

Postlethwaite, T. Neville, "Torsten Husén." *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education: From Piaget to the Present*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 96-102, 2001.

TORSTEN HUSÉN 1916-

It is relatively easy to proof read life, but very difficult to predict it.
(an oft-repeated saying of Torsten Husén)

Torsten Husén was born on 1st March 1916 in Lund, Sweden. His mother had trained as a telegraphist after having completed her secondary education. His father had five years of half-time primary education, a form of education that was typical in rural areas at that time. He was the manager of a sawmill. Husén grew up in southern Sweden and began primary school at the age of six, one year before the official age of entry to school. He had learned to type at home and therefore told his primary school teacher that he could do this so that it was not necessary for him to learn how to write by hand. He proceeded to his secondary school studies in the Gymnasium in Växjö where he opted to specialize in mathematics and the natural sciences. It was also the tradition that all pupils learned three foreign languages (indeed, it was an entry requirement to upper secondary school). In Husén's case this was German, English and French in that order. His German was so good that he was able to accompany his father on business trips to Poland and Germany where he acted as his interpreter. Although he learned English he was never able to practise it and it was only when he went to England in 1946 as a member of a Swedish delegation that he was actually able to practise speaking English. It was in the 1950s that he began to write some of his books and articles in English. In the end, his English was probably the foreign language in which he was most fluent although his German remained faultless.

In 1935, at the age of nineteen, he entered the University of Lund. He began by studying mathematics, then literature (his first publication was on the influence of French clinical psychology and psychiatry on the work of Strindberg) and history and finally psychology. He has always said that he regarded (and hoped that others would do likewise) the university as a large smorgasbord where one should be able to choose dishes to satisfy intellectual curiosity. It was in his university days that he began to 'write each day' and his way of life soon became *nulla dies sine linea*. It must have been at about the same time that he developed other traits that helped him on his way: the conviction that 'nothing was impossible' in the sense that he never let bureaucracy stand in his way, and the ability to give full concentration to the task in hand. (This writer has seen him spend a whole day in very frustrating and taxing meetings and then go and sit down at his typewriter for two hours and write an article!)

Husén's doctoral thesis, some 500 pages long, in 1944 was entitled *Adolescensen* (but the book store edition bore the title *Svensk Ungdom*¹). It was based on test and questionnaire data collection of 1000 young persons between the ages of seventeen and twenty as they entered military service. Each aspect of adolescence was described including citations from works in German, English and even French. By the age of twenty-eight, he was conversant in three foreign languages, had learned the methods of literary criticism and historical analysis, and had studied the psychological approaches of Wundt, Meumann, and the philosophy of the Vienna Circle. Indeed he had spent time studying with Kretschmer. In psychology he had learned various methodological approaches and was versed in the psychology of perception as well as in psychophysiology. By the end of 1944 he had published three books and some sixty articles.

During his last two years at the university, Torsten Husén became involved with a team in Stockholm charged with the development of a series of psychological tests for military purposes, a task requiring him to learn psychometrics. He moved to Stockholm in 1944. One extra outcome of this work was an individual adult intelligence test. In 1948 Husén published a book² on the relationships between social background, intelligence as measured by the military tests and schooling. Husén was not only involved in the construction of the first tests for military use in Sweden but during his ten years as senior psychologist in the defence department he was instrumental in organizing and implementing the application of the results of the work. One could regard him as the father of Swedish military psychology.

In 1938, all children born in 1928 in the city of Malmö were tested. This was to be the beginning of a longitudinal study that still continues at the end of the twentieth century. In 1950, there was a major report³ on the Malmö study attempting to assess the influence of schooling on the growth of intelligence from ten to twenty years of age. It also touched on the problem of the 'reserves of ability' that was to become a hot issue in Sweden in the following years. At the same time, there was other work by one of Husén's students, Kjell Haernqvist, that examined the 'pool of ability'.⁴ The major tenet of these publications was that selective secondary schooling did not favour the development of manifold talents present in the society coupled with the notion of the 'reserve of talent' in society. Neither of the studies was able to identify the two different academic and practical talents so inherent in the thinking about selective education. These findings had a profound effect on the political debate on education in Sweden and also in other countries. All of this led Husén to interest himself in the interaction between research and policy-making. His thinking and publications had effects around the world.

The Malmö study continued and several of Husén's doctoral students undertook the analyses and reporting of the various time-series data. The first comprehensive report of the Malmö data was published in 1969.⁵ At the end of the 1980s another of his students, Tuijnman, was able to demonstrate that the continuing education of adults had an effect on their later job choice and remuneration.⁶

In the meantime (1953) Husén had become a Professor of Education and Educational Psychology at Stockholm University. In those days it was insufficient for a professor of education simply to conduct empirical studies in education or to be specialized in developmental and differential psychology. He was also expected to be proficient in philosophy of education and the history of education. Ever faithful to his maxim of *nulla dies sine linea* he spent his evening writing three books on the history of primary education in Sweden with emphasis on the work of Fridtjov and Anders Berg.⁷ These two had promoted special educational approaches for the teaching of orthography and thus it was not a surprise when, at the same time, Husén published a book reporting the results of an empirical psychological study of orthography.⁸

At the same time, Husén was interested in the eternal nurture-nature debate. He analysed data on monozygotic and dizygotic twins (about 600 pairs) from military data collected in 1948 to 1952. He examined⁹ the intra- and inter-pair patterns of differences in aptitude, school achievement, height, weight, laterality and writing. The approach he used was different from many earlier ones.

From 1953 onwards and especially after 1956 when he became the first professor in Sweden of educational research, Husén and his students became engrossed in various educational research projects. These involved the major debate concerning selective versus comprehensive education,¹⁰ an analysis of educational needs as a basis for curriculum reform,¹¹ and research into the eternal problem of class size and the homogeneity of classes,¹² to mention but some of the projects. As these results had to be used by policy-makers for the reform of education, Husén became interested in the relationship between research and researchers and policy-making. This interest led him to examine this relationship in several countries and resulted in two books nearly twenty years apart. The first was in 1967 together with Gunnar Boalt¹³ and the second in 1984 together with Maurice Kogan.¹⁴ The various modes in which research relates to policy-making in different contexts are exemplified.

Between 1956 and 1982, Husén supervised thirty-eight students who successfully defended their doctoral theses. It should be recalled that then the Swedish doctorate was akin to the German Habilitation and the French Doctorat d'Etat. Thus the amount of work involved in the early theses was enormous. Husén had a great knack for identifying young researchers who would profit from training in order to undertake a doctoral thesis. As head of IEA, he put in motion the famous Gränna seminar for teams of six curriculum specialists from each of twenty-three countries. This had a profound effect on curriculum development in many countries of the world. He also was instrumental in the organization of the three European Seminars on Learning and the Educational Process (SOLEP) following on from those organized by Lee Cronbach in Stanford.

In the early 1950s Husén had been invited to Germany to participate in a workshop on the role of psychological research in the resolution of educational problems. The impact of empirical research methods on researchers trained in hermeneutics should in theory have produced some fine research conceptualization. Since Husén had published several books and articles in English, his name was known to researchers outside Sweden and in 1958 Husén's research group decided to affiliate itself with the emerging International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). In 1962, Husén became the chairman of IEA, edited its first major publication¹⁵ and guided it along its way from then until 1978. In the 1960s and 1980s this organization carried out the largest sample survey research studies in education. It was clear that counting the number of graduates from the last grade of secondary schools was a bad proxy for the educational productivity of nations' school systems and that what was required was a measure of what they had achieved in terms of knowledge, skills and values. Although the results of the studies were continuously used by ministries of education in some twenty countries, it was only in the 1990s with the publication of the TIMSS study results that IEA 'hit' the media. The standards of research set by the IEA studies in the 1960s and 1970s set the scene for the standards required in later international achievement studies conducted by ETS and OECD.

In the 1960s he was increasingly requested to advise ministries of education, the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in Paris (he was chairman of the board of this institute from 1971 for ten years), the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, OECD, UNESCO, the International Council for Educational Development (of which he was a member for many years), as well as to such conferences as that initiated by President Johnson in Williamsburg, Virginia. He taught at the Institute for Humanistic Studies in Aspen, Colorado. He enjoyed his regular visits to Stanford either as a Fellow at the Behavioural Sciences Center or at the university, that continued past his retirement.

In 1982 he became an Emeritus professor but still continued with many of his activities and even took on new tasks. He continued to publish books and even became co-editor-in-chief of both the first (10 volumes)¹⁶ and second (12 volumes)¹⁷ editions of the *International Encyclopedia of Education*. He was the senior author of the first educational publication¹⁸ of the Academia Europaea. He was a founding member of and chairman (1986-98) of the International Academy of Education.

Husén is a most affable person and is able to pour oil on troubled waters in many of the groups with which he has worked when there has been friction. Indeed, he is able to foresee trouble when chairing meetings and possesses the superlative gift of being able to divert the discussion in such a way that the trouble either does not occur or is dissipated quickly. He has a clarity of expression that is essential in international meetings. His knowledge and skills in both the philosophy of education and empirical research in education make him a rare person who commands great respect.

It would not have been possible for him to run the many research projects without competent teams of research workers and money. His 'never regarding anything as impossible' approach was essential for the success of the projects.

Husén was very closely involved in the research accompanying the Swedish school reforms in the 1950s and 1960s. This was noticed in other countries and he became a member of the Governing Board of the Max Planck Institut für Bildungsforschung in Berlin. He was also invited several times by Anthony Crosland in Britain to discuss structures of educational systems. He could also be said to be one of the founding fathers of comparative education in Europe and contributed to these kinds of studies through his chairmanship of IEA.

Husén is an interdisciplinary thinker. His knowledge of the history of educational ideas coupled with his wide knowledge of literature and his empirical approach in education led to a breadth of vision that was breathtaking. His ability to refer to psychological, sociological and economic studies in education when focusing on a particular aspect of education resulted in the problem being looked at from many angles. His writing concerning what schools as institutions can and cannot do, how the various contexts in which young people find themselves impact what they can learn, the structure of school systems, and the notion of

lifelong education have all had an important influence in many countries. Three publications (and translated into several languages) that had a wide readership concerned these issues.¹⁹

In all, he has written fifty-five books and some 1500 articles

Notes

¹ *Svensk Ungdom* [Adolescence]. *Psykologiska undersökningar av ynglingar i åldern 17-20 år*. Stockholm: Gebers, 1944.

² *Begåvning och Miljö* [Aptitude and Milieu]. *Studier i begåvningsutvecklingens och begåvningsurvalets psykologisk - pedagogiska och sociala problem*. Stockholm: Gebers, 1948.

³ T. Husén, *Testresultatens prognosvärde. En undersökning av den teoretiska skolningens inverkan på testresultaten, intelligenstestens prognosvärde och de sociala faktorernas inverkan på urvalet till högre läroanstalter*. Stockholm: Gebers, 1950.

⁴ K. Haernqvist, *Reserverna för högre utbildning*. Stockholm: Ecklesiastikdepartementet, SOU 1958, 11. K. Haernqvist. *Individuella differenser och skoldifferentiering*. Stockholm: Ecklesiastikdepartementet, SOU:1960, 13.

⁵ T. Husén, with the assistance of I. Emanuelsson, I. Fägerlind and R. Liljefors, *Talent, Opportunity, and Career*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1969.

⁶ A.C. Tuijnman, *Recurrent Education, Earnings, and Well-being: A Fifty-year Longitudinal Study of a Cohort of Swedish Men*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989.

⁷ T. Husén, "Fridtjuv Berg, folkskollärkåren och stavningsreformerna." *Pedagogiska skrifter*, 192, 1946. T. Husén, "Fridtjuv Berg och enhetsskolan." *Pedagogiska skrifter*, 199, 1948. T. Husén, "Anders Berg under folkskolans pionjärår." *Pedagogiska skrifter*, 205, 1949.

⁸ T. Husén, "Rättstavningsförmågans psykologi. Några experimentella bidrag." *Pedagogiska skrifter*, 207-9, 1950.

⁹ T. Husén, *Tvillingstudier*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1953. T. Husén, *Psychological Twin Research: A Methodological Study*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1959.

¹⁰ N. E. Svensson, *Ability Grouping and Scholastic Achievement*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962.

¹¹ U. Dahllöf, *Kursplaneundersökningar i matematik och modersmålet*. Stockholm: Ecklesiastikdepartementet, 1960.

¹² S. Marklund, *Skolklassens storlek och struktur*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962.

¹³ T. Husén, and G. Boalt, *Educational Research and Educational Change: The Case of Sweden*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, and New York: John Wiley; 1967.

¹⁴ T. Husén, and M. Kogan, (eds), *Educational Research and Policy: How do they Relate?* Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1984.

¹⁵ T. Husén (ed.), *International Study of Achievement in Mathematics: A Comparison of 12 Countries*, vols 1 and 2. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967.

¹⁶ T. Husén and T.N. Postlethwaite (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Education*, vols 1-10, Oxford: Pergamon, 1985.

¹⁷ T. Husén and T.N. Postlethwaite (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Education*, vols 1-12, (Second edition), Oxford: Pergamon, 1994.

¹⁸ T. Husén, A. Tuijnman and W D. Halls (eds), *Schooling in Modern European Society: A Report of the Academia Europaea*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1992.

¹⁹ T. Husén, *The School in Question: A Comparative Study of the School and its Future in Western Societies*. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. T. Husén. *An Incurable Academic: Memoirs of a Professor*. Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1983. T. Husén, *Education and the Global Concern*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1990.

See also

In this book: Cronbach

Husén's major writings

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Further reading

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Tjeldvoll, Arild, *Listening to Torsten Husén: A Comparative Education Researcher*. A book reporting fifteen hours of interviews, 1999.

Also see *International Who's Who*, London: Europa Publications, *Who's Who in Europa: Dictionnaire Biographique*, ed. Servi-Tech, Waterloo: Belgium, and *Who's Who in the World*, Chicago, IL: Who's Who Marquis).

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