



CHICAGO JOURNALS



Comparative Education: From Theory to Practice, or Are You A: \neo.* or B:*. ist?

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Aug., 1990), pp. 369-380

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Comparative and International Education Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1187990>

Accessed: 24/11/2011 02:47

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Colloquy on Comparative Theory

Comparative Education: From Theory to Practice, or Are You A:\neo.* or B:*.ist?

GEORGE PSACHAROPOULOS

If you are reading this, you must be associated with the field of comparative education. Are you a “relativist,” “hologeistic,” a “neopositivist,” “pre-theoretical,” a “neo-Marxist,” “epistemocentric,” a “structural functionalist,” “metascientific,” “ethnomethodological,” “paradigmatic,” a “cultural imperialist,” “evolutionary,” a “*dependista*,” a “new realist,” a “benevolent ethnocentricist,” “melioristic,” a “phenomenologist,” a “determinist,” an “educologist,” or, perhaps, “morphogenetic?”¹

Before you decide, you may wish to ask yourself a question: Does it really matter? I think not, as I illustrate in this article. What matters is your position on a substantive issue. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate this point by reference to a series of common problems in educational planning.

I have expressed uneasiness about the contents of the two major comparative education journals, *Comparative Education Review* and *Comparative Education*.² My conclusion is that the articles in two sample volumes of these journals are overly descriptive, in the sense that they provide long, nonquantitative accounts of the educational system of a single country. Seldom are the papers analytical, in the sense of statistically testing hypothesized relationships. As a result, few comparative lessons can be drawn to assist decision makers in educational planning.

Since this article covers two general fields, comparative education and educational planning, I would like to clarify my interpretations of them.

I am indebted to Philip Foster and Andreas Kazamias for commenting on an earlier draft of this article and to Erwin Epstein for his continuous encouragement, pressing me to read material I might otherwise have overlooked. The views expressed here are mine and are not necessarily shared by the World Bank.

¹ These terms do not belong to my vocabulary. I have encountered them in readings in the field, especially G. P. Kelly and P. G. Altbach, “Comparative Education: Alternative Approaches,” in *International Encyclopedia of Education*, supplementary vol. 1 (Oxford: Pergamon, 1989), pp. 137–44; E. H. Epstein, “The Problematic Meaning of ‘Comparison’ in Comparative Education,” in *Theories and Methods in Comparative Education*, ed. Jurgen Schriewer and Brian Holmes (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1988), pp. 3–24, “Currents Left and Right: Ideology in Comparative Education,” *Comparative Education Review* 27, no. 1 (February 1983): 3–29; David A. Turner, “Game Theory in Comparative Education,” in Schriewer and Holmes, eds., pp. 143–64; Carlos E. Olivera, “Comparative Education: What Kind of Knowledge?” in *ibid.*, pp. 201–23; and other readings in Schriewer and Holmes, eds.

² G. Psacharopoulos, “The ‘Methodology’ of Comparative Education,” in *Comparative Education Today*, ed. Batista Orizio (Frascati: Centro Europeo dell’Educazione, 1988), pp. 167–74.

Comparative Education Review, vol. 34, no. 3.

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0010-4086/90/3403-0004\$01.00

According to Brickman, "Comparative education . . . deals with the development . . . of observations and analysis offering insight into forms of . . . schooling . . . in countries other than one's own."³ Adams lists a series of planning definitions ranging from "planning is the process of making rational/technical choices" to "planning is the organization of hope."⁴ My preferred definition of planning is the examination of many feasible alternatives and choice among them according to an objective.⁵ This definition splits the problem into a positive (feasible) and a normative (value judgment/desirable) component.

But again, do definitions matter? The escape route might well be that comparative education is what comparative educators do (e.g., see the contents of *Comparative Education Review*, *Comparative Education*, and *Compare*, among others) and that educational planning is what authors write under the title of educational planning, often in the same journals.

So, why not put definitions to rest and stop wasting time over semantics? Instead, let us take up a series of substantive issues faced by an educational planner (whatever that may be) and see how comparative education (define it your own way) can help in addressing the issue.

Educational Planning Issues

Countries at different stages of economic development face different educational issues. Following is a list of typical problems facing a minister of education in a low- or middle-income country (below \$2,000 per capita).

Increased access to primary education.—If only 60 percent of 6–12-year-old children are in primary schools, how can the country move toward a 100 percent net enrollment ratio?

Improved school quality.—How can instructional quality be improved so that those who go through the educational system achieve and retain literacy?

Expansion of postprimary education.—As more primary school-age children are educated, the issue shifts to expanding secondary school opportunities. Who should be selected for postcompulsory studies and how? What is the proper balance between general academic and vocational education at the secondary level?

Expansion of postsecondary education.—As the country develops, an increased number of students will wish to pursue postsecondary studies.

³ W. W. Brickman, "Comparative Education: History of," *International Encyclopedia of Education*, supplementary vol. 1 (New York: Pergamon, 1989), pp. 144–48.

⁴ D. Adams, "Extending the Educational Planning Discourse," *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 4 (November 1988): 400–415. In my opinion, the best discussion on alternative definitions of educational planning is C. A. Anderson and M. J. Bowman, "Theoretical Considerations in Educational Planning," in *The World Yearbook of Education, 1967*, ed. J. A. Lauwereys, G. Z. Bereday, and M. Blaug (London: Evans Bros., 1967), pp. 11–37.

⁵ G. Psacharopoulos, "Economic Aspects of Educational Planning," *International Encyclopedia of Education* (New York: Pergamon, 1985), p. 1521.

What should be the proper balance between nonuniversity postsecondary education and university studies? Who should be admitted to what type of institution and under what criteria?

Providing the necessary skills.—How can the educational system prepare students for the working world? How will they gain the skills needed in the future by an expanding and modernizing economy?

Educational finance.—Any of the developments listed above would require additional financial resources to those currently allocated to the system, mostly by the state. Where will the new resources come from?

Equity.—How can the educational system be expanded while serving equity considerations at the same time? How can fairness and equality of opportunity be maintained?

Comparative Education Solutions

Over the years, different countries have devised different solutions to these common problems. I feel that trying to learn from such comparative experience is much more productive than trying to identify the label of the theoretical “hat” of the policymaker.

In providing an account of the range of solutions to these issues, I assume the policymaker is trying to serve both efficiency and equity. Under the first objective he or she tries to deliver the best with given resources. He or she may be concerned with the contribution of the educational systems of some measurable social goal—like the amount of real income enjoyed by the family. I am leaving out intangibles for the sake of practicality and definition. Perhaps someone could argue that policy *A* contributes to an increase in the happiness of *X* percent of the population. I leave it to others to try to measure this. My contention is that, if a poor family has more to eat as a result of the education of the household, literacy contributes to happiness.

Under the second objective, the policymaker (i.e., educational planner) is concerned with the equitable distribution of benefits associated with educational expansion and provision. How can more of the lower socioeconomic groups in the population be reached? This is a more subjective criterion than the first because it will always remain relative. There is no equality nirvana in this world.

Comparative education—or sheer history—can teach us a lot from different country experiences in expanding coverage and serving efficiency and equity goals. One route might be to start asking whether the policymaker was a “determinist,” “radical structuralist,” or some other label. I prefer, however, to ask what the policymaker actually did and how the actual deed served the two axiomatic objectives.

Of course, I am fully aware that by making the above assumptions I will be accused of being a new-“something” or a paleo-“something else.”

Let the accusations roll. Whatever the label, it will not affect the substance of the real problem or the type of policy action that may best contribute to its solution.

Primary Education

Primary Education is the entry level and cornerstone of most educational systems. It accommodates more students than any other level and accounts for about one-half of any country's educational resources. All countries have the laudable goal of educating 100 percent of school-age children, though, in reality, many countries fail by a large margin. Less than 50 percent of 6–12-year-old African children receive basic education.

Comparative lesson no. 1.—Countries that have invested in primary literacy programs have developed faster than countries that have not given priority to primary education.

A classic example is Japan and South Korea. Economic historians have documented the fact that the spread of technology in modern economic growth depended on the learning potential linked to the development of formal schooling.⁶ Such an observation is consistent with the finding that primary education has the highest economic payoff (relative to cost) of all levels of education. The so-called rate of return to investment in primary education in developing countries is around 25 percent compared to 12 percent for higher education. Such a rate of return does not mean that a country should invest only in primary education, but that there should be a bias toward primary education. What would be the point of allocating 40 percent of the state's budget for university education if the country has an illiteracy rate of 90 percent among women in rural areas? Instead, priority should be given to building and equipping primary schools.

The overwhelming evidence concludes that it would make no difference if the educational planner were to adopt a paradigmatic rather than ethnocentric approach.

Comparative lesson no. 2.—It takes a very long time to expand primary education and even longer to increase the literacy level of the population.

Such time is measured in decades rather than years. The first step is to increase the enrollment ratio, that is, the proportion of 6–12-year-old children in school. Such a step (designing the schools, building them, training the teachers, recruiting students, allowing for repeaters, and graduation) takes at least 10 years. The second step includes waiting for the expansion to affect the literacy statistics of the adult population. And in 20 years the entering cohort will still not have reached its prime working age.

⁶ R. Easterlin, "Why Isn't the Whole World Developed?" *Journal of Economic History* 41, no. 1 (March 1981): 1–19.

All too often, planners and politicians forget this comparative lesson and set unrealistic goals. The most famous incident was the 1961 Addis Ababa Conference of Ministers of Education, during which it was resolved to achieve universal literacy by the year 1980. That year has long passed, and we are still a long way from universal literacy.⁷

The comparative lesson for contemporary educational planners or policymakers is that they have to act early to increase the capacity of the primary school system—good intentions are not enough, and I really cannot see how it would matter if the policymaker in question were a determinist or neorelativist.

Comparative lesson no. 3.—Ruralization of the curriculum or combining education with production might be counterproductive in achieving the aims of primary education.

The logically intuitive argument is that children in rural areas should be exposed to a curriculum that is relevant to their environment: agriculture. Ruralizing the curriculum and combining it with agricultural production (so the argument goes) is the way to expand primary education.

Why, then, does not this method produce any success stories? Why did countries as diametrically opposed as Mao's China and Gandhi's India repeal such policies?⁸

There is a simple explanation to this paradox. Farmers are not fools. They see the real opportunities in life rest with those who are exposed to an urban curriculum. They aspire that their offspring escape rural life and go to the city. Migration statistics show that the rural-urban flows are enormous. Therefore, a rural education policy is bound to fail because it does not take into account the dynamics of incentives underlying economic and social development.

It is romantic to expect rural children to remain in their villages and cultivate the family land. But if a person's productivity in the city is higher than in the village, he should migrate to the city. Such movements are the means by which development occurs.

Again, I am at a loss on how the adoption of a hologeistic rather than an evolutionary comparative education approach could change this conclusion.

School Quality

A school is not always a learning institution. Casual observation suggests there is enormous variation in the quality of instruction not only between

⁷ For the reasons why educational reforms fail see G. Psacharopoulos, "Why Educational Reforms Fail," *International Review of Education* 35, no. 2 (1989): 179–95.

⁸ For a superb comparative analysis of these two country experiences see M. Zachariah and A. Hoffman, "Gandhi and Mao on Manual Labor in School: A Retrospective Analysis," *International Review of Education* 31, no. 3 (1985): 265–82.

countries but between regions within the same country, for example, between inner city and suburban schools.

There exists a plethora of national and international studies on school quality from which comparative lessons can be drawn. But there is a caveat: data limitations have forced researchers to compromise on how to measure school quality. More often than not, school quality is measured by the input method—if a school spends more per student, it must be of superior quality. But what if the extra resources per student were simply wasted?

A superior way of measuring school quality is by output rather than input. What matters is what the student actually learns, rather than only the cost of his or her education. Schools that provide higher learning for the same amount of resources, other things being equal, are better schools. Subject to the above caveat there are two comparative lessons in this area.

Comparative lesson no. 4.—Aside from hardware (classrooms), school inputs, such as textbooks and writing materials, contribute to student learning.

In Western literature there is a series of studies purporting to show that school does not really matter. The studies conclude that what matters instead is the socioeconomic origin of the student. However, extensive *comparative* research has shown that such a statement is not true in developing countries.⁹ The reason is simple. In advanced industrial countries, the student grows up with more exposure to education (e.g., the availability of books at home). Therefore, the school may add little to the student's knowledge. In a developing country, however, the situation is the opposite. The student has to rely on school rather than family to provide learning, and the evidence shows that this translates into increased cognitive learning.

How would the above result be affected if the analyst were pretheoretical rather than metascientific?

Comparative lesson no. 5.—School quality can only be improved if there is regular monitoring of cognitive achievement.

The difference is in what the planner *thinks* the state of school quality is in a country and how it would be affected by a given policy action rather than the actual state of school quality. Thus far, the conclusions have been based on presumption rather than facts.

Measuring cognitive achievement is difficult and expensive. But there are payoffs. Studies of the International Achievement Association (IEA) and Estudios Conjuntos Sobre Integración Económica Latino Americana (ECIEL) have shown what can be achieved. For example, in one of the poorest areas of Brazil, it has been found that student achievement can

⁹ S. Heyneman and W. Loxley, "The Effect of Primary School Quality on Academic Achievement across Twenty-Nine High- and Low-Income Countries," *American Journal of Sociology* 88, no. 6 (1983): 11–62.

be increased by the provision of simple quality-enhancing inputs such as textbooks and other classroom learning materials and teacher upgrading.¹⁰

The educational planner who attempts to measure student achievement for the sake of improving the quality of education might be accused of being a cultural imperialist. This is on the grounds that Western (or Northern) research methodologies do not apply to developing countries (lumped into “the South”). But does it really matter what hat the planner wears? If a country, as a result of a study (which I expect would be statistical as opposed to impressionistic), determines that quality educators improve education, that is sufficient.

Secondary Education

As primary enrollment and the number of graduates increase, pressure is put on secondary schools to accept more students. The comparative lessons on the two main issues involved are how to select students for secondary education and what kind of curriculum to provide. The two issues are related; if an inexpensive curriculum is offered, more students can be accommodated in primary education.

Comparative lesson no. 6.—It is not possible or desirable to put a cap on admissions to secondary education. If students and their families want to pursue postprimary studies, they will do it no matter what the planner stipulates.

A good example can be found in Tanzania, a country with perhaps the world’s most restrictive admissions policy governing secondary education—only 4 percent of the relevant age group are enrolled in secondary education. Because of the restriction, the government of this socialist country allows private secondary schools in order to defuse the demand for education. Private secondary enrollment accounts for nearly one-half the total in Tanzania. Also, private spending on education accounts for one-fourth of the total resources Tanzania devotes to education—an interesting statistic for a socialist country.

In this instance, how would it help if one were an educologist or phenomenologist?

Comparative lesson no. 7.—Vocationalization of the secondary school curriculum might not be as desirable as it sounds.

Many educational planners in the 1970s tried to kill two birds with one stone. The secondary education system was expanded in order to satisfy social demand with the addition of vocationalization to provide the needed skills for workers (especially middle-level technicians) in an expanding and modernizing economy.

¹⁰ J. Armitage et al., “School Quality and Achievement in Rural Brazil,” Education Department (EDT) Discussion Paper no. 25 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1986).

These changes produced few success stories. Evaluations of the so-called diversified secondary schools in Colombia and Tanzania produced two main conclusions. Vocationalization of the curriculum is expensive (relative to general education), and the graduates do not necessarily pursue the careers for which they were trained. Most graduates of such schools went on to the university, though they could have done so at a much lower cost by being exposed to a more general or academic curriculum.¹¹

The reason for such incongruence is, again, that the planners in the two countries acted in good faith, following their intuitive thinking. It took several additional comparative observations for Foster's "vocational education fallacy" thesis to be internalized by practitioners in the field of educational planning.¹²

Yes, one might say, the evaluations of such school systems were based on "Northern paradigms"; that is, they calculated costs and benefits and actually traced graduates into the labor market. But does the paradigm matter? The fact remains that inserting a vocational element in a country's secondary-school curriculum does not mean that the graduates will enter an occupation related to their field of training.

Universities

Countries have experimented with many different postsecondary school structures ranging from short-cycle nonuniversity education to fellowships for Ph.D.'s in advanced industrial countries. The two dominant issues in the developing world have been how to contain the demand for university education and how to produce graduates according to the needs of the economy. Comparative lessons can be found in both issues.

Comparative lesson no. 8.—There is no way to contain the social demand for tertiary education.

Attempts to stop the one-way street from the school to the university have been very unsuccessful. If rewards in life correlate strongly with university graduation, students and their families will always aspire to the tertiary level of education. If the state is unable to provide tertiary education, people will still find a way to satisfy their demand. For instance, higher education in Greece is a state monopoly capable of accommodating about 100,000 students. In response to social demand and the limited number of university places, those who can afford to, go abroad. In 1987 there was one Greek student studying abroad for every three students in domestic

¹¹ G. Psacharopoulos and W. Loxley, *Diversified Secondary Education and Development: Evidence from Colombia and Tanzania* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

¹² P. J. Foster, "The Vocational School Fallacy in Development Planning," in *Education and Economic Development*, ed. C. A. Anderson and M. J. Bowman (Chicago: Aldine, 1965). Of course, we are still far away from universal internalization of such thesis. The power of intuitive thinking ("the country needs middle level technicians, therefore we have to vocationalize secondary education") is far stronger than any research evidence.

Greek universities.¹³ In many countries, there are street demonstrations whenever cuts or other restrictions are imposed on tertiary education.

Is this counterethnocentric or a manifestation of cultural imperialism?

Comparative lesson no. 9—Attempts to forecast the number and type of labor skills needed by an expanding economy have been very unsuccessful.

In the late fifties and early sixties the belief was that an educational system should be tuned to the economic demands of the future, such as technical skills or high-level manpower. These manpower forecasts resulted in the expansion of university programs in developing countries.

The forecasts have matured, and we are now in a position to compare them to actual events. Early postmortem of manpower forecasts revealed severe discrepancies between forecasts and realizations.¹⁴ The futility of manpower forecasting as a guide for the expansion of an educational system lies in the inherent dynamism of any economy. The world moves in unpredictable leaps that are the essence of development. Predicting technological change, even 1 year ahead, is not an easy task. It is no wonder 20-year predictions of educational requirements fail.

There is another comparative lesson in this story. Manpower forecasts are ambiguous and off base, typically recommending the expansion of tertiary or skill-specific education in order to provide highly qualified labor; the real need for the economy, however, might be a more literate population base. It is very unfortunate that, even today, manpower forecasts are being used as a rationale for the expansion of an education system.

I do not see how being morphogenic would change the comparative conclusion that manpower forecasting is counterproductive in serving educational development.

Educational Financing

A government typically allocates between 10 and 30 percent of its state budget to education. Many countries also pledge free education from primary school to the university level. Though a free education policy was sustainable during the first half of this century, the increased social demand for education has created strains on the public finance systems of both developing and advanced countries.

Comparative lesson no. 10.—The public state budget is insufficient to provide for educational expansion—novel ways of financing are needed, including cost recovery.

Education competes for public resources with health care, roads, and defense programs. In view of today's so-called financing crisis of educational

¹³ G. Psacharopoulos, "Efficiency and Equity in Greek Higher Education," *Minerva* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 119–37, and "Education and the Professions, EEC 1992," *European Journal of Education*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1990), in press.

¹⁴ B. Ahamad and M. Blaug, *The Practice of Manpower Forecasting* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1973).

systems around the world, governments seek new ways to finance education. One such way is cost recovery from the beneficiaries of education.

Although this is not a novel idea, it has its obvious political costs. "Free education" is a catchy political message, though, in reality, free education might mean no education at all for some segments of the population. For example, the concept of free education at the university level often results in the most articulate groups appropriating the higher education subsidies at the expense of less politically active farmers and their uneducated offspring.¹⁵

Selective cost recovery, especially at the university level, can release a substantial amount of public resources to be used for the expansion of primary education. The imposition of fees equal to the cost of higher education in low-income African countries would allow for the increase of the primary enrollment ratio from approximately 50 to 70 percent—a significant change.¹⁶

Of course, in imposing fees for such a noble service as a university, a government might be accused of commercializing education, something many believed should remain free. Beyond the rhetoric, the reality is that there are few free things in life, and the choice comes down to (a) paying for the quantity and type of education one demands or (b) not paying and having to seek such education abroad (as evidenced in Greece).

How would dependency theory have helped in this case?

Comparative lesson no. 11.—Private schools should be an integral part of a country's educational expansion effort.

Another way of obtaining incremental national resources for education is by encouraging the operation of private schools. If parents feel they can afford to pay for a better education offered by a private school, why should they be prohibited from doing so? By decreasing the number of children in public schools they release state resources to be used for the expansion or improvement of the system.

If some students are unable to meet the admission standards set by a highly selective state university system, why should they not be allowed to enter a less selective institution and pay for it? A country engaging in this practice par excellence is the Philippines.

Also, countries as diverse as China, Sierra Leone, Thailand, Venezuela, Spain, and Japan have been able to expand their educational system by 50 percent by utilizing private resources. The comparative lesson here is that countries with relatively more developed private secondary school

¹⁵ For an elaboration of this argument see World Bank, *The Financing of Education in Developing Countries: An Exploration of Policy Options* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1986).

¹⁶ Ibid.

systems have been able to accommodate more 12–18-year-old students in secondary education.

Is such an approach melioristic?

Equity

Equality in education is usually one of the ultimate goals of educators, who generate many political pronouncements advocating free education in the name of equity. There is a great difference between free education at the primary level—a deserving cause because of the immense externalities associated with a literate population—and free education at the university level catering to a privileged few.

Comparative lesson no. 12.—Paradoxically, cost recovery is an equitable way to achieve educational expansion, especially at the higher levels.

Intuitive thinking suggests the equity of free education—research results prove otherwise. When free education is offered at the primary level, it benefits mostly the rural poor segments of the population and is indeed equitable. The situation is reversed at the university level, where students from high-income families are overrepresented in the student population in every country in the world.

The wealthy now reap the majority of public education funding.¹⁷ The imposition of fees on students from high-income families for the expansion of primary school coverage in rural areas is a clear move toward equity.

The selective state subsidies for higher education could then continue for qualifying students for low-income families. Student loans could be offered to everyone willing to borrow against future income. Although difficult to administer, student loans are one of the most efficient and equitable ways to expand an educational system.¹⁸

At this point, comparative education theorists might be wondering, Is this neo-Marxism?

Comparative lesson no. 13.—The public education budget should be mainly directed to the poor segments of the population.

What seems to be relatively more efficient in promoting economic growth (investment in primary education) is also good for promoting equity. Therefore, the educational policy of primary education expansion in the country's poor rural regions is the best safeguard of equity. Such

¹⁷ A. Mingat and J. P. Tan, "Subsidization of Higher Education versus Expansion of Primary Enrollments: What Can a Shift of Resources Achieve in Sub-Saharan Africa?" *International Journal of Educational Development* 5 (1985): 259–68.

¹⁸ For extensive comparative documentation of this point, see Zachariah and Hoffman (n. 8 above).

policy is also likely to be associated with immense externalities because of a more literate population.

Such a statement may go against the grain of intuitive thinking. But does it really matter if it is neopositivism?

Concluding Remarks

Having said all this, I would like to add a few clarifications. I am not against qualitative research. I think important analytical lessons can be drawn from it, as in the case of Zachariah and Hoffman.¹⁹ Also, not all research has to lead to clear-cut policy directives—any insight into an educational system is valuable. (Foster's classic book on Ghana had no ex ante policy orientation.) The main problem arises when classificatory mystification overrides everything else.

When a copy of the November 1988 issue of *Comparative Education Review* landed on my desk, I eagerly read the article by my good friend, Don Adams—its title promised a lot. Unfortunately, I was very disappointed. True, it added a few new terms to my poor vocabulary, even a few words of Greek origin (e.g., "protophysics").²⁰ In my opinion, Adam's paper only proves the dependency of all things, which might be perfectly true. But what would be the value of telling a minister of education facing many of the problems mentioned above that "educational questions . . . must be associated with soft-systems thinking and its interpretivist and relativist overtones"?²¹

I hope I have been able to illustrate that labels add little, if anything, to substance. This article strives to help end the debate on semantics. A better use of everyone's time might be to add comparative lessons to those listed above—a goal that can only be achieved through conceptualization, methodological design, statistical sampling, rigorous data analysis, and hypothesis testing.

Comparative educators of the world unite—you have nothing to lose but your labels!

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The spell-checker of WordPerfect version 5.0, on which this article was written, stumbled several times going through the pages with the message: "Not found." In the instance of "protophysics" the word is not even listed in Webster's dictionary.

²¹ Adams (n. 4 above), p. 414.