

Exploring Chinese “Double Reduction” Policy Based on Chrono-Political Comparative View: Comparing with South Korean 7.30 Educational Reform Measure

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Abstract. Chinese “double reduction” policy has been implemented. Viewing burden-reducing as an international issue today, this paper mainly aims at summarizing references and lessons from other relevant policies in other countries. As a neighbor in East Asia with a similar educational tradition and an analogous system, South Korea has the highest comparability with China. An analysis will be made by comparing the Chinese “double reduction” policy with South Korea’s 7.30 Educational Reform Measure. The comparison is to be drawn from perspectives of historical backgrounds, specific measures, and implementation, along with current effects and existing problems. The experience in South Korea suggests that China needs to constantly improve the quality of public education, maintain the public-service nature of public education, and build up a supervision system while proposing more supporting measures. Therefore, this paper provides a reference for future policymakers and researchers to pay attention to how to use educational policy effectively to release students’ burdens.

Keywords: Burden-reducing; Shadow education; Chinese “double reduction” policy; South Korean 7.30 Educational Reform Measure.

1. Introduction

Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Students' Homework and Off-Campus Training in Compulsory Education were jointly released on July 24, 2021 by the General Offices of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the State Council. This policy is often known as the "double reduction" policy in China. For decades, the Chinese education system has been emphasizing the comprehensive development of students, including their moral foundation, physical and intellectual capability, aesthetic sensibility, and work abilities [1]. However, the fierce competition for educational resources, which is led and represented by high-school and college entrance examinations, takes place after the nine-year compulsory education. Students tend to become exam-oriented under the pressure of competing. Thus, aiming at enhancing teenagers’ physical strength and mental health and approaching the original goal of students’ well-rounded development, the "double reduction" policy mainly focuses on: firstly, reducing the amount of schoolwork as well as the time that students need to spend on it; secondly, standardizing off-campus training which has so widely become shadow education [2].

The pressure of schooling and the sequential fever on shadow education is not an individual case that happens only in China, but a common problem that has been seen worldwide. Due to the more intensive competition over education opportunities and labor resources, shadow education has already become a global education phenomenon [3]. Countries in different regions have experienced the rise of supplementary private tutoring and its governance. In Southern Europe, Greece ranks the highest in the participation rate of shadow education, with 95% of college students having received extracurricular tutoring in primary and secondary schools [4]. A few number of developed countries such as Germany, Britain, and Australia have a relevant association to standardize the quality of the off-campus training industry [5]. In East Asia, the phenomenon is even more prevalent. Research conducted by the Japanese National Education Policy Research Institution in 2010 shows that nearly two-thirds of the third year in Japanese junior high schools had participated in shadow education [6].

In 2019, it is suggested that the proportion for which South Korea's shadow education industry accounts in its gross domestic product (GDP) ranks top in Asia [7].

Among all, South Korea can be seen as one of the most experienced countries in dealing with the problems arising from the pressures of high-stakes exams and shadow education. During the 20th century, it witnessed the challenge that shadow education poses on public education and has implemented a series of policy responses over the past few decades. Considering South Korea's comparability with China as a neighbor in East Asia and its sufficiency in experience, this paper will compare the Chinese "double reduction" policy and South Korean policy that prohibited shadow education practices, represented by 7.30 Educational Reform Measure (abbreviated as " '730 reform' policy" thereafter). Based on the comparison, the analysis will be centered on providing references and warnings to Chinese policy formulation and implementation.

2. Comparing Chinese and South Korean Policy

The education system in South Korea has an extent of similarity to the system in China. Both countries practice a nine-year compulsory education and a nation-unified college entrance examination. Furthermore, influenced by elitism and the Confucius culture that holds "to be a scholar is to be the top of society," getting good grades in the college entrance exam is often regarded as a student's top priority in both China and South Korea. These similarities allow comparability in the policy responses to shadow education made by the two governments. For this sake, although the prohibition in South Korea ended up in failure, the analysis based on comparison with South Korean policy can still bring China a different but meaningful view of its counterpart. Below is the comparison between the "double reduction" policy and the "730 reform" policy from perspectives of the historical background of policy making, specific measures and implementation, and current effects and existing problems.

2.1 Historical Background of Policy Making

The development of South Korea's policy responses to shadow education has gone through four different stages in the last few decades: equalizing school quality, prohibiting shadow education practices, improving the level of public education, and providing extra-curriculum programs [8]. The "730 reform" policy proposed in 1980, which has the highest similarity to the "double reduction" policy, belongs to the second stage. Before 1980, South Korea had spent nearly a score on narrowing the gap between elite schools and others. In this first stage when the compulsory education system had not been established yet, shadow education was seen as a result of the hierarchical schooling system and the high-stakes exams. Based on such recognition, South Korea proposed two policies concerning equalization, respectively canceling the middle school and high school entrance examinations [8]. However, it turned out that the expansion of the opportunity to higher education merely transferred the battlefield from secondary education to college entrance examinations. Consequently, the "730 reform" policy was later put forward with the goal of eliminating private tutoring. It was not until the prohibition had failed to reach its intended purpose did the South Korean government realize the significance of raising the public education system's quality.

In contrast, the Chinese "double reduction" policy was posed upon a social background where the compulsory education system has been effectively working for a long time. With the long-upheld stress on education equality, the quality of schools in Chinese secondary education is much less uneven [9]. Besides, the Chinese public education system has already experienced a series of burden-reducing policies as well. Adjusting the difficulty of curriculum, strengthening teachers' quality, attaching importance to students' overall development, and ensuring their time for rest and exercise have all been included. In 2013, the Ten Rules for Reducing the Burden of Primary School Students first raised the issue concerning supplementary private tutoring [10]. It suggests that the prevalence of shadow education started no earlier than the 21st century.

The differences can be an indicator of the different outcomes of the two policies. What emerged later in the third and fourth stages of South Korean policy responses is already the formulating background of the “double reduction” policy. Nevertheless, South Korea’s experience should also be viewed as a cautionary tale for China. A direct ban on private tutoring doesn’t work out. Instead, the scientific structure and high quality of public education is the best way of reducing the demands of shadow education.

2.2 Specific Measures and Implementation

Children of government workers were prohibited from participating in extracurricular test tutoring under the “730 reform” policy. In the meanwhile, positions in off-campus tutoring organizations were off-limits to instructors and college students, and the tax on private tutors was raised. [11]. the banning was also accompanied by other measures that were posed to have shadow education under control. To reduce the competition in high-stakes exams, which was considered to be the main engine of the shadow education market, the college entrance quota got an increase. Moreover, the government built an educational broadcasting system to provide low-cost supplementary tutoring [8].

In the Chinese “double reduction” policy, measures are provided as follows. For tutorial institutions, the government will no longer approve new extra-curriculum exam-oriented tutoring institutions that provide shadow education for students at the compulsory education stage. Existing ones will all be registered as non-profit institutions, in which financing and capitalization are strictly prohibited. Other training institutions will be clearly classified and strictly standardized. For individuals, teachers are prohibited from paid supplementary tutoring, and those who work in tutorial institutions must have and hold teacher certification. Other measures relieving students of their schooling burden include reducing homework, enhancing teaching quality, diversifying the after-school service of public education, and improving supporting facilities [2].

Due to the different policy-making backgrounds mentioned above, the difference between other supporting measures is reasonable and will not be discussed in this part. The focus will be on the bans and disciplines. The measures regarding the prohibition of supplementary private tutoring institutions and practitioners in the two policies share a high similarity. The difference appears in Chinese extra focusing on the public serving property of education. Compared with South Korea, China emphasizes more on the nature of tutorial institutions rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all solution, which should be highlighted. The full-scale prohibition in South Korea seems to be thorough, but it solves only the superficial problem of shadow education. Under the circumstance of the common anxiety of parents and the powerful capital behind the private tutoring industry, the market of shadow education is not likely to be eliminated by the policy with merely an educational level. Although this failure of South Korea can be attributed to the hierarchical social structure and the financial magnates who have too many social resources in hand, which is unlikely to happen in socialist China, it can still be a warning. Maintaining the public service characteristic of education and keeping it out of the control of capital should always be fundamental to education policy.

2.3 Current Effect and Existing Problems

It has been already recognized that the “730 reform” policy finally failed to solve the problem [11]. Although the South Korean government completely prohibited shadow education, the number of shadow education institutions in South Korea expanded to 14013 in 2000, nearly 37 times more than that of 1980 [11]. In 2000, the policy was declared unconstitutional and abolished with few outcomes left behind.

In China, the effectiveness of the policy seems promising temporarily. The “double reduction” policy has caused a huge influence on the tutoring industry. Stocks of supplementary education institutions faced a slump, with an average decline of more than 50%. Four of them, including New Oriental and Tomorrow Advancing Life (TAL), declined by more than 60%. Besides, a large number of smaller tutorial institutions have been closed [12].

However, under the surface, there are still existing problems to solve. For one thing, some illegal practices have already emerged. After the promulgation of the “double reduction” policy, some private tutors began to work underground, organizing small classes or “one-on-one” training with an even higher charge [13]. This kind of underground tutoring is more hidden, increasing the difficulty of governance. On the other hand, anxiety among parents still exists. The reduction of homework burden and the prohibition of cram schools are raising worries about insufficient practice. Parents tend to panic that their children might fall behind without enough schoolwork and off-campus courses [14]. China Central Television recently carried out a survey on what to do when the after-school training institutions have to close on holidays. More than half of those investigated choose to “ask famous teachers for guidance together with classmates” or “hire one-on-one tutors” [13].

Prevention is better than cure. With the failing experience of South Korea, China needs to be aware of the deep societal psychological issues and all kinds of obstructive elements. A supervision system needs to be built, and more detailed and targeted measures are what the government should work on in the coming stage. Furthermore, goals should also be set to rise people’s confidence in the public education system and reduce their anxiety about fierce competition. By adopting both strategies inside and outside the public education system, Chinese success in burden-reducing will be more guaranteed.

3. Conclusions

Learning the experience and lessons from the South Korean “730 reform” policy, there are three aspects that China should pay attention to when implementing the “double reduction” policy? First, the quality assurance of public education is the immutable basis of burden-reducing policy. Scientific curriculum and exams, sufficient and diversified supplementary services, and a well-considered supporting system are key points to cut the consumer demand for shadow education. Second, the fundamental idea behind controlling private tutoring is to maintain education's public-service nature. Though China is unlikely to have capitals that can interfere in policy-making with its vast wealth, the disadvantages of the market are to be reckoned with. The visible hand of the government should limit the influence of the invisible hand of the market. Last but not least, a supervision system and more supporting policies are important guarantees. More measures are needed to further renovate the education environment and prevent possible future problems. The systematic construction of a supervisory agency can help.

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