

A Study on the Policy Agenda of Burden Reduction for Primary and Secondary School Teachers in China from the Perspective of Multiple Streams Model

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Abstract: Primary and secondary school teachers are the cornerstone of basic education, and reducing their workload is essential to protecting the rights and interests of teachers and promoting the quality of education. This article uses Multiple Streams Model as a research framework and finds that primary school teachers' long-term overloaded workload and unreasonable work structure and the overburdening of primary and secondary school teachers have aroused widespread concern in the society, forming a problem Streams; the high attention paid by government officials, the advice of experts and scholars, and the appeals of grass-roots teachers constitute a policy Streams; the party's political philosophy, the state's education governance philosophy, and the civil public opinion and The party's political concept, the state's concept of education governance, and civil opinion and public sentiment form the politics Streams. The three streams are interactively coupled, and the policy window is opened.

Keywords: Primary and secondary school teachers, Teacher burden, Multiple Streams Model, Teacher burden reduction policy, Policy agenda

1. Introduction

The responsibilities and inner feelings that teachers face in their educational activities constitute teacher burden, which is divided into two categories: teaching-related and non-teaching-related. Teaching-related burdens are a normal part of the job for teachers, and appropriate teaching pressure can contribute to teachers' self-growth and professional development. On the contrary, excessive non-teaching tasks such as administration, clerical work, attendance, communication with parents, etc. would distract teachers' attention and increase work pressure. Teachers are required to handle multiple job roles and complex tasks, all of which impose additional burdens on them.^[1] In response to this problem, the Central Government has promulgated the policy of "Opinions on Reducing the Burden on Primary and Secondary School Teachers and Further Creating a Favourable Environment for Education and Teaching", which aims to reduce the non-teaching workload of teachers. Provinces have formulated measures and promoted special work to reduce the burden in the light of local conditions. At present, the country's provinces have basically completed their teacher burden reduction lists, making reducing the burden on teachers an important issue at the national level, and administrations at all levels have been given corresponding responsibilities. The core objective of the policy is to reduce extraneous interference with teachers and to ensure that they are able to focus on their educational and teaching work.^[2]

In the research on burden reduction for primary and secondary school teachers, scholars at this stage have mainly explored the causes, types, policy values and implementation effects, providing a basis for understanding the current situation of burden reduction and exploring strategies. However, there is a lack of research on the logical generation of load-reducing teacher policies. This article analyses how teacher load reduction became a policy focus, the factors that triggered the policy agenda and their modes of action, as well as the internal logic and mechanisms of these factors through a *Multiple Streams model*. At the same time, the Model is adjusted in light of the socialist situation with Chinese characteristics to construct a Multiple Streams Model suitable for China, which will provide a reference for domestic policy research.

2. The Interpretation of Multiple Streams Model and its Applicability in Chinese Primary and Secondary School Teachers' Burden Reduction Policies

2.1. Interpretation of Multiple Streams Model

Multiple Streams Model originates from John Kingdon's development of Cohen et al.'s the Garbage Can Model, which articulates policy change as a complex process in which multiple dynamic streams interact. The model is divided into three separate streams: problem, policy and Politics. The problem stream highlights the impact of focal events and crises on the concerns of policymakers; the policy stream involves programmes and ideas put forward by the policy community, in which sound policy initiatives are adopted; and the Politics stream describes the influence of independent factors, such as national sentiments, changes of government, the distribution of political parties and the activities of interest groups. These streams operate independently but interact with each other at critical junctures to open policy windows and raise public issues to the top of the agenda.^[3] At its core, the Multiple Streams Model explains which issues attract the attention of policymakers, how they rise to the agenda and how policy proposals are selected from among multiple options, revealing the multiple dynamics and rationality of policymaking.

2.2. Model applicability

The applicability of the Multiple Streams Model needs to be carefully considered when analysing policy formation in China. This model not only analyses the policy process under conditions of uncertainty, but also explains policy making at the national level. Scholars have made necessary adjustments and improvements to the Multiple Streams Model in order to adapt it to the Chinese political environment. The context of policy formation in China exhibits a certain degree of openness and plurality, which is also reflected in the process of policy formulation. Multiple Streams Model provides a new perspective in public policy analysis due to its rich theoretical connotation and practical application significance. It has been widely used in the field of education and other areas of public policy, proving its applicability and research value.^[4] The inclusion of the policy of reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers in the policy agenda is the result of the combination of historical development and real needs, as well as the product of the combined effect of multiple forces, including politics, experts and mass groups. Therefore, the application of the Multiple Streams Model to the analysis of the formation of primary and secondary school teachers' load reduction policies in China is not only of great significance, but also feasible, and can provide valuable references and support for the policy formulation and decision-making process.

3. Multiple Streams analysis of the policy agenda

3.1. Problems stream

Problem streams are at the heart of Multiple Streams Model, which is based on social issues that attract the attention of policymakers through factors such as urgency indicators and events, which in turn influence the policy agenda. The identification of problems is crucial for policymakers and relies on how the problem attracts attention over time. Problems are identified by governmental and academic institutions through comparative mechanisms, and differential comparisons of outcomes may lead to the elevation of a problem to a policy issue.

3.1.1. Key indicators: chronic overload and irrational work structure of primary and secondary school teachers

The reason why issues can attract the attention of policymakers is often because data indicators visualise the importance and urgency of the problem. In recent years, a number of data sets based on field research and facts have revealed that primary and secondary school teachers have been subjected to overloaded workloads and unreasonable work structures for a long time. Primary and secondary school teachers are burdened with diverse job responsibilities and heavy task loads, and are often in a state of busyness and confusion, which has a negative impact on their professional growth and the quality of their teaching.

The main reasons for this situation: firstly, the excessive workload of teachers makes it difficult for them to strike a work-life balance. In 2019, the results of a survey on teachers' working conditions showed that more than 70 per cent of teachers reported that their work was stressful, with long working hours

and little personal time and space. Some teachers said they work more than 12 hours a day and are often required to work overtime on weekends, a high-intensity working condition that has become the norm. Most of our primary and secondary school teachers work more than eight hours a day and more than 60 hours a week. Such a work pattern is prone to triggering negative emotions, while depriving them of rest and time to spend with their families, which in turn affects the efficiency of their work.^[5] In addition, this work-life imbalance may prompt teachers to leave their jobs, thus adversely affecting the stability of the education workforce and attracting the best talent.

Secondly, teachers' workload is tedious and complex, which affects their ability to ensure the quality of their teaching. Faced with routine and unexpected tasks, teachers are distracted and find it difficult to concentrate on educating and nurturing their students. A survey covering 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions across the country revealed that more than 6,000 primary and secondary school teachers surveyed were under pressure to deal with cadre styles, communication among colleagues, performance appraisal, tasks that were not part of their duties, and accompanying school leaders to social functions, amounting to 46.42 per cent, 16.20 per cent, 74.85 per cent and 69.28 per cent, respectively. This reveals that teachers are not only under the pressure of students' academic performance, but also under the pressure of performance appraisals and additional administrative tasks that are closely related to their personal interests. In such an environment, teachers often have to meet the basic prescribed requirements and have no time to conduct in-depth research on teaching methods, which will ultimately affect the effectiveness of teaching and the improvement of education quality. The interference of administrative matters in teaching activities not only elevates teachers' work pressure, but also has an impact on their personal lives.^[6] The data show the high level of stress faced by teachers in primary and secondary schools in China, a phenomenon that not only highlights the severity of the problem, but also accelerates the process of identifying it as a policy issue and facilitates the generation of problem streams.

3.1.2. Incidents in Focus: Overburdening of Primary and Secondary School Teachers Causes Widespread Concern in the Community

Teachers' overburden and the existence of health problems have been crystallised in a number of focus events in recent years. In 2018, a teacher at a middle school in Hubei suddenly fainted in class, which was later confirmed to be a heart attack caused by overexertion, an incident that shocked the education sector and all sectors of society. Similar incidents have also occurred in other regions, for example, a secondary school teacher eventually chose to commit suicide after suffering from severe depression due to long-term overwork. A 2019 CCTV report pointed out the current situation of teachers' heavy extracurricular burdens, with many teachers coping with a large number of tasks that are not part of their job, such as updating the school's public website, organising meeting materials, and punching cards on a variety of apps, in addition to their teaching duties. These extra tasks seriously affect the quality of teaching and personal life of teachers, leading to physical and mental exhaustion and reduced professional well-being.^[7]

The high stress and risk of the teaching profession is also reflected in the high incidence of occupational diseases among teachers. According to a national survey, many teachers suffer from serious occupational diseases, such as chronic pharyngitis, cervical spondylosis, and lumbar intervertebral disc herniation, which are far more prevalent than in other professions. These incidents have led to heightened social concern about teachers' working environment and physical and mental health. These issues have reinforced policy makers' awareness of the urgency of reducing the workload of primary and secondary school teachers and formulating relevant policies. The phenomenon of crisis in educational governance has become a key rationale for promoting the development of policies to reduce the burden on primary and secondary school teachers.

3.2. Policy stream

In order to alleviate the work pressure of primary and secondary school teachers, it is necessary to formulate a targeted policy on burden reduction. This process requires the participation of many parties, including the Government, education experts and grass-roots teachers, to build a co-operative platform for policy development. These stakeholders make suggestions through research and practice to form the ideological basis and solutions for policy development. Their propositions are discussed and adjusted to provide options for policymakers.

First, in the formulation of the policy on reducing the burden on primary and secondary school teachers, government officials, through research and listening to the views of grass-roots teachers, have learnt about the burdens and disturbances faced by teachers in their actual work, so that they can take

these factors into full consideration in the policy formulation process. Since the 18th National Congress of the Party, national leader has made numerous visits to guide localities and schools, emphasising the importance of teachers' work and making the strengthening of the teaching force a fundamental task. The Party and the State attach great importance to the work of teachers and have made the building of the teaching force a fundamental task. All sectors of society are called upon to support teachers and provide them with quiet schools and sufficient time. These important speeches have served as a guide to action in advancing education reform and development, providing an important reference for the implementation of the General Secretary's high expectations for the work of teachers, reassuring teachers to teach, and reducing the workload of primary and secondary school teachers.

Secondly, experts and scholars play the role of think-tanks in promoting the formulation of policies on reducing the burden on primary and secondary school teachers. Through academic research and field studies, they have systematically analysed the causes and effects of the burden on teachers and put forward scientific and reasonable strategies to reduce the burden. The scholars have made suggestions including optimising teacher training and teaching and research activities, adjusting teachers' roles and functions, and implementing dynamic monitoring of teachers' work pressure. These suggestions and propositions are based on field research and empirical studies, and they provide theoretical basis and data support for governmental decision-making. Through participation in education policy forums and seminars, experts and scholars directly advise government departments and education policymakers, influencing policy formulation and optimisation.

Thirdly, as the direct beneficiaries of the policy, grass-roots teachers' views and suggestions are important references for policy formulation. Teachers have expressed, through various channels, the practical problems they encounter in their work and their demand for burden reduction.^[8] The voices of grass-roots teachers are conveyed to the decision-making level through the teachers' unions, seminars of the education authorities, and so on, so that the policy on burden reduction can be made more relevant to the actual needs.

3.3. Politics stream

The ideology of the state and government, and the shifting moods of the population are the main political elements in the formation of policies to reduce the burden on primary and secondary school teachers. These elements inject political momentum into the creation and resolution of social problems, build up a base of public opinion, provide a political climate, provoke a response from policymakers, and contribute to the creation of policy agendas.

First, in order to ensure the legitimacy and appropriateness of policies, their formulation needs to be consistent with the political philosophy of the ruling party. The political philosophy of the ruling party is not only a compass for policy direction, but also a key factor in policy choice. The government's concern for the development of the teaching force is reflected in its programmes and reforms, which provide firm political support for reducing the work pressure on primary and secondary school teachers. National leader's concern for teachers provides direction for the reform and development of the teaching force. Improving the working conditions of teachers is essential if the development of the teaching force is to play a key role in the national strategy. Therefore, solving the problem of excessive workload of primary and secondary school teachers is an important part of realising the goals of the national strategy.

Secondly, the State's philosophy of educational governance has provided political guarantees for the formulation of policies to reduce the burden on primary and secondary school teachers. In comprehensively deepening the reform of teacher training in the new era, the State has emphasised its concern for the physical and mental health of teachers and its efforts to improve their social and political status.^[9] The Government's concern has made burden reduction for primary and secondary school teachers an important agenda item, and has ensured that work on burden reduction at the grass-roots level is carried out at the policy level.

Thirdly, civil opinion and public sentiment have shaped the heat for the policy of reducing the workload of primary and secondary school teachers. As concerns about the workload of primary and secondary school teachers continue to rise, public discussion has become more open and active. Several news media have called for a reduction in teachers' work pressure through serialised articles. Such a fervour of discussion has made the issue of reducing teachers' workload a high priority for the government. With the help of online public opinion, key stakeholders on the issue of teacher workload reduction have spoken out through the Internet, stimulating wider public participation and facilitating quick action by the government in formulating policies on workload reduction.

3.4. Three Streams coupling leads to the opening of a policy window

At the critical stage of the high-quality development of basic education in China, the development of policies for reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers is a complex process. The problem, politics and policy streams operate independently, but are nested together, and the coupling of the three streams is achieved when the policy window opens, providing an opportunity for the creation of a policy agenda and the introduction of policies to reduce the burden on primary and secondary school teachers.

Firstly, problem and politics streams are nested. Problem streams are the key to getting social concerns onto the policy agenda, and the formulation of China's primary and secondary teacher burden reduction policy is based on the optimisation of real-life problems. The high workload, heavy and complex tasks of teachers and the overburdening of primary and secondary school teachers have aroused widespread concern in society together constitute the problem streams of primary and secondary school teachers' burden reduction policy formulation. As the problem of overburdening primary and secondary school teachers became more and more prominent, the public and the government reached a consensus, forming an initial coupling of the problem and politics streams. National leader has repeatedly emphasised the need to reduce teachers' work pressure to ensure they can concentrate on teaching. Since 2018, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has made clear its opposition to assigning unrelated tasks to teachers at several key meetings and has committed to developing policies to reduce the burden. Media coverage and public discussion have also fuelled this agenda.

Second, problem streams are combined with policy streams. Policymakers identified the problem of overburdened primary and secondary school teachers, explored its causes and developed feasible and valuable policy options that fit the current political environment. Through the construction and restructuring between the problem to be solved and the policy alternatives, the re-coupling of the problem streams and the policy streams is promoted, and the mature policy alternatives are finally formed through continuous adjustment and innovation. In order to address the problem of excessive workload of primary and secondary school teachers, national government departments, after extensive research and gathering opinions from various sectors, formulated a programme to reduce workload and submitted it to the National Education Reform Leading Group for approval.

Finally, politics and policy streams are nested. Driven by the will of political parties, policy makers screened the alternatives, seized the opportunity to facilitate the deep coupling of policy and politics streams, and incorporated into the agenda policy alternatives for primary and secondary school teachers' burden reduction that were adapted to the current political environment, in line with the expectations of the society, and feasible, so as to create a political atmosphere for the formulation of primary and secondary school teachers' burden reduction policies. The mutual nesting and coupling of these three streams, driven by policy makers, eventually opens the policy window. The opening of the policy window not only provides an institutional context for policymaking, but also provides an opportunity for the formulation of the primary and secondary school teacher load reduction policy. In September 2019, the Central Committee for Comprehensively Deepening Reform adopted a programme for primary and secondary school teachers to reduce their load. In December of the same year, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the General Office of the State Council issued Several Opinions on Reducing the Burden on Primary and Secondary School Teachers and Further Creating a Favourable Environment for Education and Teaching to guide localities and departments in implementing the policy, which marked the official opening of the window of the policy on reducing the burden on primary and secondary school teachers.

4. Conclusions

In exploring the process of the formation of Chinese primary and secondary school teachers' burden reduction policies, it is found that in China's particular national context, problem streams, policy streams and politics streams interact with each other to facilitate the opening of the policy window. Typically, the problem stream attracts the attention of policy makers before the policy stream, thus facilitating the creation of the policy stream and coupling it with the politics stream. In the Chinese context, the direction of the politics stream is mainly influenced by the party's ideology and governing philosophy. Policy makers have multiple identities in China, and they not only pay attention to problem streams and policy streams, but also have influence on politics streams, thus playing a central role in policy agenda setting. The policy of reducing the burden on primary and secondary school teachers reflects the flexibility and diversity of China's policymaking process.

Primary and secondary school teachers are the cornerstone of basic education, and reducing their workload is essential to protecting the rights and interests of teachers and promoting the quality of education. The State and society have taken note of the excessive burden of primary and secondary school teachers, and the promulgation of the Opinions demonstrates the State's attention to this issue, but this is only the starting point for problem-solving. Reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers is not a short-term task, but requires sustained attention and efforts to ensure that teachers can focus on education and contribute to the training of the next generation. Burden reduction for primary and secondary school teachers is a complex long-term project that requires sustained attention and efforts. In the process of policy implementation, the potential impact of the multiple streams theory should not be overlooked, as it can provide valuable insights for improving governance efficiency.

This study utilises John Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model to provide an explanation of the policy agenda of load reduction for primary and secondary school teachers in China, and explores the applicability of the theory in the localisation process. However, as the research methodology is limited to case study analysis, it can only reflect the situation in a single domain, lacks standardised data support, and may carry a certain degree of contingency and subjective judgement. In view of this, research on the application of the Multiple Streams Model in localisation still needs to be explored more extensively and in depth.

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