

Between astonishment and dust: archives in educational research*¹

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Abstract

This article proposes a reflection on the notion of archives in the work of Michel Foucault, highlighting two complementary movements in its conceptual formulation. On the one hand, archives appear as a monument, the result of an archaeological gesture that destabilizes the linearity of history and interrogates regimes of knowledge through the conditions of emergence of discourse. In this sense, discontinuity, rarity, and the materiality of what is said are foregrounded as elements that challenge totalizing narratives and promote attentive listening to the forces that traverse and sustain knowledge. On the other hand, the poetic dimension of archives is emphasized, understood as an investigative operation driven by astonishment, curiosity, and openness to chance, an effect of the dust of time and of what is found in the interstices of documents. This perspective suggests attentive listening to deviations, traces, and to what escapes, resists, and insists on remaining. Finally, the idea of “prying,” as evoked by Foucault, is outlined as a possible methodological gesture for research in education, especially in the face of the recurrence of ready-made questions and answers and the urgency of interrogating the ways in which knowledge is produced, legitimized, and circulated. This is perhaps less a conclusion than a wager still in the making: to be struck by the dust of archives and their traces of lives, marks of time, and spaces of suspension, as a way of opening breaches in the hurried logic of the present.

Keywords

Archive—Michel Foucault—Educational research—Poetics.

* English version by Carlos Eduardo Chiba. The author take full responsibility for the translation of the text, including title of books/articles and the quotations originally published in Portuguese.

1- Data availability: The entire dataset supporting the results of this study is published in the article itself.

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<https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634202652297711en>
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Introduction

This article seeks to reflect on educational research based on the notion of archive that permeates Michel Foucault's work, taking this operator as an analytical axis. It is an attempt to work, with archives, toward a form of writing in educational research that shifts away from prior certainties, thus operating with a kind of "one step back" (Aquino, 2021, p. 10).

It is certain that the educational field has been widely traversed by Foucauldian writings since their introduction in the 1990s by Alfredo Veiga-Neto and Tomaz Tadeu da Silva. The book organized by the former, titled *Crítica pós-estruturalista e educação* (Veiga-Neto, 1995), as well as *O sujeito da educação: estudos foucaultianos*, organized by the latter, constitute fundamental milestones for the dissemination of Foucauldian thought in the educational field, inaugurating what has become known as post-critical research in this field.

In different bibliographic review studies (Aquino, 2013, 2018; Gallo, 2025), it is possible to trace how Foucault's thought has circulated in Brazilian education. Gallo (2025) distinguishes three phases in the Foucauldian appropriation in this field: the first centers on disciplinary power, followed by the notion of governmentality, and, more recently, by care of the self and parrhesia. These concepts are present in Foucault's later courses and have appeared more forcefully in current educational research. Aquino identifies three types of appropriation of the French philosopher's thought in circulation: initiatives of an instrumental and apologetic nature; others that take it as a safe-conduct for a certain critical reading of education, reinforcing the author function so rejected by Foucault himself. Finally, those in which one glimpses, albeit sporadically, a "recalcitrant, untimely, and forever moving" Foucault (Aquino, 2013, p. 318). In turn, Gallo (2025) highlights two uses of Foucault in educational research: the methodological and the conceptual. The former is what the commentator defines as the product of a transversal thought concerned with showing its way of working and its methodological procedures (as in archaeology, genealogy, etc.). The latter, conceptual use, takes as operators concepts that could be displaced into educational questions.

We are not interested in delving into these or other categories, but rather in drawing attention to what Fischer proposes regarding our encounter with a thought capable of making us "scour a meeting point with ourselves in its theoretical formulations, with that which we choose as an object" (Fischer, 2005, p. 120). In other words, it is a matter of asking what, from Foucault, empowers educational research. By refusing a kind of Foucault-mania, certified fads, or even the conceptual transposition of problems that do not target the educational field in Foucauldian work, we aim to understand archives as an operator simultaneously conceptual and methodological. It must also meet "what we invest our lives, our work and our thought in" (Fischer, 2005, p. 120). It is from archives, their poetics, and a methodology of prying that these lines are woven in search of a Foucault who is still moving, untimely, in the form of gesture.

Thus, the notion of archive that crosses Michel Foucault's work has remained little explored in the educational field. It relies on scattered articles (Aquino; Val, 2018; Aquino,

2023; Aquino *et al.*, 2023; Borges; Neira, 2020; Munhoz; Ribeiro, 2023) that seek to operate from archives to reveal what composes us, instead of seeking answers in the heat time. The archival gesture thus appears as a wager on the decanting of investigative time. Through a refined work of editing and curatorship (Aquino, 2023), the investigative-problematizing gesture presents itself as “a mode of investigating in which the form of the problem is put into play throughout the entire thinking process” (Munhoz; Ribeiro, 2023, p. 3).

Foucault and archives

The mode of operating with archives find one of its most decisive formulations in the work of Michel Foucault, particularly in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), defined as “the law of what can be said” (Foucault, 2008, p. 148). In this work, clarifies that the term refers neither to the testimony of the past nor to its preservation mechanisms:

[...] rather—and on the contrary—what causes so many things said by so many men over millennia not to have arisen merely according to the laws of thought or circumstances, nor to be simple signals, at the level of verbal performances, of what unfolded in the order of the mind or of things. These things said appear thanks to a play of relations that characterizes the discursive level; instead of being adventitious figures, inserted at random into mute processes, they are born according to their own regularities (Foucault, 2008, p. 146).

Nevertheless, Foucault’s archival procedure—though not explicitly named—emerged in his earliest investigations. In July 1957, research conducted by him at the National Archives of France and the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, institutions provided the documentary basis for his first major work, *History of Madness*, published in 1961. Only the original French edition contains the full preface describing his method and first mentioning archives.

In that preface, Foucault emphasizes avoiding materials already systematized by other authors, using them only when access to primary sources was impossible. This reveals his concern with “letting these words speak for themselves, these texts that come from beneath language” (Foucault, 2014a, p. 160). In this regard, he states that the most significant element of his work lies in the space granted to archival texts themselves—posing a methodological stance privileging direct contact with recorded discourses and their conditions of emergence

After 1972, this preface was removed from the three re-editions of *History of Madness*, giving way to a recurring question in Foucault’s work: the problematization of the author-function. Foucault reiterated his desire that his book not be understood as bearing a truth or personalized authority, but as a set of statements. Rejecting “the monarchy of the writer who intends to offer his law to all those who, in the future, may be formed from him,” he stated: “I would like this object-event, almost imperceptible among so many others, to be recopied, fragmented, repeated, simulated, unfolded, and to disappear” (Foucault, 1978a, p. 6). These formulations aligns directly with the original

preface, showing that Foucault's interest in archives go beyond conferring on a book the status of a true statement. On the contrary, his archival approach refuses the centrality of the author and shifts the focus to the emergence of discourses, their conditions of possibility, and their effects of power and knowledge. This perspective was deepened in later works, yielding a view of archives that escape identity-based and epistemological fixation, opening it as a field of historical problematization.

Michel Foucault, in *The Archaeology of knowledge*, formulated the concept of archive as the set of rules that define the conditions of possibility of what can be said, thought, and constituted as knowledge at a given historical moment. Thus, it is possible to find, in scattered texts and interviews gathered in *Dits et écrits*, several passages in which he returns, in greater detail, to the importance of archives in his investigative practice. However, among the texts compiled there, none is explicitly devoted to the notion of archive—at least not in their titles.

Despite this, archive function as an operative concept for Foucault since the 1960s, traversing not only *Dits et écrits*, but also his way of researching and writing. This is especially evident in the courses delivered between 1970 and 1984 at the Collège de France, in which he often begun with explanations of the methodological procedures guiding his investigations. This kind of “account-giving” reveals intellectual rigor and a commitment to the intelligibility of his method. In one interview, for example, Foucault states that he would like to write books “quite clear about his own way of proceeding” (Foucault, 2010, p. 367).

This attention to method and to the status of the discourses worked upon leads the notion of archive to exceed a merely documentary function, operating as a central analytical matrix in the constitution of his objects of research. Gilles Deleuze (2005) stated that Foucault traced a precise archival trajectory: from the emergence of hospitals in the seventeenth century, through the clinic in the eighteenth century and the prison in the nineteenth, to the constitution of subjectivity in ancient Greece and early Christianity. According to Deleuze, this is not the only one dimension of his work. The interviews given over the years—always in dialogue with his books—function as diagnoses of the present, composing, together with the major texts, a kind of double movement between archive and present. It is worth noting that Foucault was not concerned with building a definitive philosophical system. Conversely, he often stated that his books should resemble fireworks rather than theoretical monuments (Foucault, 2003a, p. 266). Many times, he also referred to his work as a “toolbox, suggesting that readers should appropriate, displace, and reuse his writings according to their problems and contexts.

In this sense, the notion of archive, as mobilized by Foucault, cannot be understood as a fixed concept, nor as a unifying, structural, or universal principle, but rather as a theoretical operator in constant displacement. Here, it is also mobilized as a procedure or, if we prefer, as a working methodology in educational research. Rather than proposing a stable definition, what interests us is to follow the movement of Foucault's thought: to understand what archives produce, what effects it triggers on what is known, and, above all, how its logic can destabilize what has been naturalized as truth or established knowledge.

For Foucault, archives neither correspond to the totality of the discursive mass, nor to the mere testimony of discourses, much less to the institutions responsible for recording and preserving them. It is mistaken to understand archives as a normative instance or as the “law of what can be said” in a structuralist sense. Archives change according to historical conditions and corresponds to the “system of its functioning.” As the author states: “Far from being what unifies everything that has been said in the great confused murmur of a discourse and what assures us its existence, it is what differentiates discourses” (Foucault, 2008, p. 147).

It is from this understanding that we selected some passages from Foucault’s work—as well as interpretations by his commentators—in which the notion of archive is more explicitly mobilized or suggested in procedural terms. We organized these readings into two axes: the first is oriented toward archives as monument, associated with what commentators identify as the archaeological phase of Foucault’s thought. The second, freer and less schematic, concerns what we call the poetics of archives, present especially in texts and courses from the 1970s and 1980s. These approaches, while not mutually exclusive, allow us to observe the conceptual displacements in Foucault’s trajectory and to reflect on the fecundity of the notion of archives in educational research.

In both strands, we treat archives as a «demystifying balance» in educational research. Its effects, if taken as forms of questioning addressed to the present, could support research problematizations whose answers are not predetermined and that, rather than verifying what is already known, remain open to surprise from what has already been said.

Archives as monument

In the 1960s, the concept of archaeology gained prominence in Foucault’s work as a counterpoint to archivology. While the latter examines and groups personal or institutional documents for sociological, historical, or psychological interpretation (Castro, 2009), Foucaultian archaeology proposes a shift. Instead of granting documents intrinsic historical legitimacy, archives themselves is understood as a gesture of historical construction—a lens through which the past is recomposed and the present invented.

According to Foucault, archives, far from sacralization, is [...] the set of discourses actually pronounced: it is considered not only as a set of events that occurred once and remain suspended, in the limbo or purgatory of history, but also as a set that continues to function (Foucault, 2008, p. 145). Thus, archives would be the system that arranges what could be said, thought, and preserved in each period for a given society. According to Judith Revel, archives allow the reconstitution of «the set of rules that, at a given moment, simultaneously define the limits and forms of sayability, conversation, memory, reactivation, and appropriation» (Revel, 2005, pp. 18-19).

The principles listed by Revel would govern work with archives as monument. In Foucault’s terms, this refers to “[...] the mass of things said in a culture, preserved, valued, reused, repeated, and transformed, [...] whose primary task is not to interpret it, not to determine whether it tells the truth nor what its expressive value is, but to work it from

within and elaborate it [...]” (Foucault, 2008, p. 7–8). Here lies archaeology’s importance for Foucault: investigating the conditions making knowledge necessary, moving beyond purely linguistic analysis. Veyne describes this as a «demystifying balance» due to its essentially descriptive rather than interpretive procedure (Dreyfus; Rabinow, 1995).

The Foucaultian archaeological phase is marked by the effort to forge a discourse analytics escaping formalist, interpretive, or psychoanalytic readings prevalent in structuralism. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is the privileged locus for these writings, where the notion of archaeology—expanded since *The Order of Things* (2007)—is resumed systematized. Initially criticized for lacking methodological boundaries and allegedly attempting a “cultural totality” analysis (Foucault, 2008, p. 19), Foucault used the book to describe rigorously his methods. Seeking to distance himself from structuralist readings, Foucault devoted himself, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, to a rigorous description of his methodological problems, elaborating notions that operate both on the procedural level—such as discursive formations, positivity, and archive --and on the analytical level, such as statement, enunciative field, and discursive practices. In this context, archaeology assumes a central role in understanding archives. Although archaeology had already appeared as a subtitle in *The Order of Things* (2007), it was there misread as an attempt at a totalizing analytic; it is in his next book that Foucault offered a decisive systematization: “archaeology describes discourses as specific practices in the element of archives” (2008, p. 149).

In other words, archaeology is the description of archives (Foucault, 2005a, p. 45), not the «discovery of a beginning» (p. 52). It is, above all, a shift in the relation to the document. It triggers a shift in the relationship with the document. If traditional history interpreted documents to determine their truth or expressive value, Foucaultian archaeology seeks to “work it from within” (Castro, 2009, p. 40) by organizing, dividing, distributing, and describing relations. It departs from “traditional history”, which “memorizes” silent, inert monuments of the past by turning them into documents through historical discourse. Conversely, Foucaultian archaeology transforms documents into monuments, revealing what they say rather than what is deciphered from them. It repositions documents as statements to be described, not traces to be unveiled. This is surface-level work, not interpretive excavation. Thus, the archival gesture—the researcher’s choices, serializations, and orderings—takes precedence. Instead of seeking totality, this gesture highlights discontinuities and ruptures that configure regimes of knowledge.

Thus, archaeology, understood as the monumentalization of archives, fulfill a decisive function in Foucault’s thought—at least in the 1960s—as a gesture of escape from the position of “historian of ideas,” into which many tried to place him. Foucault was not concerned with the major themes of the history of ideas, nor did he see archaeology as interpretive. He did not view documents as signs to be deciphered in terms of signifier and signified.

This non-linear operation treat archives through heterogeneous, asymmetrical descriptions in constant contact with the present. It is not about grouping preserved documents as «bastions of history for future generations» (Sabino, 2024, p. 5). In systematic terms, for Foucault, the problem could be summarized as follows: “How is it that, at a given moment, this can be said, when it had never before been said?” Understanding the rules of archives imply problematizing: “What are the different types of discursive practice

in a given period? What relations can be established between them? What transformations are they susceptible to?” (Foucault, 2014b, p. 52).

In other words, archives concept is deeply linked to historical investigation. While discourse, episteme, and statement reveal what functions in an era, archives—the set of these formations—allows us to glimpse them in their discontinuity. As Deleuze notes, they are “inseparable from a law and an effect of rarity” (Deleuze, 2005, p. 14). Hence the monument’s relevance: archives as monument invite us to view historical formations in their rawness. Eliasson observes that while a monument commemorates what passed, it also “conceals and participates in the forgetting of what escapes the monument’s power of symbolization, or what is, voluntarily or involuntarily, ignored” (Eliasson, 2010, p. 9).

It is at this point that what we call the poetics of archives emerge. As a monument of the past, archives allow us to see, in the present, that from which we differ, offering clues about what we are today. As Deleuze states: “History are archives, the configuration of what we are and cease to be, while the actual is the sketch of what we are becoming. History and archives are what still separate us from ourselves, and the actual is that ‘other’ with which we already coincide” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 6).

The poetics of archives

While the archaeological phase systematized Foucault’s investigative procedure, this formulation shifted in the following decade. Judith Revel (2005) notes that the archaeological use of archives (1966–1970) vanished after his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. Engaging more directly with history and collaborating with Arlette Farge, Foucault claimed a subjective dimension for his work: archival selection followed “his taste, pleasure, and emotion.” The author, who once claimed to write only fictions, turned toward a “poetics of archives,” valuing traces of existence over mere discursive production.

For the historian Marlon Solomon (2019), the 1970s mark, if not a new concept of archive, a new address to it. From then on, Foucault wrote three works entirely devoted to archives: the first deals with the memoir of Pierre Rivière (1973), a parricidal peasant who slaughtered his family. In 1978, Foucault edited the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, known as Alexina B., with a small dossier on hermaphrodites in the nineteenth century, containing only two pages written by himself, in which he describes the state of the documentation on Barbin. Finally, in 1982, he published *Disorderly families: infamous letters from the bastille archives* with Arlette Farge.

This book was part of an ambitious project to publish an anthology of existences (Foucault, 1977, p. 12): the common human being, or “anyone,” as Deleuze (2005) would describe in his book on Foucault. There is no interpretation or internal analysis of the documents: it is not a history book. These are works that compile not moral lessons but brief effects of astonishment and surprise that Foucault experienced when confronting them. Unfortunate people, lives destined to pass beneath discourse and disappear. According to Solomon, what seems to turn these documents into archive is a kind of light cast upon them –hence the importance of not interpreting them. It is why the intent here was not interpreting the collection, but creating a genealogy of the mechanisms of

recording what the historian makes into a document. “What is at stake in Foucauldian archival studies is not a phenomenology of traces, but an analysis of what makes them possible, i.e., an analysis of the types of power strategies that make archives as knowledge possible” (Solomon, 2019, p. 240).

A new way of dealing with archives can be observed, one less concerned with strict systematization. Yet Foucault maintains archives as monument, making it function *ipso facto* not only in the three works mentioned but also in his analyses of disciplinary society, to cite a well-known example.

In any case, Foucault contrasts the idea of an exact archive with a “meticulous analysis of archives” (Foucault, 2012b, p. 242). The shift from a more systematic perspective gave way to a gesture consisting in the publication of original writings, opposing an excess of power attributed to the author-function—a remnant that may still have persisted in his selection of discourses in the 1960s. Here, the aim is to let archives speak for themselves. As Artières (2015, p. 5) notes, “it is essential to show a historically inscribed *dispositif* and the effects it produces on the subjects who use it. In other words, archives are not the illustration of his thesis on power, but the place where power relations are anchored.”

In this sense, the collaboration with Arlette Farge was crucial to this new poetic dimension of archives in Foucault’s work. By allowing the material to speak for itself, Foucault positions the archives as spokespeople for singular lives, obscure existences, “not endowed with any of those established and recognized forms of greatness” (Foucault, 1977, p. 206). Thus, we can see the intersection of power and discursive practices acting upon existences and shaping life paths.

For Knut Ove Eliassen (2010), the notion of archive, like many of the concepts coined and used by Foucault, should not be understood as a conceptual monolith, but as a tool through which the French thinker interrogates the present in light of the past. The idea of episteme, later replaced by the notion of *dispositif* and, finally, by practice, shows that concepts undergo mutations throughout his work and, in the latter case, the term disappears in his final writings.

In this direction, three distinct conceptions of archive can be identified across Foucault’s work. The first is linked to a system of rules specific to a given time, as described in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The second is linked to a strategy of real, historical archival institutions to record and store documents, such as data on populations and nations. Thus, “archives are both a collection of documents and an instrument of power, discipline, and knowledge” (Eliassen, 2010, p. 4, our translation). This conception appears in numerous books and courses; for example, *History of Madness* relies on official documents for its analysis. Finally, there is the idea of archives as a geographical space, in which Foucault spent his days almost as in a refuge. Eliassen stated that archives function here as a space of experimentation, a heterotopia able of suspending established schemes that order space-time.

According to the commentator, archives function as an arena of research and experimentation for Foucault, configuring itself as a form of heterotopia. It is a “poetics of archives” emerging from the desire that archives speak for themselves, opening space

for singular encounters, such as those of infamous lives—Herculine Barbin, Pierre Rivière, among others—which gain voice and place through this approach.

As a real physical space, archives represent the rediscovery of the nineteenth-century invention of document preservation in its raw state, allowing for a poetic gesture before it (Foucault, 2013a, p. 187). Just as Foucault refers to Manet and Flaubert as two artists whose “[...] art rises where archives are formed” (Foucault, 2013b, p. 82)—i.e., both archivists—this proximity between artists and archive is not accidental. For the author of *The order of things*, “Flaubert is to the library what Manet is to the museum. They write and paint in a fundamental relation with what has been painted, with what has been written, or rather, with what in painting and writing remains perpetually open” (Foucault, 2013b, p. 422), just as Foucault himself proceeded before archives. Hence, for Deleuze, Foucault received the epithet of “new archivist,” one who reshaped the relation to archive, writing, and history.

Returning to the conception of archives as heterotopia, as defended by Eliassen, we note that, especially in the text devoted to this concept, the French philosopher indeed seemed to approximate heterotopia and archive:

[...] heterotopias of time that accumulates infinitely—for instance, museums and libraries. Museums and libraries are heterotopias in which time never ceases to accumulate and to perch atop its own summit, whereas in the 17th century, and even until the end of the eighteenth century, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything, the idea of constituting a sort of general archive, the desire to enclose all times, all epochs, all forms, and all tastes in one place, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages. Thus, the project of organizing a kind of perpetual and infinite accumulation of time in a place that would not move—well, all of this belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias characteristic of 19th-century Western culture (Foucault, 1984, p. 422).

Clearly, the general notion of archive does not refer to the handling of archival material addressed here, but points to a material notion of archive. Currently, although we are increasingly connected to archives in their digital form, accessible with a click, the same cannot be said of the physical space dedicated to it, marked by a will to preserve everything over time, often without a single place for such storage. Foucault called this physical space a heterotopia.

As a space responsible for preserving documents, archives result from an imposed contingency. On the one hand, it houses what can be preserved according to the rules of its time; on the other, its organization is not interpretive, i.e., it does not depend on full reading, but above all on classification.

Here too a poetic dimension of archives appear, to which Foucault alludes in *The order of things*, through a certain Chinese encyclopedia drawn from a Borges story. Classification is a random and impossible gesture, marked by the arbitrariness of thought. Not by chance, in *The disorder of families*, Foucault and Arlette Farge emphasize the descriptive—not interpretive—character of work with *lettres de cachet*, which were petitions

to the king to intervene in private matters such as family conflicts, betrayals, evictions, disobedient children, among others.

The poetics of archives are evident in the three works mentioned: it was a matter of letting dead people speak, since “they constitute their own archives” (2013d, p. 347). Archives are this generous way of treating poetic lives, reinscribing them in the present through what we once were and no longer are, so that we may become different from that. “It is a crafted interlocution with the voices of the dead, aiming to establish a historical-philosophical practice of another kind. What emerges is not a gesture meant to elucidate present truths by unveiling past facts” (Aquino *et al.*, 2023, p. 17).

Prying as an archival methodology

The previous sections sought to show how the concept of archives operate as monument by reinscribing voices from the past and enabling the recreation, editing, and glimpsing of life’s beauty. We now turn to its reverberations in educational research, contending that transposing Foucault’s archival notions and methods into research procedures constitutes a viable scholarly path.

This procedure, in turn, emerges from the forging of an archive, through which the lenses and hands of the researcher are inscribed in processes of editing and curation, ultimately composing a poetics of archives. Methodologically, this procedure may take the form of what we call prying, a notion addressed in this section.

According to the bibliographic reviews conducted by Aquino (2013, 2018), Foucauldian research in education often operates as an instrumental phagocytosis of the author, literally transposing concepts never intended for the educational field. It also reinforces the author-function from which Foucault sought to free himself. For Gatti (2006, p. 33), a key figure in educational research, “from the standpoint of theorization, the researcher’s dialogue with authors must be guided more by doubt and discussion, by a critical and expanding stance, and not merely by reproduction and acceptance.”

Such an undertaking would perhaps serve as an antidote to a longstanding problem in educational research: theoretical poverty and methodological inconsistency (Mello, 1983). Or to what Gatti calls a kind of reign of opinion, for which it would be “necessary to move beyond the level of superficial information or common sense, to move beyond ‘opinion-worship’” (Gatti, 2006, p. 25). Perhaps due to its transversality and interdisciplinarity, it is not uncommon to borrow models from fields such as psychology, sociology, and economics without attending to the specificities of education.

To capture Foucault in his gestures and procedures, in order to forget him as author, would run counter to such tendencies and recalls an interview given on the occasion of the publication of *Discipline and Punish* in 1975, when he was asked about a supposed “Foucault method.” Given that both this book and his earlier research were grounded in meticulous analysis of thousands of pages of archives, Foucault opposed the idea of founding a school or method of his own, as he reiterated in various texts and interviews. He replied, as usual, that what he did was to share “lines of research, ideas, schemas, dotted outlines, instruments,” leaving readers free to do as they wished with them (Foucault, 2006, p. 4).

In responding, Foucault also criticized the prestige of Freudian-type approaches at the time, according to which the analysis of historical texts should seek the “unsaid” of discourses, the “repressed,” the “unconscious” of systems. Against this interpretive and hermeneutic tendency, he proposed another gesture: “It is good to abandon this attitude and be at once more modest and more prying” (Foucault, 1975, p. 36). This remark again shows his refusal to attribute hidden meanings to documents and discourses, preferring instead to describe their conditions of possibility, their functioning, and their effects—an investigative stance more attentive to games of visibility and enunciation than to the search for hidden essences.

The prying in dealing with archives to which Foucault refers concerns a willingness to let the dead speak – as everything is there, in the archives. As he noted, “when we look at documents, we are struck by the cynicism with which the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie said exactly what it did, what it would do, and why. [...] To recover this explicit discourse implies, evidently, leaving the academic and school material of ‘great texts’” (Foucault, 1975, p. 36). It is thus a gesture of displacement: to abandon canons and consecrated discourses in order to excavate margins, traces, neglected voices—not interpreting them through a system, but hearing their modes of functioning.

If we pry into archives with Foucault’s curiosity, we may allow ourselves to be struck by the encounter rather than erect monuments around great texts. The invitation is to let what has been hidden, excluded, or banished emerge—to recognize in archives their astonishment, beauty, and poetics. In this sense, if there is a Foucauldian method of reading archives, it lies not in formalization or exegesis (Foucault, 1968, DE 6, p. 9), but in a single gesture: the monumentalization of archives and the creation of its poetics as forms of problematization. What is at stake is not the constitution of an encyclopedic volume of all that could be said and preserved, but the understanding of the rules that, in a given time and society, define what may be said, what must be forgotten, what remains, and what disappears.

This gesture finds perhaps its clearest formulation in one of the texts in which Foucault most sharply outlines his archival practice, and which may be worth recalling here:

[...] the limits and forms of sayability: what is it possible to speak of? What has been constituted as a domain of discourse? What type of discursivity has been assigned to such or such a domain (What has been narrated? What have we sought to make into a descriptive science? What we have reconciled with literary formulation, etc?..) (Foucault, 2016, p. 9–11).

In other words, the task is to ask how it becomes possible to say what we say, and what, conversely, remains banished from discourse. It also entails asking how such discourses are preserved, which acquire prestige and legitimacy, which pass without leaving traces, what is retained in memory, and what is erased from it. In this sense, Foucault offers a set of crucial questions for thinking about archives, especially for those who, in selecting a research object, seek not to treat forms of knowledge as natural or universal, but to problematize them.

Final remarks

This text mobilized Foucault's archival conceptions to test an operation treating archives as both monument and poetics, managed through a prying methodology. Rather than instituting a finished model, we experimented with a way of operating based on what we have been doing. This approach may help curb the immediate demands of the present, in which the opacity of our own time often obscures thought due to the lack of full critical distance.

Ultimately, we must reconsider how we handle the discursive mass surrounding our research: what we value, despise, or deem worthy. At stake is the reactivation of discourses, how we address them, their transformations through reading, and the regimes of truth sustaining them. Foucault (2016, p. 11) invites us to problematize our choices when he asks: «[...] commentary, exegesis, analysis, what system of appreciation do we apply to them? What role do we give them to play?» Amidst the proliferating educational discourses—canonical texts, historical documents, artworks or commentaries—we must question how they are appropriated.

To investigate—across education and other fields—is primarily to inquire. Often, however, questions merely reaffirm prior knowledge rather than problematizing it. Foucault countered this by stating: “I do not question discourses about what they silently mean, but about the fact and conditions of their manifest appearance; not about the contents they may conceal, but about the transformations they have effected” (Foucault, 2016, p. 11). This requires treating discourse as monument rather than commentary, shifting focus from a hidden “true meaning” to the conditions of existence of discourses as practices. Ultimately, engaging with archives become a form of discursive repopulation that unearths alternative narratives and lives, revealing its inherent poetic sense.

These questions are vital for understanding archives as both monument and poetics, as they entail precise methodological premises for investigative work. In education, they offer a “rather precise ethical-political and epistemic horizon: to make things visible in their abundance instead of speaking summarily in their name; in the latter case, attenuating or extinguishing their eventual force” (Aquino, 2023, p. 9).

At the limit, work with archives are forged from a curiosity arising from some form of affectation. It is an operation of prying that begins with questions, not answers; that does not aim to totalize or to establish truths. It is sometimes melancholic and always incomplete, yet it carries the flavor and astonishment of an encounter—one that renders existence poetic and opens a breach, a suspension in what we take to be certain about ourselves, revealing that we may be otherwise. Is this not, after all, one of the aims of education?

Hence prying as an archival operation, since it implies estrangement from what is taken as common, given, or natural. Secondly, we might say, in dialogue with *The Lives of Infamous Men*, that perhaps the most decisive rule of an investigation is one grounded in some form of affectation. It is a reminder for those working with post-metaphysical thought in education. More than restoring essentialized truths, grounded in a universal and Eurocentric notion of subject and development—linked to the idea of education as

improvement—it matters to ask: What will to truth do we wish to sustain in our research? What kind of salvation do we propose? In the name of which present-day imperatives do we speak?

By contrast, perhaps the most simple and powerful gesture of archival research lies precisely in taste, pleasure, emotion, laughter, and surprise—or, as Foucault puts it, in “a certain astonishment or some other feeling” (Foucault, 2003b, p. 203), capable of giving meaning to writing. A writing that transforms what we know, freeing us from certain unnoticed truths. It is not, therefore, truth that gives meaning to education, but “the possibility that this act of education, this experience in gestures, allows us to free ourselves from certain truths, so that we cease to be what we are, to become something else beyond what we have been” (Larrosa; Kohan, 2021, p. 6).

From this perspective, archives, as a procedure in educational research, proves central, as it allows astonishment before what has already been thought, confronting us with our present. If what has been made of us can be revisited and reclaimed through archives, this matters insofar as it frees us to be different from ourselves and, perhaps, to think differently about our relation to education. In the dust of the archives, we find lives—our own—time, and suspension, so distant from an accelerated, immediate present. In this encounter between researcher and archive, what is at stake is the capacity to “[...] attend to the dust, the cloud, and the murmur that, between them, persists” (Aquino *et al.*, 2023, p. 19). It is a rare experience, increasingly precious, especially in times marked by speed and forgetting.

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Received on June 11, 2025

Revised on December 15, 2025

Approved on February 10, 2026

Editor: Professora Ana Luísa Paz

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