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**Nurturing Creativity and Talent in After-School Musical Societies under the 'Double Reduction' Policy in China**

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**Abstract**

In 2021, China issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework and Off Campus Training Burden of Students in Compulsory Education". This title highlights the element of innovation within after-school musical societies in Nanjing's primary schools, showcasing their ability to adapt and find creative solutions within the constraints of the 'Double Reduction' policy. This paper examines the after-school musical societies in three primary schools in Nanjing within the context of the 'double reduction' policy. Through questionnaire surveys and interviews, it aims to explore the current state of these societies and identify the challenges they face in their establishment.

Keywords: China, "Double reduction" policy, Musical societies, Creativity

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**1.0 Introduction**

China has attached great importance to extracurricular learning activities since ancient times and advocated the combination of in-class and out-of-class activities. Conventional music teaching in schools is aimed at all students' music education, which cannot take into account the interests and hobbies of each student. In contemporary society, people's education is increasingly affected by the income gap and social stratification (Wang, 2022). In addition, the uneven distribution of educational resources intensifies social contradictions. Despite some educational reforms, the basic education, which should have been developed for all students, has become increasingly unfair due to the "exam-oriented education" and some parents who choose to have students study outside of school for the sake of "training excellence", resulting in increased learning pressure on students (Luo, 2022). In addition, the fixed curriculum and relatively single learning content of the school have also been ill-equipped to adapt to the needs of students.

**2.0 Literature Review**

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### 2.1 The Theoretical Concept of the "Double Reduction" Policy

The "Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework and Off Campus Training Burden of Students in Compulsory Education Stage", the "Double Reduction" policy proposes to comprehensively reduce the total amount and duration of students' homework, improve the level of after-school services in schools, and regulate off-campus training behavior. The meaning of "Double Reduction" includes two aspects: the content of burden reduction and the main body of burden reduction. The content refers to reducing the pressure on students' homework and extracurricular training, while the main body refers to primary and secondary school students in the nine-year compulsory education stage (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). The "Double Reduction" policy aims to reduce the intervention of family capital in obtaining high-quality educational resources based on equal school education, reduce parents' family education expenditure and corresponding burden, and promote the realization of social fairness and justice through educational equity (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

#### *Policy Implementation*

The implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy is connected with Chinese education development trends and mainly includes three aspects. Regarding assignment issues, the homework content for the difficulty level of the student's learning stage should be from shallow to deep, and the specific workload arranged by teachers and schools should also have a certain degree of flexibility, which can be suitable for different students. Second, the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy is also driven by non-standard and excessive extracurricular tutoring. The Education Bureau not only needs to standardize the operation and safety management of extracurricular training institutions, and distinguish and manage subject and non-subject categories. At the same time, to some extent, it is necessary to suppress the impact of extracurricular training institutions on the talent resources and positions of school teachers (Yang, 2021). Third, the delayed after-school service is one of the most important content for the policy, which, although it increases students' time in school, the purpose is to improve students' creative ability and comprehensive quality beyond classroom learning (Zhou, 2022). After-class services also strengthen the investment of social talent resources in the school, and use this time to further enrich the content and improve the quality of its services (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

With the development of the times and the changes in the workplace, students are been asked to develop skills far beyond Chinese and mathematics, including strong communication and problem-solving abilities, as well as the ability to work in teams and demonstrate leadership (Vandell & Posner, 1999). Meanwhile, studies have shown that when young people do not stay with adults after school, they are less safe, more vulnerable to becoming victims or perpetrators of crime, and more likely to become engaged in such high-risk activities as experimenting with alcohol and drugs (Snyder & Melissa, 1999). Therefore, the reasonable implementation of policies is an effective arrangement and utilization of students' spare time, promoting their healthy and comprehensive development.

### 2.2 The Establishment of After-School Musical Societies

For many years, parents with both money and opportunities have used local youth programs— various types of clubs and sports teams — to help support their children's development (Grossman et al., 2001). Nowadays, parents and the general public increasingly view after-school activities as necessary support for the growth and development of young people, rather than additional things. Schools seem to be the best place to carry out these projects, and a safe environment also provides legitimacy for some parents who might feel hesitation (Grossman et al., 2002).

At present, the main content of after-school services includes homework guidance, physical training, art development, and expanding learning and reading. Among them, after-school art cultivation is an activity that promotes the comprehensive development of students' qualities and cultivates innovative thinking. In terms of categories, musical societies in primary and secondary schools can be roughly divided into vocal societies, instrumental societies, and dance societies to teach students according to their aptitude, enhance their interest in music, and cultivate their musical talents. However, there are individual differences in the thinking and physical and mental development of primary and secondary school students, especially in terms of emotional management and interest selection, which leads to frequent changes in the personnel of musical societies (Sun, 2022). At the same time, observing the current primary and secondary schools in Nanjing, the number of full-time music teachers in many schools ranges from 6 to 8. This situation can lead to a teacher's need to lead multiple societies, coupled with objective conditions such as venue and time, resulting in an imbalance in the quantity and quality of musical societies (Chu, 2021).

### 3.0 Specific Issues Addressed in the Study

The review of the current situation of the "Double Reduction" policy suggests that there are several issues in nurturing creativity and talent in after-school musical societies that need to be addressed. On the one hand, in the current context of exam-oriented education in China, many parents and students believe that score is of utmost importance. Therefore, some students tend to have a negative attitude towards choosing interest societies. In actual activity organizations, situations such as being late, leaving early, being absent, and even writing homework in class emerge endlessly (Chen, 2016). On the other hand, the fixed time delayed after-school services deprive students and parents of the right to make independent choices. At the same time, the relatively single course content limits the source of students' knowledge and prevents them from exercising and cultivating creativity (Cheng, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to explore the current state of these musical societies and identify the challenges they face in their establishment.

## 4.0 Methodology

By employing a mixed methods approach, the research involved three primary schools' music teachers and parents in the Nanjing school system which are implementing the "Double Reduction" policy to ensure that receipts are collected and analyzed from different perspectives to get a fuller picture of the real situation after the implementation of the policy. Simultaneously, the parents were provided with a comprehensive overview of the study's purpose, enabling them to complete the questionnaires either online or offline. The interview for six music teachers in this study and the participants were drawn from three Nanjing primary schools in terms of school types (one government, one private, and one international) who music teaching experience of more than five years. Eighty-four parents who voluntarily participated in this study were invited to respond to a questionnaire, and participants were selected using a convenience sampling method.

*Questionnaire and Interview*

The questionnaire for parents was adapted from Luo (2022) and Yang (2021) and consisted of 21 items, three seeking background information (school grade, gender, family role), 13 involving Likert scales, and four questions involving tick boxes to indicate preference or factual information. 1 question is asking to answer does the "Double Reduction" policy needs improvement, and areas still need improvement. According to the specific implementation of Nanjing's "Double Reduction" policy, the authors modified some questionnaire items (types of music societies, after-school service hours) to ensure that the questionnaire was appropriate for the real situation of the participants. The questionnaire will be collected using paper questionnaires and software "問卷星", and analyzed using SPSS. "問卷星" is a Chinese software that has the function to deal with the data collected from the respondents and is free to analyze and visualize the data for users.

In addition, six music teachers were interviewed, notes were taken during the interviews, and the anonymous interview data were manually transcribed using Excel software.

**5.0 Findings**

This article reports and discusses the current situation of the establishment of primary school after-school musical societies under the background of the "Double Reduction" policy, and establishes the challenges they face in nurturing students' creativity and talent during the establishment process. The survey results on the views of parents and music teachers on musical societies and policy implementation are shown in the following sections.

*Parents' opinion on children's participation in after-school musical societies*

One of the major aspects of the questionnaire survey investigated the current attitudes toward children's participation in after-school musical societies from parents. According to Figure 1, 40.91% and 54.55% of first-year parents respectively expressed strong and relatively supportive attitudes towards their children's participation in after-school musical societies; 46.67% of second-grade parents and 40% of third-grade parents also expressed a very supportive attitude. In fourth grade, 28.57% of parents choose to be very supportive, while 7.14% of parents respond not to be supportive. 71.43% and 54.55% of parents of fifth and sixth-grade students respectively respond very supportive (see Figure 1). At the same time, more than half of parents expressed satisfaction with the professional abilities of music teachers who establish musical societies, with only about 8.33% believing that the abilities of music teachers still need to be improved.

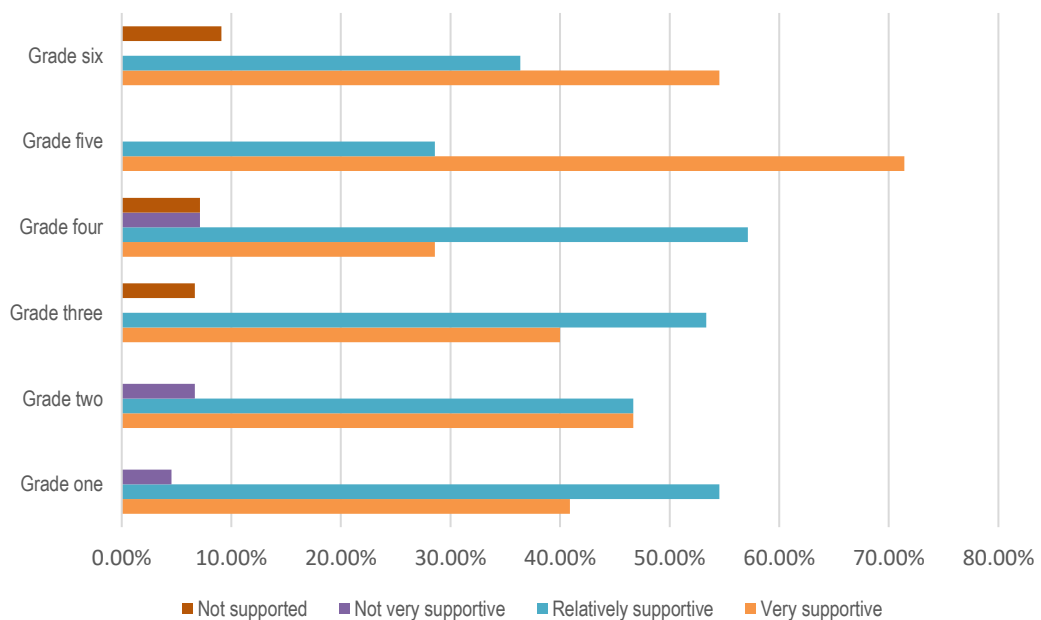


Figure 1. Parents' opinion on children's participation in after-school musical societies

*The categories of extracurricular tutoring institutions children participate in*

Parents were asked to select the types of extracurricular tutoring institutions that their children participated in from the following five items: 1. Academic subject guidance related to subjects such as Chinese and mathematics; 2. Art category, such as music, art, dance, calligraphy, etc.; 3. Sports related; 4. Custody class, institutional care for children, and tutoring homework; 5. Not participating in extracurricular tutoring institutions. The two most-important tutoring institutions, as perceived by parents, were Academic subject guidance (more than 50% chose in each grade, besides first-grade parents, only 31.82%), Art category (from grade one to grade six: 81.82%, 86.67%, 66.67%, 42.86%, 42.86%, 63.64% respectively), and Sports related, reaching 46.63% overall (see Figure 2).

The data shows that the main purposes for parents to arrange their children for extracurricular tutoring institutions at present are to develop their children's interests and cultivate their artistic and innovative abilities (58.33%), 51.19% want to improve their students' academic performance, 47.62% want to improve their children's overall quality, and 42.86% want to cultivate their children's athletic abilities and strengthen their physical fitness (see Figure 3).

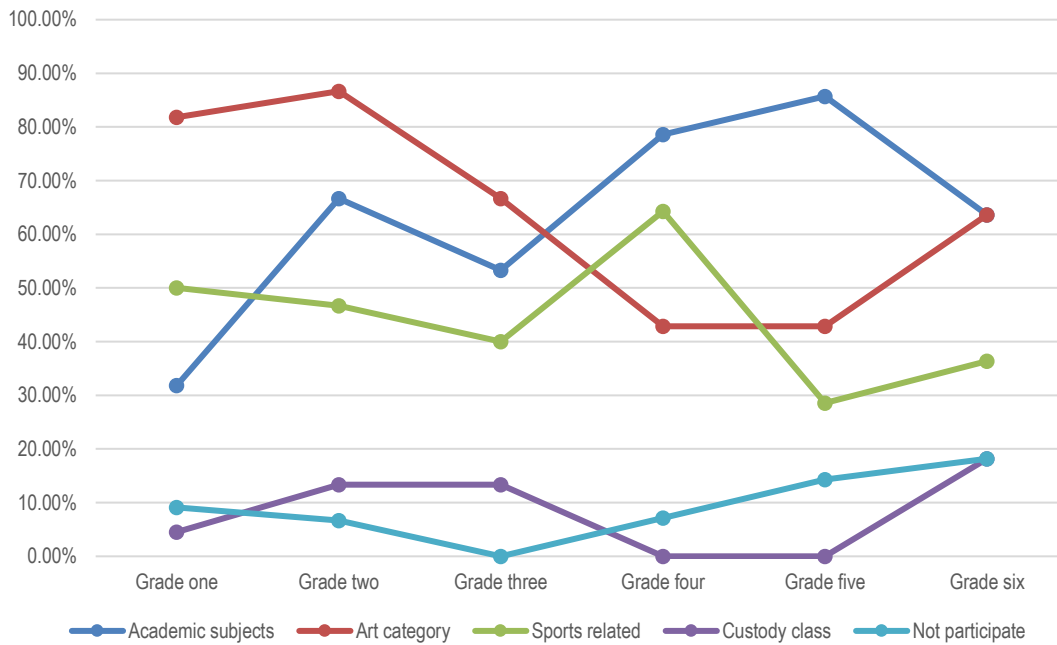


Figure 2. The categories of extracurricular tutoring institutions children participate in

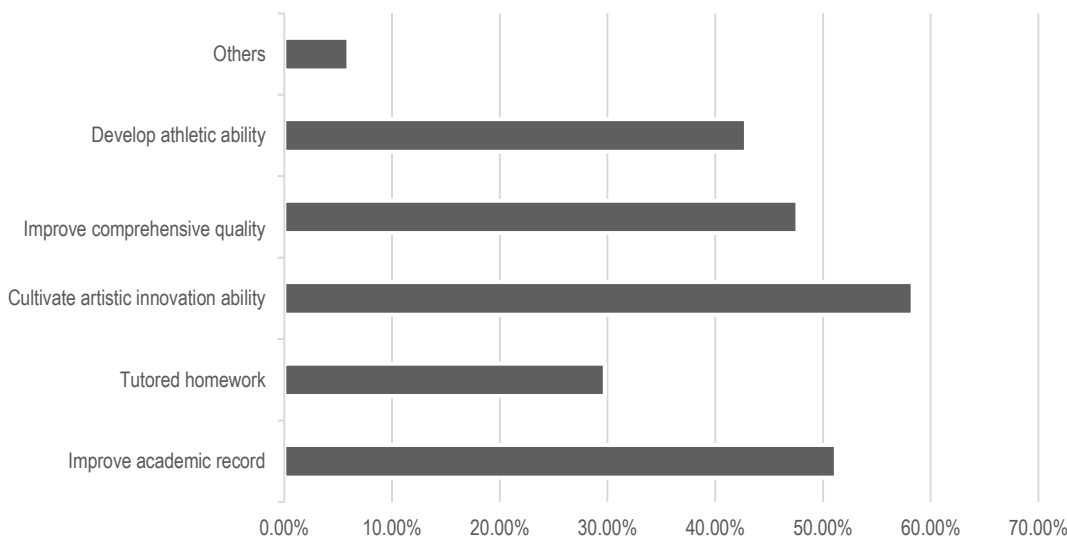


Figure 3. The main purpose of parents arranging extracurricular tutoring institutions

*Parents' attitude towards the "Double Reduction" policy*

The data shows that 58.33% of parents believed that the school's current after-school services could basically meet their students' educational needs, but require some extracurricular tutoring. 29.76% of parents thought that students still needed more extracurricular

tutoring. In terms of attitude towards the "double reduction" policy, 39.29% and 29.76% of parents chose "comparatively compliant" and "not very compliant" in line with their needs, with only 19.05% of parents indicating full compliance (see Figure 4).

		Number (N=84)	%
Do you think that since the establishment of after-school services, the existing school education can meet the educational needs of children?	Completely satisfied	5	5.95%
	Basically able to meet the requirement	49	58.33%
	Not very satisfying	25	29.76%
Do you think the "Double Reduction" policy is in line with the desire to improve your child's education status?	Completely unsatisfied	5	5.95%
	Fully compliant	16	19.05%
	Comparatively compliant	33	39.29%
	Not very compliant	25	29.76%
	Not compliant	10	11.9%

Figure 4. Parents' attitude towards the "Double Reduction" policy

#### *Teachers' perceptions of establishing after-school musical societies under the 'Double Reduction' policy*

All music teachers from three schools through interviews stated that the changes caused by the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy are challenging for the education industry. These changes may mean adjustments in the content, teaching methods, and forms of music teaching courses for schools and music teachers. Though most teachers agreed that the establishment of after-school musical societies helps cultivate students' talents and creativity, they thought that each child was a different individual, and they were very willing to have the opportunity to educate students more on their aptitude. However, three-quarters of government school and private school music teachers believed that schools do not have advanced and sufficient teaching resources to support the establishment of societies and help teachers create opportunities for students to nurture musical talent and creativity. 60% of teachers stated that the work of musical societies has a certain impact on them. The decision-making of after-school service activities in schools requires music teachers to spend more energy and time preparing course content beyond common teaching. In addition, two teachers also stated that the after-school service time and content need to be adjusted according to the specific situation of each school. The current implementation situation not only extends the working hours of teachers but also has a certain impact on their mental stress and health.

## 6.0 Discussion

This study aims to investigate the understanding of primary school parents and music teachers towards the "Double Reduction" policy, and their feelings towards the cultivation of students' creativity and talent in the after-school musical societies arranged by the policy, as well as the practical implementation of the policy. In summary, the "Double Reduction" policy, to a certain extent, has followed the trend of China's education development. The development of musical societies focuses on allowing students to practice music experience, promoting the development of students' comprehensive qualities, and cultivating innovative abilities in listening, learning, and performance. However, most schools in China will have certain deviations when implementing the policy. Music teachers face different constraints when implementing the new policy, including misunderstanding and ignorance of "creativity and talent cultivation" (Sun, 2022). Due to the lack of renewal and related on-the-job training, the position of music as a discipline in schools is often at a disadvantage, which will be exacerbated by the lack of specific guidelines and assessment criteria in the curriculum documents themselves.

According to the results of this study, the majority of respondents strongly support students participating in musical society activities in school, believing that it helps to cultivate children's creativity and talent. However, due to China's "Teaching to the test", parents do not believe that the existing school music education activities under the "Double Reduction" policy can meet their children's educational needs (Chen, 2016). In other words, they believe that children still need to spend some time on after-school tutoring. According to the types of extracurricular tutoring, parents in lower grades (grades one to three) believe that learning art courses is relatively important and plays a significant role in cultivating children's creativity and aesthetics. On the contrary, most parents in the senior grades (grades four to six) choose to have their children engage in academic subjects tutoring learning, believing that learning music is not as useful and important as learning academic subjects. It is common for Chinese parents to encourage their children to take a safe path in their future careers and focus on academic subjects. Learning common and "useful" subjects such as Chinese, Mathematics, and English is considered more likely to find higher-paying jobs in the future. Most parents have inherited the traditional Chinese view that learning music is not for a living, but for the sake of artistic aesthetics and personal development (Jiaxing Xie & Bo Wah Leung, 2011).

In the process of nurturing personal creativity and talent, students not only participate in musical societies but also make reasonable use of their time after school and personal leisure time, which is an important factor. According to the survey results, Chinese students will continue to spend time after school to learn and preview related knowledge to the academic subject or use time to read. In addition, as students grow in grade, the time they are willing to spend with their parents decreases, while in contrast, the time they spend alone for entertainment increases. Nearly 40% of students in the second and fifth grades of primary school choose to go to bed directly after they finish their homework too late at home. This may be attributed to the current state of education and development in China and the fact that the "double reduction" policy is still in the early stages of exploration, and there are still many problems in the actual

implementation of the policy (Zhou, 2022). At the same time, excessive learning pressure may be an important factor affecting students' ability to develop music.

In addition to the above issues, in the feedback from parents, not all primary schools currently offer after-school services and art courses by policy requirements. At the same time, some schools even charge fees. This situation has caused great dissatisfaction among parents, not only increasing economic pressure but also expressing concerns about whether students can receive sufficient education and services in school. This circumstance also goes against the original intention of the "Double Reduction" policy. It not only did not effectively reduce the burden on children, but also failed to nurture students' abilities and talents through using extracurricular time, school music teachers' professional knowledge, and teaching conditions. At the same time, it still did not improve the unfair educational environment, and students were unable to achieve fair and comprehensive development.

## 7.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, the purpose of the implementation of the after-school musical societies in the "Double Reduction" policy is to improve students' artistic aesthetic opportunities in addition to traditional teaching, let them explore and cultivate their talents, and provide them with more opportunities to show. However, Chinese parents have always faced a paradoxical situation in nurturing students' creativity and talent. On the one hand, according to the current social development, they believe that creativity is very important and are very willing to spend time and energy cultivating children's talents; On the other hand, they consider that learning academic subjects well is of utmost importance for children's future, whether it is getting into a good school or finding excellent jobs. They do not want students to confuse cause and effect and affect their academic performance. The recent "Double Reduction" policy reform has indeed played a certain role and solved some problems. However, how to further help parents see the value of participating in school musical societies and understand the importance of cultivating creativity and talent remains an urgent problem to be solved.

Based on the conclusion above, it is recommended that in future research, in addition to the participation of parents and music teachers, students from primary schools can also be invited to participate in a questionnaire survey to gain a more comprehensive understanding of different people's feelings towards policy implementation. At the same time, the research object should be expanded to select more provinces and schools for research based on the education development level of different regions and urban and rural areas in China, to have a more realistic understanding of the implementation effect and feasibility of the current policy.

## Acknowledgment

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study will help to understand the effective impact of school after-school musical societies on students' creativity and talent under the "Double Reduction" policy, as well as the challenges they face. At present, most research only focuses on understanding the current situation of primary school musical societies under the policy background. However, these studies did not use suitable methods to measure and analyze the true feedback and actual situation of parents and teachers through data analysis. This study analyzed the perspectives of parents and music teachers through questionnaire surveys and interviews and adjusted the content and methods of societies' establishment based on social reality. It compensates for the lack of professionalism in the establishment of primary school after-school musical societies and the problems of neglecting the importance of cultivating students' creativity and talent in existing research. The study improves the current situation of limited research results in this field and advises making good use of time to cultivate students' abilities and reduce the corresponding energy burden on parents.

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