

From Zilliacus to Husen: Northern ambitions for comparative
education 1930 -1960



MARTIN LAWN

NORDIC COMPARATIVE EDUCATION SOCIETY

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

21ST MAY. 2013



- This paper is an exploration of the work and ideas of two comparativists in education – Laurin Zilliacus and Torsten Husén – in the middle decades of the 20thC
- These two actors never met – I think – and if they had met, they would have been puzzled by each other, and possibly hostile. Yet they have problems in common
- My interest in them is derived from different sources- historical research on the history of testing; the New Education Fellowship; the sociology of science; the rise of international organizations; and the history of the education sciences.
- Through the study of these two actors, we can see how the field of comparative education developed at moments of transition and the problems it faced



- Zilliacus and Husen were cosmopolitans, that is, at one level, they had both lived and travelled in other countries, they spoke several languages and their wide interests were expressed within communities which were national, cross border, and international.
- Zilliacus was an internationalist, working within a view about peace and transnational cooperation, while Husen as a scientist/ policy actor working within a growing world scientific community.
 - Zilliacus worked closely with the New Education Fellowship, from the 1920s to the 1950s, and was close to its educational and political ideals.
 - Husen's community was a scientific and policy community, located in the national but gradually transnational and international, close to university researchers, and populating the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement [IEA] of which he was a founder member [working with it from the 1960s]



- In the original sense of a membership of a world community, based on a shared morality and human values, then Zilliacus was prototypical cosmopolitan. By birth, upbringing, and education, Zilliacus was a world citizen, more at home in that imagined space than any particular place.
- Husen's cosmopolitan orientation was driven by his scientific and personal capacities which enabled a scientific community to come into existence, and in which he thrived. It involved curiosity, an openness to develop and contest, and form relationships based on mutual respect.
- For both of them, it was culture which defined a sense of collective endeavour; for Zilliacus, a major transnational education movement, and for Husen, a global scientific community establishing an international institution.

International Exams Inquiry



- They represent different ‘moments of transition’ – Novoa’s term for the main concerns or problems that shape comparative education at any ‘*period*’
- - that is, the significant changes that the field went through in the mid 20thC from a cosmopolitan conversation, undertaken around the work of the New Education Fellowship, to a science of comparison, organized within transnational research projects and a international organization.
- This shift is demonstrated in the meetings of the International Examinations Inquiry which took place in the 1930s. Although the group was drawn together by invitation from important comparativists – Monroe, Sadler and Kandel – and used information drawn from the NEF, the key conversations in the meetings take place between the intelligence and testing theorists – Spearman, Thorndike, Thomson – and policy modernisers in each national team.

International Exams Inquiry



- The IEI acts as a space in which the promise of the testing technology, and its statistical foundations, prefigures the post-war expansion of comparative data in education and its use in governing education.
- It is the movement in which Zilliacus is prominent – New Education and its networks and concerns – and the dominant humanist view of comparative education which loses ground
- And it is the ‘scientific’ movement of testing and comparison through data, which gains ground, as developed further by Husen and the community of psychometricians within comparative education.



- My interest is in the flows of people and ideas across borders –
- the idea of space has been important to analyse cross border travel, the movement and impact of ideas and objects, and the way it is imagined [in relation to community, work or project]. These two elements are bound together in my way of understanding the flows of ideas, objects and practices in education sciences.
- The setting or location is often the laboratory, widely conceived as the practice and discussions of a group or network, from which they communicate and exchange with other places and their actors elsewhere. This is the space they work across – literally – but more often imaginatively, thinking about shared work or projects. Space is not a container but a medium for action, and a taken for granted field of action.
 - Their social imaginaries, that is how they see their social existence, work with others, and their expectations [Taylor 2004]

Zilliacus



- Laurin Zilliacus was born in Yokohama in 1895, brought up in Sweden, graduated from Oxford, Cambridge, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and undertook study travels to France, England, Switzerland, Belgium, Scandinavia and United States.
- Between 1917 and 1924, he was a science teacher at Bedales School in southern England, a significant progressive, co-education school, where he had been a pupil. George Badley, its founder and famous head teacher, described him as
 - ‘predominantly English in his sympathies, but with an outlook widened by [his] cosmopolitan experience, he has a grasp of the meaning of education as firm, and, in translating its principles into practice, a touch as sure as any educationalist I have known’
- Founder and Headteacher [1928-1940] - Tölö Svenska Samskolan in Helsinki, - founded on similar principles to Bedales [pupil independence, self study and individual tutoring within familial relations].

Zilliacus



Member of the Executive Board of the New Education Fellowship in 1930, and its Chair between 1935-1951.

He attended and spoke at NEF conferences in Sweden [1931], Lillehammer [1933] and Helsinki [1938]

1935 - addressed the NEF St Andrews Conference on Education for Leisure

1937 - part of the NEF Delegation to Australia and New Zealand, and India

1941 – addressed the US Ann Arbor NEF meeting.

Through the NEF Zilliacus influenced the invitations to the Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish delegations to the IEI, and members from each delegation later played significant roles in their country's education reforms.

It was his work in the NEF in the late 1920s on Examinations which was the spur which created the IEI, the major European project on examinations.

Zilliacus



‘Working for a great hope’ – an independent- minded socialist

- Post-war – he argued that the NEF should work for the production of ‘social and world-minded teachers’ and to ‘help make citizens’ of children.
- His time at the NY Teachers College during wartime seems to have converted him to the ideas, expressed by George Counts, that the teacher should build a new social order
- The NEF survived for a time by working for the new UNESCO – using its financial support, and doing what it asked to survive

Husén



- Torsten Husén, born in Lund, Sweden, in 1916
- In 1938-39, he was involved in a major longitudinal study to carry out psychological tests on all 10-year-olds born in the city of Malmö, aimed at understanding the social influences on intelligence. [This study was influenced by some of the scientific work which had taken place in the IEI in the 1930s].
- He was working in the new field of intelligence, measurement and testing, which he developed further with the Swedish Army building up a system of psychological tests.
- Husen's interest lay in the relation between ability, social background and school performance.

Husén



- It is not surprising that in reconstructing German education the Americans would invite an expert in their own dominant specialization.
 - In 1952, a workshop on the role of educational research was organised jointly by the American High Commissioner's office and the newly formed German Institute for International Educational Research [DiPF] in Frankfurt on the use that educational research could have on current problems in German school education.

In some way, this was the model of the IEI focused on a single country.

- Older cosmopolitan actors in education comparison were less influential now. Countries had become part of blocs and blocs were in competition. International projects and organizations were working in education, and their international actors were psychometricians, often coming together for the first time in proximity.

Husén



- The new UNESCO Institute in Hamburg became a nodal point in the distributed laboratory of scientific testing and its community of workers
 - In the mid-1950s, a group of mainly psychometricians were brought together to discuss problems of school and student evaluation through the study of pupil cognitive development in different countries.
 - At a meeting in 1958, Husen realised the gap between school judgment and school data -
 - ✦ how little empirical evidence was available to substantiate the sweeping judgments that were commonplace about the relative merits and failings of various national systems of education [Husen 1979]
- Investigation could now be added to description.
- A core group, soon to be chaired by Husen, met in Hamburg to consider a study of measured outcomes and their determinants within and between systems of education. Using tests as their tools, they organised large scale international studies.
- The world was to be conceived as more than a meeting place, it was to be an educational laboratory

Husén



- A particular way of seeing comparative education as comparison by quantitative methods grew in strength – what Husen called the empirical-positivist 'paradigm'.
During the 1960s, the scientific possibilities – producing cross-national generalisations about input and output factors – began to shift toward the idea of comparative results and system improvements.
- The vision of a laboratory was dependent on the construction of a community of experts, and in turn, a shift toward the formation of national research centres able to undertake the tests. Funding for the international projects aided the establishment of these centres and the employment of new experts.

Husén



- The idea of a laboratory of professionals was inevitably pushed towards the efficiency of national systems and types. Husen wished to avoid an arms race of competition and comparison, which he referred to as a ‘cognitive Olympics’, and to retain a degree of autonomy. However, science needs funding, and funding became dependent on studying Cold War problems, and weaving together key international organizations and national centres
- Husen regretted what was lost in comparative education. This new research paradigm could not focus on the ‘historical, cultural and economic circumstances which affect formal educational systems’: these factors had to be neglected.

Conclusion



- It was not my intention to compare them or evaluate them, but instead, to view them symbols and exemplars in comparative education of different ‘moments of transition’.
- Viewing them, through their social imaginaries and as working in comparative education as a field of social, political and knowledge problems with particular material conditions of work – the places, tools and ideas they worked with.

Conclusion



- Zilliacus was foremost an internationalist and a cosmopolitan, using education as his field of operation in the changing of society. He worked with inspiration inside an education movement.
- Husen based his work within a community of psychometricians but extending their methods into the study of schools and their effects. He worked within a time which needed his ability but also determined research policy and practice through him.
- Through understanding what they did or were unable to do, and their successes and vulnerabilities, we can understand the problems of comparative education and the work of its scholars. And we may recognise the problems we have now in this field.