

Supply and demand dilemma and deep motivation of the implementation of the basic education burden reduction policy

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Abstract: The excessive academic burden of students is the focus of our attention nowadays, and despite the introduction of a large number of relevant policies to reduce the burden, the effect of policy implementation has not reached the expectation, and the implementation process is faced with many difficulties. Therefore, based on the perspective of supply and demand theory, we study the supply and demand relationship between the policy implementation subjects and analyze the failure to reach the effective social consensus due to the differentiation of demand, the "theater effect" of tutoring, and the government failure in education supply. In order to solve the dilemma of supply-demand mismatch and regional imbalance of educational resources, the government needs to tackle both the root and the symptoms from both supply and demand sides, to create a collaborative education environment between society, schools and families, to establish a perfect supervision, inspection and monitoring mechanism for reducing the burden, and to meet the demands of policy implementation stakeholders so as to mobilize the value rationality of policy implementation subjects.

1. Introduction

Over the years, Overweight education burden has been a chronic disease that overwhelms society, schools and families. Education burden reduction is crucial to ensuring the healthy and comprehensive development of students, and is an important part of the high-quality development of China's education ^[1]. Since the founding of New China, a series of burden reduction policies have been issued, but they have little effect, and are often questioned, even with the trend of "reducing burden in school and increasing burden outside school". On July 24, 2021, the central government issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Extracurricular Training for Students in Compulsory Education Stage (i.e. "Double reduction" Opinions) ^[2], which again put education burden reduction into a hot topic of widespread public attention, and basic education burden reduction entered a new era. The "double reduction" policy for the first time takes reducing students' homework burden and extracurricular training burden as the focus of reducing students' academic burden, and proposes to improve the quality of after-school service, expand

educational resources, and prevent excessive capital inflow to further reduce students' burden in compulsory education stage. It aims to protect the physical and mental health of primary and secondary school students in compulsory education stage and improve the quality of teaching. However, the policy can often not be effectively implemented in the process of implementation, falling into the strange circle of "state burden reduction - parents burden increase - children burden increase - state burden reduction" ^[3].

2. Analysis of the supply-demand dilemma in the implementation of the policy of reducing the burden on basic education

2.1. Mismatching of supply and demand leads to efficiency loss

"Double reduction" is achieved both on and off campus, reducing the academic burden on students both on and off campus, which helps to improve their physical and mental health and expand their development space. But reducing the burden is not something that can be achieved overnight, and there are still challenges facing families, schools, and society. According to the survey results of the 21st Century Education Research Institute, it can be seen that parents of students have different attitudes towards "reducing burden". Although the majority of parents acknowledge that their children face academic burdens during the compulsory education stage, nearly half do not support the policy of reducing these burdens, believing that a certain level of burden is necessary to motivate their children to study harder. A small number of parents feel that with improved living conditions, their children are not burdened at all, making the concept of burden reduction irrelevant. They even argue for increasing the academic load. The attitudes of parents significantly deviate from the original intent of the government in implementing the burden reduction policy.

Parents' desires often affect their children. The involution phenomenon causes children to worry about "losing at the starting line," leading to significant educational investments by parents. This results in a supply-demand mismatch between the government's burden reduction policies and parents' individualized expectations for their children's success. Such a mismatch impedes the effective implementation of the burden reduction policy and could lead to efficiency losses.

2.2. Uneven compulsory education among regions

Since the reform and opening up, China's economy has grown rapidly, and people's demand for education has upgraded from "having access to school" to pursuing "good schooling". However, the contradiction between the insufficient and untimely provision of high-quality compulsory education services and products by the government and the increasing demand for quality education among the people has become increasingly prominent. The issue of equality in the supply side of education services has also received widespread attention. Having fair and high-quality educational resources has become a new pursuit for people, which requires quality education equity^[4]. Since the beginning of the new century, the popularization of nine-year compulsory education in rural areas has been a top priority for the central and local governments. Efforts to bridge the urban-rural education gap have been made by tailoring educational measures to local conditions and increasing investment in rural education. However, educational inequality between urban and rural areas, as well as among different regions, persists due to various factors such as cognitive biases, uneven economic and social development, and deficiencies in the government's provision of educational services.

Firstly, there is a significant quality disparity between urban and rural compulsory education. Rural schools lag behind urban schools in terms of educational resources and quality, especially during the junior high school stage. Although the national government has mitigated this gap

through financial subsidy measures, local educational financial investment remains the main limiting factor for educational development. Moreover, the uneven distribution of educational resources across regions is also a prominent issue. Schools in different areas exhibit noticeable differences in funding, facilities, and teaching staff, which, influenced by the cognitive understanding and service levels of local governments, exacerbates the phenomenon of educational inequality.

Based on the above unbalanced conditions, there is a conflict between parents' educational needs for their children and the uneven supply of regional educational resources. Many parents insist on investing more energy in their children's learning, dare not relax their demands on their children, and even choose to "add burden", which constitutes resistance to the implementation of the burden reduction policy and seriously hinders its implementation. The contradiction in the supply structure of education in the process of balanced development of compulsory education has led to a dilemma between people's demand for high-quality compulsory education and the shortage of government compulsory education services and high-quality compulsory education products.

2.3. Conflict between exam demand and long-term burden reduction supply

The immediacy of exam oriented education exaggerates the additional functions of education, causing families to attach great importance to young education, leading to increasingly fierce competition among young people. The saying "winning at the starting line" has also become a burden that every child should not bear. Reducing burden is undoubtedly beneficial for children's health, but for parents, the utilitarian title brought about by exam taking needs is equally important. From the perspective of social laws, the comprehensive development of children's morality, intelligence, physical fitness, and aesthetics is important. However, if true comprehensive development cannot be achieved at present, parents will make the best choice for their children in their eyes. Therefore, parents will prioritize the development of intellectual education that has the greatest impact in practical life. The foundation for children to establish themselves in society is to meet academic requirements, which is closely related to exam oriented education. In the social structure where education selection is rigid and social mobility channels become narrower, the role of education in upward mobility at the lower level is more prominent than in upward mobility at the middle level^[5]. Having excellent grades brings various titles, honors, and rewards to students and parents, which will give them an advantage over others at the time of enrollment. Schools use exam scores as admission benchmarks and set higher thresholds based on this to attract more "top students". Although local governments strictly prohibit compulsory education schools from conducting entrance examinations on students and implement on-site and nearby enrollment. However, parents have become even more aggressive in this regard, rushing to purchase school district housing just to make their children eligible for enrollment^[6].

The implementation of the burden reduction policy is inevitable. But in terms of education, its effectiveness is difficult to see in the short term. It is reasonable for families to meet their exam taking needs, but the government is implementing burden reduction out of consideration for future development, not just the current temporary development. Therefore, the realization of the demand for exams and the requirement for long-term burden reduction make it difficult to solve the problem of academic burden for students in compulsory education.

3. Analysis of the Causes of Supply and Demand Dilemmas Behind the Implementation of Load Reduction Policies

3.1. Differentiation of demand leads to ineffective consensus on reducing burden

Although most families and students have a need to reduce academic burden, and this demand dominates, there are still voices in society who hope to maintain or even increase academic burden and have a greater acceptance of educational burden. It is not difficult to see that there is a phenomenon where a group of families feel that time has increased and hope that students can learn more knowledge outside of school that is not available in textbooks. Some families still hope to help their children achieve "overtaking on the curve" through extracurricular tutoring, have better opportunities for further education, and change the social status quo of the family, even achieving a class leap. Another group of families, due to their economic conditions not allowing them to access more educational resources, will hope to rely on schools to complete their own reshaping of their children. Many dual income families also want to alleviate the pressure of tutoring their children through off campus training institutions. These, due to the inability of individual families to change themselves, subsequently manifest as a need to maintain the status quo and even increase the burden of education, continuously exporting to society. The above phenomena cannot be said to be unreasonable, universal, and long-term. In the context of increasingly fierce talent competition and narrower upward channels in the new era. The continuous overflow of education needs from a large number of families into the public domain, as well as the education concept of "not daring" or "unwilling" to easily reduce the burden, have become the biggest obstacles to implementing the current education burden reduction policy.

3.2. Tutorial "Theater Effect"

The theater effect refers to the individual's pursuit of maximizing benefits, which will lead to an imbalance in collective order and ultimately result in collective tragedy. The theatrical effect of extracurricular tutoring is more rooted in the helplessness of rational choice^[7]. At the beginning, if everyone followed the order of the theater, received unified school education, and no one participated in extracurricular tutoring, sitting and watching the play, then everyone would default to this choice and there would be no pressure or anxiety. When considering their own interests and in order to achieve better viewing results, there will be people standing up in the theater to watch the play, and the people in the back row who advise will not be understood. In addition, due to the lack of supervision, the people in the back row can only choose to stand up in the hope of not falling behind. The beauty of the future stage and the anxiety brought about by "selective admission" have led individuals to choose unconventional methods to achieve short-term improvement in grades. However, regulatory authorities have allowed some parents to follow suit, until everyone in the theater stands up. With the increasing cost of competition for further education, the fragmentation and ritualization of the education system are deeply rooted, and the long-term negative impact has led to everyone ultimately choosing to stand up and watch a play, whether willing or not, in order to achieve a new leverage balance. Because if they don't stand up, they can't watch the show, and if they don't participate in off campus training institutions, they can't compete with others and fall behind. Rational stakeholders, when everyone participates in tutoring and forms a new balance, will inevitably choose better teachers and tutoring classes to gain greater advantages and compete for high-quality educational resources. Parents spend more money, while children spend more energy and time on extracurricular training and tutoring. Intense educational competition will only increase the academic burden on children, as the total amount of high-quality educational resources tends to be stable and will not increase with the increasing intensity of

extracurricular tutoring, ultimately causing physical and mental exhaustion for each participant.

3.3. Policy failure in education supply

Policy implementation involves multiple and complex delegation relationships between central and local executing agencies. During the implementation process, adverse selection and misinterpretation interception problems often arise due to different priorities, ultimately leading to implementation deviations such as selective execution, mechanical execution, and delayed execution. Local governments and schools may not be able to openly resist policies due to their authority and enforceability, and choosing to delay or selectively implement them becomes their "coping strategy". Similar to the "theater effect" of tutoring, other policy implementers often follow suit when they see that the benefits brought by this behavior outweigh the costs incurred, ultimately leading to a deviation in the implementation of burden reduction policies. For instance, in some regions, there is a lack of targeted adjustments when policies are being implemented, leading to a "spinning in place" phenomenon in execution, which ultimately turns into empty slogans. This mainly stems from the policy enforcers' overemphasis on utilitarianism and a narrow instrumental rationality, thereby neglecting the value objectives behind the policies. Max Weber believed that instrumental rationality is aimed at current needs, while value rationality is aimed at future needs. Value rationality lies in the formulation of policies by the subject, while instrumental rationality lies in solving the problem of policy implementation by the subject. The two are essentially unified^[8]. Value rationality should affirm instrumental rationality but also surpass it. However, with the rapid development of the economy and society, instrumental rationality is gradually placing more and more emphasis on value rationality. Therefore, in the context of the proliferation of instrumental rationality and the decline of value rationality, when facing the game with the central decision-making body, the implementation of "selective" policies to maximize their own interests mistakenly becomes the "best" game strategy for lower level policy implementers. For policy implementers, the uncertainty brought about by strict implementation of superior burden reduction policies can easily harm the interests of other departments, and the feedback of target groups can also affect the implementation of policies. During the implementation of educational burden reduction policies, if policymakers fail to effectively supervise the executors and there is a lack of communication with the target group, the executing bodies may interpret and implement the policies superficially and perfunctorily. This leads to formalism, characterized by the saying "policies at the top, countermeasures at the bottom," turning the policy into a shell with only apparent effects.

4. Governance strategies for supply and demand mismatch in the implementation of load reduction policies

4.1. Creating a sound environment for collaborative education between society, school, and family

The smooth implementation of the burden reduction policy not only requires government implementation, but also requires coordination and unity among schools, families, and society to promote the smooth implementation of the education burden reduction policy. The so-called collaborative education between society, schools, and families means that society, schools, and parents should, under the leadership of various levels of government, clarify the responsibility subject, develop quality education, and achieve the healthy development of students. The formulation of future burden reduction policies by the government should be in line with the interests of society, schools, and families, fully considering economic and social factors, breaking

away from habitual dependence on traditional paths, and creating a favorable environment for the implementation of burden reduction policies from the perspective of negotiation and communication^[9]. The government should guide the establishment of a society-school-family cooperation mechanism centered on student development, to alleviate educational burdens, promote the comprehensive development of children, discard the score-centric mentality, and collectively create a healthy educational environment. For students, schools are an important part closely related to their own growth, and it is necessary to strengthen the education and guidance of schools to students, especially the identity of principals as "guides" and teachers as "guides". The fundamental reason why the burden on primary and secondary school students continues to increase is still the concern of families about whether their children can leap into social classes in the future. The concept of "only prestigious schools" and "only academic qualifications" in society has caused employers to consider too much when selecting and employing personnel. Therefore, stakeholders should foster talent-focused employment, regions should build fitting education systems to ease parental concerns, and media should advocate positive education to mitigate anxiety.

4.2. Establish and improve the supervision and inspection mechanism for reducing workload

In the "theater effect", if theater administrators effectively prevent the audience in the first row from standing up to watch the play, they can avoid the helplessness of having chairs but unable to sit down to watch the play. The government plays the role of a "theater administrator" in the real education system. As a regulator, the government should manage and prevent extracurricular tutoring in a timely manner. When the government lacks strong supervision of the extracurricular tutoring market, extracurricular tutoring institutions will inevitably expand their scale after obtaining huge profits, leading to the proliferation of extracurricular institutions and the exaggeration of the advantages of tutoring, creating a tense atmosphere that causes anxiety among parents and encouraging them to implement this burden reduction policy to increase their children's burden. Therefore, we must increase government supervision, strictly control the review of extracurricular training institutions, prevent excessive extracurricular tutoring behaviors, reduce the unreasonable burden of tutoring on students, and reasonably guide parents and students to choose tutoring education. The government can start from the following three aspects regarding the supervision and inspection mechanism for reducing workload: Firstly, in off campus training institutions, establish a high threshold registration mechanism to form an effective supervision and monitoring system and a feedback information chain from the public. Secondly, in schools, we should strengthen the ideological education of teachers, change the evaluation of their excellence based on the admission rate, fully mobilize the initiative of teachers to reduce their workload, and strictly supervise in-service teachers to privately attend extracurricular offline, especially online tutoring. Thirdly, in terms of economy, the government should tilt high-quality public education resources towards areas with poor economic conditions or teacher groups with insufficient energy and time. For groups whose interests have been damaged due to the burden reduction policy, the government should formulate corresponding compensatory measures, provide additional learning costs for families with economic difficulties, and give full play to the core connotation of people-oriented education.

4.3. Pay attention to the reasonable demands of stakeholders in policy implementation

Professor Wu Kangning proposed that "no reform can avoid involving the redistribution of original power and resources."^[10]The main reason why policy implementers are influenced by instrumental rationality is that their interest needs have not been met. In order to achieve the expected effect of load reduction policies, it is necessary to meet the interest demands of

stakeholders in the policy, and to achieve interest integration, their value rationality can be mobilized. In implementing the policy of reducing the burden on compulsory education, the higher-level government and education departments should promptly pay attention to the execution space of policy implementers, plan their powers clearly, respect the differences in the implementation environment of burden reduction policies in different regions, and ensure smooth feedback channels for the implementation of burden reduction policies. Implementing local burden reduction policies can boost enthusiasm and prevent power abuse. When difficulties arise, regional education departments should report to higher authorities for timely policy adjustments. Addressing conflicts between schools and policies involves understanding and balancing their interests, establishing mechanisms for interest expression to enhance the effectiveness of compulsory education burden reduction policies. Parents and students, as key stakeholders, have vital interests and demands. Improving mechanisms to express their interests enhances policy recognition. Strengthening their ability to voice concerns increases policy transparency and broadens interest expression channels, ensuring that the interests and demands of parents and students are effectively represented.

5. Conclusion

Reducing the burden of education cannot be achieved overnight. In this massive system project, the supply-demand contradiction behind reducing the burden requires the joint efforts of decision-makers and implementers. Breaking away from the theories of "only grades", "only prestigious schools", and "only academic qualifications", policy makers should coordinate and implement the reasons for the failure of supply and demand between the main body, improve the supervision and feedback system, and enable society, schools, and families to truly enjoy the benefits of reducing burdens, allowing students to easily acquire knowledge and make happy progress according to their own pace.

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