Quality and Assurance of Policy Advisory Reports: A Case Study of the X Education Think Tank in D City (Postprint)

Authors: Li Qinggang

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Ensuring the quality of policy advisory reports is evidently of significant importance to the quality of policy documents. The quality of policy advisory reports refers to the degree of goodness or badness of other issues incidentally generated while solving educational problems. High quality of policy advisory reports can only be effectively ensured in value-neutral domains.

[Methods/Process] A case study of X Education Think Tank of institutional nature in D City reveals that ensuring the quality of policy advisory reports also requires the comprehensive application of multiple research methods, such as historical research, comparative research, trend extrapolation, model analysis, cost-benefit analysis, etc.

[Results/Conclusion] Strengthening the professional capacity building of local new-type education think tanks, ensuring that education policies are grounded in sufficient evidence as much as possible, while fostering a clean and upright academic atmosphere.

Full Text

On the Quality and Assurance of Policy Reports: A Case Study of X Education Think Tank in D City[1]

Li Qinggang
South China Normal University, Guangzhou 510631

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Ensuring the quality of policy advisory reports is evidently crucial for enhancing the quality of policy texts. The quality of such

reports refers to the degree to which they solve educational problems without generating additional issues, yet this quality can only be effectively guaranteed in value-neutral domains. [**Method/Process**] Based on a case study of X Education Think Tank—a public institution in D City—this research finds that guaranteeing report quality requires comprehensive application of multiple research methods, including historical research, comparative studies, trend extrapolation, model analysis, and cost-benefit analysis. [**Results/Conclusion**] The study concludes that we must strengthen the professional capacity building of local new-type education think tanks to ground education policies in sufficient evidence, while simultaneously fostering a clean and upright academic atmosphere.

Keywords: Policy Advisory Report; Quality; Case Study
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Since entering the "new normal" period, China has launched the construction of new-type education think tanks across various regions. However, research on how to guarantee the quality of policy advisory reports—the core issue in building truly qualified new-type think tanks—has only just begun. This gap between scholarly inquiry and urgent practical demands has significantly hindered the pace of think tank development. This paper examines X Education Think Tank in D City as a case study, analyzing its explorations and initiatives in quality assurance to stimulate deeper academic discussion on this critical issue.

1 The Quality of Policy Advisory Reports

The quality of policy advisory reports refers to the degree to which they solve educational problems without generating ancillary issues. High quality primarily denotes research excellence—reports must provide first-rate policy ideas and recommendations that innovatively address or alleviate real educational problems. In the initial stage of education think tank construction, governments often place excessive hope in these institutions, idealistically expecting them to eradicate long-standing educational maladies overnight. This misconception assumes that think tanks can "solve everything," enabling precise policy implementation with "one-strike solutions." In reality, policy advisory reports have far more limited effects. Given the complex causal chains inherent in educational issues, a report that alleviates problems without breeding new ones already qualifies as relatively high quality.

This is particularly true when educational issues involve value domains, where the rational role of education policy diminishes significantly. As noted in the literature, "the most significant advances of human reason have occurred in value-neutral territories; value judgments lack rational support, and reasoning from facts to values is suspect" [1]. Since educational policy problems are often inseparable from value judgments, the field is replete with "contradictory" research conclusions. For instance, based on the 2000 NAEP results, private school students outperformed public school students across all subjects, while

a RAND Corporation study of Philadelphia' s school privatization experiment found that privately-managed schools (both for-profit and non-profit) did not significantly exceed regular public schools in academic achievement. Such conflicting evidence begs the question: what is the truth? Different researchers, guided by different value judgments, reach different conclusions.

Therefore, high-quality policy advisory reports are those that improve educational problems or do so without creating other problems. This perspective does not suggest that think tanks should weaken ideological production and innovation to focus on promoting viewpoints. Rather, it emphasizes that achieving high quality is exceptionally difficult and requires concentrated, interdisciplinary research efforts. Since values are difficult to separate from research, even the most "evidence-based" education think tanks often transform into advocacy-oriented institutions, fighting for their own principles and values. While becoming advocacy-oriented think tanks is necessary for disseminating the Party' s educational policies and competing for international discourse power, education think tanks must avoid becoming "sophisticated marketing machines," which would make them indistinguishable from lobbying interest groups. Despite the challenge of value-laden research, this is no reason to abandon rigorous inquiry. On the contrary, developing policy advisory reports requires exploring more effective research methods, and education think tanks must position themselves as "idea factories" to supply objective, evidence-based reports for educational decision-making.

Moreover, developing policy advisory reports emphasizes independence and painstaking research rather than dependent, sycophantic secretarial work. Compared to public intellectuals who begin and end with critique, policy report development stresses constructiveness and cumulativeness, aiming to spare decision-makers from facing ambiguous options when seeking to alleviate educational problems. Though less exciting than the idealistic perspectives of public intellectuals—and despite the tedious nature of quantitative assessment—this process promotes good educational governance.

2 Quality Assurance of Policy Advisory Reports: The Case of X Education Think Tank in D City

X Education Think Tank, located in an economically developed southern region, has played a pivotal advisory role in supporting D City' s government to deliver satisfactory education. Given D City' s high level of social development, diverse public education demands, and difficulty reaching consensus, decision-makers' personal experience increasingly cannot meet the challenges of rapid educational development, making think tank support essential.

X Education Think Tank identifies two primary conditions for ensuring report quality. First, research must be conducted objectively without interest interference. Since the 21st century, American education think tanks have shown an important trend of moving from neutral objectivity toward serving partisan

interests. As Howard J. Wiarda points out, think tanks can no longer merely conduct neutral, non-partisan research; they must take positions and propose policy recommendations as integral parts of their work, shaping everything they say or write to advance partisan advantages [2]. Such alignment with interest groups naturally compromises research quality. Fortunately, X Education Think Tank is a fully government-funded public institution without charitable donations or interest group "inputs,"enabling it to focus wholeheartedly on educational policy research and independently propose objective judgments and viewpoints, free from improper interference and truly committed to solving policy dilemmas.

Second, scientific research methods must be comprehensively applied to discern problem essence and propose feasible solutions. Given the hierarchical, evolutionary, ambiguous, and value-laden characteristics of educational policy research objects, diverse methods are necessary to judge trajectories, predict trends, develop countermeasures, and promote coordinated development. These comprehensive methods include historical research, comparative studies, trend extrapolation, model analysis, and cost-benefit analysis.

2.1 Applying Historical Research to Better Interpret the Present

British historian E.H. Carr viewed historical research as an endless dialogue between present and past. Historical research systematically seeks data to answer questions about past phenomena, with the purpose of better understanding current educational practices, development trends, and existing problems [3]. When developing D City' s "Twelfth Five-Year" education development plan, X Education Think Tank first employed historical research. By systematically collecting data since the late Qing Dynasty and triangulating sources to verify authenticity, researchers discovered a distinctive local tradition of strong educational support. This finding not only corrected the widespread bias that the city traditionally valued commerce over education, but also informed the planning process. This overlooked tradition continues today, with township governments and village collectives bearing primary responsibility for school infrastructure funding and allocating special annual funds to support daily operations. Many village collectives also provide teachers with substantial holiday subsidies and travel benefits —significant funds that are not captured in official education expenditure statistics. Consequently, while the city' s official education investment ratio to GDP appears low, educational development has not been severely hindered. Village collective subsidies have enabled local public school teachers to maintain low turnover rates despite modest salaries. This insight prompted planners to consider local support traditions alongside the unified district-county school system, establishing township and village education investment indicators to guide and fully leverage local enthusiasm for education.

2.2 Applying Comparative Research to Better Position Development

Comparative education expert Sadler believed that comparative education' s purpose is to better understand one' s own education system by correctly study-

ing foreign systems [4]. Comparative research enables more appropriate self-positioning for development. X Education Think Tank' s planning experts selected cities with similar economic development levels to D City at the time—such as Singapore, Taipei, and Hong Kong—to compare multicultural education, class sizes, educational investment, and teacher treatment. The comparison affirmed D City' s strengths, revealing that its compulsory education quality slightly led the three cities. However, rather than becoming complacent, planners 清醒地 recognized substantial gaps in equitable development, particularly in inclusive education for disadvantaged children. The key to comparison lies in identifying gaps, exploring successful experiences of other cities, and assessing their adaptability to catch up and surpass. X Education Think Tank incorporated Singapore and Hong Kong' s long-standing inclusive education experiences when developing policy recommendations for integrating migrant children into D City' s cultural environment.

2.3 Applying Trend Extrapolation to Better Predict the Future

For educational planning, a plan' s accuracy depends not only on data reliability but also significantly on methodological validity [5]. When encountering stable year-to-year data—such as enrollment, student population, graduate numbers, and teacher counts—trend extrapolation methods like exponential smoothing can be used for forecasting. Regression methods suit expenditure planning estimates. These approaches enable more forward-looking predictions. However, they assume future trends will mirror past patterns. Although this assumption' s error probability is small, it may limit planning credibility, particularly regarding future projections. Additionally, educational planning data often depends on other social and economic development plans; for instance, teacher salary and education expenditure planning relies on economic variables, making educational planning accuracy contingent on social and economic planning accuracy. Nevertheless, educational planning' s predictive value remains substantial, with reform paths involving continuous methodological improvement and enhanced social/economic planning accuracy.

2.4 Applying Model Analysis to More Clearly Understand Problems

Model analysis in educational policy development primarily includes survey methods and big data analysis. Survey methods provide quantitative descriptions of population trends, attitudes, and opinions through sample investigation, allowing researchers to infer population conclusions based on sample structure models. X Education Think Tank planners employed surveys when researching urban-rural compulsory education equity in D City, designing questionnaires around three main dimensions—material resources, institutional frameworks, and curriculum implementation—and conducting statistical analysis to construct an equity model. This formed the basis for targeted planning proposals, effectively translating educational theory into practical guidelines.

Big data analysis uses computers and the internet to model and analyze mas-

sive datasets for grasping overall patterns. It focuses on correlation rather than causation, distinguishing it from educational experiments, yet holds immeasurable value for policy development. Like survey methods, it aims to understand overall trends, but whereas past limitations of time, space, and funding necessitated sampling methods, modern technology enables near-complete data access, yielding new discoveries beyond traditional sampling statistics and providing better foresight. Big data is relative: national student numbers constitute big data for a country, while citywide student numbers are big data for a city. X Education Think Tank' s big data mining and modeling of D City' s enrollment, student population, teacher numbers, and school quantities revealed a correlation: districts with the most students were often relatively educationally backward. Further analysis showed these backward districts had labor-intensive industrial structures with relatively low housing costs, attracting large numbers of migrant workers and their children, creating immense pressure on public education services. Improving education quality in these districts requires not only government initiatives to build and expand facilities and enhance teacher quality, but also active promotion of local industrial transformation and upgrading for fundamental solutions.

2.5 Applying Cost-Benefit Analysis for More Precise Evaluation

Cost-benefit analysis evaluates and quantifies policy proposals' costs and benefits to compare their value, using economic models to measure decision options. When considering costs and benefits, both tangible and intangible benefits—such as social equity, justice, and human dignity—must be included, with intangible values often superseding tangible gains as the ultimate goal of education policy. Using D City' s private education policy development as an example, we illustrate this method. Nearly 40% of D City' s compulsory education institutions are private, with 90% being migrant worker children' s schools leasing facilities. These schools typically have safety hazards and low educational quality, becoming a bottleneck for balanced compulsory education development. Using the comprehensive research methods described above, X Education Think Tank proposed three alternative solutions.

Option 1: Establish private education parks in districts where migrant workers concentrate. The government would provide educational land and contract with private school operators, who would construct facilities and provide equipment according to legal standards, charging tuition based on cost-plus-reward (operator profits slightly exceeding three-year fixed bank deposit interest). Costs would be shared among government, operators, and parents. The plan involves building 50 medium-sized schools (24 classes per school, 50 students per class, totaling 60,000 students across 50 schools, while the two main migrant-child-concentrated districts have 90,000 students, with 30,000 attending private elite or public schools). This would guide existing scattered leasing schools toward active participation. Research shows leasing schools urgently desire stable premises and long-term cooperation contracts, with operators willing to invest

in construction, thus eliminating government construction costs. Government expenses would only involve land acquisition and demolition—estimated at 1,800 mu × 300,000 yuan/mu = 540 million yuan based on 20 m^2 per student. Split between municipal and district finances, each would pay only 270 million yuan, or 90 million yuan annually over three years. This represents minimal pressure for a city with over 20 billion yuan in annual education investment and economically achieves educational equity and balanced development at low cost while promoting social justice. The challenge lies in scarce public land in large cities; such large land use requires State Council approval with unpredictable processes and outcomes. Moreover, land acquisition negotiations are costly and time-consuming.

Option 2: Subsidize leasing private schools. The government could provide special funding for leasing fees and teacher training support for 90% of leasing private schools. Leasing fee subsidies face difficulties: varying economic development levels across districts create inconsistent leasing costs, making uniform pricing hard to achieve, while leasing fees are considered business secrets, hindering accurate total cost statistics. Debates continue over appropriate subsidy ratios and their relationship to quality improvement. Therefore, subsidies should focus on teacher training support. Funding professional development for nearly 20,000 leasing private school teachers at 500 yuan per teacher annually would cost approximately 10 million yuan—easily affordable for municipal finances and directly improving educational quality.

Option 3: Require districts to establish risk prevention plans for leasing private schools. This option places risk supervision at the district level, creating prevention plans for schools with expiring leases to handle student and teacher relocation. Districts must legally supervise school assets, tuition income, operational funds, financial management, and accounting to prevent illegal capital flight when leases end. Two systems should be established: (1) a risk insurance system where leasing schools, education departments, and insurance companies sign tripartite supervision agreements using insurance claims for liquidation and emergencies; and (2) a risk early-warning mechanism where regulators intervene one year before lease expiration to guide student placement, teacher settlement, property liquidation, and cancellation plans. This option involves no new government funding or cost increases, only improving existing management, and doesn' t address low educational quality. While simple from a short-term risk perspective, it fails to promote long-term balanced and quality development.

From a cost-benefit perspective, if Option 1 exceeds municipal authority and proves too difficult, combining Options 2 and 3 offers a suboptimal choice that both controls operational risks and improves educational quality. As Donald E. Abelson notes, good policy proposals don' t guarantee political success; think tanks must not only help decision-makers understand and accept their proposals but also ensure governments have sufficient resources for implementation [6]. Cost-benefit analysis helps decision-makers evaluate and select options more precisely under resource constraints.

3 Conclusions and Recommendations

Education think tanks must not only maintain objective, neutral research positions but also skillfully integrate multiple research methods to ensure policy report quality. As discussed, education policy is interdisciplinary, multi-variable, and multi-level—recognized in the West as a "soft science" with limited consensus on research results and predictions, attracting only a handful of top scholars or institutions [7]. China's education policy research landscape is similar, primarily involving top-tier normal universities. Local education think tanks rarely engage in this field due to insufficient professional capacity, making X Education Think Tank's focus on policy research exceptional among local institutions.

China's educational reforms and transformations over the past four decades have created strong demand for policy innovation, yet innovative policy supply remains severely inadequate. This supply-demand imbalance has become the primary contradiction hindering deeper educational reform, leading to rampant pseudo-innovative policies—particularly those shaped by vested interest groups—that persist like "incurable problems" in education governance. These pseudo-innovations not only fail to alleviate problems but create numerous additional issues, worsening the educational ecology. For example, policies advocating for legal profits in private education may stimulate capital influx and apparent educational "prosperity," yet no global evidence shows improved educational quality. Moreover, legal profit-making in private education stimulates latent profit motives in public education, setting a bad example for industrialization and overall ecological deterioration [8].

Therefore, the urgent priority is strengthening professional capacity building in local education think tanks through training programs conducted by double-first-class universities, particularly emphasizing comprehensive research methods to ground education policies in sufficient evidence. Another pressing issue is the pervasive atmosphere of administrative interference in academic work within local think tanks, where decision-makers often demand "scientific justification" for their empirical decisions to lend them scientific legitimacy. To cater to this demand, think tank personnel often focus not on improving professional capacity or strengthening theoretical research, but on discerning leaders' intentions, currying favor, and using second-hand materials to justify predetermined viewpoints, producing so-called "quasi-academic" 成果. While this may often yield administrative capital, it creates a crisis of "tanks without wisdom." Thus, we must urgently foster a clean and upright academic atmosphere in think tanks and eliminate 浮躁心态 among professionals.

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Author: Li Qinggang (ORCID: 0000-0002-0281-3983), Associate Researcher at Guangzhou Academy of Educational Research, PhD Candidate at the School of Public Administration, South China Normal University. Email: 82229748@qq.com.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.