



Photo: Prof. Yukiko Sawano

Torsten Husén

*1.3.1916 – † 2.7.2009

The life's work of the Swedish educationalist Torsten Husén, which had lasted for more than 60 years, came to an end with his death on 2nd July 2009 at the age of 93. With his extensive basic research that opened up new perspectives, Husén undoubtedly became the best-known internationally of all Nordic scholars in the field of education. He was active as a source of far-reaching educational policy initiatives from the very beginning of his career and participated with cogent arguments in both domestic and international educational discussions. He can with good reason be regarded as the chief architect of the educational reforms introduced in numerous countries around the world in the 1960s and 1970s.

Born in Lund on 1st March 1916, Torsten Husén first studied mathematics, literature and history in the mid-1930s and followed this with psychology and education, before gaining a doctorate in educational psychology at the University of Lund in 1944. His thesis, entitled *The youth of 16-20-year-olds from the perspective of youth psychology*, was supervised by the philosopher, psy-

chologist and literary and cultural historian John Landquist.

Among Husén's significant early research projects was the Malmö Study, in which he monitored the development of a cohort of elementary school pupils in Malmö in a longitudinal manner over a total span of forty years. The idea behind this was to examine the permanence and variability of the results of intelligence tests in relation to the pupils' backgrounds. One of the main findings was that by no means all the nation's reserves of talent were able to advance through their schooling in a manner that conformed to their capabilities, diligence and will, but that a notable degree of recruitment took place that could be deemed selective with regard to background and distinctions in learning environments and opportunities. The prevailing form of schooling, with parallel school systems and teaching arrangements, left a powerful classifying imprint. Inspired by these and other findings, Husén came to be involved in paving the way for a new philosophy of educational equality and shaping a new type of comprehensive school system for Sweden.

Torsten Husén was appointed professor of education and educational psychology at the University College of Stockholm in 1953 and was invited to occupy the first chair of education at the new Stockholm University College of Teacher Education in 1956. From 1971 until his retirement in 1981 he was professor of international and comparative education at Stockholm University, where he created the Institute of International Education (IIE), which later achieved a strong position in the field of comparative educational research. He was also a visiting professor and scholar at many other universities throughout the world in the course of his career. Husén was invited as a foreign member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1973.

In the 1960s Husén was one of those involved in founding the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), which subsequently published comparative assessments of learning achievements in various countries for given subjects, beginning with mathematics in 1967. These constituted some of the internationally most significant comparative investigations within the behavioural sciences at that time and had a considerable impact on educational policy decisions and school organization reforms, laying the foundation in a sense for the later PISA studies undertaken by the OECD. Various Finnish instances, especially within the Institute of Education Sciences, were also involved in that organization.

As chairman of the IEA in 1962–78, Husén forged extensive contacts with celebrated figures in the behavioural sciences in a number of countries. He also served as chairman of the board of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning in Paris in 1970–81 and as an expert advisor to various UNESCO organizations, the OECD,

the World Bank and the UN University in Tokyo. He received honorary doctorates from no less than nine universities in various parts of the world, including China, the Soviet Union, Britain, the Netherlands and several in the USA. In Finland, he was honoured in this way by the University of Joensuu.

Torsten Husén was one of the last academic all-rounders. In his biography, T. Neville Postlethwaite places great emphasis on the breadth of Husén's reading and his highly productive mind. He published works on a wide range of topics, from educational psychology to the history of education, educational sociology, educational policy, research methodology and comparative educational research. The earliest stage in his work is represented by his *Psychological Twin Research* (1959), and the later stages by his *Talent, Equality and Meritocracy* (1974), *The School in Question* (1974), *The Learning Society* (1986), *Higher Education and Social Stratification* (1987), *Schooling in Modern European Society* (1992) and *The Information Society* (1999). He is also remembered well in the world at large for his social and futurological study *Utbildning år 2000* (Education in the year 2000) published in 1970, in which he employed the Delphi Method backed up by interviews with experts on social and educational questions to create what proved to be an amazingly accurate picture of the reality of education in that year and trends over the intervening thirty years. The work was translated into ten languages. Husén was also the editor-in-chief of a seminal work in comparative education, the *International Encyclopaedia of Education*, and many of his writings on the role of educational and pedagogical research in educational policy are still of relevance today.

Arild Tjeldvoll interviewed Torsten Husén in 1996 at the age of 80 years when

he was a visiting professor at the University of Oslo, and these interviews were later edited by Hans G. Lingens into a fascinating book *Torsten Husén: Conversations in Comparative Education* (2000), which delves into both his life's work and questions of comparative education and provides a wealth of useful and instructive reading for all those interested in such matters. Husén is asked in the book to comment once again on future prospects for school education, whereupon he is forced to admit to an error:

"If someone had said to me twenty years ago, or even ten years ago, that we would have a growing private sector in the educational sphere today, I would not have believed them."

But by the time of the interview, close to the turn of the millennium, he was convinced that the privatization of education would continue in the future:

"Yes, it is inevitable, on account of the difficulties we have because there are no mechanisms by which we can direct development centrally within the country as a whole or within the regions. I believe that privatization will increase in the sense that decisions regarding everyday practices in schools will come to be taken at the local

level or even at the level of individual schools themselves."

On the other hand, Husén still regarded it as quite right that the many characteristic features of the somewhat exceptional Nordic model of schooling, with its specific emphasis on equality, should remain visible and properly justified.

We were privileged to meet Torsten Husén only a few times, when he was a visiting lecturer in the Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Turku in 1980 and the 1990s and more recently when he was lecturing and holding discussions with his accustomed sharp-witted dignity and experience at a research conference held at Stockholm University that was attended by members of the Stanford School such as Francisco Ramirez. His thinking was as ever coolly analytical, gently sympathetic and far-sighted. There would be a great need for bold thinkers and scholars of his kind, with a broad-based outlook focused seriously on both the past and the future, both the national and the international, in our present-day global world. But is the era of the all-rounders over and done with?

Obituary by Risto Rinne and Erno Lehtinen