

# **IS MY RESEARCH A RESEARCH? LOOKING AT MATHEMATICS EDUCATION RESEARCH METHOD AS A DERRIDA READER**

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*In this paper I suggest that the labels postmodernism and poststructuralism are not enough to investigate educational research methods from the view of Derrida. I propose a 'full meaning of research' as able to grasp the concept of writing in Derrida.*

## **THE PLACE OF DERRIDA IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH METHODS LITERATURE**

If I rely in the idea of origins I should say that, probably, since postmodernism and poststructuralism have appeared, there have been heated criticisms against it. That does not say too much because everything is the subject of heated criticism. In postmodernism's and poststructuralism's case, many of those heated criticisms against them walked by the path of saying that these "philosophies" go nowhere. A kind of 'naïve' notion of nihilism is supporting those criticisms. However, it did not stop the growing of occurrence of the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism in academic literature. On the contrary it has been increasing and one should notice that the criticism itself increases the volume of those occurrences. The first question here is: would be there a kind of alliance between the criticism and the object of criticism?

In what concerns me in this paper I note that now these terms begin to occupy educational research methods as an issue. That sounds at least curious. If postmodernism and poststructuralism have been found to be a hard attack on Enlightenment, one could ask how they could share space with ideas as central to Enlightenment as "education" and "methods". In this paper I will be looking at the question of research methods from the point of view of a Derrida reader. Firstly I attempt to place Derrida to confront this increasing occurrence of the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism.

As happens with most of authors classified as postmodernist or poststructuralist, Derrida does not use these terms often. I should say, on the limits of my reading, I never saw them there at all. First of all, I would say that poststructuralism is more easily related to Derrida in the sense that he actually refers to structuralism:

As modern structural thought has clearly realized, language is a system of signs and linguistics is part or parcel of the science of signs, or semiotics (Saussure's sémiologie). (Derrida, 1976, pp. 13)

One could quote many other passages in his text. It is enough to say that in the book 'Of grammatology' (Derrida, 1976) there is the chapter 'Linguistics and Grammatology' where Derrida has confronts Saussure's structuralism. Also, in 'Writing and Difference' (Derrida, 1978) he discusses structuralism there in one of his most famous chapters: 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'.

Even if poststructuralism is easily related to Derrida, the terminology has certainly not been created by himself. On the contrary it has been used to join his text with others under the same label. My point is that this terminology has not served to support a focused approach to Derrida. That is the context in which I see that educational research methods have given space (little of course) to Derrida's work. That is, comparing with or mixing Derrida amongst others. I contend that the consequence of this is that studies of Derrida have not been seriously considered in this literature and when quoted is not sufficiently rigorous. In order to say what I mean by this I draw on his concept of writing and the consequences of it for educational research methods.

## **EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH, EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE, METHODS AND POSITIVISM**

...there are no universal methods to be applied invariantly (Scott and Usher 1999, p. 10)

How seriously should one take this quotation?

If one wants to take seriously the process of assessment in the academy, by which I mean to take seriously the academy itself, he/she should be aware of the following situation about the question title of this paper, "Is my research research?"

- 1 - This question should be a research question for any research and probably, it should be the main one;
- 2 - This question should be one which the researcher can never answer by him/herself because that is exactly the question which will be decided by the Viva;
- 3 - This question should be the last one to be answered.

However those same conditions should shake that which grounds research in itself and also that which supports the assessment of it, which is: the self-evidence and self-justification, the clarity on the argumentation or exposition of it. Also, those statements would mean that 'research' becomes research when the process of 'doing research' has finished, that is, after the Viva.

This uncomfortable position (it can also be comfortable in that 'any thing goes'), is both a position about research, and it includes educational research, and, also, it is a position about assessment, that is, about educational practice. And probably this is not clearly seen because educational research discourse has been constructed on the dualism educational practice v educational research in such a way that to end it would mean to collapse the language of doing research as I have just done.

Even if educational practice and educational research have a close link, whenever one, at some point, effectively separates them there is, already, a position about research. If there is this separation one could ask: How is educational practice brought to educational research discourse? In educational research discourse, educational practice must assume the position of a concept. However, then, one must conclude that either a concept is a practice or, as a concept, educational practice is not a practice. On the other hand, any research, including educational research, being an academic process involving, at least, learning and assessment, is an educational practice. The separation between educational research and educational practice is, at some point, just an *artifice of language and discourse*. It does not mean that the true (reality) of these two concepts is that they are just only one and the same. As the difference of two words they are already two. However, it posits us to ask: what constitutes this artifice? Where are its roots and what is it a root of? What is the set of meaning and heritages linked to it? What is the set of meanings and heritages which constitute the language that allows one to understand it?

What separates educational practice and educational research, must also distinguish “doing” (of educational research) and “practice” (of educational practice) as two different things. The fact that there is an “application” of what has been done through the so called educational research to educational practice is enough to contend that the language at play here is that: while educational practice is part of the worldliness, the “given” or the empirical field, the research and its doing would be apart from that.

The idea of methods comes into account at this point. This difference between the “doing” of research and practice of education is not casual. The “doing” of research is almost referenced by the idea of methods (of research). The idea of methods has always been completely strange to the idea of the fallibility which is at the heart of worldliness. The method is exactly what is necessary to make sure that one will not fail. The difference between educational practice and methods of educational research is that the latter shapes the former. When educational practice comes to be part of the ‘conceptual discourse’ of research it takes, and it is taken by, the position of an empirical place, the ‘given’, where one with scientific methods (experimental, surveys, qualitative design, case study, interviews and so on) goes to collect and validate its knowledge, its thesis, its research. What is the heritage here?

At the heart of this dualism there is positivism-empiricism. However, by this same dualistic discourse, which keeps notions like theoretical framework, empirical field and methods, educational research methods discourse has agonized trying to deny positivism and offer a fair criticism of it. Here there is also the strong dualism of form and content. Educational research believes that it is possible to criticise the content keeping the form. That is, it is possible to make serious criticism of educational research content while the positivistic methods are kept. I contend that the reason why Derrida appears amongst others under the same label is because a focused approach to Derrida would disturb this dualism supported by positivism-empiricism through a meditation that *the form is nothing but the actual positivistic content*.

## **A FULL MEANING OF RESEARCH: WRITING**

A full meaning of research should be based on a move-of-unrevealing. Researching should mean to look for something that no one has seen before. Research should always be guided exactly by that which is missed, that which is as yet unrevealed, that which is at-research. 'Research' comes from re- + search. The term re comes from Latin and it means 'intensively' or as it is understood today: doing again, repeatedly. Re + search would mean an intensive and repeated action of 'searching'. But what is this 'action'? What is 'searching'? The term 'search' comes from the Latin "cicare", "circus" which back to English means go about. Looking up 'go about' in the Oxford English dictionary we have 'move from a place to place, to circulate'. It does not help us too much because 'search' in itself means, again, a kind of intense and repeated process. That is, 'place to place' and 'to circulate' are nothing but they are 'to do repeatedly'. One should keep asking: what is this process? What does it mean 'from place to place' and 'to circulate'? Back to the dictionary meaning, 'to circulate' plays a relevant role when one thinks about research. It brings 'us' another important notion of research, which is the notion of to focus on. 'Circus' on the etymological roots of research takes us to the meaning of 'to circulate' and then to 'to focus on'. That is a quite usual and relevant notion in the lexicon and semantic world of academic research. 'Go about', 'from place to place' not through a straight line, but instead circulating. What is attempted to be captured by this is: what actually is the 'meaning' of a focus? The focus is exactly the center of the circulated region and if one looks there one must find the emptiness. This emptiness is quite useful to all that which makes the move-of-researching. My point is that research is not first of all about finding out, but about moving-to-find-out.

The idea of questioning and inquiring are almost enough for this idea of research. But a full meaning of questioning and inquiring is also required here for this emptiness. A full meaning of questioning must be independent from answering. One must notice that as soon as there is the answer, the question has finished. "Going about", "moving from place to place" and "to circulate" are processes typical of inquiring but not answering. Contrary to what I have affirmed earlier, the question "Is my research research?" does not shake the grounds of research. It is most originally an actual research question in the sense that it is a question which keeps itself as a question forever at the same time as it produces and is produced by the movement-of-researching. It is not just a research question it is also a position about doing research, methods, practice and research itself. It is a position of research in the sense that any research must ask it and no one can answer it.

The idea of questioning is strange to methods, since methods meaning "how to do it" is in itself an answer. The idea of methods (how to make sure and find out), being not essential to research, has, together with "empirical field", "theoretical framework", "to find out", joined its lexicon and language at a point of its history. Method is part of Enlightenment and the positivistic epoch. Probably, today without them the research discourse and language collapse. However, at this point, I bring Derrida's

concept of writing through the question: “How much” is one walled-in by language? The problem here is if there is something called “language” which walled anyone in, what I understand by a “full concept of research” is lost. I would like to think of research as going “beyond” walled places. A “full meaning of research” must escape the confines of language. (I will not discuss now this “beyond”, but it is not some transcendentalism). What goes beyond language is writing.

By a slow movement whose necessity is hardly perceptible, everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name language is beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarized under, the name of writing (Derrida, 1976, pp. 6)

To understand research as a faithful Derrida reader means to understand that the nature of research is writing. Most of us would recognize it, but always with the caution that there are other research activities than that. This caution lies on the idea that methods are necessary to collect the data from a given reality. This caution lies on to accept that

...the signified [the findings] is originarily and essentially (and not only for a finite and created spirit) trace, that is always already in the position of signifier. (Derrida, 1976, pp.73)

And it is “understandable” why mathematics education research methods struggle with it. That is because it

...is the apparently innocent proposition within which the metaphysics of the logos, of presence and consciousness, must reflect upon writing as its death and its resource. (Derrida, 1976, pp.73)

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