

Unforgettable encounters with the changing world of IEA, 1963-2008

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I found out about IEA in my first doctoral course in comparative education taught by Professor C. Arnold Anderson at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1963. In that course, Anderson emphasized the importance of the first full-scale IEA study (now called FIMS, First International Mathematics Study). As I recall, what he said was: "The trouble with comparative education is that we don't have the dependent variables we need for comparative research across countries, but soon we will," referring to a study with data not yet then collected.

It was almost ten years later, in 1972, when I got my own chance to work for IEA. After an interruption for active duty military service, I was back at Chicago to finish my doctoral studies. I spotted a one-page nondescript flyer on the wall in Judd Hall. It announced that Spencer Fellowships were available to go to Stockholm to analyze IEA data. When I read that, I immediately saw this as the chance of a lifetime, and now more than 40 years later, I have not changed my mind. What could be more important than to participate in a research movement to collect data from many countries in areas of such significance to future citizens?

After talking first to Anderson and then to Neville Postlethwaite, the IEA Executive Director, about applying and finding them agreeable, though noncommittal, I contacted Judith Torney-Purta, the head of the first civic education study who was hardly older than I. She told me I was completely unqualified, having done nothing in political socialization research (and, for that matter, not much in survey research either). Undeterred, I was able, by asking about the variables in the civic education study, to put together a proposal for secondary analysis of the new civic education data. This proposal must have done the trick since Judith changed her mind. Ironically this inauspicious beginning evolved into a wonderful collaboration with Judith that remained one of the most important of my professional life. In the short run it led to my being asked to join the first group of IEA Spencer Fellows in Stockholm as soon as possible. Packing up my unfinished dissertation, I left Chicago for Stockholm in September 1972.

Upon arrival in Stockholm, I met Torsten Husén for the first time. Professor and Director of the Institute of International Education at the University of Stockholm, Torsten was one of the world's most successful and well-known educational researchers. Even so, colleagues, students and clerical workers called him by his first name. Although he irreverently described himself as condemned to carry hat in hand, begging for money for IEA from all possible sources, he was also first among equals in the group of greats who got IEA started, in other words an iconic figure. However famous he was, when I met him he struck me as warm, approachable and gracious. Others have told me that Torsten had other less cordial sides, but I always remember him with admiration and pleasure. When first arrived, I found that the on-going Six Subject Survey faced grave problems in dealing with six huge and complex domains at the same time: science, literature, reading comprehension, civic education and both French and English as foreign languages. In moving to these additional subjects, IEA had overreached. It was only when nine separate tomes of study results (plus an unknown number of national reports) were published that IEA convincingly demonstrated that it

could deal with a number of subjects simultaneously, but it was such a stretch for IEA's fledgling organizational capacity that it was never again attempted.

Before finishing these publications, IEA faced a crisis when Neville Postlethwaite took a new job at IIEP in Paris, making a great deal of information about the study and its datasets very difficult to access because the only direct routes were through his mind! To cope, Carolyn Massad, another Spencer Fellow on leave from ETS, and I agreed to pitch in and help push the study over the top. By studying the office files, I discovered that Neville had been carrying on a correspondence of epic proportions with national centers, report authors and others. This was long before the Internet, email or even fax, desktop computers, or word processors. I saw for myself what Ken Ross described years later at Neville's memorial service: "Neville had an enormous appetite for hard work and he always assumed that everybody around him shared the same feeling. He not only worked hard, he also produced huge volumes of high quality work at enormous speed. The energy that he produced was infectious. When he moved into top gear everybody in the vicinity tended to get swept up in the whirlwind, whether they wanted to or not."


Even before publication, the importance of this study was feted when, in 1973, Harvard University hosted an international conference on the results (see book by Purves & Levine, 1975). At one of the sessions, Ben Bloom, an IEA founder, told participants that the conference was a testimonial to being able to finish such a large-scale, complex research project without creating another self-serving, self-perpetuating bureaucracy. Bloom's remark undeniably reflected the milieu out of which IEA had sprung: a loose and informal network of very prominent, internationally known educational researchers who decided to innovate and collaborate on an unprecedented venture. It also reflected the culture of the University of Chicago where two of the IEA founders, Ben Bloom and C. Arnold Anderson, held positions of influence. In this culture with a certain arrogance, the most talented researchers thought they were better off if they could pursue their research interests in the absence of organizational constraints. In fact, the culture was one in which the term *bureaucracy* connoted obstacles and was unlikely to refer positively to any capacity to do academic work, and especially not research. The irony of the remark was that Bloom was speaking in Longfellow Hall at Harvard in the midst of perhaps the world's richest, most successful and respected self-serving and self-perpetuating institution, then in its 337th year of dealing with the challenges of higher education. IEA, in contrast, had been put together in a few years in ad hoc fashion to meet the demands of particular studies. But time and institutions change. What would Bloom think of the IEA Hamburg office in 2018 with its over one hundred twenty specialized and technical employees employed to meet standards and maintain quality in IEA studies.

It was this gradual reinvention of IEA as an organization that changed attitudes and made possible the last of the four IEA studies in which I was deeply involved: an unprecedented IEA study of teacher education known as TEDS-M. By that time, IEA had in TIMSS a model that worked well in K-12, but teacher education was in higher education, not K-12. If successful, the proposed study would be the first in all of higher education, not just in teacher education, to do an international assessment of learning outcomes based on national samples. I remember when, after the main collection of data for this study, the national research coordinators (NRCs) met for the fourth time, hosted by the Norwegians in Bergen. After years of bickering, missed deadlines and predictions of disaster, this meeting served to demonstrate that, whatever happened from then on, TEDS-M was

a success. This conclusion was forcefully put forward by IEA executive director Hans Wagemaker and by Liv Gronmo, the Norwegian professor who headed the team hosting the meeting. They both recalled that, when we began the study, skeptics said it could not be done. These skeptics had asserted, in contrast to TIMSS and other such studies of elementary and secondary education, the institutions, faculty members and students of higher education would never cooperate in a large-scale international survey in which all were asked to fill out fairly lengthy questionnaires, provide syllabi and in the case of the students voluntarily submit to a test of their knowledge of mathematics content and mathematics pedagogy, especially inasmuch as they were to be selected as part of a national probability sample (or census in the case of the smaller countries) and not because they themselves volunteered. This being the case, skeptics charged, the study would not be able to meet the exacting IEA technical standards for response rates which are far higher than most surveys of higher education are able to achieve, even ones which do not ask the students to agree to be tested.

As Gronmo put it, skeptics had the idea that we were building an airplane that was never going to fly. Using this metaphor to great advantage, she asserted that by the time of the Bergen meeting, the plane was flying quite successfully even though she had to concede with some understatement that there had been bumps here and there in the flight path. And the challenge remained to bring the plane safely down to earth. Nevertheless by that time the final data collection was finished and almost all of the countries had submitted data to the IEA DPC in Hamburg for initial processing, checking and cleaning. The achieved response rates and coverage of national target populations of students were astonishingly higher than I had believed possible. IEA had indeed demonstrated that it could do cross national assessment in higher education, overcoming various challenges that exceeded what it had experienced in elementary and secondary education. And in any case, if the TEDS-M reports did not satisfy the critics, they could do their own analyses. IEA by then required and made possible the documentation, archiving and dissemination of data for secondary analysis by any researcher who wanted to do this: one of the greatest advances achieved by an organization which had once taken pride in not being so tightly and effectively organized.

The world has changed a great deal since I first sat in a University of Chicago classroom in 1963 and heard C.A. Anderson say that at last we were going to have a measure that could be used across countries in studies of educational outcomes. Due to changes in economies, politics, technology and public attitudes, cooperation between countries had inexorably become both easier and more desirable. The trend is globalization and what I have experienced in my work with IEA over these many years is one of the most important, most fascinating instances of the globalization of educational research. In my view, the existence, results and, yes, the criticisms of these studies have all contributed greatly to the globalization of public and scholarly discourse on education. In my case, having experienced IEA research, worked with such extraordinary collaborators, learned so much about education and research throughout the world, all this has been its own reward. I have no regrets. Being selected as an honorary individual member of IEA at the 2010 General Assembly in Botswana was a much appreciated and surprising bonus adding to the intrinsic satisfaction I already felt.



NOTE: The examples used for this short memoir were selected and rewritten from a much longer chapter about my experiences and the evolution of IEA in Papanastasiou, C. & Plomp, T. (Eds) (2011). *IEA 1958-2008-50 years of experiences and memories*. Nicosia: Kailas.