

# Thomas Neville Postlethwaite: A Doctorfather's Subjective Portrait

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I think there is no one in Sweden or elsewhere with whom I have worked so closely over the last 30 years on various academic matters as Neville Postlethwaite. He has been very active on the international scene but remained British, very British. It began in 1962 when, in my capacity as Chairman, I was involved in hiring him as a coordinator for the first major survey of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The idea of cross-national surveys which led to the setting up of the cooperative body known as IEA grew out of a series of meetings held at the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, Germany in the late 1950s. The research embarked on in 1959 by a dozen national institutes was, so to speak, institutionalized in 1961. We soon found that we needed somebody at the UNESCO Institute experienced in test and measurement. Douglas Pidgeon who was the Deputy-Director of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in London suggested a young man of 28 years old who had been working with him for some time at the NFER in London. His name was Postlethwaite, a name that it took a long time to learn to pronounce, not to speak of spelling it correctly. He came to Hamburg for an interview with the Director, then Saul Robinsohn, who seemed to have gained a good impression, because he decided to employ him. Subsequent experience gave him reason to regret this. More about this later.

Neville was the only child of a marriage where the father had died when Neville was only one month old. The mother who was a teacher, had to take care of him alone. The lack of a father may have affected his development. My wife Ingrid told me many times that I, both in my capacity as 'Doktorvater' and in a wider sense, served as a father substitute. For many years we had long telephone conversations, in certain periods almost daily. I had the impression that he seemed eager to keep me posted about what he was doing and when so

informing me, he implicitly wanted my advice.

Neville stands out to me as a man of perpetual action with a capacity for work that borders on narcomania and who expects something similar from those in his close working environment. He is administratively very skillful and in the possession of an enormous receptivity. He is difficult to steer and control, easily prone to rebellion and straightforwardly expresses his opinions about people. The only job, I think, that would not quite suit him would be diplomatic service. Not surprisingly, his working capacity and receptivity make him a very good coordinator of international projects. The first of these began in 1962 and the results were published in two volumes in 1967. During these five years Neville took two degrees with me, his licentiate in 1965 and his doctoral disputation in 1967 under my chairmanship. His receptivity has also been manifested in his language skills. He had had only a few years of French (and no German) in secondary school. But he went to France for some time in an enterprise and fell in love with a French girl. This is the basic preparation he had for giving lectures to university audiences in France four decades later. Even more remarkable is that since 1976 he has been a professor of comparative education and his teaching load there has been eight hours per week in German. His competence was founded through females. In Britain he met Trudi from Munich who was an au pair girl in a British family. His further competence in German, he tells me, was acquired in the kitchen of his mother-in-law listening and talking to her.

With a dynamic person like Neville conflicts soon arose with the Director of the UNESCO Institute and I had to step in as mediator. Since I was also Chairman of the IEA Council, consisting of researchers each representing his country in the survey, I was also forced to extend my mediator role to conflicts between the Director and the Council. At issue was who should take the final decisions in running the mathematics survey. Formally, IEA was at that time in a weak position, since it had not yet been incorporated and was therefore not a legal entity. The coordinator of the project, Neville, was serving the Council and expected to conduct his business according to its decisions. But, again formally, he was on the staff of the UNESCO Institute and had in that capacity to report to the Director. A further complication was that our colleague, Benjamin Bloom of the University of Chicago, was the principal investigator since the US Office of Education which had given the research grant had to base the grant at the university where the principal investigator was located. Ben Bloom was the US member of the Council and also of the Standing Committee and did not cause us any trouble simply because he behaved according to the decisions taken by the Council. The issue of who was in

command, as far as the IEA survey research was concerned, was later resolved by incorporating IEA as an international body under Belgian law. The Statutes of the Association were then solemnly published in the *Moniteur Belge* in an announcement signed by King Baudouin!

By that time Robinsohn had left Hamburg to become one of the Directors of the newly established Max Planck Institute for Educational Research in Berlin. Until 1969, when the IEA headquarters moved to Stockholm, Neville served under two more Directors at the UNESCO Institute. In late 1966 IEA entered upon its huge Six-Subject Survey and the number of participating countries had increased from 12 (in the first mathematics survey) to 20. This considerable increase in IEA activities meant that the staff had to be expanded with a research assistant and a couple of secretaries, all financed by the research grants, mainly from the US Office of Education and later from the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation. This meant that the young cuckoo became too big for the nest and had to be relocated. The Swedish Government and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation offered to provide accommodation and research funding respectively. The Ministry of Education, Stockholm University, the National Board of Logistics and the Bank of Sweden became responsible for the resource infrastructure. IEA was given a suite of offices in the Wenner-Gren Foundation building. Neville and his staff of 4-5 people were based in Stockholm during a period of three years, when the hectic data collection and the bulk of the data analyses for the Six-Subject Survey took place. The initial data processing had been conducted by a team located at Teachers College, Columbia University and the multivariate analyses were conducted in Sweden. When he accepted a position at the International Institute for Educational Planning in Paris in 1972 the processing and analyses and the writing of the Science, Reading Comprehension and Literature Reports had been completed. The international reports on these subjects as well as the Swedish national report on Science were presented at an international press conference in Stockholm at the end of May 1973. Reports on the remaining three subject fields, French and English as foreign languages and Civic Education, were published a couple of years later. The subsequent coordination of the surveys as well as further analyses were carried out at the Institute of International Education which had been established following legislation in the Swedish Parliament 1971; the legislation also made provisions for a professorship in Comparative and International Education.

During the entire 1970s and well into the 1980s IEA's so-called headquarters were located at the Institute of International Education in Stockholm, an institution that IEA itself had bred. I continued to be the Chairman of IEA and

the members of the General Assembly met once a year. At the 1978 General Assembly Meeting in Tokyo I made the decision to step down after 17 years of chairmanship. I had done 'my job'. Neville seemed to me to be my self-evident successor. His academic achievements and competencies were well documented and objectively obvious. During an early stage of his Hamburg IEA assignment I had suggested that he should join the doctoral program I had at the Stockholm University and as mentioned earlier, in 1965 he took the so-called licentiate degree which manifested a competence somewhere between the Master's and the Doctoral Degree. In 1967 he submitted a thesis with the title *School Organization and Student Achievement in Mathematics in Twelve Countries*. He had taken advantage of the mathematics survey data in an attempt to elucidate to what extent organizational differentiation (separating the 'academically oriented' pupils from the rest) had any effect on their subsequent achievements, a major policy issue in several European countries. He could draw upon the differences between countries in terms of degree of parallelism and comprehensivization in school organization.

In the Chapter on 'A Doctorfather's Record', which I was asked to write in the *Festschrift* given to me on my 75th birthday, I characterized Neville as 'without doubt the doctoral student with whom I have had the closest cooperation over nearly 30 years'. Our cooperation was at that time in full swing with the editing of the second edition of the *International Encyclopedia of Education* and did not stop with its publication in April 1994. Over many years hardly a day passed without a telephone conversation between Hamburg and Stockholm. In 1976 Neville was called (got a Ruf) to a professorship of comparative education at the University of Hamburg. By then he had in various ways supplemented his competence after having been closely involved in several major IEA surveys. This involvement provided him with more thorough insights into the 'nuts and bolts' and the functioning of studies of this kind than his 'doctorfather' had acquired.

Neville's chairmanship from 1978 to 1986 meant a revitalization of IEA with new major studies, among them the second mathematics and the second science studies which provided data that enabled IEA to conduct trend analyses of student competences. Additional countries joined the IEA. At the same time an interest in so-called national assessments began to manifest itself on both sides of the Atlantic. Increased school costs gave rise to demands for 'accountability'. What did the schools accomplish with their increased budgets? It began in the 1960s in the United States where I had an opportunity to follow the preparatory work conducted by Ralph Tyler and his task force. In the wake of the crisis and the stagflation in the early 1970s governments and parliaments

in several countries began to take interest in the quality of the 'products' coming out of the schools. The control of student competence became a priority. This enhanced the interest of governments in several countries in joining IEA which, it should be noted, was not an intergovernmental body but an association of research institutions, governmental or not. During Neville's time as chairman of IEA the number of participating countries increased from 25 to some 40.

In 1979, at a meeting in Salzburg of the Club of Rome there was a discussion of the manuscript of the report *No Limits to Learning*, which Pergamon Press was going to publish. I was introduced to the legendary publisher Robert Maxwell with whom the Club had contracted the book. Hardly had we met than he proposed that I should become the Editor-in-Chief of an international encyclopedia of education and schooling, a publication that he had had in mind for a long time. I shrank back when I tried to imagine the scope of such an enterprise and the amount of time it would take away from the first few years of my retirement which I saw on the horizon. Subsequently, however, he persuaded me to undertake the task and I promised to organize a planning meeting with leading scholars in education at Oxford in June 1980. I had been given a free hand to invite whatever key experts I thought should be considered, several of whom were subsequently invited to join the Editorial Board. One of them was Neville Postlethwaite, who had at that time already been a Professor at Hamburg University for a few years. Maxwell had originally thought of a young American, whom he had met in the Club of Rome, as my Assistant Editor-in-Chief. I made it a condition for serving as Editor-in-Chief that I could have Neville as my Co-Editor-in-Chief on an equal basis. His working capacity, administrative skill, international network and, not least, the fact that the encyclopedia had to be produced in his mother tongue led to the conclusion that he, if anybody, was fitted for the task of helping me with this formidable task. Apart from the qualifications just mentioned he also possessed a personality trait that was less developed in me or which I lacked entirely. Over all the years I have learned to appreciate Neville's straightforwardness which with full honesty could hit anybody, not least his 'doctorfather' whom he did not hesitate to criticize. This was an asset when it came to rejecting articles that were of low quality and requesting revisions of others.

We worked hard on the first edition of the *International Encyclopedia of Education: Research and Studies*. Section Editors had to be identified, an Advisory Board had to be set up, invitations had to be sent around and, not least, manuscripts had to be read. Neville and I met in Hamburg for detailed planning with a representative of the publishing house in the late summer of

1980. My summer of 1984 was absorbed by reading galley proofs. Neville undertook most of the perusal of manuscripts. We had almost daily telephone contact. Rapidly drafted, handwritten notes and hardly legible letters, or letters hastily dictated and then typed amounted to a couple of thousand during that time. Indeed, over more than three decades, the number of letters and copies of letters written by Neville must amount to something like ten thousand. Most of them are now in my personal correspondence files which have been deposited at the National Archive in Stockholm.

The first edition of the Encyclopedia was presented at a reception at Palmer House in Chicago in connection with the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in April, 1985. It was well received and after a couple of years it was almost sold out. A few years later the publisher decided to launch a second, revised, edition. Such a revision meant completely rewriting most of the 1500 articles and bringing the rest up to date. Educational scholarship had developed quickly. The Editorial Board had to be renewed. A Planning meeting was held in Marbella, Spain in early 1991. Again, Neville and I were asked to be paired horses, this time with increased responsibility and doubtless more work on Neville's part. When the first edition was planned at an editorial meeting in the Bahamas in early 1981, I was the internationally most renowned of the two of us. After all, Neville was my former student and much younger than I, but had not yet grown above the head of his 'doctorfather'. But, holding the advantage of being 18 year younger he had time to grow, whereas I had retired with the euphemistic title Professor Emeritus. This time the section editors sent all of their article manuscripts to Neville, who then read them carefully. If an article was of unacceptable quality he sent it to me who had to serve in the role of supreme judge. He had to go through and examine (in print) more than 6000 pages with double columns. I could imagine the amount of work when I had spent most of my time from late June to early September, 1993, reading the galley proofs and making cross-references between articles belonging to different sections. The section editors were expected to make cross-references within their own sections, a task that proved too much for some of them.

The second edition of the Encyclopedia, now in 12 volumes (the first being in 10 volumes with two supplements) was also launched at an AERA Annual Meeting, this time in New Orleans in April, 1994.

We have worked together on yet another international scene in founding the International Academy of Education which was incorporated by a group of 'founding fathers', such as Hellmut Becker, Mark Blaug, Benjamin Bloom, James Coleman and Gilbert De Landsheere at a meeting in Oxford in 1986.

Both of the two preceding projects mentioned here, IEA and the Encyclopedia, meant the establishment of comprehensive international networks, something quite unique in education which by its very nature, socializing young people to the surrounding national culture and language, tends to be rather provincial. The founders met at the Pergamon Press headquarters at Headington Hill Hall. Somewhere else on the same premises, another meeting was being held with Maxwell negotiating with people from another company that he was in the process of taking over. The new academy did not have a single penny for its operations and for the projects it intended to launch. It was crucial to have financial resources, at least for the take-off of the Academy's activities. We could not refrain from turning to Maxwell who within a few years had become a kind of media tycoon, first by buying the British Printing Corporation, a conglomerate of printing enterprises and then the Mirror group of newspapers. We knew that he had established a foundation, one of the aims of which was to support research. Our hope was to receive some help from that source in order to get started. We finally succeeded in getting an audience with him when we told him about our plans, our hopes, and our predicament; and, we requested help. We left Neville to conduct the further negotiations and the details of a proposal. He was, with his straightforward and outgoing manner, fit for such a task. Maxwell, the 'bouncing Czech', appeared to like him. As a result of the negotiations, the Academy was able to count on some 'seed money' for its initial operations and for its first project on 'Home and School'.

It followed naturally to ask Neville to become the Executive Director of the Academy. After all, he had successfully served in that capacity in IEA until 1972. Neville had succeeded me as Chairman of IEA and in Hamburg he had also coordinated the huge IEA project on Reading Literacy. But even his working capacity had its limitations with regard to what he could embrace. After a couple of years he resigned from his post as Academy Executive Director and was succeeded by our Australian colleague, Barry Fraser.

Some years ago Neville told me that he planned to take retirement at the age of 62. I could hardly believe this, used as I was over many years to his youthful exuberance. At any rate, he is now retiring. This means, in order to state it correctly, that he is retiring from one of his jobs, teaching and supervising students at Hamburg University. The other jobs, among them international consultantships, he keeps. He plans to spend some of his time at his flat in London and some of it in France as a freelancer with various commissions for, among others, the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP).

He has impatiently been waiting for his formal retirement to occur. Impatience is one of the similarities that unites him with his 'doctorfather'.