



International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

Torsten Husén



IEA

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Torsten Husén



1916-2009

Torsten Husén, one of the most celebrated names in the world of education and a founding father of IEA, passed away in Stockholm on 2 July 2009. Many people from all spheres of education and government regarded Professor Husén as the chief architect of most of the major educational reforms that took place in numerous countries around the world in the 1960s and 1970s. His advice was sought from both educational researchers and policy-makers.

Torsten Husén began his university education in 1935 at the University of Lund. He studied mathematics for his first academic credits, then literature and history, and finally psychology and education. His thesis for his first advanced degree (Licentiate) in 1941 was on eidetic imagery. His doctoral dissertation, defended in 1944 and titled *Adolescence*, dealt with the psychology of youth between 16 and 20 years of age. The conclusions he developed in it were based on his analysis of responses to questionnaires from a sample of 1,000 young people applying for enlistment to the Swedish army.

Torsten's intellectual leaders during those early years were Professors John Landquist from Lund University and Ernst Kretschmer from the University of Marburg in Germany. His studies in psychology were in the tradition of Wundt and Meumann, while his studies in philosophy were shaped by the school of Vienna Circle, whose members endeavored to reconceptualize empiricism through reference to then recent advances in the physical and formal sciences.

In 1944, after receiving his PhD, Torsten moved to Stockholm. After building a system of psychological tests and interviews for military selection and specialization purposes, he became involved in research on various other topics. His methodological studies on test reliability and validity were followed by psychological research on twins, the psychology of spelling, and the relationships between ability, social background, occupation, length of schooling, and school performance. These bodies of work, among his many others at the time, made a substantive contribution to democratization of education and revision of selection procedures, first in Sweden and then in other European countries.

In 1953, Dr Torsten Husén became professor of educational psychology at the University of Stockholm. Three years later, he moved to the university's new school of education, where he took up the position of Sweden's first professor of applied educational research. Subsequent years found him busy leading research that had a marked impact on the curriculum planning conducted by the Swedish School Commission. He also spent time examining the utility of education research. This work led him to argue that while much of the educational research being conducted at the time was useful for elucidating macro problems in education, it was of little use in solving micro problems, such as how teachers should optimally go about their tasks in the classroom.

The beginnings of Professor Husén's international leadership in the field of education can arguably be dated to 1952 when the American High Commissioner invited him to serve as a consultant on the role that psychological research could play in addressing problems in German education. However, his appearance on the world stage and the development of his worldwide reputation primarily came about through his work as a founding member of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). His work in this regard began with a pilot study in 1958 organized by a few prominent European, British, and American researchers who wanted to determine the feasibility of cross-national research on educational achievement. The study suggested that such research was feasible, and led to the first major and widely reported IEA study—the First International Mathematics Study (FIMS) of the 1960s. The study was published in 1967 in two volumes edited by Professor Husén.

Contrary to the supposition of critics who have argued that IEA in the early days failed to take account of differences in the selectivity of secondary schools in different countries, one of the prime motivations for conducting FIMS was to produce empirical evidence relative to the question of whether newly implemented comprehensive schools systems in various European countries were having a negative effect on educational achievement, when compared with more traditional and selective systems of secondary education.

IEA HONORARY MEMBERS

Gordon Ambach
Zoltán Báthory
Albert E Beaton
Benjamin Bloom
Christiane Brusselmans-Dehairs
Gilbert L de Landsheere
Robert Garden
Torsten Husén
John P Keeves
Rainer Lehmann
Constantinos Papanastasiou
Roy W Philipps
Tjeerd Plomp
T Neville Postlethwaite
Alan C Purves
David F Robitaille
Alejandro Tiana
Judith Torney-Purta
Aldo Visalberghi
Richard M Wolf

Issues specific to mathematics education were of secondary interest to the leaders of this first study.

By the late 1960s, IEA had taken on a more formal mien as a non-governmental organization under Belgian law. Torsten was the first head of the organization, and he continued in this role until 1978. Under his leadership, IEA carried out the very ambitious Six Subject Survey, a cross-national study of achievement in reading, science, literature, civic education, English as a foreign language, and French as a foreign language. In 1971, the Swedish Parliament created a special chair of international education for Torsten Husén at Stockholm University. This development was the beginning of the International Institute of Education; the first IEA secretariat was located at it.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, ministries of education from various countries, along with the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, increasingly asked Professor Husén to act as an expert consultant for different aspects of education. The OECD also asked him to participate in their reviews of educational policy. In 1982, Torsten was accorded the status of emeritus professor, but continued to maintain his office at the University of Stockholm. From there on, his committee work, his travel abroad, and his expert advice to governments continued; he was still producing books and articles at a prodigious rate in the 1990s.

During his career, Professor Torsten Husén supervised 38 doctoral students. He also played a major role in training educational researchers; his networks of such researchers extended worldwide. Professor Husén furthermore published over 40 books (including his autobiography), edited the first edition of the International Encyclopedia of Education, served on boards of various organizations, such as the International Institute of Educational Planning in Paris, was awarded a number of honorary degrees, was one of the founding members of the International Academy of Education, and was an international associate of the National Academy of Education in the United States. He visited universities all over the world and was honored by universities in Amsterdam, Bristol, Chicago, Glasgow, Joensuu, Liège, New York, Rhode Island, and Shanghai, as well as by many national educational societies. In 1978 IEA elected him its honorary president.

Professor Torsten Husén will be long remembered as an expert in both philosophical and empirical approaches to education. His work covered the psychological, sociological, and historical aspects of the discipline. This unforgettable scholar and educator, with his outstanding record of achievement, will be greatly missed.

The IEA secretariat thanks Professor Jack Schwille for his contribution to the text. We also used an article titled "Torsten Husén," written by Professor Neville Postlethwaite and published in *Prospects*, 1993, Vol. 23(3/4), pp. 677–686. The photo is from Jack Schwille archive.