

How to set up conditions for authentic participation, or how to escape the institutionalisation of research?

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Prelude

Becoming a university teacher, after six years of teaching mathematics at a public school, made me a double professional specimen: half teacher, half researcher, a condition that would eventually go well with my horoscope of Gemini. But reality seems to stubbornly deny that.

Some would say it made me part of a community of researchers, advisors and experts on mathematics education and excluded me from the bundle of mathematics teachers.

A dear friend of mine – a recognised activist in the Portuguese mathematics education scenario – told me he was truly sorry to know that I would go on lecturing at university amphitheatres, doing a PhD research, and forget all about the real world of mathematics classes. Even if I did not forget that earthly reality – he added – there was not much I could do from where I would be standing: the pantheon of research, of sterile theories, useless reports, detached analyses of real problems.

My purpose in reacting to the talk of Orlando Borda is to examine the extent to which the kind of feelings and conceptions described above may highlight some possible unsolved problems in the nature of action-research, and more specifically of participatory action-research.

I will locate my analysis on what I believe to be some problematic traces of the Portuguese situation.

The meaning of research in the binomial action-research

This state of things propels a certain view of research – a domain reserved to the experts who devote their time to the study of abstract and theoretical ideas usually having little relevance to the solution of practical problems.

One of the interesting aspects of Borda's discussion is the way in which the tensions and paradigm shifts in the social sciences were put in a historical and cultural context where the positivist and Cartesian tradition was placed on the other side of the trench.

Action-research is still painted with the colours of a utopian project, a risky mixture of power and knowledge, a rebellion, an insurrection against methods that fail in the transformation of oppressive conditions and in the induction of emancipatory experiences.

The primacy of practice is elected as a distinctive character of action-research, working as a dynamo in social transformation, through the experience and vivencia of participants in research.

But it is in the framework described above that it seems urgent to ask what counts as research. And this in turn leads to the question of knowing what is the meaning of research in the binomial action-research.

Taking, in particular, the research on mathematics education, we are still asking what counts as investigation. Our endowment to systematic enquiry, our recurrent efforts in setting quality standards and criteria, forms of validation, of certification, and of recognition, subtly reinforce our positivist heritage and contradict the pursuit of a critical, ethical and political reflection. Any ideological commitments are still seen as undesirable biases by the academia. The research is still prompted to be solid, independent and to be able to offer evidence of the results obtained, even when those are filtered by the researcher's experiences or the experiences of those whose voices are considered and reflected.

It is not unusual to find in the rhetoric of mathematics education research the claim that the voices of the practitioners, the knowledge of the protagonists, the perspectives of the teachers that are working in the field should be taken into account. But giving the "participants" the active role often turns out to be freezing them in a system where practice mirrors certain theoretical perspectives. An example of such learning and teaching practices would be those where students are supposed to be the agents of their own learning, and the teacher the one who leads them in the "emancipatory experience" of discovering and constructing the knowledge that school requires and expects them to learn.

I realise the need to embrace other paradigms that refute the universality of certain historical, economic and cultural traditions. But in doing that we need not only to include students and teachers' experiences, thinking, feelings and practical knowledge but also to review our own thinking of what counts as research.

I would risk saying that a significant part of the research that is proclaiming to be learning from the field of practice is more or less tautological in the sense that teachers and students have become the vehicles through which established theories are transmuted in research findings.

In a simpler way, I would question the benevolence of bridging distances, tying up different kinds of knowledge, translating into differentiated languages when research itself is not seemingly abdicating the essential of its format, discourse, jargon, social norms of certification, requisites of dissemination, claims of consistency, and academic resonance. Surely, universities and researchers can become more participative, but can this be more than a one-way route to the outside world? Are we capable of envisaging forms of changing from within?

Integrating and bridging communities

In my country, there are some committed groups of people giving significant contributions to mathematics education at various levels. Still I am not sure about the possibility of defining the actual configuration of the so-called

mathematics education community and likewise about its political, social and educational role. I can find, despite of all, a discourse that is being produced as the voice of the mathematics education community. There are galvanising meetings; there are projects, published documents, written reports, recommendations, materials, articles, and in-service training programs, among other things. But who is this community?

Possibly the best way to describe it is as a discourse of legitimisation. The community of mathematics education is still shaped by the need to affirm itself before others. Some of the others are the official education administrators, the mathematicians, the journalists, the "outside" mathematics teachers and the public in general.

But we could also consider the mathematics education research community. Either at the expenses of universities or through state agencies, we have groups of researchers conducting investigation on mathematics education. Academic degrees are being overtly encouraged and the official discourse is to integrate teachers in the research process as partners, participants, and co-learners. From my point of view, the shape of this community is even more blurred than the previous one. For instance, being a member of a research project team is not always a sufficient condition to become a member of a research centre. Doing a PhD would be such a condition, though.

Another important aspect is the fact that the two communities are not identical no matter their large intersection. Noteworthy is the fact that their discourses and agendas are apparently very similar: to change the culture of school, to change curricular emphasis, to change classroom practices, to change teaching methods, to acknowledge and value cultural diversities, to promote opportunities for all, to change the assessment modalities, etc.

Within this scenario, power relationships are crucial to the question of how the research/researched relationship may be conceptualised. Thus, for example, speaking of teachers' authentic participation tends to become a cliché, and is often a synonymous of being a member of the mathematics education community whose theories are institutionalised by the research corpus. But what are teachers researching other than what the alluded community of mathematics education is expecting, supporting and legitimating?

To what extent are we merely conserving the status quo, by stating in our methodological accounts the symmetrical positioning of the researcher vis-à-vis the other participants, the concern with outside references and the engagement in practices? Who is formulating the problems that are supposed to be relevant? Who is producing and who is collecting? Who is reporting back? Who owns the credits? Who is establishing the rules of the game?

Colonialism can be both a wider and timeless concept than it tends to appear. Are we not colonising under the liberal narratives of integrating, democratising, learning from others' vivencias, collaborating, preserving identities and indigenous readings of the world?

How to escape institutionalisation?

My final words are of some scepticism towards the actual shifts of paradigms in the social sciences and particularly in mathematics education research. Are there reasons to believe and fear that action-research is allowing itself to become institutionalised and therefore absorbed by the dominant paradigm?