The double life of Véronique — Facing the normative complexity of the classroom

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Introduction

The debate around the question of how research can help practice has long been present in the educational literature. One of the various issues it has touched concerns the way in which the holistic complexity of any one educational situation can be properly taken into account when doing research or using its results. Proponents of action research and of case study research, for instance, have argued that this issue can only be addressed by means of attention to details, attempting to not narrow down the range of the aspects examined, and concentrating on the interactions between them (Hopkins, 1993; Stake, 1995; Radford, 2006; and Smeyers, 2008). That is, instead of focusing on just a few aspects in an educational situation (in order to look at those same few aspects in many other situations), it is proposed that research pay attention to the ways in which its many elements interact with each other to finally configure it in a particular way.

But what are the situational elements that we should holistically understand? It is generally accepted — in theory, although not necessarily in practice — that an understanding not only of what is, but also of what ought to be, is needed if policy or practice are to be more fully supported (Bridges and Watts, 2008). As we will argue, this normative dimension has nevertheless been largely ignored in educational research, and consequently it has not been taken as an object of study or development. At the most, in some approaches our knowledge or understanding about what ought to be done has been taken as given, as something that should be acknowledged because it affects the ways in which we interpret reality, as a kind of frame or lens, but not as something that can be developed or improved, by means of research.

Based on the idea that the complexity of educational situations does not only involve causal interactions, but also elements of a normative and conceptual nature, we will firstly argue that it is desirable for empirical research to be used as a means to the development of the researcher’s normative understanding of educational situations from a first-person positioning; i.e. normative knowledge that she commits to, rather than the one that she reports other people as holding. And from an antirepresentationalist position that takes seriously the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth (see Davidson, 1984; and Rorty, 1991; see also Mejía, 2008), we will then argue that it is also feasible. But doing this proposed kind of research implies straying from the path that has been established in the educational research tradition, as expressed in textbooks. This way, if a researcher were to strictly and dutifully follow the instructions in such textbooks, she would simply end up avoiding this normative dimension altogether, and therefore wasting the opportunity to take advantage of her direct contact with the educational situation.

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Our argument, then, suggests that the normative should be explored from a first-person positioning in empirical research, explicitly, systematically, and perhaps even naughtily with respect to educational research tradition. Nevertheless, in research practice, it may still be the case that dutiful researchers following textbooks may improve their normative understanding of educational situations in the course of empirical research, albeit in a not-fully developed way. But how can that happen, if received wisdom tells us that it can only explore what is and not what ought to be? A free interpretation of Krzysztof Kieslowski’s film La Double Vie de Véronique (The Double Life of Véronique, 1991) can help us advance a hypothesis. In this film, two physically identical women live far from each other, and have never met. But nevertheless one of them (Weronika) seems to send messages to the other (Véronique) —unwillingly and covertly, but meaningfully— that warn her of dangers that loom over her. And thanks to this enigmatic form of communication, the latter can cope with her complex life in a better way: anticipating, intuiting, and attending to matters that otherwise she would have missed.

In a likewise fashion, the normal researcher may still develop her normative understanding from a first-person positioning, but only as a result of her fragmentation into two versions of herself —a dutiful one, that does her homework properly, and a naughtier one, that ventures into the forbidden territories of the normative, but has to remain hidden from view if the researcher is not to be accused of lack of rigour, unreasonableness, or even insanity. But, of course, this naughty version of the researcher cannot go out in public just as easily, and she must act in cover, sending messages to her dutiful counterpart that she can only come to perceive as intuitions or hunches happening to her. But then, the more silent the naughty side is forced to remain, the more impaired the researcher will be for fully learning about the complexity of the educational situations, as well as for supporting other practitioners for coping with it. Consequently, we argue for a type of research that allows for a fuller development of the naughtier side, one that decidedly and openly tackles normative issues head on, from a first-person positioning, as a way to a more comprehensive support to practice. We will also provide an illustration of how that research can take place.

Kieslowski’s “La Double Vie de Véronique”

“All my life I’ve felt like I was here and somewhere else at the same time.”

Before his famous trilogy on the colours of the French flag, Bleu, Blanc, and Rouge, Krzysztof Kieslowski directed an enigmatic film called La Double Vie de Véronique (1991). The story actually has two threads, each one following the life of a different woman. They —Weronika and Véronique— are physically identical, besides sharing some other characteristics: they were both born on the same day, they both want to follow singing careers, they are both charmed by inverted images in all sorts of mirrors or lenses, they both suffer from a weak heart condition, both their mothers have died, they both have a special and close relation with their fathers, and they both feel that something is missing in their lives. Nevertheless, they apparently bear no relation to each other, and do not know of each other’s existence. Weronika is living in Krakow, and Véronique in Paris. It is only at one moment in a Krakow square during a student demonstration in which neither of them is involved, that Weronika notices the presence of Véronique. The latter happens to be there as a tourist, and is not aware of the other. We are not explicitly told of any consequences deriving from this brief encounter, and only much later does Véronique realise that someone who looks just like her —Weronika— appears in the photographs she took that day.
Weronika has a very good singing voice, and is spotted by a choir director when she happens to accompany her cousin to a rehearsal. After some hard work, she is chosen to be a soloist. But all the stress she has felt during this process, combined with her heart condition, will cause her to die during the climax of her premier performance. At exactly the same time, Véronique is suddenly caught by a feeling of deep grief, that she cannot explain or even put a name to. Following a hunch, she then decides to not follow a professional singing career which, we hear from her teacher, she has great talent for. Later in the film, a romantic relation develops with a puppeteer who comes to perform at the school in which she teaches music. The puppeteer — Alexandre— is almost as enigmatic a character as Véronique. He initially contacts her by means of letters containing mysterious clues including an audio tape with the music Weronika was singing when she died. Following the clues, Véronique finally comes to a train station where they meet after he has been waiting for her for a few days. Towards the end of the film, this puppeteer —Kieslowski himself? A master of fate who has unexpectedly become involved in his own plans? A messenger?— is writing a play for which he has just created two identical marionettes.

Véronique: Is that me?
Alexandre: Of course it’s you.
Véronique: Why... Why two?
Alexandre: I handle them a lot when I perform. They get damaged easily... You try it.
Alexandre (referring to the play script): Shall I read it to you? “November 23, 1966, was the most important day of their lives. That day, at 3:00 in the morning, they were both born, each in a different city, on a different continent. They both had dark hair and brownish-green eyes. At two years old, when both knew how to walk, one of them burned her hand on a stove. A few days later, the other one reached out to touch a stove but pulled back just in time. Yet she couldn’t have known she was about to burn herself.”

“They get damaged easily”. It is almost like one of them will allow the other to have a second chance; a chance to relive her previous experiences, so that next time she will take a different, and perhaps better, decision.

Two Verónicas

“But I know... I always sense what I should do.”

Let us imagine two Verónicas, both of them teachers, and both of them involved in action research on an idea they have recently got about implementing some form of critical pedagogy in their classrooms. They both devise a plan for transforming their normal teaching practices with students of ninth, tenth and eleventh grades, and do research on their attempt.3

Dutiful Verónica

One of them —whose name is Dutiful Verónica— has constructed the following question to guide her inquiry:

3 All the quotes in this section are taken from Verónica Molina’s teacher journal, written during 2008 when teaching a group of 14 students in a personalised school in Bogotá. All of them have been translated from Spanish, and some have been slightly edited.
How to promote in students the critical view of the reality of otherness around them, from questions about power as formulated by critical pedagogy?

This question assumes a normative frame within which the process will occur: at least, it is presupposed that a critical view of reality is desirable, and achieving it will be the goal of the educational activities.

Dutiful Verónica comes to her class and asks students to bring a song they really like. When they do, they start to work on some questions that she has formulated for them about their songs and their life experiences. In her journal, Dutiful Verónica writes the following:

During the first sessions they tried to answer the questions, but it wasn’t easy for them to identify the main themes, and they could only do it with my help. “It’s my favourite song, and I don’t wanna analyse it.” “I don’t know what they’re talking about... A guy who wanted to seduce a girl?” After some discussions, they begin to find themes related with various different power structures.

Another fragment from Dutiful Verónica’s journal reads as follows:

[Student 1] chooses “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” and suggests to look at the context the song came from. Afterwards I give him some questions and we start to read and analyse the song together, line by line. When we get to “that cold black cloud is comin’ down, feels like I’m knocking on heaven’s door” I ask him what “that cold black cloud” means. He starts talking about guilt and relates it to a previous line “Mamma take this badge from me, I can’t use it anymore”, and we talk about situations in which one can feel trapped doing something one doesn’t want but can’t stop doing.

Let us note that her journal entries deliberately avoid going beyond the purely descriptive: what she did, how her students answered, and so on. Of course there are intuitions and questions that would come to a teacher’s mind, concerning, for instance, the good and bad in the student’s desire to not analyse his favourite song. But this is not the moment for Dutiful Verónica to do it, as she is concerned about only recording “what she sees”, dutifully. Interpretations on what she sees are supposed to come later. Something she later analysed concerned her role as a facilitator, and how it was materialised in the asking of questions.

The next session [student 1] brings information about the song and the context, and we continue with the analysis. I ask him: “What do you think of the army in Colombia? What kind of families do soldiers who fight come from? What kinds of contradictions do you think they face when killing someone else who comes from a similar place in society?” We then decide to explore the topic of low rank officers as a subordinate group.

Verónica Dutiful’s analysis of her observations, of “what she has seen”, take her to formulate the importance of her intervention, of the questions she asks her students, for them to begin to establish connections with other domains of their lives and with their contexts.

**Naughty Verónica**

The second teacher researcher is called Naughty Verónica. She starts with a much more open research question:

How should I go about my students’ attitudes towards otherness?

In this case, the question directly engages the normative rather than simply presuppose it. It does not define a purpose from the start, and thus she opens the door for problematising it.
Naughty Verónica still guides her actions by what can be called “initial working principles”. This way, she wants her students to recognise power structures underlying various societal institutions, and asks her students to choose a topic of their interest so they can take it as a starting point. A line in her journal reads:

Not one of my students came up with a topic they would like to learn about. This was a first shock: What’s that supposed to mean? What’s that about working with my students’ own interests?

There is here a questioning of the very idea of starting with her students’ interests. It is conceptual, because pursuing these questions may involve issues about how to understand what it means for someone to have interests of her own. It is also normative, because the desirability of starting with her students’ interests, given all the particular conditions of that particular situation, is in question. Through this reflective process, which of course cannot be appreciated in only a few lines from her journal, Naughty Verónica may well develop a richer conceptual and normative understanding of what is going on in her classroom. Another excerpt from her journal can also illustrate this:

After some ideas, [student 1] told me that he’d run out of ideas, and I started to ask him: “Is that justice? What happens with all the innocent people who die for defending a nation? What are the limits between right and wrong when you’re a soldier?” He always gave me “good” answers. But were these really questions? Or were they answers formulated in question form?

In the case of [student 2], after analysing the song, we ended up talking about politics and about social representations in political discourses. I, in my “dialectic” attitude, asked him: “Who do you think Uribe [Colombia’s president] refers to when he says ‘dear compatriots’?” The answer is “Well... he’s not talking to the guerrilla fighters.” But who would have given me a different answer? I think of Elizabeth Ellsworth, and of those things you say because you have to. (...) I should ask questions that facilitate the students’ critical attitude; not mine.

Again, the report involves some assertions that may well be called “normative observations”. She is also questioning her previous ideas about what is desirable in the classroom. And all this comes in the midst of her practical experience. Her action research process is fed in with these normative observations and questions, and not only with those that are purely descriptive. That is, the decisions she takes in the process correspond to her progressively improved understanding of what ought to be in the classroom.

Some last fragments of her journal show this process in a clearer way. In this case, two of her students chose songs they felt were very close to their feelings and the particular realities. Naughty Verónica thinks that they fail to adopt a critical attitude. She writes:

With these two students I realise that, probably, their arguments are not the strongest ones in any academic sense; but their feelings are practically enough to back their positions. I wonder what should do with this, if I should go on with this work, or call it off. I realised that what I wanted was to bring them to my truth about the conflict, and to the conclusion that the proposal for unity was wiping out difference. And I felt frustrated. (...) I realised that on the one hand [student 3’s] feelings responded to a need to believe in a song that gave her hope. And on the other hand she wanted to believe in people’s wishes of peace and unity. I didn’t have to go on insisting.
Here is perhaps the most dramatic example of how Naughty Verónica comes to question what in traditional research would have been seen as her framework; as that relatively arbitrary choice of perspective that the whole research process gets its meaning and significance from. With these observations, she puts in question both the notion and the desirability of critical thinking. In the end, she concludes that critical thinking should not always be taken to its ultimate consequences. Her journal’s final words are worth quoting:

This was a very important experience for me. In my initial plans, I mentioned love, life, and politics, but I didn’t expect to find a student, and certainly not male, who would be enthused by the idea of exploring love. In general, I questioned many of my assumptions and realised that in my discussions of gender, for example, I was failing to see that it is also a form of discrimination to assume that men wouldn’t want to explore “girl’s stuff”.

Roles of the normative in the educational research literature

“— What else do you want to know about me?
— Everything.”

It can be seen that the two Verónicas assume their role as researchers very differently. The aspect that we are concerned with here, regards the way in which each one of them deals with the normative aspects of the situations they inquie about. Dutiful Verónica does her homework: she firstly writes a research proposal in which she justifies why the issues she wants to inquire about in her classroom are relevant. Particularly, in our example, she argues for the importance of promoting in her students some critical view of the reality around them. Then comes the fieldwork, in which she diligently takes notes of all the events that occur that may be of any relevance to her research questions. And in writing her research report, after presenting and analysing her relevant data, she discusses in the final section the significance of her findings. In doing this, she even reflects on the possible ways in which her own beliefs and worldview may have influenced her interpretations and appreciation of the results. Her normative judgements have only come out in her justification of the research proposal, and, at the end of the report, in the discussion of the significance of her findings. But they are notably absent from her field notes as well as from her presentation and discussion of the data in her report. On the contrary, the normative has had a constant and explicit presence in Naughty Verónica’s research, as she continuously inquires into meaning and value in her classroom situations. From the start, her research questions did not simply assume some normative position; but directly engaged it as problematic, as something to be developed. Instead of taking it for granted, she sees it as her job as a researcher to improve her understanding of what she ought to do and why. Similarly, her observation notes are filled with phrases that do not only presuppose, but that directly make assertions —or judgments— concerning meaning and value.

Some might want to argue that hermeneutic or interpretive approaches to research have for a long time already dealt with the normative dimension in educational situations, and that the

4 It is important to clarify that we are taking the idea of the normative to refer to what ought to be, and as such as involving at least the ethical, the just, and the aesthetical. The word, however, carries with it some connotation of reference to norms, or principles concerning how to act, which can also be used as criteria for judging the worth of any action. This is not the sense intended. We instead follow Carr (1987) and his idea of educational practice as a form of praxis, guided by contextual judgement which cannot be taken to consist in reference to norms.
critique to positivism has already reinstated it and given it a proper place in research. Indeed, for many academics and educators nowadays the normative certainly occupies a different and more important place in research than it used to. Nevertheless, we think that the normative has not been yet given a proper role in these research approaches, as these still retain traces of positivism and of a correspondence theory of truth. And thus the normative dimension is still denied a proper development that can fully take advantage of the privileged position of the researcher who is in direct contact with educational situations.

We identify four main different roles that the normative is ascribed in current literature on educational research: as frame, as foundations for interpretation, as object of study, and as object of construction. The first one refers to the commonly accepted idea that there cannot be such a thing as value-free educational research, or, more broadly, value-free knowledge; that is, that there unavoidably is a normative dimension in any form of knowledge and/or knowledge construction process. This way, whatever research questions one tries to answer, and whatever variables or aspects of a situation one chooses to study, make sense, and are in some way justified as relevant or simply interesting, within some framework or conceptual scheme (for instance, see Hirst, 1983). And, necessarily, any justification of relevance or interest will be fundamentally normative. The usual course of action for dealing with the framing role of the normative in a research project is to declare it explicitly, so that it becomes visible for other researchers or practitioners who might use its results.

A second role for the normative comes about in interpretation, and can be in a sense regarded as an extension of the first one. One important step in research is referred to as “data collection”, which is later followed by the analysis and interpretation of those data. Now, it is presently widely accepted, especially but not exclusively in qualitative research, that this interpretation cannot be neutral in respect of the researcher’s beliefs and worldview. And these would inevitably include normative commitments. Again, the proposed way of dealing with this issue here becomes that of making those commitments explicit so that everyone else can more critically appraise their significance, with their assumptions and limitations. Interestingly, whereas some may see this as an unfortunate but inevitable issue that appears in research, others actually see a great potential that so far has been largely overlooked and unexploited. For instance, Simmons advocates “the need to think holistically, to perceive directly, to engage our passions and emotions as well as our intellect in coming to understand” (1996, p.235).

A third role for the normative is as an object of inquiry. That is, research is conducted which attempts to understand the normative in some situation. The basic underlying idea is that the social world is constructed by means of actions and behaviours that are constituted as such by the meanings that people attribute to them; that is, of their ways of sense-making. Some forms of research are thus defined to inquire into such meanings in particular situations, and “ethnography” has become the name most commonly associated with them. Ways of making sense of life involve beliefs about how things are, but also about how things ought to be; and thus, the normative here becomes an object of study. Now, functionally, this kind of research is still descriptive and explanatory. It describes a state of affairs by pointing at the phenomena that constitute it, which in ethnography includes meanings or ways of making sense. It can also be said to explain, in the sense that reasons and meanings are causes for human behaviour and action, which to a moderate extent help us both understand what has happened, retrospectively, and anticipate what might occur in the future, prospectively (see Davidson, 1980). Insofar as it only attempts to describe and explain, it can be understood as a third-person positioning of the researcher when inquiring into the normative. She does not attempt to develop or justify her
particular normative position, but instead she looks from above and points at the normative positions that others hold, and perhaps she too.

As such, it can be contrasted with what we call a first-person positioning, in which the researcher directly attempts to propose, advance, develop, put to the test, or improve, her normative beliefs and her own ways of making sense. This configures a fourth possible role for the normative in educational research: again as an object of study, but this time from a first-person positioning of the researcher. It is in some versions of action-research that this role has been relatively clearly proposed, particularly in Carr’s idea of educational practice as a form of praxis (1987) and in Elliott’s characterisation of the teacher researcher as a practical philosopher and of action research as a moral science (1987 and 2000; see also Bridges, 2003). Although the task of developing a normative understanding has been traditionally ascribed to philosophy, and therefore has been taken away from the arena in which practice occurs, Carr’s and Elliott’s proposal take as a starting point “the centrality of pragmatic tests of experience in justifying practical principles” (Elliott, 1987, p.152); that is, the idea that practical experience, immersed in the complexity of everyday situations in the classroom, is irreplaceable in its contribution to normative understanding.

Interestingly the search for understanding of the normative that characterises this fourth role, while so ignored and left out of the research tradition, is arguably involved in an essential way in the everyday concerns of reflective teachers. Cochran-Smith and Lytle, for instance, mention the kinds of questions that appeared in a teacher’s journal (1993, p.28):

How can I help children learn English? How can I make children feel comfortable in my class? How can I help this class become a community? What counts as play, what counts as work, and how do children figure out the differences in my classroom? What do I do about issues of race and gender in my classroom? As a teacher, what is my role in helping children to develop attitudes about diversity? What does it mean to learn to read in this class, and how do children learn to do it? What roles do they play in each other’s learning? When should I go with a child’s ideas, when should I intervene? How can I connect with children’s emotions?

Some of these questions are descriptive (“What roles do they play in each other’s learning?”), or explanatory (“How can I help children learn English?”). But some others are normative, either directly (“When should I go with a child’s ideas, when should I intervene?”) or indirectly (“What counts as play, what counts as work?”). And in other cases it is difficult to tell, as they may even involve all these aspects. Teacher experience cannot be understood correctly if it is not looked at holistically, exploring the interconnections between all these dimensions.

Naughty Verónica provides us with another illustration: she wants to know better what she ought to do in her classroom, as she faces various situations in the course of her attempt to promote critical thinking in her students. This concern includes questions regarding the what, why, and what for of critical thinking, in a holistic relation with other aspects or dimensions of her particular, complex, classroom situations.

Let us note that of the four roles that we have pointed out for the normative in educational research, the first two are deemed (we think, correctly) inevitable, and thus only a matter of acknowledgement and of dealing with the implications. They are, therefore, philosophical. The last two, on the contrary, are optional; that is, they correspond to choices made by the researcher in particular cases. In this sense, they are methodological.
The feasibility of empirical research on the normative from a first-person positioning

“So I wondered whether it was possible. Whether, psychologically, a woman... Anyway, whether it was possible.”

We now turn to a discussion concerning the feasibility of empirical research and empirical observations, when it deals with normative issues from a first-person positioning. This idea may look to many as perhaps the result of insanity; or, for some other more benevolent and charitable readers, at the most as some philosophical oddity, useless in the reality of worldly affairs. Of course, the burden of proof is on our shoulders. And, although elsewhere we have explained the feasibility of this idea (Mejía, 2008), in the following section we will try to show in more detail how such observations can be understood and why they should not be considered an absurdity.

As mentioned before, traditionally the kind of inquiry on the normative from a first person positioning, has been left out of the confines of educational research. Munn, for instance, has said that researchers should not be ‘arguing for the desirable’ (Munn, 2005, p. 24, quoted in Bridges and Watts, 2008, p.56). But even authors who are strongly concerned with the normative and who do not conform to a merely instrumental view of educational inquiry, seem to accept that this dimension belongs in a different space of inquiry which is not empirical. For instance, in a recent paper, Bridges and Watts have strongly argued that the normative dimension is essential for supporting decision making and policy in education, while at the same time say that inquiry into principles that are morally or educationally defensible should not, or cannot, appeal to empirical evidence (2008, pp.54-58). Furthermore, they have referred to a “normative gap between what empirical research can provide and what is needed if one is required to decide what one ought to do” (Bridges and Watts, 2008, p.54). Hammersley’s words (2003) can be taken in a similar manner:

What is necessary is not that educational researchers explicitly draw value conclusions, but instead that they make clear the limited nature of their conclusions: that their work is concerned solely with describing and explaining, or with conceptual clarification, not with evaluating and prescribing. (p.6)

In my view, it is very important for researchers to avoid giving the impression that research can answer value questions. Problems about what is wrong and what is to be done cannot be resolved entirely on the basis of empirical research or conceptual analysis; and researchers do not have any distinctive authority to select value assumptions from which such conclusions could be derived. (p.17)

This matter has various dimensions, among which are at least one political and one epistemological. The former concerns issues such as the possibility that, in the name of some presumed authority, researchers impose their own normative positions and values. We will present our views on these political implications at the end of our paper. For the moment, however, we want to address the epistemological dimension. The discussion here involves topics such as those implicated in Hume’s traditional analysis of the is-ought problem (sometimes associated to the naturalistic fallacy): plainly, that no conclusions about what ought to be can be purely derived from premises about what is. As empirical research is assumed to only provide us with is ideas, then ought ones cannot be arrived at only from it. The premise in this argument is what we reject.
A further consequence of this conception can be seen in the types of research questions that are usually accepted as valid. Suter has put it explicitly, giving advice to students of educational research:

Is the hypothesis or question researchable? This question may seem obvious, but it is not. There are many truly important and fascinating questions that can be asked about education, but in fact some of them are simply not researchable because it is not possible to collect data to answer them. For example, the question, “Should moral or character education be taught in school along with reading, writing or arithmetic?” is a very reasonable and important question. But what type of data will actually answer it? Questions that are concerned with “should,” or “ought,” or something similar are outside the realm of scientific research; they are more closely aligned with philosophy, ethics, morality, or some other intellectual discipline, maybe even theology. (2006, p.76)

This position is the norm in all the textbooks on this subject that we have consulted, with the exception of a few —clearly not all— that are concerned with action research (see for example Hopkins, 1993). And even when it is not made explicit, the examples of research questions found in them avoid *ought* questions. And even when the normative dimension is somehow acknowledged, it is only so in a relative way. For example, Mertens has distinguished four types of research questions, namely descriptive, normative, correlative, and of impact (2005, pp.107-108). According to her, “normative research questions go beyond description and require that the information generated in response to the descriptive research be compared with some standard or expected observation” (p.108). Questions of this type, however, only call for a comparison with a predefined standard. And in this sense the associated research only brings the descriptive information needed to, in conjunction with the standard, form a normative judgement.

Nevertheless, empirical research addressing normative issues from a first-person positioning has to do more than a mere comparison with predefined criteria. Instead the researcher must be able to problematise and question those very criteria by means of the (observational) experience she has in the classroom. This is not to say that experience gives us a direct access to reality (in this case normative), independent of any previous beliefs the researcher may come to the educational situation with. But neither are those empirically produced beliefs *entirely* determined by previous theoretical ideas, as if they were just their application to a particular situation. It is this space of theoretical underdeterminacy that allows progress in empirical research —for descriptive observations as well as for, so we claim, normative observations.

We would like to call the reader’s attention to the fact that the usually taken-for-granted idea we are arguing against —namely, that there cannot be normative observations— very possibly comes from the remnants of a correspondence theory of truth together with a positivist radical separation between the realms of the *is* and the *ought*, in which only knowledge in the former can represent or correspond to facts in the world (even if representation occurs through filters, or perspectivally).

Instead of a relation of representation or correspondence between our beliefs and the world, some authors have shown us that, in the process of creation of empirical observations, the relation must be causal (see Sellars, 1956; Rorty, 1979 and 1987; and Davidson, 1988). But we do claim that, just in the same way that descriptive observations occur, contact with the situation *causes in us the having of particular beliefs*; and among them, there is nothing that logically
prevents those beliefs so produced from being normative (see Davidson, 1995). Of course, *causing* does not mean *justifying*; and thus normative observations empirically produced — just like descriptive ones — may have to be contrasted with the rest of our beliefs. The development of our normative ideas can therefore occur in this way, in an empirical way. Elsewhere one of us has formulated this argument more extensively (Mejía, 2008), and we will not go further into it here.

From this discussion we conclude that Naughty Verónica’s research questions and field notes, directly engaging the normative as well as the descriptive dimensions of the situations she finds herself in, in her classroom, should be considered legitimate. They should not be dismissed a priori, for not having followed the method that educational research textbooks suggest. Of course, legitimacy does not imply a special status that grants them bypassing critique. Normative observations, perhaps more so than descriptive observations, still have to be critiqued for research or inquiry to be considered rigorous.

**Verónica the teacher researcher**

“— I’m quitting.
— Why?
— I don’t know. But I know I have to quit now.”

The descriptions of the two Verónicas represent two different, relatively pure, ways in which classroom research can be conducted: one disregards the normative, and the other emphasises it. Nevertheless, we took the quotes above from a journal written by a single person that we now call *Verónica the teacher researcher*, or simply *Verónica*. In some sense, it is the interaction between those two other Verónicas that configures the research practice of our teacher researcher.

In our free interpretation of Kieslowski’s film, one can think of Weronika as providing a sense of anticipation to what might occur if certain paths in life are chosen. She has already taken them; she has already burned her finger with the stove; she has already died on stage. It is Weronika’s experience that helps compensate Véronique’s lack of it. But Weronika’s knowledge only appears in the form of intuitions, of memories of events that have only happened in a different although simultaneous life. Had it not been for Weronika’s death experience, misteriously communicated to Véronique, the latter would have also probably died before time. But there are choices to be made; that is, there are different ways in which these two characters can be made to interact: most importantly, Weronika’s experience can be either shut out, or allowed in. And the more it is allowed in and let play a role in decisions, the more likely that Véronique will cope with life in a better way.

In our depiction of Verónica the teacher researcher, it is not so much a factual predictive anticipation that Naughty Verónica contributes with, but a normative one: about what ought to be, in the past, present and future. And here, again, there are decisions to be taken concerning how much this naughty version of oneself is allowed in and let play a role in decisions. Certainly, then, when we say that Verónica the teacher researcher is both, we are not arguing for a balance between the two. Instead, we propose that the Naughty side of the researcher be given a more open and important role in research. As we have argued, tradition in educational research and its concern with rigour have favoured a type of research more similar to that

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5 Although, culturally, we might be trained to not have those beliefs; that is, to stop at some point the causal process that creates them empirically.
carried out by Dutiful Verónica. This way, Naughty Verónica has to act outside of the confines of formal, academic, research. And Verónica the teacher researcher will inevitably feel the weight of tradition, exerting pressure for her to be dutiful.

Let us for the moment imagine an extremely dutiful teacher researcher. She follows research textbooks very strictly. Accordingly, she also believes that empirical observations can only be descriptive, and cannot even imagine how research can have anything to do with the normative. Consequently, she would not be able to draw normative conclusions from her research, save for the rather trivial sense of learning about how to reach a certain (normative) purpose more efficaciously or more efficiently. But this previously defined purpose comes entirely from outside of her research. Here, normative reflection has been completely removed from the flow of experience, and the naughty version of herself has been locked away in a remote place, where her voice cannot be heard.

Another teacher researcher is also dutiful, but has the sufficient wit to not completely silence her naughty part. She still follows textbook instructions, and therefore will allow her dutiful version to formulate a research question as well as to report observations on her teacher journal, that are purely descriptive and/or explanatory. But she will be “subliminally aware” (Tsoukas, quoted in Radford, 2006, p.188) of the normative all along. That is, the naughty version of herself will be acting in the background, but will send messages that will help the researcher cope with the normative complexity of the educational situations before her in a better way. The messages are mysterious, and will appear to have come from nowhere, something that pops in her mind due to her reflectiveness. They will be implicit during most of her teaching practice as well as in the written research report, surrepticiously having played a role in many decisions, but will come out and be visible only in the designated areas for reflection on significance: in the discussions at the end of the report. This is a double life, in which the dutiful version of the teacher researcher is mostly in command, but the naughty one is still there, keeping a low profile. But there is a down side to this approach, that can be seen in the very rationale for keeping a teacher journal: one is supposed to record one’s observations closely after they have happened so that they are still vivid and as little as possible can be forgotten. By not giving her naughty part a chance to be more fully integrated to, or be a much more active part of, the process of collecting “data”, this researcher faces a greater risk of letting some important aspects of her classroom pass by, ignored. It is like a process of following clues that only provide a fragmented image of the situation.

Verónica the teacher researcher, however, has allowed Naughty Verónica to take an important and visible role, and therefore she has been able to enrich her understanding of the normative aspects of the situations she faces in an arguably deeper way. Naughty Verónica is responsible, then, for not allowing Verónica’s normative beliefs to remain static and taken for granted — merely playing a framing role — as they are developed and transformed throughout the process. Importantly, she is more holistically acknowledging the normative complexity of educational situations, without assuming that dealing with this dimension is just a matter of applying general principles to particular situations. She takes advantage of her privileged direct contact with the classroom situation and with her students, in order to do this more effectively.

We argue, then, that by explicitly and deliberately having incorporated meaning and values in her empirical observations, as well as in the very research questions that guide the whole process, Verónica may effectively have been more rigorous than if she had not. This is a kind of rigour that concerns the taking account of the relevant dimensions of educational situations, for
supporting decisions about how to significantly act in them. Of course, there is another sense of rigour that is prominent in the tradition of educational research, that should also be maintained. We can see it as springing from the fact that one’s conclusions and interpretations, as well as one’s observations, can be wrong. And this risk, as we said it before, is surely higher when dealing with the normative as compared with the descriptive. Any observation or conclusion must not be simply taken for granted, and instead must always be subjected to critique. Here comes, perhaps, the main task for Dutiful Verónica. But, her sense of duty should not be directed towards the authority of tradition as embodied in textbooks and the main literature, but towards a greater idea of being a good teacher.

Final remarks

In this paper we have argued that, contrary to what appears in most of the literature on educational research including textbooks that embody the tradition in this field, explicitly addressing the normative as an object of research from a first-person positioning is both logically feasible, and desirable. Moreover, we have further argued that failing to do so implies a lack of rigour when supporting decisions for action in education.

But arguably the normative has been there, all along, albeit in a hidden and relatively silent way. Witty dutiful researchers still take it into account, not as a mere application of general principles in particular situations, but reflectively taking into account contributions to it coming from the flow of experience. After all, the normative cannot be escaped given its essential role in the decisions taken in educational situations. But these contributions will only have sneaked in the process, when the naughty versions of the researchers are allowed to play some part in it. This means that the inquiry will not be carried out with the rigour presupposed by an activity like research.

We advocate, therefore, a legitimation of the role of the normative in educational research as object of inquiry from a first-person positioning of the researcher. This legitimation, as we see it, will allow naughtier researchers play a more important role in the task of supporting educational practice.

References


