

Zeitschrift: L'Enseignement Mathématique
Herausgeber: Commission Internationale de l'Enseignement Mathématique
Band: 39 (1993)
Heft: 1-2: L'ENSEIGNEMENT MATHÉMATIQUE

Kapitel: 2. What are the aims of research in mathematics education?

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

educators viewed as a part of the mathematics community? Similar questions arise when research in mathematics education is surveyed from other domains, including history, philosophy, anthropology, and psychology.

An approach from both within and outside the field of research in mathematics education raises the following questions, among others, to be discussed:

1. WHAT IS THE SPECIFIC OBJET OF STUDY IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION?

The object of study (*der Gegenstand*) in mathematics education might be, for example, the teaching of mathematics; the learning of mathematics; teaching/learning situations; didactical situations; the relations between teaching, learning, and mathematical knowledge; the reality of mathematics classes; societal views of mathematics and its teaching; or the system of education itself.

If a mathematics educator studies mathematics, is it the same object for him or her as it is for a mathematician who studies mathematics? What is mathematics as a subject matter? What is “elementary mathematics”? Analogous questions could be asked concerning the learner of mathematics as an object of study. Is it the same object for a mathematics educator as it is for a psychologist or a pedagogue? Is the mathematics class or the process of learning in the school viewed in the same way by a mathematics educator and a sociologist, anthropologist, or ethnographer? Are questions of knowledge aquisition viewed the same way by a mathematics educator and an epistemologist?

The variety of activities offered at the ICMEs certainly distinguishes these congresses from, say, the international congresses of mathematicians. ICMI 7 was compared by some to a supermarket. Is there a unity in this variety? What gives unity to different kinds of study in mathematics education? Is this the object of research? Or is the object of research perhaps not even something held in common? Might the commonality lie in pragmatic aims of research in mathematics education?

2. WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF RESEARCH IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION?

One might think of two kinds of aims: pragmatic aims and more fundamental scientific aims. Among the more pragmatic aims would be the improvement of teaching practice, as well as of students’ understanding and performance. The chief scientific aim might be to develop mathematics education as a recognized academic field of research.

What might the structure of such a field be? Would it make sense to structure it along the lines of mathematical subject matter (e.g., the didactics of algebra or the didactics of geometry), of various theories or approaches to the teaching and learning of mathematics, or of specific topics or *problématiques* (research on classroom interaction and communication, research on students' understanding of a concept, etc.)?

Both kinds of aims seem to assume that it is possible to develop some kind of professional knowledge, whether that of a mathematics teacher, a mathematics educator, or a researcher in mathematics education. The question arises, however, whether such professional knowledge can exist at all. Is it possible to provide a teacher, say, with a body of knowledge that would, so to say inevitably, ensure the success of his or her teaching? In other words, is teaching an art or a profession (*un métier*)? Or is it perhaps a personal conquest? As Luigi Campedelli used to say, "*La didattica è, e rimane, una conquista personale*".

What does successful teaching depend on? Are there methods of teaching so sure, so objective, that they would work no matter who the teacher and students were? Are there methods of teaching that are teacher-proof and methods of learning that are student-proof? If not, is there anything like objective fundamental knowledge for a researcher in mathematics education—something that any researcher could build upon, something accepted and agreed upon by all? Or will the mathematics educational community inevitably be divided by what is considered as belonging to this fundamental knowledge, by philosophies and ideologies of learning, by what is considered worth studying?

Many mature domains of scientific knowledge have become highly specialized into narrow subdomains. Is this the fate of mathematics education as well? Or rather, in view of the interdisciplinary nature of mathematics education, must every researcher necessarily be a "humanist", knowing something of all domains and problems in mathematics education?

Although we aim at clarifying the notion of research in mathematics education as an academic activity, we should be careful not to fall into needlessly "academic" debates. After all, the ultimate goal of our research may be for a specific teacher in a specific classroom to be better equipped to guide his or her students as they seek to understand the world with the help of mathematics.