

A Study on the Implementation of Governance Policies for Secondary School Out-of-School Training in Xi'an in the Context of Double Reduction - Interpretation Based on Ambiguity-Conflict Modelling

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Abstract:

The issue of regulating out-of-school training institutions (OSTI) entered the government's agenda as early as 2018. However, over the years, the implementation of the policy has been blocked and the effect of the policy is unsatisfactory. This study focuses on the practice of regulating out-of-school training in Xi'an under the background of the 'Double Reduction' policy since 2018, and adopts the content analysis method to analyse the reasons for the obstruction based on the locally modified Ambiguity-Conflict model. The study finds that the policy implementation mode changes significantly with the dynamic evolution of ambiguity and conflict: the embryonic period (2018-2020) shows experimental implementation relying on local incentives due to the high ambiguity of the goal and means and the low explicitness of conflict; the high-pressure period (2021-2022) shows lower ambiguity driven by the central government's political potential, but the implementation shifts to political implementation due to the high intensity of conflict arising from touching on fundamental interests. In the current transition period (2022-present), ambiguity continues to diminish, but conflicts become more subtle and complex, and policies face the challenge of a difficult transition to regular administrative implementation. The conclusions show that political power, local incentives, and the game of interests among multiple subjects are the core dominant factors shaping the path of policy implementation, which highlights the necessity and explanatory power of the localised modification of the model.

Keywords: double reduction policy; Ambiguity-Conflict model; policy implementation.

1. Introduction

As early as 2018, the issue of regulating out-of-school training institutions (OSTI) entered the government's agenda. On 22 August 2018, the General Office of the State Council issued opinions on regulating the development of out-of-school training institutions, which made provisions for the strict approval and registration of out-of-school training institutions, regulating training behaviours, and strengthening supervision and management. On 24 July 2021, General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework for Students in Compulsory Education and the Burden of Out-of-School Training (hereinafter referred to as the Double-Reduction policy). The Opinions set out five major goals: improving homework management, improving after-school services, regulating out-of-school training, improving education quality, and strengthening safeguarding capacity. For regulating out-of-school training, it is improved by insisting on strict approval of institutions, regulating the behaviour of training services, and strengthening regular operation and supervision. The fundamental concept is to promote educational equity, safeguard the attributes of public welfare in education, and promote the return of basic education to its roots of moral education and the all-round development of students.

Looking back at the years of out-of-school training institutions, there is a lack of uniformity in the policy objectives, and the implementation of the policy is highly differentiated at the local level; tensions between parents, schools, training courses, the government, students, and other stakeholders continue to emerge; and out-of-school training institutions have many tricks to avoid inspections while the implementation of the policy is often hindered. Existing research on this policy in the field of administrative science focuses on describing the effects of the policy, but lacks analyses of the implementation dilemmas, so it is necessary to use a framework to analyse the multiple challenges it faces in the implementation process.

Accordingly, the author asks the following questions: How does the Ambiguity-Conflict model explain the development of the policy of regulating out-of-school training as part of Xi'an's 'double reduction' policy? How the ambiguity of the policy objectives and the conflict between different interest groups lead to the policy implementation bias? Based on the Ambiguity-Conflict model, this paper will study the specific implementation of the policy of regulating out-of-school training in Xi'an City based on the double-reduced policy, and for the attempt to continue to make in-depth adaptations to the Ambiguity-Conflict model to the local context of the amendments.

2. Literature Review

The Ambiguity-Conflict model proposed by Martland in 1995 is a classic model for studying the policy implementation process. It breaks through the previous 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' paradigms of policy implementation, and from the ambiguity and conflict of the policy itself, it divides the policy into four types of implementation, namely, administrative implementation, experimental implementation, political implementation and symbolic implementation, and for each type of implementation, Martland has given the dominant factors, which are respectively resources, contextual conditions, power and coalition strength [1].

The research on the Ambiguity-Conflict model has been developed in domestic academic circles. Most articles have made adaptive corrections to the Ambiguity-Conflict model, focusing on the correction of dominance factors, the dynamic correction of the model, and the defining factors of ambiguity and conflict. Yuan Fangcheng and Kang Hongjun changed the dominant factors of the four scenarios to industrial and public service resources, local power autonomy, capital resources and local government activism, and social forces such as migrant workers, based on China's policy implementation [2]. Wang Luozhong and Du Mengdie measured ambiguity through policy language, policy objectives and policy instruments, and assess conflict through policy objectives, policy instruments, and the subjects and objects of policy [3]. Wu Bin and Qi Xin also retained the aspect of policy objectives in the identification of policy ambiguity, and examined ambiguity in terms of policy instruments and policy articulation, and analysed conflict in terms of policy adoption, content formulation, and interest analysis [4]. In order to correct the dynamic defects of the original model, Wang Luozhong and Du Mengdie adopt the way of observing the change of policy attributes to judge the policy implementation converging to a certain pattern [3].

From 2021 to now, the policy has been implemented for four years, and the field of administrative science has explored the implementation of the double reduction policy from many angles. For the performance of the double reduction policy implementation problem, Yu Hui and Chen Xinyu summarised four types of double-reduction policy implementation bias based on the reality of the implementation situation: selective implementation, replacement implementation, mechanical implementation and symbolic implementation [5]. With regard to the policy tools used to implement the policy, Wang Yuanyuan and Peng Jun found that most provincial governments mostly use command tools and symbolic exhortation tools in implementing the double reduction policy [6]. As for the rea-

sons for the implementation deviation, Yu Hui and Chen Xinyu point out that due to the problems in the top-level design, the ambiguity of the policy itself, and the conflict between the individual interests of the policy recipients and the overall interests of the policy, it is difficult for the implementing agencies to ensure the effectiveness of the policy due to the constraints of the subjective and objective conditions [5].

Among the many policies of double reduction, the regulation of out-of-school training has become one of the focuses of academic attention. Yang Chenxi and Che Liping point out that the repeated prohibition of out-of-school training is closely related to parents' concept of education, and at the same time, due to the complexity of the relationship between the interests of the out-of-school training organisations, it is difficult to eradicate them at one time [7]. Zhang Maocong, Yin Guangqi, and Du Wenjing suggest that the double reduction policy is to promote the return of the educational services provided by out-of-school training institutions to the public welfare [8].

In light of the literature on Ambiguity-Conflict modelling, domestic researchers have developed a more mature approach to adaptive modification of dominant factors to

local contexts. The specific definitions of ambiguity and conflict vary widely among researchers, with the common denominator being the adoption of policy texts as the object of analysis. However, the Ambiguity-Conflict model is still more often used in static policy research to show the characteristics of the policy at a certain point in time, and does not include the overall policy development history in the scope of the model. There have been preliminary discussions in the existing literature about the ambiguity and conflict in double-decrease policies, however, there have not been any studies applying the Ambiguity-Conflict model to the analysis of double-reduction policies.

3. Research Methods

In this study, the implementation of the policy on the governance of out-of-school training institutions in Xi'an City is selected as the main object of study, and a total of 13 policy texts related to the governance of out-of-school training institutions at the national, Shaanxi Provincial and Xi'an Municipal levels have been collected since 2018 as the object of study of the content analysis method, then these texts are entered into Nvivo software for coding analysis, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Coding Table for Dimensions of Policy Ambiguity Measurement

Policy Characteristics	First-level Dimension	First-level Coding	Second-level Dimension	First-level Coding
Ambiguity	Responsible Entity	1	Clear	11
			Ambiguous	12
	Behavioural Requirements	2	Clear	21
			Ambiguous	22

This study relies on Martland's Ambiguity-Conflict model for analysis, see Table 2. In order to better fit the implementation environment of the double reduction policy, the author makes localized revisions to this model, as Table 3 shows. In China, incentives are an important means to motivate local governments to experiment and innovate, and this paper will use incentives to replace the semantically ambiguous situations in the original model. The de-

terminant of political implementation is political potential. The term "policy potential" is an academic expression for the "high-level push" of public policy in China, which refers to top-down pressure. Regarding the dominant factor of symbolic implementation, since there is no 'social coalition' in the Western sense in China, this paper concludes that interest relations are an important dominant factor in the context of the double reduction policy.

Table 2. Martland's Ambiguity-Conflict model

Low		Conflict	
		High	
Ambiguity	Low	Administrative Implementation <i>Resources</i>	Political Implementation <i>Power</i>
	High	Experimental Implementation <i>Contextual Conditions</i>	Symbolic Implementation <i>Coalition Strength</i>

Table 3. Localized Ambiguity-Conflict model

Low		Conflict	
		High	
Ambiguity	Low	Administrative Implementation <i>Resources</i>	Political Implementation <i>Political Potential</i>
	High	Experimental Implementation <i>Incentive</i>	Symbolic Implementation <i>Interest Relations</i>

4. Results

Ambiguity refers to the degree of clarity of policy goals and means, which is measured in three dimensions: language expression, responsible entity and behavioural requirements. First, the language expression, the language expression in the policy text has ambiguous words, such as ‘guide’, ‘explore’, “regularly”, ‘relevant departments’, etc. The degree of ambiguity can be effectively measured by counting the percentage of such ambiguous words.

Second, the responsible entity, clearly stipulated implementation, supervision of the division of responsibility and specific tasks can be regarded as the main body of responsibility is clear. Third, the behavioural requirements, for the implementation of the means, have clearer provisions, the quantification of the objectives is clearer, the time point is clear, then the behavioural requirements are clear. Policy texts are coded based on the latter two dimensions, and the detailed results are showed in Table 4.

Table 4. Analysis Results of Policy Texts Coding

		Date of policy texts release	
		2018-2022.7	2022.9-2024
Proportion of ambiguous words in language expression		16.49%	14.99%
Responsible Entity	Clear	30.96%	63.63%
	Ambiguous	69.04%	36.36%
Behavioural Requirements	Clear	36.90%	80.49%
	Ambiguous	63.10%	19.51%

Conflictiveness refers to the tension in the relationship between the subjects of interest involved in the policy, and will be examined from the perspective of subject-of-interest analysis, as Figure 1 shows. Among the subjects involved in the policy, the core demand of the policy implementation subject is to put the policy into practice, but other subjects may block the realisation of the policy out of their own demands. After the reform of the screening system of the Senior high school entrance examination,

the pressure for higher education has not been substantially reduced, and anxious parents will seek out the more hidden out-of-school training institutions. OSTIs and related practitioners will continue to provide tuition services for their own benefit. Public schools are too large to provide qualified after-school services for every student, which further exacerbates the collusion between parent groups and OSTIs, counteracting the real implementation of the OSTI governance policy.

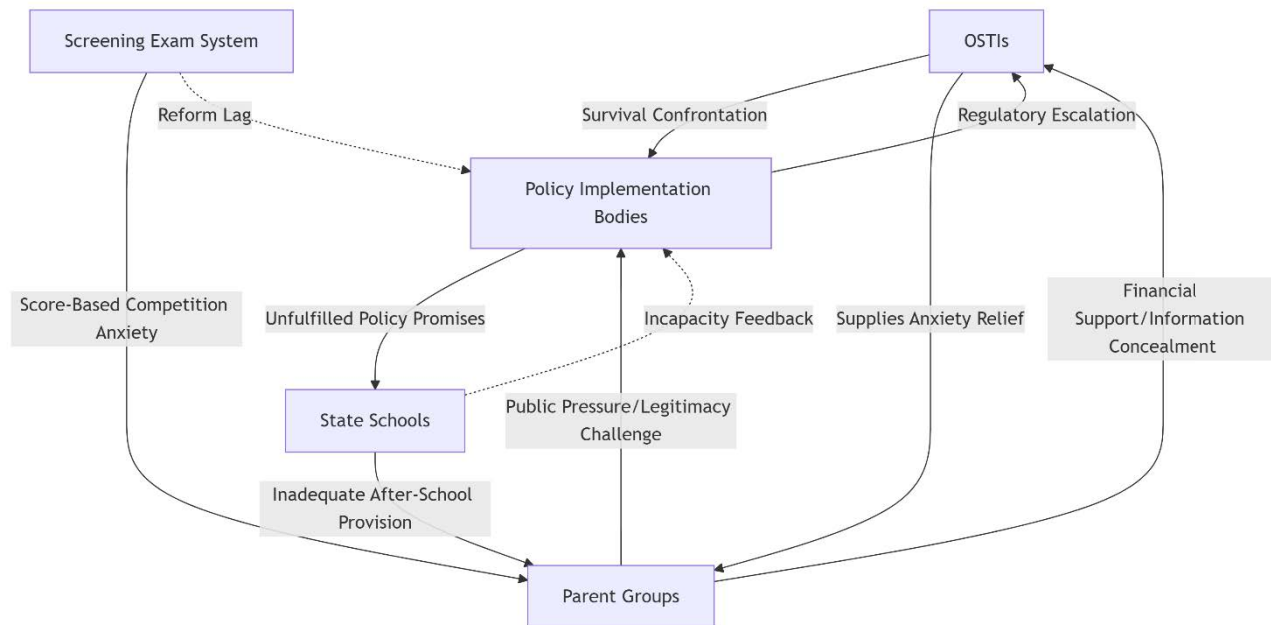


Fig. 1 Conflict of interest among stakeholders

5. Discussion

The practice of regulating out-of-school training in Xi'an under the double-reduction policy clearly shows the dynamic evolution of policy ambiguity and conflict over time, and its profound shaping of the path of implementation. This journey began with early exploration at the national level, entered a phase of intense implementation after the introduction of the central 'double reduction' policy, and gradually shifted to regularised governance, with changes in policy attributes at each stage directly determining the main features of implementation and the challenges faced.

5.1 Policy Germination and Exploration Period (2018-2020)

This period is characterised by high ambiguity and low explicit conflict. In this phase, Xi'an City formulated a local implementation plan based mainly on the 2018 Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Regulating the Development of out-of-school training institutions. However, there is significant uncertainty in the core dimensions of the policy text: the language relies heavily on vocabulary that lacks operational direction, such as 'improving daily supervision' and 'improving teaching quality', and there is no specific operational guidance, such as 'regulating the management of fees'. "and other specific operations are not given quantitative standards, the main body of responsibility, although mentioned in the education sector to take the lead, multi-departmental

co-operation, but the market supervision, civil affairs, human resources and other sectors of the responsibility of the boundary delineation of the extremely general, inter-departmental coordination mechanism and accountability procedures are less. This high degree of ambiguity, coupled with the policy has not yet touched on the fundamental profit model of the out-of-school training industry, resulting in the main stakeholders - out-of-school training institutions are generally in a wait-and-see state, large-scale, open resistance has not yet appeared, the conflict is more reflected in the implementation of the department due to unclear powers and responsibilities generated by the ineffective internal coordination and grass-roots level of implementation. Insufficient motivation. In this context, policy implementation presents a typical experimental implementation mode, the level of incentives determines the enthusiasm of local governments, and insufficient incentives in this policy leads to the failure to land.

5.2 High-pressure Policy Implementation Period (2021-2022)

In July 2021, the central government's Double Reduction policy was launched in a thunderous manner, followed by the release of a relevant notice by Shaanxi Province. In this phase, a substantial breakthrough was made in reducing ambiguity: the language expression of directives and prohibitions was improved, and specific operational methods, such as 'strengthening the synergy between advertising control and the approval and management of out-of-school training institutions', became more specific, and

the main body of responsibility was refined to a certain extent. However, while the clarity of the policy has been enhanced, the subversive impact on the original business model of the out-of-school training industry has triggered a high-intensity conflict between various interest groups. Out-of-school training institutions and practitioners are facing a serious existential crisis, with a large number of organisations failing to adapt to the non-profit-making model and price-limiting policy and closing down or falling into operational difficulties; many subject teachers are facing unemployment or a sharp drop in their income; and there have been open questions and sporadic confrontations about regulation and enforcement. At the same time, divisions and anxiety within the parent community have become another important source of conflict: the unchanged screening system for the middle and high school entrance exams is an immovable pressure that forces some anxious parents to seek more costly and covert ‘underground’ training channels, while other parents who support the reduction of burdens express concern about the rising costs of non-subject-based training and the possible widening of the class gap. Another group of parents in favour of reducing the burden is concerned about the rising cost of non-academic training and the possible widening of the class gap. The involvement of multiple stakeholders has caused a certain degree of stagnation in the implementation of the policy. However, as the policy continued to be rolled out and cracked down on, under the pressure of strong supervision and accountability from the central government, provincial and municipal governments used their political authority and administrative coercion to push forward the reduction of institutions and crack-down on irregularities by means of high-level promotion, high-intensity political mobilisation, and focusing on advantageous resources to carry out special remedial actions in order to reach the preset hard targets. At this stage, the enforcement mode gradually shifted from the symbolic enforcement mode dominated by interest relations to political enforcement.

5.3 Deepening Governance and Normalisation Transition Period (2022-present)

With the improvement of policies, ambiguities continue to decrease, but conflicts at high levels show a trend of complexity and concealment, and the implementation of policies is facing the arduous challenge of transitioning to administrative normality. After the strong rectification in the previous period, the visible market of subject-based out-of-school training has been greatly reduced, and the policy framework and main regulatory rules have basically been established. However, the conflictual nature of the

market has not diminished, but rather persisted and even deepened in a more complex form. The confrontation strategy of out-of-school training institutions has accelerated the ‘evolution’ of ‘invisible variant’ training due to its covert nature, the difficulty of discovery and forensics, which has become a new difficulty in regulation; institutions and regulators continue to carry out a high-cost ‘cat and mouse game’. The cat-and-mouse game between institutions and regulators continues to be a costly one. Parents’ educational anxiety and differentiated demand for quality educational resources, especially the reality of the selection test system of the middle and high school entrance exams, make the ‘underground demand’ for subject tutoring stubbornly exist, which provides a continuous market soil for invisible training, and also makes it difficult to truly implement the policy objectives. At this stage, the focus of the goal has shifted to building a long-term regulatory mechanism and responding to the challenge of ‘invisible variation’, and the mode of implementation should tend to be administrative, i.e., relying mainly on the regularised administrative system, clear rules and stable resource inputs to achieve effective governance. In reality, however, due to the high complexity of the governance of invisible variation, the fact that the mechanism of cross-sectoral synergy has not yet fully matured, the persistence of deep-rooted conflicts of interest, and the ambiguity that still exists in localised areas, the implementation of policies has not yet been able to reach the state of administrative implementation that is stable, efficient and sustainable. The success of this transition will be highly dependent on the science and implementation of the design of the long-term mechanism, especially the ability to clarify the remaining ambiguities and the extent to which deep-seated, structural conflicts are resolved.

6. Conclusion

Based on the locally modified Ambiguity-Conflict model, this study systematically explains the evolution of the implementation path of the policy of regulating out-of-school training in Xi’an from 2018 to 2024. The study finds that: in the budding period of the policy, due to the high ambiguity of the goals and means and the low level of explicit conflicts, the policy was implemented in an experimental mode that relied on local incentives; in the high-pressure implementation period, the ambiguity was reduced under the drive of the central government’s political potential, but the implementation shifted to the political implementation led by political authority due to the high intensity of conflicts that touched on the fundamental interests of the industry; and the ambiguity continued to diminish during the current transition period of normality,

but the conflicts showed characteristics of concealment and complexity. In the current period of normalisation and transition, ambiguity continues to diminish, but conflicts are hidden and complex, and policies face the daunting challenge of transitioning to a conventional administrative mode of implementation.

The limitations of this study are twofold: first, focusing on a single case in Xi'an deepens the analysis of implementation details, but it is difficult to fully reveal the impact of regional differences on policy attributes; second, the data sources are mainly policy texts and macro-descriptions, and there is a lack of in-depth interviews with grass-roots practitioners, parents, and practitioners, which constrains the mining of the micro-generation mechanism of conflicts.

This study is still an attempt to broaden the path of the Ambiguity-Conflict model to explain the Chinese case, and its generalisability needs to be verified by more case studies in future research. The reasons for the obstruction of the implementation of the double-minus policy also need to be combined with more theories such as street-level bureaucracy in order to come up with a comprehensive picture, and the micro and macro perspectives need to be combined in the discussion.

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