

After-School Service Implementation Under China's Double Reduction Policy: Evidence from a Rural Primary School in Zhejiang Province

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Abstract

China's Double Reduction Policy, introduced in 2021, required public primary schools to provide high-quality after-school services to reduce students' reliance on private tutoring and ease the overall academic burden. As an important adjustment in educational governance, the policy faces prominent and often neglected challenges when implemented in resource-constrained rural schools. Based on interview data from two school leaders, five teachers, ten students and ten parents, this qualitative case study explores the practice of after-school services in a rural primary school in Zhejiang Province. The findings show a series of interrelated problems: single and insufficient service content, long-term insufficient funding, inadequate teacher compensation and professional support, limited participation of external instructors, insufficient physical facilities, and unsatisfactory basic logistics such as food supply. This study argues that these problems are not only caused by the lack of school-level resources, but also by structural inconsistencies in policy design, funding allocation, teacher management and curriculum development support. Without systematic reforms to address these interrelated aspects, after-school services may become a burden-shifting measure rather than a real strategy to reduce burdens. Finally, this paper puts forward targeted policy suggestions for educational authorities at all levels.

Keywords

Double Reduction Policy, after-school services, rural education, China, educational policy implementation, qualitative case study, migrant worker families

1. Introduction

In July 2021, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Extracurricular Training for Students at the Stage of Compulsory Education, known as the Double Reduction Policy. This policy is a major measure in China's educational governance. By prohibiting for-profit tutoring institutions from offering core academic courses to compulsory education students on weekends, legal holidays and winter and summer vacations, it has curbed the development of the off-campus training industry to a large extent, and responded to social concerns about students' excessive academic burden, rising family training costs and the increasing commercialization of educational opportunities.

A core way for the policy to make up for the withdrawal of private tutoring is to require public schools to provide compulsory after-school services. Under the new framework, public primary schools need to offer standardized after-school programs to extend students' on-campus time to match the local average working hours, so as to meet the childcare needs of working parents, and provide homework guidance and non-academic quality development activities. This arrangement aims to realize both educational functions—reducing excessive academic pressure and enriching students' development experience—and social welfare functions,

ensuring that children of working parents have a safe, managed and educationally valuable environment in the afternoon and early evening.

The policy's goal is in line with the international consensus that the quality of children's after-school time is crucial to their growth. Mahoney, Larson and Eccles (2005) pointed out in their basic research on organized activities that structured and purposeful after-school participation has a positive impact on adolescents' social, cognitive and emotional development. Similarly, the Afterschool Alliance (2014) confirmed that well-implemented after-school programs can improve academic performance, reduce risky behaviors and support working families. The Double Reduction Policy implicitly draws on this concept, treating after-school services not only as custody arrangements, but also as developmental resources.

However, as Young and Lewis (2015) emphasized, the implementation of educational policies is rarely linear, and the gap between policy intentions and institutional capabilities is often the most critical part of reform. This is particularly prominent in resource-constrained rural schools. The requirement to provide high-quality after-school services is a qualitative change in school functions rather than a gradual adjustment. For schools that are already struggling to maintain basic educational quality due to insufficient funds and staffing, the Double Reduction Policy has added responsibilities beyond their current capacity. Bray (2009) also found in a cross-national study of off-campus training that government regulation of private tutoring without fully strengthening public school capacity often transfers rather than solves the underlying demand for supplementary education.

This paper conducts a qualitative case study on the implementation of after-school services in a rural primary school in Zhejiang Province. The school is selected because it represents a common but under-researched type of institution: a long-term resource-scarce rural school serving migrant workers' children, located in a manufacturing-intensive area, and far from the administrative centers where educational policies are formulated. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with two school leaders, five teachers, ten students and ten parents. The findings reveal continuous and interrelated problems in all aspects of after-school services: shallow educational content of services, structural insufficiency of funding mechanisms, low teacher participation caused by inadequate compensation, limited ability to employ external instructors, lack of curriculum development support, insufficient physical facilities, and inadequate food supply during extended school hours. The core view is that the sustainable improvement of after-school service quality requires not separate administrative adjustments, but the systematic coordination of funds, management, teachers' working conditions and curriculum support system.

2. Policy and Institutional Background

2.1. The Double Reduction Policy: Goals and Mechanisms

The Double Reduction Policy is derived from the recognition that excessive educational competition in China has triggered widespread social anxiety and widened economic and educational inequality. In recent years, the unchecked expansion of the private off-campus training industry has turned high-intensity supplementary tutoring into a basic requirement for students to gain advantages in academic competitions, which inherently advantages children from wealthy families with sufficient financial resources, while placing low-income families under heavy financial pressure and further consolidating the gap in educational opportunities, undermining the fairness and public welfare nature of basic education. Zhang and Bray (2020) documented this trend in a longitudinal study of off-campus training in China, showing that by the late 2010s, private training participation was almost universal among urban middle-class families, bringing huge family expenses and exacerbating educational inequality. In many urban and suburban areas, students spent a lot of time on formal schooling,

training and homework, leaving little time for rest, physical exercise or unstructured development, which severely damaged their physical and mental health, caused chronic fatigue and psychological stress, and hindered their all-round and personalized growth.

The policy responds through two parallel and complementary mechanisms. On the restrictive side, it strictly prohibits for-profit institutions from providing academic subject training on weekends, holidays and winter/summer vacations, and imposes comprehensive regulations on institution establishment, fee standards, teaching content and teacher qualifications to curb the overheated and disorderly training market, preventing the industry from fueling unnecessary educational anxiety and vicious academic competition. On the constructive side, it requires public schools to expand and improve after-school services, including homework guidance and quality development activities in art, sports and literature, to meet students' diverse learning needs and reduce families' reliance on private training. Provincial governments are mainly responsible for ensuring financial sustainability through government subsidies and standardized family fees (GOCC & GOSC, 2021). The policy also clearly proposes to incorporate teachers' contributions to after-school services into the formal systems of professional evaluation, recognition and remuneration, acknowledging that the success of service provision fundamentally depends on teachers' active participation and professional ability, so as to fully motivate teachers to devote themselves to after-school services, balance their extra workload, and guarantee the long-term stable operation and effective implementation of the policy, ultimately promoting the healthy and coordinated development of basic education.

2.2. Institutional Profile of the Case School

The research object is a public primary school founded in 1994 in a rural township of Zhejiang Province. The school has a certain scale of students and teachers, and a relatively fixed campus area. Since its establishment, the school has been rated as a school with relatively weak educational quality by the local education bureau, and has not reached the average educational quality standard of the county for a long time. This rating has a direct impact on the school's finance: the school cannot obtain performance-related bonuses from the local education bureau, and the annual operating budget can only barely cover daily expenses.

The student composition of the school is closely related to the economic characteristics of the surrounding township, which is famous for the children's clothing manufacturing industry. Most students are children of migrant workers who come to work in factories. Factory working hours make parents have very little time to support their children's learning at home or obtain educational resources independently. Hu and West (2023) found in a study of migrant worker families in Zhejiang that such parents often have "educational helplessness"—time shortage, information gap and unfamiliarity with school systems, which greatly limit their ability to support their children's schooling. Different from urban families with mature social networks, migrant worker families in this township often lack informal support or family help.

Before the Double Reduction Policy, many families relied on private training centers near the school as a practical custody method. Students went from school to training centers to wait for their parents to finish work, regardless of the educational quality of the centers. The Double Reduction Policy broke this model, but did not fully replace its custody and basic educational functions.

2.3. School Leadership and Governance Structure

The school adopts a highly centralized management structure, with administrative decision-making power concentrated in the principal. Regular meetings are mainly used to convey instructions rather than collect teachers' opinions or carry out collaborative problem-solving. Teachers reported that new policies are conveyed without sufficient explanation, and the school culture emphasizes compliance rather than professional initiative.

This management model has an important impact on the implementation of after-school services. Krogh, Nonaka and Rechsteiner (2012) believed that effective educational innovation relies on distributed leadership and teachers' active professional participation, because teaching work is inherently knowledge-intensive and context-dependent. When teachers are structurally excluded from the meaningful participation in program design and policy interpretation, their internal motivation decreases, and the implementation tends to meet the minimum requirements rather than pursue substantive quality. Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008) also concluded in an influential review of school leadership research that the impact of leadership on student learning is mainly realized through teachers' motivation and working conditions, which means that the management culture here will restrict the quality of after-school services regardless of other resource inputs.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design. The case study method is suitable for exploring complex contemporary phenomena in real situations, especially when contextual factors constitute the core of the research object (Yin, 2018). The implementation of after-school services cannot be understood only through quantitative summary; its operation logic comes from the interaction among policy requirements, institutional conditions, professional culture and the real experience of students, teachers and families.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two school leaders (principal and vice principal), five teachers, ten students and ten parents. It is methodologically important to use multiple stakeholder groups: different actors are in different positions in the after-school service system, and their experiences and feelings of demands and results are different. Triangulating from multiple perspectives can form a more comprehensive and internally verified understanding of the program operation. Separate interview outlines were formulated for each stakeholder group, with questions designed to collect experience, satisfaction and structural supporting or restrictive factors.

All interviews were analyzed by thematic method. Recurring patterns were identified, sorted into conceptual themes, and interpreted combined with the policy framework and existing research. The whole process abides by the ethical standards of anonymity and confidentiality, and no identifying information of individuals or specific schools is disclosed.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, each interview was audio-recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours to avoid information loss. The thematic analysis was carried out in two rounds: the first round involved open coding to extract initial concepts from the interview texts, and the second round focused on axial coding to connect related concepts into coherent themes, such as "policy implementation barriers" and "stakeholder demand mismatch". The case school was selected purposefully for its typicality in implementing after-school services, covering both academic tutoring and extracurricular activities, which helps to reflect the overall operation status of after-school services in general primary and secondary schools.

4. Findings

4.1. Homogenous and Educationally Impoverished Service Content

The most commonly reported problem among all stakeholders is the single and insufficient educational content of after-school services. Although the policy requires providing diverse quality development activities in art, sports and literature, the main activity in the service is supervised homework completion in ordinary classrooms. A small number of club activities

such as dance, art and reading have been carried out, but participants reported that these activities are carried out irregularly, lack resources and are marginal to the whole program.

A prominent problem is the simultaneous reduction of homework volume. Since the Double Reduction Policy requires schools to limit the amount of homework, many students finish their homework long before the end of the after-school service, resulting in a long period of unstructured time. Some parents mentioned that children have to stay in the classroom even after finishing all homework. Some students described feeling sleepy during the service, which vividly reflects fatigue, low participation and lack of meaningful activities.

Durlak and Weissberg (2007) confirmed through a large number of meta-analyses that the way young people spend their after-school time has a significant impact on their social, emotional and academic development, and well-designed after-school programs can produce obvious positive effects. Vandell, Reisner and Pierce (2007) further showed in a longitudinal study of low-income children that participating in high-quality after-school programs is related to the improvement of learning habits, task persistence and social competence over time. The opposite conclusion is also obvious: poorly designed programs that cannot make students participate in meaningful activities are not only a missed opportunity, but also a waste of development time. In this case, after-school time has become the opposite of “key cultivation”—long-term stay at school without purposeful development investment.

4.2. Insufficient Funding

Interviews with school leaders show that there is a fundamental mismatch between the school’s income and the expenditure needed to provide high-quality services. The main expenditures of the school include teachers’ remuneration for after-school services and student snack supply.

If the school wants to improve the service quality, such as building special activity venues, purchasing teaching equipment, carrying out teacher professional training and improving teachers’ remuneration to enhance motivation, it needs a lot of additional investment, which is far beyond the current financial capacity of the school.

4.3. Inadequate Teacher Compensation and Professional

Both teachers and school leaders clearly reported that teachers have low enthusiasm for after-school services, which is also indirectly confirmed by students’ descriptions of lackluster services and teachers’ management-oriented behavior. Teachers said that participating in after-school services is a mandatory task without sufficient compensation, and it is not linked to an effective professional recognition system.

The Double Reduction Policy clearly stipulates that teachers’ performance in after-school services should be included in professional title evaluation, recognition and performance salary distribution (GOCC & GOSC, 2021). However, in this school, the remuneration for after-school services is only slightly higher than that of daily teaching, and it is not linked to professional title evaluation or promotion standards. Ruan and Cheng (2022) pointed out that this is a systemic contradiction in the implementation of the Double Reduction Policy. The policy virtually requires teachers to bear a lot of extra work without corresponding compensation or professional status improvement, which forms a hidden burden transfer from students to teachers.

Based on self-determination theory, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) found in a study of Norwegian teachers that teachers’ work pressure and emotional exhaustion are most strongly predicted by time shortage, lack of management support and inconsistency between values and work—all of which exist in the after-school service environment of this school. When the professional work required to provide high-quality programs is carried out in an environment of material and symbolic devaluation, low enthusiasm is not a personal problem, but a rational institutional response. The local education bureau has issued teacher welfare protection

measures under the Double Reduction Policy, but these have not changed the actual working conditions of teachers in this school, which is a typical “implementation gap” between policy formulation and front-line practice (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002).

4.4. Limited Involvement of External and Part-time Instructors

The Double Reduction Policy expects to form a diversified service team, with school teachers as the main body and qualified external professionals from art institutions, universities, science institutions and community centers as supplements. However, in the research school, the participation of external instructors is very limited and mostly passive. The vice principal said that the school only employs external instructors when students’ demand for specific activities exceeds the capacity of internal teachers, which is rarely met in practice due to the lack of a standardized employment mechanism and sufficient budget.

Therefore, the teaching work almost entirely depends on the existing classroom teachers, many of whom are required to carry out activities outside their professional fields. This leads to double deficiencies: students cannot obtain professional subject guidance, and teachers have to undertake teaching work they are not trained for. Lauer et al. (2006) found in a meta-analysis of after-school programs that the quality of programs is closely related to the participation of professional qualified instructors, and the cross-field work of general teachers is difficult to effectively improve students’ performance. Therefore, the current staffing model of the school is not only suboptimal, but also structurally inconsistent with the high-quality program expected by the policy.

4.5. Inadequate Physical Facilities and Learning Environments

Insufficient physical facilities have been a persistent constraint on service quality in various activities. Students are mainly arranged in ordinary classrooms during after-school services, including so-called activity-based club time. The school lacks a closed gymnasium or covered sports venue, making physical activities dependent on weather conditions. Some students hope to have an indoor sports venue so that they can exercise on rainy days.

Musical instruments, art supplies, scientific materials and other equipment are either unavailable or insufficient in quantity. The principal admitted that capital construction investment is not feasible under the current budget constraints. Zhu and Li (2019) found in a national survey of rural primary school facilities in China that the lack of special activity venues is the most commonly mentioned obstacle to curriculum diversification in rural compulsory education, and the facility gap is more obvious in schools serving migrant workers or low-income groups. The physical environment directly limits the teaching scope of after-school services: even if teachers want to carry out active, project-based or creative activities, they are restricted by only having ordinary classrooms where students have spent more than six hours of formal schooling.

4.6. Inadequate Basic Student Welfare

Students stay on campus from the end of daily school to the end of after-school services, which lasts for several hours and requires basic nutritional support. However, the school’s food supply is single and simple, with limited budget, which is generally considered insufficient by all participants. Students reported feeling hungry during the afternoon service, and students felt hungry in the afternoon and couldn’t concentrate. The school prohibits students from bringing their own food, so there is no way for families to provide supplementary meals. This problem shows that the initial implementation of the after-school service model is too limited: extending the school day without ensuring basic student welfare creates an environment where students are at school but not effectively supported for development.

5. Discussion

Taking school-level service fees as the main financial source and supplemented by provincial subsidies, and failing to ensure that sufficient subsidies are allocated to resource-constrained rural schools: well-resourced urban schools use better financial and institutional resources to provide higher-quality services.

The problem of teacher management exacerbates this trend. When the professional work required to provide high-quality after-school services is imposed on teachers without sufficient compensation or recognition, the policy virtually requires teachers to support school compliance through personal efforts. Based on Spillane et al.'s (2002) framework of policy implementation as a cognitive process, it is noteworthy that teachers in this study regard the after-school service requirement as an administrative burden rather than a professional opportunity, which reflects the actual implementation environment rather than personal attitude towards the policy. To change this situation, we must change the conditions that cause it.

Young and Lewis (2015) believed that the sustainable implementation of education policies requires continuous investment in professional capacity, consistent incentive mechanisms and realistic assessment of institutional basic conditions. All three requirements are far from being met in the research school. Until they are systematically addressed—as basic prerequisites rather than supplementary measures—after-school services in similar schools will remain institutional compliance rather than real educational services.

6. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This study documents a complete and interrelated set of implementation problems in after-school services in a rural primary school serving migrant workers' children in Zhejiang Province. Although the case study method cannot obtain statistically universal conclusions, the structural problems found—long-term insufficient funding, excessive teachers' work burden, insufficient facilities, limited external cooperation, lack of curriculum support and neglect of basic student welfare—are likely to be common in similar schools. Therefore, the findings have implications for policy design and management beyond this school.

Based on the analysis, and on the premise of fully affirming the positive role of after-school services in relieving family education burdens, promoting students' all-round development and optimizing the educational ecology, the following specific policy suggestions are put forward in a constructive manner:

1. The government should establish stable, sufficient and special funding channels for after-school services in rural and resource-constrained schools. It is advisable to further standardize the use and management of service fees, so as to better ensure that funds can be fully used for improving the quality of after-school services and better meet the actual needs of schools and students.
2. The policy requirement of incorporating after-school service performance into teachers' professional title evaluation and performance salary should be implemented at the local level as soon as possible. Timely translation of central policy guidelines into specific and operable local practices will help enhance teachers' sense of gain, recognition and trust, and further consolidate the legitimacy of schools in carrying out after-school services.
3. Regional education authorities should formulate and promote practical curriculum frameworks, professional training programs and resource kits for after-school services. These supportive measures can provide effective guidance and help for schools, especially those with insufficient independent research and development capabilities, enabling them to better design high-quality and distinctive after-school programs.

4. Special funding should be set up to enable schools to employ qualified external instructors and carry out community cooperation. Building a sound institutional system at the regional and school levels is an important guarantee for realizing the policy vision of professional after-school programs, which can effectively make up for the shortage of professional resources at the school level.

5. The policy should clarify the minimum welfare standards for extended school days—including nutritional supply, physical activity venues and rest time—and allocate corresponding budgets. Clarifying and implementing these standards will help better protect students' physical and mental health and lay a solid foundation for the sustainable development of after-school services.

6. Education authorities should take school management structure as an important part of service quality. Encouraging teachers to participate in the design and improvement of after-school programs can give full play to their professional advantages and enthusiasm, which is conducive to continuously improving service quality and better matching the needs of students and parents. Therefore, supporting a more participatory management model is a reasonable and important policy goal.

The Double Reduction Policy is a necessary and historically significant measure to adjust the relationship between schooling, family life and educational competition in China. Its long-term success depends on whether the institutional conditions needed to provide real high-quality after-school services can be established in all types of schools in China. For rural schools serving migrant workers' children, it is particularly important to gradually improve the supporting institutional conditions. Narrowing the gap between policy expectations and institutional reality, and continuously optimizing the guarantee system, should be the core task of the further promotion of the reform, so as to let after-school services truly benefit every student and family.

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