

Discretion Under Resource Constraints: School Administrators and China's Silver Age Teaching Program

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Abstract: Population aging and the uneven distribution of public service capacity are accelerating countries' efforts to encourage retirees to participate in public services. China's "Silver Age Teaching Program" recruits retired teachers to work in rural schools with scarce educational resources, thereby improving basic education provision in under-resourced areas. This study takes Bobai County in Guangxi—the county with the largest number of teachers recruited under the program—as the research site. Drawing on street-level bureaucracy (SLB) theory and employing a qualitative case study design involving field observation and semi-structured interviews, we analyse how school administrators' discretion reshapes implementation pathways and policy outcomes. We find that, under conditions of persistently high student enrollment, chronic teacher shortages, and broadly defined policy texts, administrators prioritize practical solutions to immediate operational challenges through situational role allocation, selective task assignment, and experience-based judgment. These discretionary practices produce several outcomes, including the practical contraction of developmental objectives, the institutionalization of a gap-filling implementation mode, and the instrumentalization of silver-age teachers' roles.

Keywords: Street-level Bureaucracy, Policy Implementation Gap, Rural Education, Silver-age Teachers.

1. Introduction

The ageing population continues to spread in countries around the world, causing labour shortages (Maestas, Mullen & Powell, 2023), pension crisis (Grinin, Grinin & Korotayev, 2023), and increased pressure on family care (Bao et al., 2022) and other social issues. In order to meet this challenge, WHO officially released Active Ageing: Policy Framework at the Second World Congress on Ageing and incorporated it into the global ageing policy system (WHO, 2023). Existing studies suggest that active ageing, senior volunteering, lifelong learning, and tourism are associated with improvements in older adults' physical and cognitive functioning (de Lima Flauzino et al., 2022; Dogra et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022a). In the context of active aging, people

are living longer (Liu & Zhong, 2022), and the prevalence of various dependencies has significantly decreased under more favorable and convenient living conditions (Gong et al., 2022). Consequently, countries are widely mobilizing retired individuals to participate in public services (Falanga et al., 2021) to alleviate the long-standing tight balance in public service provision. This is particularly evident in rural and less developed areas where resources are scarcer and insufficient public service supply is especially severe (Li, Shi & Xue, 2020).

In the field of education, teacher shortages have become one of the core issues of public service deficits faced by many countries, leading to attempts to address the shortfall through measures such as delaying retirement or rehiring retired teachers. In a case study on teacher shortages in Japan (Sakuma & Shimazaki, 2024), local schools, to some extent, pinned their hopes on filling vacant positions by rehiring retirees, yet very few retiring teachers reaching the mandatory age were willing to accept re-employment. In some schools in Germany's most populous state, Nordrhein-Westfalen, teacher gaps emerged, and the state encouraged already retired teachers to return to teaching by offering pension supplements (Seeliger & Håkansson Lindqvist, 2023). As the retirement age for public-school teachers in Missouri, USA, is significantly earlier than that for teachers in other comparable professions, a study simulated the impact of targeted late-career salary bonuses and deferred retirement option plans (DROPs) on the labor market (Kim et al., 2021). It found that because DROPs force teachers to reveal their work-retirement preferences, they can typically increase teaching years at a lower average annual cost.

In response, China has launched a volunteer service program called the "National Silver Age Teaching Program," aiming to better utilize the human resource of the "young-old" (Neugarten, 1974) — a demographic with significant capacity and social potential — while simultaneously addressing the shortage of educational teaching staff. The plan is a policy tool coordinated by the central government and implemented by the local government. It is expected to form a team of 120,000 silver-age teachers by 2026, giving full play to the supplementary and exemplary role of retired teachers. In the Notice on the Implementation of the 2025 Silver Age Teaching Program, the Ministry of Education of China proposed to recruit 7,000 lecture teachers to independently select retired teachers in weak areas to carry out lecture services, which is known as the "Silver Age Teaching Program" and is a sub-plan of the compulsory education stage in the "National Silver Age Teaching Program". The goal is to promote the level of education, teaching and management in mountainous counties, especially in rural areas of poverty alleviation counties. These areas are affected by complex topography, weak economic foundation, insufficient public service supply capacity and other factors, and the shortcomings of teachers in the allocation of educational resources are particularly prominent. With long-term accumulated professional knowledge and practical experience, the group of silver-age teachers carry out teaching, teaching and research guidance and other work in poverty alleviation areas, border ethnic areas, old revolutionary areas and other areas with weak education (Xie, 2025), which not only alleviates the pressure of teaching, but also undertakes the function of demonstration, leadership and experience transmission (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023).

Although the implementation of the Silver Age Teaching Program has solved the shortage of teachers in the recipient areas to a certain extent (Zhang, Fang & Jiang, 2025),

there is also a gap in the implementation of policies. Current research on the Silver Age Teaching Program and its supporting policies mainly focuses on policy objectives and their effectiveness, with very limited attention paid to the gaps in policy implementation at the grassroots level. As a public service delivery tool combining developmental goals with a gap-filling function, the Initiative's operational process integrates voluntary participation mechanisms with administrative coordination arrangements. When the Initiative faces long-term resource constraints while its policy objectives remain multifaceted, how school administrators interpret, prioritize, and reconstruct policy content through discretion, and how such discretionary practices shape the actual operational form and governance outcomes of the policy, still lack systematic analysis. Based on this, this paper proposes the following three research questions:

1. Under what policy and situational contexts do school administrators exercise discretion within the Silver Age Teaching Program?
2. What practical outcomes are generated through the discretion exercised by school administrators in the Silver Age Teaching Program?
3. Which functions of the Silver Age Teaching Program are reconfigured by the outcomes of this discretion?

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the discretionary mechanisms and impacts of the Silver Age Teaching Program from the perspective of street-level bureaucracy discretion. The structure of the remainder of this paper is as follows: Section 2 provides a contextual discussion on dimensions such as educational equity, senior volunteering, and policy implementation, leading to an introduction of the value and dilemmas of the Silver Age Teaching Program. Section 3 introduces the complete data collection and analysis methods. Subsequently, Section 4 explores the discretion within the Silver Age Teaching Program from a bottom-up perspective through interviews with policy implementation subjects and objects. Section 5 provides relevant discussions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Education Poverty Alleviation

Education can block the intergenerational transmission of relative poverty (Zuo et al., 2023). A study on education poverty alleviation in 32 European countries (Hofmarcher, 2021) found that education has a substantial poverty-reducing effect on individual income. For each additional semester of compulsory schooling received, the probability of experiencing relative poverty decreases by 6–8%. Research indicates that receiving quality basic education during the schooling stage has a significant impact on increasing adult income levels and well-being, with its effect second only to that of higher education (Yang et al., 2022b). In terms of implementation, China has adopted a series of measures to ensure that impoverished populations have access to education, can afford it, receive quality education, and benefit from it (Yuan & Ding, 2023), which includes the Silver Age Teaching Program. Correspondingly, poorer regions suffer from scarcer educational resources. Research on the professional development of young rural teachers in Western China (Liu, Liu & Wang, 2022) found that the amount of rural young teachers provided by the government every year still cannot meet the

normal teaching needs of schools. Therefore, addressing the shortage of educational resources, particularly of excellent teachers, in impoverished areas is extremely urgent. Consequently, the Silver Age Teaching Program possesses the dual attributes of an active aging policy and an educational equity policy. The “Silver-Age Teacher Action Plan” aims to awaken the self-awareness of “silver-haired” teachers, fully utilize the advantages of retired teacher resources, promote the essential transformation of teacher resource allocation from “supplying” to “making full use of available resources”, and thereby achieve equitable and quality rural education (Jiang, 2023).

2.2. Senior Volunteering

The proportion of older people in the world is projected to reach nearly 12% in 2030 and 16% in 2050. In 2030, 1.4 billion people will be aged 60 years and older globally (WHO, 2023). As statistics show, an increasing number of senior citizens (aged 60 years and older) tend to participate in service provision as a volunteer (Rudnicka et al., 2020). Volunteers may increase physical activity levels and subjective ratings of physical function for seniors without apparent harm (Moore et al., 2021). Older adults become more positive about their volunteer role as service providers and may strive to maximize benefits for their clients. The overall performance of this role contributes to enhancing their well-being. Negative experiences such as value co-destruction (VCD) can be overcome by building good relationships with colleagues within the organization (Shirahada & Wilson, 2022). Among the elderly retired population, volunteers show significant improvements compared to non-volunteers in terms of emotional stability and quality of life (Matthews & Nazroo, 2021). Regarding the social value contributed by senior volunteers, managers in volunteer organizations need to understand the positive and negative value experienced and created through volunteering as a service provision activity to continue motivating seniors to volunteer and to foster well-being (Allen & Prange, 2021). Research also indicates that volunteering offers older adults opportunities to continue and cultivate new social roles, as the aging process leads them through numerous life stages and transitions (Russell, Storti & Handy, 2022).

2.3. Discretion in Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is a crucial stage in the policy completion and cycle. Research has found that there are appropriate and nicely-formulated policies but ineffectively carried out, as a result, leading to a wide gap between policy intent and implementation (Abdullahi & Othman, 2021). Inadequate policy implementation often stems from complicated guidelines that tend to be difficult to understand and implement by the region (Aminullah et al., 2022). Policy means also are ambiguous when there are uncertainties about what roles various organizations are to play in the implementation process, or when a complex environment makes it difficult to know which tools to use, how to use them, and what the effects of their use will be (Taylor, Zarb & Jeschke, 2021). In his 1980 work *Street-Level Bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public service*, Lipsky introduced the concept of bureaucratic discretion in public policy implementation. Scholarly research starting from this point has since examined the members of bureaucratic agencies, their intentions, values, and their influence on policy implementation outcomes (Lipsky, 2010). Not

only are frontline public servants, but also teachers, including school administrators, broadly considered street-level bureaucrats, possessing similar space and rights for discretion. In contexts characterized by incomplete policy rules, significant resource constraints, and coexisting accountability pressures, frontline teachers must make contextualized judgments regarding teaching content, resource allocation, and student management (Guimarães, Bernado & Borde, 2022). Compared to teachers, there is very little research on the discretionary power of school administrators. While citizen participation matters, bureaucratic discretion has a more significant influence over administrative decision-making (Young & Tanner, 2023). In Global South countries, fragile institutional environments, imbalances in public service supply and demand, and severe resource constraints make the work of street-level bureaucracy (SLB) more challenging. As compared to developed countries, this may lead to a wider divergence between formal prescriptions and actual services, as well as the emergence of informal tactics that exceed the boundaries of discretionary rule application (Lotta et al., 2022). The literature above illustrates that the Silver Age Teaching Program, as a policy practice highly dependent on grassroots interpretation and operation, provides an important context for analyzing the operational mechanisms of discretion in grassroots education management. This paper treats discretion as a key analytical lens connecting policy texts with grassroots practice, and further analyzes its impact on the governance effects of the Silver Age Teaching Program.

3. Methodology

Bobai County in Guangxi is the county with the largest resident population in Guangxi and was designated as an autonomous region-level county that has emerged from poverty (referring to counties that, following relevant policy stipulations for poverty exit, have reduced their poverty incidence rate—the primary metric for exit—to below 2% in principle, or below 3% in western regions). It is also the county that has recruited the largest number of teachers nationwide since the implementation of the Silver Age Teaching Program, with as many as 270 teachers in the 2025-2026 academic year alone. Therefore, in terms of both balancing educational needs and the number of silver-age teachers, Bobai County serves as a representative observation window for analyzing the actual operational logic and grassroots discretionary mechanisms of the silver-age teachers' Teaching Program within the context of grassroots education governance.

From 2017 to 2025, Bobai County has recruited a total of 1,746 silver-age teachers, covering 411 rural schools throughout the county. As shown in Table 2, primary schools account for the highest proportion (71.8%), followed by teaching sites (19.7%). Table 1 shows that teachers aged 55–60 account for 72% of the recruited silver-age teachers. In terms of gender ratio, there are 501 males and 1,245 females, accounting for 28.7% and 71.3% respectively.

From March to December 2025, the research carried out field research by combining observation and interview, and sent official invitation letters to the stakeholders of six rural schools in Bobai County, Guangxi, clarifying the details of the research objectives, content and interview process. All the respondents were fully informed and agreed. The study adopted the semi-structured interview method to conduct field visits to the above-mentioned schools in Bobai County, Guangxi. The observation and interview focussed on the development of silver-age teachers, and interviewed 13 silver-age

teachers, school administrators and leading cadres of the Education Bureau. As shown in Table 3, the sample included 8 female and 5 male participants; by position, there were 6 silver-age teachers, 6 principals, and 1 education management official. Each interview lasted 30-90 minutes, was recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then relative analysis was conducted using a formal coding procedure based on inductive and deductive methods. To protect the privacy of the respondents, key information such as their names and work locations were omitted.

Table 1: Age Structure Distribution of Silver-age Teachers.

Age	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	Others	Total
No. of Teachers	224	322	270	164	113	174	141	101	80	47	21	89	1746
Percentage	12.8%	18.4%	15.5%	9.4%	6.5%	10.0%	8.1%	5.8%	4.6%	2.7%	1.2%	5.1%	

Table 2: Types of Schools Supported by the Silver Age Teaching Program.

School Type	Primary School	Teaching Site	Junior Middle School	Kindergarten	Total
No. of Schools	295	81	33	2	411
Percentage	71.8%	19.7%	8.0%	0.5%	

Table 3: Basic Information of Interview Samples.

Case Code	Gender	Age	Work Unit	Position	Interview Duration
T1	Female	57	Primary School	Silver Age Teacher	90 min
T2	Female	56	Middle School	Silver Age Teacher	45 min
T3	Female	57	Teaching Site	Silver Age Teacher	50 min
T4	Female	58	Primary School	Silver Age Teacher	60 min
T5	Female	62	Middle School	Silver Age Teacher	50 min
T6	Male	61	Middle School	Silver Age Teacher	55 min
H1	Female	47	Primary School	Principal	60 min
H2	Male	46	Middle School	Principal	60 min
H3	Female	40	Primary School	Vice Principal	80 min
H4	Male	35	Teaching Site	Head	60 min
H5	Female	42	Middle School	Principal	60 min
H6	Male	41	Middle School	Principal	80 min
A1	Male	52	Education Bureau	Education Administration Staff	90 min

4. The Practice of Discretion in the Silver Age Teaching Program

4.1. Adaptive Adjustments under Contextual Constraints

Bobai County, a populous county, a traditional agricultural county, and a major labor-exporting county in Guangxi, consistently faces a high number of students in rural schools, resulting in tight class sizes and a large proportion of left-behind children. For example, the surveyed schools, Shuangwang Town Central Primary School, Dongping Town Hejiang Central Primary School, and Yingqiao Town Central Primary School, have 6875, 4579, and 2744 students respectively, with teacher-student ratios all exceeding the Guangxi average of 17.61. Silver-age teachers recruited 29, 16 and 24 respectively. Left-behind children generally have the characteristics of weak cognitive ability (Ye & Wang, 2024) and insufficient family care (Xiong et al., 2024). School administrators have to make adaptive adjustments under the constraints of this situation. Principal H1 pointed out: “Our school

is in the countryside, with 752 students, 80% of whom are left-behind children.” Principal H2 similarly mentioned: “Our school applied for silver-age teachers because there are many students and few teachers, primarily to alleviate the teaching workload pressure on existing staff.” Consequently, during the policy implementation process, silver-age teachers are primarily assigned to front-line classroom teaching positions. The narrative of Silver Age Teacher T1 corroborates this discretionary context from another angle: “Compared to students in urban areas, the students here have a weaker foundation. Teaching must start from the most basic knowledge; for example, English instruction begins with the alphabet.” Under the contextual constraints of weak cognitive abilities and insufficient family support, administrators, through adaptive adjustments, translate the relevant requirements from the policy text into specific position allocations.

4.2. Selective Reconfiguration under Resource Constraints

Field research indicates that insufficient teaching staff in rural schools in Bobai County constitutes the most significant resource constraint for conducting teaching work. Instances were found where a single English teacher had to cover English classes for all six grades. Consequently, having silver-age teachers conduct classroom instruction became the primary function prioritized in the program’s implementation. Vice Principal H3 explicitly stated: “silver-age teachers need to shoulder teaching responsibilities for multiple grades or classes, leaving insufficient energy to guide young teachers.” Under the aforementioned teacher resource constraints, the actual work of silver-age teachers exhibits a clear state of daily responsibilities combining course instruction with student management. Silver Age Teacher T6 mentioned: “My assigned tasks are not limited to classroom teaching; they also include homeroom teacher duties such as supervising morning and evening reading sessions and dormitory duty every day.” This prioritization is also reflected in how silver-age teachers perceive their own roles. Silver Age Teacher T3 clearly stated, “I came to this school primarily to share the teaching workload and help other teachers reduce their student management burden.” When teaching resources are only sufficient to support instructional delivery, school administrators can only simplify the implementation content of the Silver Age Teaching Program. Through the discretionary power of school administrators, the Initiative is first and foremost understood as a crucial tool to alleviate teaching supply pressures, passively setting aside multiple policy objectives such as teacher development and pedagogical improvement. Principal H5 noted in an interview: “The school’s teaching staff has long been in a state of shortage, with teachers under immense pressure from teaching tasks. It is difficult for the school to reserve sufficient time for systematic teaching research guidance and the cultivation of young teachers.” The interviews above collectively indicate that under conditions of highly strained teacher resources, silver-age teachers are prioritized for use in ensuring the baseline goal of “having someone to teach classes and manage students after class.” Thus, the Silver Age Teaching Program is reconfigured from a policy tool intended to be both developmental and demonstrative into a gap-filling implementation tool centered on guaranteeing teaching supply and organizational operation.

4.3. Implicit Screening under Cognitive Orientation

Interview materials reveal that, during the implementation process of the Silver Age

Teaching Program policy, school administrators applied differentiated treatment to the policy content based on cognitive orientation, manifesting in three implementation approaches: rule dependence, selective implementation, and priority implementation. Only a minority of administrators, when implementing the policy, relied entirely on tasks explicitly listed in the policy text for setting Silver Age teacher positions, arranging work content, and daily management requirements, maintaining a high degree of consistency between execution content and document stipulations. In practice, some managers selectively implemented the policy, only assigning tasks such as classroom teaching and course delivery. Silver-age teachers (T4) explicitly stated that their main contribution to the school was to “share teaching responsibilities and reduce the workload of other teachers.” Other managers, based on past experience, prioritized assigning silver-age teachers to front-line teaching. Teaching Site Head H4 mentioned: “There is no practical difference in managing silver-age teachers compared to regular in-service teachers; silver-age teachers are the main teaching force holding the front line and the class managers.” This indicates that administrators in different schools, during the execution of the Silver Age Teaching Program, apply different implicit screenings of policy content based on individual cognition. These implementation approaches appear respectively in concrete practice, constituting different forms of the Initiative’s execution within school management.

4.4. Implementation Tensions Among Multiple Roles

During the implementation of the Silver Age Teaching Program, school administrators need to simultaneously respond to different demands and expectations from three levels: superiors, peers, and subordinates. Vice Principal H3 noted, “In our work, we must both complete tasks assigned by higher authorities and ensure the normal operation of the school’s teaching order.” Principal H5 stated in an interview, “In practical work, we constantly need to communicate and coordinate among different demands; it is difficult to accomplish multiple policy objectives simultaneously.” The interview shows that school managers clearly realise that they need to fulfil both the responsibility of policy implementation and assume the responsibilities of school operation managers. It is difficult for this multi-role pressure to form a unified action guideline, which also promotes the Silver Age Teaching Program to show the inevitable goal tension in the grass-roots implementation. The operation of the Silver Age Teaching Program involves the interaction between many subjects, including school administrators, silver-age teachers, and groups such as students and parents, showing mixed characteristics. The multiple roles of school administrators face the dilemma of many expectations, and silver-age teachers are neither regular teachers nor volunteers in the general sense. There is a lack of clear definition of roles and insufficient performance of multiple roles. Silver-age teacher T2 mentioned: “Although returning to the podium as a silver-age teacher, there is not much difference between daily life and work and what you do before retirement.” Principal H5 mentioned: “The work intensity of older silver-age teachers is not only not significantly different from that of in-the-job teachers.” This expression supports the vague positioning of silver-age teachers in the service relationship. The Silver Age Teaching Program proposes that silver-age teachers can carry out lectures and give full play to the role of demonstration and radiation in various forms such as classroom teaching, young teacher guidance,

teaching management and research support, but the job responsibilities and work focus of silver-age teachers are not clearly defined. Based on the broad policy text, the plan is given multiple goals, and this multi-goal juxtaposition makes the policy inherent in potential tension before it is implemented at the grassroots level.

4.5. Constrained Choices under Limited Support Conditions

The Silver Age Teaching Program requires silver-age teachers to be provided with temporary accommodation and necessary living facilities. Surveys found that the high number of junior high school students and poor commuting conditions, coupled with the fact that most students choose to live on campus, leads to a shortage of accommodation. School administrators can only redistribute remaining dormitories among all teachers, including silver-age teachers, after prioritizing student accommodation needs. Silver-age teacher T5 mentioned, “Currently, I share a dormitory with other teachers, but the difficulties can be overcome.” The continuous mountainous terrain of Bobai County also makes commuting inconvenient for silver-age teachers. Furthermore, to save energy and concentrate on teaching and student management, most silver-age teachers choose to live at school on weekdays and return home on weekends. Education official A1 stated, “In county-level coordination, the Silver Age Teaching Program is primarily used as a practical tool to address teacher shortages, mainly ensuring basic operational needs in terms of funding, training, and supporting facilities.” In rural impoverished areas with limited resources, school administrators, lacking greater control over material resources and finances, are forced to choose to provide only a minimum living allowance for silver-age teachers.

5. Discussion

Based on a case study of Bobai County, Guangxi, this study finds that the Silver Age Teaching Program provides significant support for alleviating teacher shortages in basic education in counties of central and western China and ensuring better operation of the school teaching system. However, in practice, it presents a situation characterized by persistently high student numbers, a shortage of teachers, and limited material support. School administrators cannot simply follow the functional design of the policy text, but rather exercise discretion based on maintaining stable teaching order. As this discretionary practice is repeatedly implemented at the grassroots level, the Silver Age Teaching Program is gradually embedded into the existing school teaching organization system, and its implementation gradually exhibits a single-supplementary characteristic. In order to cope with the coexisting multi-policy goals and teaching stability, school managers make discretionary adjustments to the job allocation, task arrangement and operation focus of the Silver Age Teaching Program, so that the plan has formed a stable practice model with ensuring classroom supply and teaching continuity as the core in the grass-roots operation. Although it has effectively supported the basic operation of the school under the tight conditions of teachers in the short term, it has also reshaped the functional focus of the Silver Age Teaching Program in practice, so that the developmental goals such as demonstration teaching and experience transmission are marginalised in daily implementation, and the teaching tasks directly related to classroom supply are easier to be implemented continuously, so that The plan shows the result of tilting from development-oriented

to supply-oriented in terms of functional structure, so the plan also shows the characteristics of highly relying on grass-roots interpretation and operation.

The distinction between silver-age teachers and regular teaching staff in terms of staffing and work assignments has been continuously weakening, with their participation becoming closer to that of routine teaching and management positions. Thus, the policy arrangements, which initially had some flexibility and room for exploration, have gradually formed a relatively stable implementation model at the organizational level. The Silver Age Teaching Program has been institutionalized at the grassroots level as an important component in alleviating teacher shortages, a result also reflected in the statements of school management. The research results indicate that discretionary power is not only a choice of implementation strategy, but also a way to define the functional boundaries of policies in their continuous operation. To fully realize the potential value of the Silver Age Teaching Program in demonstration and guidance, it is necessary to clearly define the role boundaries of silver-age teachers in policy texts, improve the goal-matching support and evaluation mechanisms, provide operational guidelines for schools to implement multiple policy objectives, and alleviate the pressure on school administrators when balancing different roles.

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