools in the region, so as to attract students to stay in schools around them.

3.2. Establishing a Family-School-Community Mechanism of Cooperation and Trust

First, it is important to intensify the publicity of the “double reduction” policy. Although the “double reduction” policy has gradually gained popularity, there are still quite a few people who have not yet realized the connotation and value of students’ burden reduction. Second, the mutual trust between family, school, and community should be enhanced. Schools should protect parents’ right to know, speak, and participate, thereby winning mutual trust between schools and families starting with understanding and consensus. Third, there is a need to build a real education community [7]. Although families, schools, and communities play different roles in young people’s growth, they have the same goal and pursuit in the process of family-school-community cooperation. Young people are the common educational objects of families, schools, and communities, and promoting the all-round development of young people is the goal of and the bond of the family-school-community education community.

3.3. Incorporating the “Double Reduction” Policy into the Legal System

In the law, the responsibilities of the government and education departments should be further clarified, and the management of the “double reduction” plan implementation should be incorporated into the orderly regulation. Meanwhile, an organizational system with an integration of clear responsibilities and powers should be established [2]. Moreover, it is necessary to continue to deepen the reform of compulsory education, change the traditional notion of exam-oriented education, optimize the allocation mode of educational resources, and provide high-quality education for each region as much as possible. Most of the content related to burden reduction is scattered in policy documents [8], lacking special legislation, which is likely to lead to the mismatch between the policy design and the actual implementation of the “double reduction” policy, thus affecting the authority and effectiveness of the policy.

3.4. Establishing a Complete Supervision Mechanism

It is necessary to establish a complete supervision system and incorporate the supervision and inspection of “double reduction” into daily work so that supervisory institutions can take the initiative to carry out supervision activities, rather than relying solely on unilateral reports from the masses. At the same time, the “double reduction” policy requires strengthening supervision, inspection, publicity, and guidance while unblocking the channels for the masses to supervise and report. There is a need to activate social forces and let the public participate in the supervision and management of the “double reduction” policy implementation in an organized and planned way. Besides, online public opinion can be made use of to actively grasp people’s attitudes towards the implementation of the “double reduction” policy [9]. The scientific formulation of extracurricular tutoring policies cannot be separated from the understanding of public opinion. At the same time, normative documents are supposed to be issued according to the actual situation and relevant laws and regulations to vigorously enhance the legal rationality of regulatory departments. It is necessary to rectify various chaotic situations under the implementation of the “double reduction” policy so that there are laws and evidence to follow [10].

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the implementation of the “double reduction” policy has actually reduced a lot of academic burden for students in the compulsory education stage. In many areas, the enforcement of the “double reduction” policy has been significantly reflected. However, the existing problems in practice have greatly affected the further play of the effect of the “double reduction” policy. The traditional view of exam-oriented education still exists in society, and parents are forced to take part in the exam because of the uneven distribution of high-quality education resources. As a result, the current “double reduction” policy cannot fundamentally solve the problem of excessive competition in the current education. In order to make the “double reduction” policy work, first, it is necessary to change the uneven distribution of high-quality educational resources in society and further change the traditional educational concepts in society through publicity. At the same time, the current implementation of the “double reduction” policy is mainly aimed at education and training institutions and schools, ignoring the leading role of parents in children’s education. It is necessary to further face up to the main role of the family in the overall process of children’s education and clarify the subject of policy implementation. In the current implementation process of the “double reduction” policy, the shortage of a complete supervision mechanism has a great impact on the implementation effect of the policy. The supervision system for the “double reduction” policy can be improved by strengthening daily inspection and setting up supervision teams. Only by better implementing the “double reduction” policy can China make better practices in the subsequent reform of the education system.

Since the situation of different regions in China is different, it is impossible to use the same theory to explain the problems existing in each region. Therefore, in future research on the “double reduction” policy, case analysis, field research methods, questionnaires, interviews, etc. can be applied to get a more detailed understanding of the regional situation and provide more detailed suggestions for the implementation of the “double reduction” policy in specific regions.

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