

Shadow Education and Parental Involvement: A Study on the Double Reduction Policy in China

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Abstract: In 2021, the Chinese government issued a policy to ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education. This policy is also known as the "double reduction policy". This study will review the research on shadow education and parental participation and consider shadow education as a component of parental involvement in China. It also exemplifies the paradox between the act of reducing the burdens placed on students by education policies and the intense competitiveness in exams, which is seen to be a key component of shadow education. Parents actively seek shadow education alternatives and are vocal about their dissatisfaction with the policy. This study will assist researchers in studying the implementation of the double reduction policy, understanding the worry and anxiety parents experience, and making recommendations for future policy modifications.

Keywords: shadow education, education involvement, education equity

1. Introduction

In 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Students at the Compulsory Education Stage, which called for the burden of homework and off-campus training for students at the compulsory education stage to be reduced. The policy required that the volume of subject-based out-of-school activity be limited, the participation in extracurricular training be reduced, and over-standard and over-advanced training be strictly prohibited. As the "No. 1 project" of the 2021 education supervision work, the policy is a crucial step taken by the Chinese government to encourage the return of education to its true essence and comprehensive growth.

The shadow education business has suffered dramatically as a result of this policy. According to [1], "Shadow education is a set of educational activities outside formal schooling and are designed to enhance the student's formal school career". Parents are the selectors of shadow education and the bearers of the costs. So shadow education is also one of the forms of parental education involvement. The implementation of this regulation has affected parents involved in their children's educational process.

Scholars worldwide have performed extensive research on shadow education and parental education involvement. However, most Chinese studies were carried out later and in a limited number of fields. More in-depth investigations are required. Furthermore, China's latest situation after the

"double reduction policy" has not been studied quite well for various reasons, including the relatively short implementation period and the sensitivity of the data. This article aims to examine how the policy is being implemented and what parents think about it and make recommendations for improving the educational system.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Shadow Education

2.1.1 Concepts

"Shadow education", also known as tutoring, complementary education, private supplementary tutoring, or extra fee-paying classes, has been studied since the 1980s. In 1992 Stevenson and Baker, in their study of extracurricular tuition in Japan, introduced "shadow education" as a separate educational concept, considering it an educational activity outside of mainstream schooling. The primary purpose of shadow education is to improve academic performance in mainstream schools [2]. Mark Bray and Iveta Silova then further standardized "shadow education" in three ways: "private", "academic", and "supplementary" [3].

Academic: It should be restricted to mainstream subjects.

Supplementary: Shadow education is an additional educational activity outside of formal schooling. It takes place after school hours, frequently on weekends [4].

Peng Pai introduced "shadow education" to China in 2008. He characterized Bray's concept as "privately funded academic supplemental education outside of mainstream education aimed at elementary and secondary school pupils" [5]. Researchers such as [6] and [7] have primary connotations consistent with [8] and others argue that non-subject-based education can assist students in choosing schools and should be categorized as shadow education. Several hobby-based competition certificates are equal to academic competition certificates in mainland China. Also, some students may be admitted with lower test scores due to their interest in specialities. Hobbies can also help students stand out while applying for schools' independent admissions. Considering those mentioned above, this paper's definition of shadow education covers non-subject-based training activities like art and sports.

2.1.2 Parental education involvement

[9] underlined the family's effect on children's and adolescents' academic success. The term "parent" is a person in a parental role, including immediate family members, foster parents, and other guardians. [10] proposed that it should include parental involvement at home and school. [11] provided a broader view, stating that it includes parenting, nurturing, and regular involvement with school-related activities such as learning at home, home-school communication, and school activities. [12] breaks down parenting involvement into six areas: parenting, exchange of volunteer activities, family learning, decision-making, working with the community, and integrating services and resources to facilitate student learning at school and home.

Moreover, parents' educational involvement varies culturally. According to [13], Asians and Pacific Islanders have lower levels of family dialogue, school communication, and school participation. However, they show a higher level of family supervision.

Researchers represented by [14] [15] have primarily focused on constructing theoretical models while ignoring particular educational involvement practices. Given China's high participation rate in extracurricular activities, this behaviour can be regarded as education involvement. For example,

choosing extracurricular classes for their kids and paying extracurricular fees are particular actions of parental participation in education.

3. Methods and Methodology

In most previous studies, extracurricular tuition was studied quantitatively and qualitatively in several regions. However, they ignored the fact that shadow education plays more than one role. The shadow education industry is also fast changing owing to policy changes. Therefore, research information should be kept updated.

This paper will examine how the government influences educational practices through policies and how parents respond to education reform. So, this research contains three elements. The first step is to grasp the national education policy and the gap between ideal and reality. Second, to understand shadow education's role in the conflict between policy requirements and schools' fierce competition. In this way, we can better understand why parents choose shadow education. Thirdly, to obtain information about parents' involvement in shadow education under the double reduction policy and their attitudes towards it. The first part will mainly collect relevant information using the literature reading method to examine the external environment in which shadow education is generated. The second and third parts will conduct questionnaire surveys and interviews.

3.1 Choosing a research site

The cases' significance and representativeness should be considered, as should the survey's convenience and practicality. To better understand why parents choose shadow education, how the double reduction policy affects them, and how parents reacted when the government halted extracurricular subject training, this study should select the group with the highest demand for and reliance on shadow education.

X Primary School and W middle School are typical elite schools. X Primary School is a public model elementary school. Most students are from the middle class. The W middle School performed well on exams, with 76.39% of students passing the general high school entrance exam in 2021[16], compared to the average of 52.33 percent [17]. Both schools are academically outstanding in the area, and the students' demand for shadow education satisfies our requirements. Because shadow education is now prohibited due to the double reduction policy, and the topic is a little private. A trusting relationship between the respondents and the researcher is required to acquire more in-depth data. The author interned and volunteered at X Primary School, developing good relationships with two classes of pupils. The author graduated from W Middle School and remained in touch with several teachers who aided in gathering information. We chose these classes to distribute the questionnaire for more reliable results.

3.2 Interview

Interviewees were chosen using two sampling strategies: maximum difference sampling and typical case sampling. We selected typical representative cases through questionnaire data and teachers' recommendations. The influence of students' age, gender, and parents' gender on educational involvement was also considered during the case selection process.

We questioned 20 people in total, with their kids being of the same gender and age ratio. However, we interviewed only two fathers and eight mothers. The gender ratio of parents was unbalanced due to the different parental roles and the greater participation of mothers in education.

Because of the sensitive data involved, only one parent agreed to tape the interview.

3.3 Survey

This survey consists of four fill-in-the-blank questions designed to gather information about the number of subjects students participate in shadow education before and after the double reduction policy and the cost of shadow education before and after the double reduction. The survey will show the shadow education participation, the impact of the double reduction policy, and other data. The surveys were given to 72 X Primary School parents and 93 W Middle School parents. A total of 164 questionnaires were gathered, but one parent of a W Middle School student could not finish the survey.

4. Policy Tendency and School Entrance Exams

To alleviate students' academic burdens at the turn of the twenty-first century, education authorities-imposed requirements on school hours and after-school assignments, which prompted investors to focus on out-of-school resources and facilitated the development of out-of-school training institutions [18]. The policy reflects a tendency to reduce the difficulty of teaching and examinations. However, there have been no significant modifications to how school entrance exams are conducted. Students are assigned to the nearest secondary school unless they can pass the independent test administered by a good public or private school. Because of this, it is challenging for them to transfer to a good high school and later to a good university. To compete for excellent learning resources throughout junior high school, some students engage in a "school choosing" process. They use various means to obtain admission to a school with the best education resources instead of the nearby school. There are three primary ways to accomplish this:

1. With financial capital, by purchasing a school district house in a high-quality school
2. Through participating in the public schools' independent admission procedure
3. By taking the private school's entrance tests

The second and third are more related to shadow education. Private schools, in particular, have higher-quality educational resources and greater enrollment independence, which results in more stable student quality, making them the primary competition goal for students and parents. Secondary school students also worry that they will fail the high school entrance exams because only about half of the students who take them pass.

To ensure high-quality education and promote educational equity, policies require schools to minimize students' burdens continually. However, competition for primary "school choosing" and the fear of secondary school triage exist, contradicting the burden-reduction program. Shadow education has shifted academic competition away from the school and toward the community, providing kids with an advantage over their peers through competition outside school.

This demonstrates the importance parents attach to academic achievement as well as the lack of acceptance and recognition of vocational education.

5. The role of shadow education

When policies promote educational equity by cutting school hours, reducing homework, restricting school tuition, and lowering the difficulty of examinations, they also show a reduction in schools' effect on students, a reduction in schools' educational function, and a reduction in education's testing role. However, if the pressure on students to go to better schools exists and these needs continue, capital will replace schools in performing these functions.

(1) Academic performance enhancement

[19]stated that shadow education aims to improve academic performance in their definition of shadow education. Many parents believe that increased study time and professional tutoring will help students perform better academically. [20]observed that students who receive extracurricular tutoring

do not perform significantly better on final exams than other students. However, choosing shadow education for their children provides psychological comfort to parents. Some parents see this additional expense as a reflection of their love for their children, so the children will not be regretful when they grow up.

(2) Information gathering: When major exams are scheduled, large off-campus training organizations will arrange for dedicated workers to gather and collate exam questions and predict score lines. They will rank the outcomes of major schools based on the number of high-scoring students, the number of people who passed the test, and the percentage of passing the test—providing educational information while promoting educational anxiety.

(3) Customized teaching: Customized teaching can be classified into three categories: small class teaching, levelled teaching, and customized content. This compensates for the school's large class size teaching inadequacies.

(4) Conducting examinations

The Ministry of Education's policy declared in 2009 that "No examination or test shall be conducted independently or in collaboration with other educational institutions in society to establish meritocracy or selection." [21], but in practice, schools continue to implement these measures differently to select the best students and gain an advantage in competition with other schools. These unspoken and unwritten standards are not published on the internet but are spread via indications from shadow educational institutions.

6. Parents' reaction

The rapid growth of out-of-school training institutions quickly attracted the attention of authorities, which is viewed as an aggravation of students' load. Several policies were introduced to promote educational equity and return education to its essence. In 2015, legislation strictly prohibited teachers of public schools from compensated tuition, but the policy did not pay much attention to out-of-school training institutions [22]. On 22 February 2018, the Ministry of Education joined with four other departments to publish a notice on effectively decreasing the extracurricular burden on primary and secondary school students. It proposed that rectification of out-of-school training facilities requires a thorough assessment and management of irregular training [23].

In 2021, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly introduced the double reduction policy, which proposed strict governance and comprehensive regulation of off-campus training institutions, with the following two main requirements.

(1) Existing institutions of subject-based education must be registered as not-for-profit organizations. Capitalized operations are forbidden under all circumstances.

(2) Strictly implement the Protection of Minors Act; off-campus training institutes shall not use national holidays, rest days, or winter or summer vacation periods to conduct subject-based training [24].

The conflict between the policy requirement to reduce the burden on schools and students' desire to better schools makes the existence of shadow education necessary. Even if shadow education is banned by law as a matter of policy, there are still various ways for parents to substitute it. According to the survey taken in X Primary school and W Middle school, before the double reduction policy, only four students did not participate in shadow education, with an average of 1.87 extracurricular training courses per person at the primary level and 2.27 training courses per person at the secondary level. The average annual expenditure on shadow schooling for primary school students was ¥16,400; for secondary school students, it was ¥36,300.

After the double reduction policy, five students did not participate in shadow education, with an average of 1.85 training courses for one person at the primary level and 2.15 training courses for one person at the secondary level. The average annual expenditure on shadow education for elementary

school students was ¥18,400, while for secondary school students, the average annual expenditure on shadow education was ¥45,200.

The double reduction policy had no apparent effect on the number of shadow education participation sizes. Nonetheless, it resulted in a significant 24 percent rise in secondary pupils' expenditure on shadow education.

According to the survey, parents try hard to find substitutes for shadow education.

6.1 Activating social capital in preparation for "group lessons."

Social capital has been widely researched, and researchers have continued to define the concept based on their findings, resulting in a rich connotation of social capital. In this context, it refers to parents' social efforts to find shadow education information.

As [25] implied, there are mechanisms to obtain maximum the interests of specific social groupings by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a small group of qualified insiders. Small groups that exclude outsiders form due to parents' social efforts and students' academic performance. Groups of students receive private, covert tutoring from teachers.

6.2 Activating economic capital and hiring tutors

Extracurricular tutoring was prohibited with the implementation of the double reduction policy, and many tutoring institutions closed. To meet the demand for shadow education, some parents privately contact former teachers and invite them to conduct one-to-one tutoring for their children outside the institution.

While the school provides after-school services, wealthy parents prefer to hire a tutor who can spend long periods with their children, assisting them with homework and extracurricular tutoring.

Parents were usually dissatisfied with hiring a tutor, owing to the high expense and the absence of institutional supervision, quality assurance, and the lack of other institutional benefits (for example, social resources and exam information).

6.3 Making use of online resources

As a result of the covid-19 epidemic, many courses have been moved online, and online education has grown rapidly. There are two forms of online classes. The first is live online courses, which shift the classroom from offline to online. Because students and teachers can interact, students are more likely to study with a higher concentration level. They can also ask the teacher questions after the class. The second form is the online recorded courses, which are the online courses that major institutions offered before the double reduction policy. The advantage is that they are inexpensive and usually have the best teachers. The downside is that the courses are kind of out of date and do not reflect the annual changes in the examination syllabus. There is no interaction during or after the lessons.

Additionally, many parents are considering international courses taught by foreign teachers. This is especially noticeable when studying a foreign language.

7. Conclusion

Shadow education offers some parents the opportunity to help their students get into better schools within the conditions of the existing progression system. Shadow education plays an important role in further education. The tension between official requirements of reducing school burdens and students' desire to compete for better education resources necessitates the presence of shadow education. Even if shadow education is banned on a policy level, parents can still substitute in various ways, which becomes a grey area in the early stages of policy implementation. However, this policy

raises the bar for shadow education participation and places increased pressure on parents to enrol their children in shadow education.

Due to space limits, not all of the emotions and attitudes expressed by parents throughout the interviews are conveyed. Parents' anxious, confused, yet struggling feelings can contribute to understanding parents' involvement in shadow education. Furthermore, while the research focuses on elite urban schools, the response to the double reduction policy in rural areas is also worth investigating.

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