

A Systematic Analysis of Challenges and Optimization Strategies for After-School Services under China's 'Double Reduction' Policy

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Abstract: This systematic literature review comprehensively conducts an analysis of a collection of 34 core journal articles from the CNKI database, focusing on the topic of after-school services. Considering the perspectives of key stakeholders, such as students and parents, teachers, schools, and government policymakers, the review thoroughly examines the challenges encountered by these different entities with the realm of the after-school service. By identifying these challenges, the study then systematically proceeds to pinpoint optimization strategies that seamlessly align with these multifaceted challenges. Furthermore, a noteworthy recommendation emerges from the findings. It suggests that future research endeavors broaden the scope of engagement by involving additional stakeholders in the after-school service discourse. By expanding the spectrum of entities, it is poised to elevate the generalizability and practical applicability of the insights derived from the review. In essence, the systematic review makes a meaningful addition to the ongoing conversation about after-school services. By digging deep into the challenges faced by different groups involved and offering practical solutions, this study becomes a valuable reference for improving the overall impact and quality of after-school services.

Keywords: double reduction' policy, after-school service, optimization strategies

1. Introduction

The Chinese central government introduced the 'double reduction' policy in 2021, known as the Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and off-campus Training Burden of Students in Compulsory Education. The policy aims to address crucial issues in education related to people's livelihoods and provide accessible and high-quality educational resources for the entire population. As a vital component of the 'double reduction' policy, after-school services for primary and secondary schools have garnered significant attention. After-school services refer to structured educational and developmental programs centered around students, conducted within the school environment but not integrated into the standard curriculum [1]. This concept is common worldwide and holds particular importance in China for addressing the 'three-and-a-half' problem [2], which refers to the care gap experienced by students due to the mismatch between their dismissal time and their guardians' off-work time [3].

The implementation of the ‘double reduction’ policy has led to an expansion of the Chinese school education beyond subject teaching, incorporating after-school care and tutoring. This extension has resulted in several positive outcomes, including strengthened overall student development, enhanced school functions, and the establishment of the after-school service system [4]. Through after-school services, students can complete their homework under the guidance of teachers and participate in various sports, arts, and other enriching activities, reducing academic stress. Schools, in turn, leverage their management, personnel, venue, and resource advantages to promote the coordinated development of in-class education and after-school services. Moreover, the after-school service system in China has been initially established, with local governments and schools aligning with the Ministry of Education to ensure funding, format arrangements, and the utilization of social resources for after-school services while exploring unique models based on local conditions.

Despite these achievements, the after-school service system is still in its infancy and faces challenges. While progress has been made in alleviating the ‘three-and-a-half’ problem in some regions, there are still flaws and deficiencies that need to be addressed. Understanding the difficulties and underlying causes of after-school services is essential for enhancing their quality and efficiency. Previous research has explored the value, current status, and optimization strategies of after-school services. However, due to the relatively short duration of implementing these services, comprehensive reviews detailing the problems and visualized overview of optimization pathways are lacking. To fill this gap, this study conducts a systematic review to address the following questions: What are the problems faced by after-school services under the ‘double reduction’ policy? What are the optimization paths to overcome these challenges? This research holds significant value as it offers critical insights to improve the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of after-school services in China, ultimately benefiting students, their families, and the broader educational community.

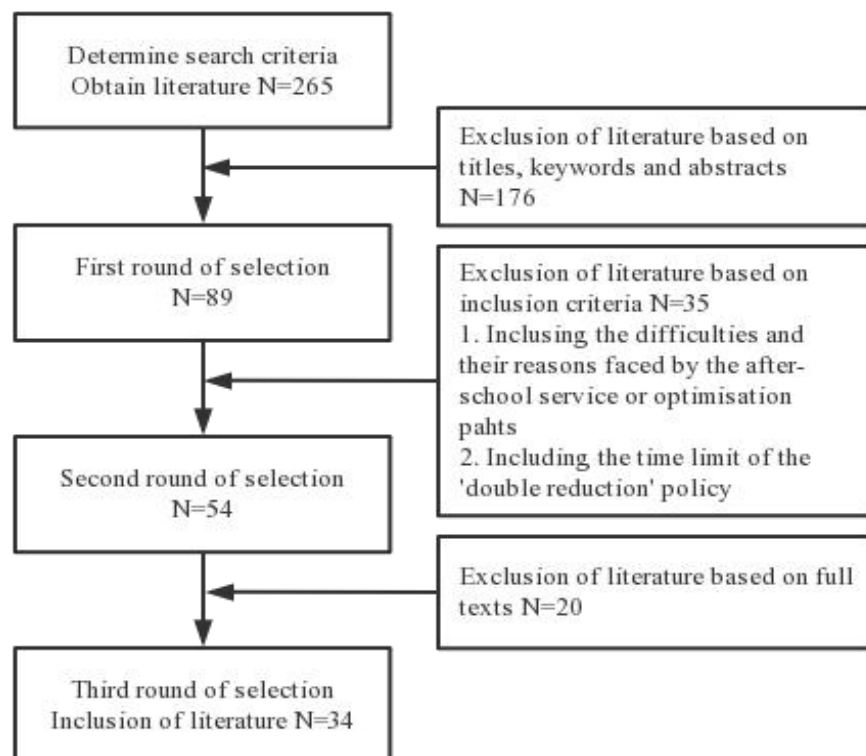


Figure 1: Selection process.

2. Method

The systematic literature review is an advanced and methodical approach to reviewing existing literature. Unlike traditional literature reviews, which may suffer from inherent limitations, the systematic review aims to present a comprehensive and unbiased synthesis of relevant research studies in a single manuscript, providing a formal and replicable approach to assess research findings [5]. This paper adopts the systematic literature review method to summarize previous research on the problems, causes, and optimization paths of after-school services under the backdrop of the ‘double reduction’ policy.

This study focuses on relevant research published in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) since 2021, when the ‘double reduction’ policy was introduced. The Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) and Peking University Core Journals are selected as the analysis targets due to their significant influence in Chinese scholarly literature. During the literature search, the terms ‘after-school service’ and “the ‘three-and-a-half’ problem” were widely recognized by Chinese scholars. Therefore, the study retrieved 265 documents using these two terms as keywords, and after three rounds of selection, 34 documents were ultimately retained for analysis (see Figure 1).

For ease of reference in subsequent research, the 34 selected literature pieces are sequentially numbered (see Table 1).

Table 1: The authors and publication years of the 34 selected studies.

Author(s)	Year	Author(s)	Year	Author(s)	Year
1.Yao & Liu	2023	13.Ji & Sun	2022	25.Wang & Ma	2022
2.Song & Zhang	2023	14.Bai, Li & Wang	2022	26.Zhang	2022
3.Meng & Yang	2023	15.Wu, Du & Pan	2022	27.Zhang & Tian	2022
4.Huang & Zhou	2023	16.Xu & Zhong	2022	28.Ma	2022
5.Li, Li, Xin & Zhang	2023	17.Yang, Huang, Zhu, Fan & Yu	2022	29.Dai, Xie & Cui	2022
6.Pei & Shao	2023	18.Luo, Li & Hou	2022	30.Fu & Guo	2022
7.Wu, Yu & Huang	2023	19.Luo	2022	31.Liu	2022
8.Zhang & Qu	2023	20.Gao, Zhou & Li	2022	32.Jin, Sun & Zhang	2021
9.Long & Li	2023	21.Liu	2022	33.Yang & Wu	2021
10.Liu, Liu, Shi & Zhou	2022	22.Zhao, Wang & He	2022	34.Li & Li	2021
11.Shi, Li, Zhao and Chu	2022	23.Du	2022		
12.Bao & Zeng	2022	24.Yu	2022		

3. The Challenge of After-School Services in China

An analysis of the content of the 34 sample pieces of literature reveals that the problems of after-school service are reflected in the perspectives of students and parents, teachers, schools, as well as government and policies (see Table 2).

Table 2: Classifications of the 34 selected studies.

Subjects	Problems	Literature number
Students and parents (7)	Ignorance of service needs (4)	9,16,23,29
	Forced participation (4)	11,16,22,32
	Increased workload (15)	3,4,5,6,9,13,16,17,20,23,24,25,29,30,32
Teachers (19)	Challenges in adequate compensation (8)	5,12,20,22,24,27,29,32
	Lack of strong professionalism (3)	9,11,25
	Limited home-school collaboration experience (2)	4,30
Schools (13)	Significant regional development disparities (6)	4,10,12,14,17,30
	Single content and form (13)	4,9,10,12,13,14,15,17,20,25,27,30,33
Government and policies (23)	Unclear stakeholder roles and responsibilities (8)	2,8,11,12,16,22,28,32
	Incomplete system and mechanism (18)	2,4,8,9,10,11,13,15,16,17,24,25,27,28,30,31,32,33
	Underutilization of social resources (9)	4,6,9,15,19,20,25,31,32

Note: A total of 29 literature articles relate to the problems of the after-school service. The number in each cell is the count of studies falling in this category.

3.1. Students and Parents

Students, being the primary recipients of after-school services, actively engage in these activities, seizing the learning opportunities that these services present. Concurrently, parents act as supporters, maintaining communication, offering suggestions, and participating in decision-making processes with teachers and staff. Despite the crucial roles students and parents play in the after-school service landscape, their perspectives are frequently marginalized in discussions. This neglect is evident in seven studies that indicate a disregard for the needs and participatory discretion of students and parents in after-school services.

Some studies point out that the implementation of after-school services fails to adequately address and accommodate the needs of both students and parents. The primary need of students and parents is 'custodial service' to assist parents in addressing problems related to the pickup and care of their children. Apart from this basic necessity, there exist supplementary requirements that warrant consideration, including addressing inquiries about student learning difficulties, offering homework guidance and academic planning, and engaging in diverse extracurricular activities such as artistic, athletic, labor-related, and reading activities [6]. Nevertheless, the public opinions on Weibo, a Chinese social platform, reflect that parents and students contend that their needs are arduous to address [7]. Some scholars believe that the majority of schools are only offer subject tutoring. The imposition of subject tutoring eliminates the agency of students and their parents, leaving them with no alternative but to comply [8].

A few studies suggest that students and their parents are deprived of the choice to participate in after-school services. Although these services are not part of compulsory education, many schools mandate participation. The rationale behind the mandatory requirement is attributed to administrative efficiency and student academic improvement [9]. Furthermore, students and parents residing in underdeveloped regions encounter a deprivation of their agency in the participation of after-school services due to limited opportunities. The findings of a quantitative investigation confirm the negative correlation between the level of rurality of schools and students' engagement

in after-school services, which also contradicts the primary objective of the ‘double reduction’ policy [10].

3.2. Teachers

The workload of teachers, the executors, has been intensified without commensurate compensation. Teacher workload emerged as the most prevalent concern, as evidenced by its inclusion in 15 out of the 29 studies that examined the challenges encountered by teachers. Additionally, 8 studies support the claim that teachers are not adequately compensated for their work in after-school services. Through effective instruction and guidance, teachers help students achieve their learning goals and develop skills and interests in after-school services. Nevertheless, 3 studies suggest that some teachers lack professionalism and competence.

The increased workload is initially reflected in the extension of working hours and unsymmetrical work priorities. Teachers dedicate more time to fulfilling their duties than before [6,11]. In addition to achieving regular teaching tasks, educators are required to allocate time and effort toward after-school services. The additional workload contributes to teachers experiencing diminished work enthusiasm as well as increased pressure and anxiety. Simultaneously, excessive public attention on after-school services results in an asymmetrical allocation of teacher work focus [12], thus intensifying the difficulties associated with their professional obligations. In Yang, Huang, Zhu, Fan and Yu’s quantitative research [13], 40% of school administrators and 74% of teachers agree with this view.

Besides, the diligent endeavors of teachers have not received adequate rewards and incentives. Despite the increased workload that teachers undertake, the allowances and subsidies to incentivise their involvement in after-school services are lacking [4,9]. Data from a study examining the reward strategies employed in primary and secondary schools in Beijing revealed that over 50% of the schools rely on after-school service subsidies to incentivize teachers, but approximately 18.5% of teachers reported a lack of comprehension regarding the school’s reward standards. Alarming, approximately 15% of teachers indicate the absence of any form of reward [14].

Finally, after-school serviced have raised higher demands for teacher professional competence, requiring teachers to possess elevated levels of expertise. However, due to the limited availability of subject-specific teachers specializing in this domain, the responsibility of teaching quality development courses falls upon other teachers [12]. In the mentioned quantitative study [13], approximately one-third of school administrators and teachers concurred on the existence of a deficit in professional educators to implement after-school services.

3.3. Schools

Schools serve as the primary setting for the provision of after-school services, which encounter three challenges in the after-school service, namely limited home-school collaboration experience (n=2), significant regional development disparities (n=5), and single content and form (n=18).

The primary problem is the single content and form. In some schools, the after-school service provided mainly focus on subject tutoring or homework assistance while neglecting interest-based activities and life skills training [15], and failing to explore and utilize online courses and resources [16]. Survey data in Shaanxi [4] also show that 55% of teachers point out the narrow coverage problem of the after-school services in schools. Furthermore, a prevalent issue in the after-school service is the absence of integrity and pertinence in the content, which has the potential to exacerbate regional imbalances in education.

The second issue is that there are significant differences in the regional development of the after-school service. In contrast to their urban counterparts, schools situated in rural and remote areas

exhibit significant disparities in terms of teacher distribution, material resources, and funding support necessary for after-school services. First, in the rural and remote regions, there exists a notable gap in the number of educators specializing in music, physical education, and arts compared to those teaching examination-oriented subjects [17]. The imbalance in the teacher-to-student ratio also hampers the efficacy of after-school services. Second, rural schools lag significantly behind their urban counterparts in school infrastructure, such as total value of fixed assets, and book availability. Besides, many material resources in rural schools often remain idle, making it challenging to fully utilize their potential value [18]. Third, local governments in economically disadvantaged and geographically isolated areas face difficulties in increasing their educational budget for after-school services, in addition to the funds earmarked for basic education [17].

A few studies highlight that schools often struggle to establish meaningful and consistent home-school collaboration to ensure the effectiveness of the after-school service due to limited experiences. Fostering student achievement and overall development requires strong and effective collaborations between families and schools. The ‘double reduction’ policy puts forward higher requirements for parents to participate in school education and teaching activities. However, the reality is far from the blueprint of the policy. Parents do not understand the purpose, value, and content of after-school services in schools [4], and even some rural parents are sceptical about after-school services [17].

3.4. Governments and Policies

Government and policies assume multiple functions in after-school services, like formulating guidelines, providing financial assistance and promoting innovation and advancement to foster student development and educational equity. The subsequent three concerns are government and policy issues that arise in the selected studies: unclear stakeholders’ roles and responsibilities, incomplete system and mechanism, and underutilization of social resources. These issues are explored in 23 studies, 18 of which specially focus on the system and mechanism issue.

First, the insufficiencies in the system and mechanism of the after-school service are primarily evident in significant concerns about the lack of the funding guarantee system [12,19,20,21], the management system [7,22], and the evaluation system [10,23]. These systems improve the quality of after-school services, optimize the allocation of resources, enhance the professional level of teachers, and promote home-school cooperation, thereby improving students’ overall development. Moreover, the after-school service exhibits a deficiency in the establishment of explicit and specific guidelines [4]. The after-school service system has accumulated valuable experiences and encountered various obstacles in investigating and executing after-school services across different locations, but there is an immediate need to develop comprehensive and precise guidelines or strategies for the implementation of after-school services on a national scale.

Second, 8 studies draw attention to the problem of unclear stakeholder roles and responsibilities, which hinders effective collaboration in implementing the after-school service. The implementation of the ‘double reduction’ policy in the after-school service involves various stakeholders including the government, schools, teachers, parents, and society [11,24]. However, diverse values perceptions and work content among the stakeholders [22], coupled with the lack of specific regulations regarding the goals, beneficiaries, content, and methods of after-school service assurance [19], result in unclear mutual responsibilities. The coding of popular opinion on social media also favours that the absence of precise regulations leads to the ambiguous division of obligations of the after-school service [7]. As a result, it is difficult for relevant stakeholders in the construction and guarantee of after-school services to form an effective joint force.

Third, the after-school service system underutilizes various social resources, which are examined in 9 studies. Only a few schools have initiated preliminary efforts to establish partnerships with off-

campus service agencies. Moreover, there is a notable absence of standardized criteria for assessing the efficacy and caliber of these off-campus service agencies [25]. In addition to the absence of off-campus agencies, the collaboration between educational institutions and other functional departments and social institutions [26], such as universities [27], is largely lacking. According to the survey questionnaire on school leaders by Long and Li [8], the absence of social involvement is the second issue that schools confront while providing after-school service. Few opportunities for cooperation (54%), and weak support from social institutions and organizations (22%) rank as the top two issues schools encounter while working with social institutions or organizations. Additionally, it is still unclear what the rules are for outsiders who enroll in the school to provide after-school services [25].

4. The Optimization Strategies of After-School Service

Upon examining the content of the 34 literature samples, it becomes evident that the optimization paths of the after-school service are manifested in the same aspects as the problem section, including the perspectives of students and parents, teachers, schools, and government policies (see Table 3).

Table 3: Classifications of the 34 selected studies.

Subjects	Optimization path	Literature number
Students and parents (8)	Student-centered (2)	22,23
	Active parental involvement (7)	2,4,7,11,27,28,32
	Workload reduction (6)	2,5,8,21,30,32
Teachers (15)	Rights and interests protection and promotion(14)	2,3,5,17,21,22,23,25,26,27,29,30,32,34
	Improving professional competence (7)	2,3,5,17,29,30,34
Schools (13)	Build home-school collaboration (11)	4,5,10,20,21,22,23,24,26,30,32
	Enrich the service content (3)	5,16,18
	Take a leading role (11)	1,2,4,6,7,8,16,21,28,32,33
Government and policies (29)	Establishment and improvement of systems and mechanisms (21)	1,2,3,4,8,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,20,22,23,27,30,31,32,34
	Utilization of social resources (11)	3,4,5,7,12,14,15,22,24,26,32

Note: A total of 34 literature articles relate to optimization paths of the after-school service. The number in each cell is the count of studies falling in this category.

4.1. Students and Parents

9 selected studies examine the optimization of after-school services from the perspective of students and parents. Most studies encourage parents to participate in their children's after-school services (n=7), while a few emphasize that the after-school service should be centered on students (n=2).

From the perspective of parents, there are two main ways for parents to actively participate in after-school services: cooperating with schools and teachers and sharing their experiences in after-school services. First, as recipients of the after-school service, parents should understand the significance of these services [10] and actively collaborate with educational institutions and

educators [28], because the growth of students requires the joint efforts of both parties. Second, the professional experience and life wisdom of parents enrich the after-school services, greatly benefiting the students. Huang and Zhou's research on rural after-school services suggests that the parents are distributed across various professions, so they possess unique life experiences and specific skills, which enable them to provide after-school services that are closely aligned with daily life [17]. Therefore, parents sharing their professional experience and life experience can enrich after-school services and bring students more practical help that is closely related to daily life.

From a student-centered perspective, after-school services should prioritize the recognition of students' subjective status. To enhance the relevance and satisfaction of these services, it is crucial to understand and take into account the interests of students, endeavoring to establish programs that are tailored to their specific needs and preferences [9]. Respecting the students' agency and individuality should be at the core of the approach to after-school services, ensuring that their voices are heard and their choices are valued.

4.2. Teachers

15 studies identify three optimization strategies from the perspective of teachers, namely workload reduction, rights and interest protection, and professionalism improvement, which align closely with the identified problem. The predominant topic of debate is rights and interest protection, with a total of 14 studies addressing this subject matter.

The most effective approach in selected studies is the protection and promotion of teachers' rights and interests. First, the remuneration for teachers in school after-school programs should be commensurate with the quantity and quality of their labor input. After-school services are additional labor that teachers provide beyond their regular teaching responsibilities. Therefore, teachers engaged in after-school services deserve to receive corresponding compensation [29]. The compensation that teachers receive in terms of salary provides fair and adequate financial recognition for their additional responsibilities [30]. Second, it is imperative to further enhance the incentive structure for teachers' engagement in after-school services, which entails commending teachers for their dedication to after-school services through rewards, commendations, professional titles, and the like [4].

There are 6 studies that elucidate strategies for mitigating teacher workloads. First, in light of the circumstances of the faculty, the school endeavors to reduce teacher workload by implementing the 'flexible commuting system' and making appropriate arrangements for teachers to remain on campus as necessary [19]. Second, the involvement or cooperation of off-campus educational institutions through formal channels can allow school teachers to only focus on their regular work [23]. Some social people, such as parents with professional backgrounds, public welfare volunteers in the community, and retired professionals from the cultural system, are also encouraged to engage in enhancing the accessibility to comprehensive after-school services [23].

7 studies underscore the significance of enhancing teacher professional competence, specifically highlighting the direct correlation between the professional competence of teachers and the quality of after-school services [6]. Teachers can cultivate their competence to design and implement after-school service courses by engaging in curriculum development and teacher training programs through formal collaborations between schools and universities, research institutes, and non-disciplinary training institutions [13]. In addition to participating in external training offered by these institutions, attending seminars and engaging in practice observations within the campus are also crucial means to improve teachers' professional competence [22].

4.3. Schools

In terms of schools, a total of 13 studies offer valuable insights. Among them, eleven studies highlight that schools should establish effective home-school collaboration, while three studies emphasize the necessity for schools to provide students with diverse service content.

The collaboration between home and school is a significant aspect of after-school services. The most notable distinction between after-school service and classroom instruction lies in the open nature of the former, which allows the involvement of multiple subjects in the educational process [15]. For one thing, schools ought to enhance their interaction with parents. This can be achieved through interactive activities, like the establishment of parent committees, organising parent meetings, similar initiatives and so on [18]. By attentively considering the perspectives and opinions of parents, schools can effectively enhance the quality of after-school services. For another thing, schools ought to integrate after-school services with family education through technology. The online platform for conducting communication and collaboration between teachers, schools, and parents can direct parents towards improving their aptitude in family education [4].

It is necessary for schools to enrich the kinds and contents of after-school services since the after-school service serves to foster the holistic development of students and encourages the exploration of their capabilities. With the long-term development of students as the goal, the school provides high-quality after-school services in various forms and rich content with the help of internal and external resources [7]. For instance, Li, Li, Xin and Zhang suggest that the content of after-school services can be categorized into subject guidance, arts and sports, as well as life skills to nurture students' proficiencies in various domains, rather than only focusing on subject-based service content.

4.4. Government and Policies

Scholars possess the greatest degree of interest in the subject of government and policies in the after-school service. The 29 selected studies mainly involve the following three optimization schemes: establishment and improvement of systems and mechanisms (n=21), taking a leading role in stakeholder roles and responsibilities (n=11) and utilization of social resources (n=11).

Initially, establishing and improving the systems and mechanisms discussed previously, such as the funding guarantee system, the management system, and the evaluation system, is a priority. Firstly, an open and transparent funding guarantee system is a necessary condition for sustaining the after-school service. After-school services in primary and secondary schools fall into the category of quasi-public goods [4], so the costs of the services can be shared among the government, enterprises, social organizations, and parents [11]. It is worth noting that the process needs to be open and fair. Especially before local governments decide whether to charge parents for these services, not only should the governments consider the financial situation but also seek broad input from parents. Secondly, the government shall establish a dynamic management mechanism for the after-school service to ensure continuous optimization and advancement. This involves constructing an information management system for after-school services that cover teachers, students, schools, and resources. This system enables comprehensive and accurate supervision throughout the entire process of after-school services, allowing for ongoing tracking of their effectiveness. Based on real-time monitoring results, make dynamic adjustments to improve the quality and effectiveness of after-school services [10]. Thirdly, it is crucial for governments to establish an evaluation standard system that takes into account various factors. This includes assessing the actual implementation of after-school services, evaluating the development of students' diverse capabilities, ensuring the protection of parental rights in decision-making, recognizing the efforts of teachers in providing extra support, and assessing the roles played by schools and governments in facilitating after-school

services. This comprehensive evaluation system will help measure the quality and effectiveness of after-school programs and drive continuous improvement [11].

Besides, the government needs to consciously play a leading role in the after-school service system. The government coordinates the interests of various stakeholders, such as schools, teachers, students, families, and market conditions, and facilitates their involvement throughout the entire process of after-school service development. This approach ensures that all relevant stakeholders can contribute to the development of high-quality after-school services with diverse types and enriched content [22].

Finally, the government needs to utilize the diversified social resources to sustain the regular operation of the after-school service system [9]. It is recommended that the government utilize various communication channels such as mass media and online platforms to enhance social organizations' awareness of participation in after-school services and to disclose information about the projects entrusted to these organizations [31]. Additionally, government and policies exert effort in developing the involvement regulations of off-campus institutions and the qualifications and credentials guidelines of personnel to assist the operation of after-school services [19].

5. Conclusions

This systematic literature review analyses 34 core journal articles from the CNKI database, including CSSCI and Peking University Core Journals, related to the after-school service to summarize the challenges from the perspectives of various entities: students and parents, teachers, schools, as well as government and policies. Additionally, the study identifies corresponding optimization strategies to address these problems. However, the study possesses certain limitations. On the one hand, it concentrates on a restricted number of stakeholders. In addition to the discussed entities, the after-school service also involves the participation and collaboration of additional entities, such as communities, non-profit organizations, and volunteers. Hence, it is recommended that future studies delve deeper into the engagement of additional stakeholders in the after-school service in order to enhance the generalizability and applicability of the findings.

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